

## Separation

The process of recalling a memory entails the restructuring of that memory; the human brain does not write in archival ink. My childhood room, then, and the house it was situated in with sloping lawn and black widows in the shed, none of it is even remotely as it exists in my idealized recollection. I can see it on Google Maps, in fact; no more gravel planter to the right of the driveway, no more fence to the backyard. The shed is now attached to the garage, though maybe it always was. The new glass front door has a wood frame painted a dark black found nowhere else on the facade. Tacky. These oil people move in in droves whenever a new investor tries to get at the abundance of shale found all over the Grand Valley, but they move out just as fast whenever the fracking