

Biblical scholars writing about the Book of Genesis have explained the relationship between the patriarchs and their sacred places. Southern writers draw a similar power from the places where they live. This third example of MEMPHIS WRITING by Eleanor Glaze creates a sanctuary, a grotto, a mystical retreat, where the child draws power from the senses of that magical place.

This is in her words, 'a small portion of something in slow process,' following her novella and collected short stories, EMBRACE AND STORIES (1970), and her novel, FEAR AND TENDERNESS (1973), both published by Bobbs-Merrill.

— David Bowman / Series Editor

THOSE WERE THE AFTERNOON ROOMS / ELEANOR GLAZE

Those were the afternoon rooms of old houses . . . spacious, open, high-ceilinged rooms of soft faded hues; forms remorseless and fixed. Often, as from within, the rooms were gently sunlit, more often settled in shadow, clouded and damp. Conjuring shadows, cognent, would shyly advance a step or so from their corners, then recede, draw back unsure, retreat, again draw back to the safe walls. There before fading the shadows would linger. Deepening, guarding, they would hold as they lingered to their own corners, to their own places.

Being a child in those rooms, the only child, made me envy shadows for their quiet appearances and escapes, made me identify with shadows, made me believe that I would be a child always and as the shadows always, causeless, changeless, choiceless.

There was an evening room of dim yellow light, mellow, substance, all covering of comfort unmeasurable, manifesting objects trustworthy and large. Evening was most often in the second room, the room after the parlour, evening came only to that second room with the touch home center, the huge wooden table, a solid heavy circle. Of such solemnness was that circle that it supported light, of such solidness as to allow light to cover it as a rich, textured cloth. In the same room stood a dresser thick slabbed with cool marble when there was nothing else cool to touch. Framed in wood above it hung a narrow mirror six feet tall. Grandmother lifted me to the dresser to stand before the mirror so that I could see for myself that I was only a child. In the second room, the room after the parlour, the only room where evening was allowed, invited, lived out, great grandmother sat on a brown leather sofa, her hands locked behind her head, her elbows jutting out from the sides of her head at a winged angle. She sat silent and motionless in evening as a carving from pale grey wood.

Wide as an avenue down the center of the house ran a long hallway. At the end of the hallway, off to the side rose curving stairs, an ascending spiral of bannister glossy slick, wide, of dark wood which gave subtle gleamings. Within the rooms I thought and kept images and counted on orange Tiger Lilies, there always, outside against the left wall, on slender stems holding their heads high, eager, inquisitive, the rash, defiant Tiger Lilies dipping in and out of sun-shade cycles.

In the front yard on either side of the walk, two squat funny trees grew. They were called umbrella trees. They protected nothing. Across the entire front of the house ran a wide front porch. Heavy round columns were at each end of the porch and on either side of the steps to the walk. At each end of the porch hung a wooden swing. Great grandmother sat in the swing with the rose lattice behind it where she was protected from being seen. Great grandmother was very thin, her hands and wrists covered with splotches, her lap too small for anything but a grey cat, the grey cat the exact color of her knotted hair. Because there were no roses behind it the other swing could go higher. Being a child I could push that swing to motion and before it ceased swaying fall asleep.

At the window seat in the second room a snowball tree outside nestled close to the wall. Across the cinder driveway was a house with a window seat facing the one I sat in. When I climbed into the window seat I expected to see myself in the one facing me, the duplicate. I waited. And waited.

There were many rooms to the house. There were many levels. There was a cellar. There was an attic.

A musky ether was in the cellar, intoxicating; hearing, touch, sight, on first entering overwhelmed. It made me inhale deeply. The furnace loomed up as though from deep within the earth, centered in the cellar its pipe arms thrust upward through the house, a monster metal spider, it held the house up. It was evil, yet supportive and martyred. When it burned within its square eyes glowed brilliant flickering blue and yellow orange. Heavy clouds of dark dust arose when coal thundered down the chute to feed it. The dust would choke you, grandmother said. Don't go in the cellar when the coal comes down.

Thin ropes were nailed to the rafters for hanging wash when it rained. Inverted criss-crossed arcs at the corners formed interlaced patterns. Insects traveled those limp highways and they swung and hung daringly down, the insects, the crazy acrobats. From enormous tin tubs and scrub boards and cakes of brick-sized brown soap came sounds of sloshings and scrubblings. When I sat at the top of the cellar stairs hot steam would rise, a mist on my bare arms and knees and face, making

my dress limp, my hair limp. Then the arid lye smell warm and moist would come in alternating waves with the cool musky ether, competing, but never merging.

Up the stairs . . . up the long spiral stairs at the end of the hallway . . . on the way to the attic, a long trek which made grandmother pant as I followed, past rented rooms on the second floor where the doors were closed tight and perhaps even locked and grandmother called me away from the doors and told me not to bother them, as if those who lived behind those doors were unnecessary, beneath her, and to be deliberately avoided. But on the way to the attic those doors and rooms of intermediate and unknowable people were passed where I tarried and had to be urged forward, those doors so precariously connected and carefully hidden from the predominant personality of the house.

The attic was warm. It made me think Heaven. But after a few minutes it was hot and close and stifling. Then that passed also. Shafted sunlight in the attic, straight pure shafts wider at the bottom at a holy angle slanted from right to left. Closed off, not often visited, never available to renters, attic secrets were stored in piled boxes and trunks, treasures gathering sun mote and dust. It was as if the sun had poured into the attic for countless ages raising the value of every secret. Grandmother was busy sorting or looking for something, or putting something else away to be saved, but I stood still until my vision cleared and focused, beginning as it cleared to reach, to touch.

There in the corner near the slanted window, the dressmaker manikin with ribs of a desert skeleton picked clean. Carcass and sovereign, she presided over all debris, over the paradox, neglect and treasure, treasure and neglect. Chipped mirrors so caked with grime as to give distorted reflections or none at all. Dolls sprawled, with their heads off, or their hair matted and awry, bald in spots, or their heads turned all the way backward, eyeless faces pressed down into chaos, their legs flung apart. Gifts new from the red clown came to this? In an arranged, but never the same disorder — or did I see it differently each time? — lay small useless parts of so many things separated from what they once belonged to or were a part of; torn apart, pulled apart, fallen apart. The mechanics or grace of wholes was absent in these separations which were somehow a part of one and the same overwhelming accident. Each piece separate was thus entirely object.

Especially forlorn were old books in piles and how they hugged to themselves their own fragile dry pages, or all that was left. Photographs in dust-filmed frames were of people who no longer were, who no longer mattered, no longer related to anything except perhaps other useless scattered pieces and parts. In such golden warmth these

things were abandoned, yet saved and stored. And by not only the sun. The attic was warmed by a spread, collective slight smile of ghosts, lying low, close to the floor, hiding in the piles. Oh the forgotten dust dreams of forgotten people in picture frames. Who was that, Grandmaw? Who was that? Even in profile their eyes looked bravely straight into the border of white nothingness within the picture frame. Bland, tight-lipped, haughty or compliant, male or female, child or adult, their eyes looked straight and unflinchingly into whatever had captured them, past to present, past to now, their eyes looked straight into whatever had led them, guilty of time, away.

On the middle shelf of an empty bookcase of darkest blue there was a white horse of glass with a broken leg. Fine lines and cracks netted his arched and sensuous body; with three legs he galloped, forever still, forever in motion at breakneck speed.

And a light green mold outlined and lifted many edges or many pieces of separate things, a light green mold was entrusted with the keeping of tattered books and tokens and dry dead flowers and withered letters. And the golden keeping of the dust did not resist the ageless filtered sun.

Great grandmother was very old then . . . and then she died.

Then grandmother grew old . . . and she died.

Then mother became not so very old but died anyway.

It is afternoon . . . I am a tiger lily . . . I am a shadow . . .

But those were the morning and evening and afternoon rooms of old houses . . . through which moved moist rich airs . . . through which moved echoes faintly and shadows more strongly than echoes and through which moved as though from far away, lost and unfinished voices.

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In addition to EMBRACE AND STORIES and FEAR AND TENDERNESS, already mentioned, Eleanor Glaze has had stories published in REDBOOK, McCALL'S, ATLANTIC, NEW YORKER, DELTA REVIEW, and elsewhere.

She lives in Raleigh with her husband Neal Ellis and keeps biographical curiosity away with a pen name.

One explanation of her powers in writing may be that the Ellises live near the old Raleigh Springs, a Victorian spa, and before that, a sacred place to those who have been here for thousands of years.

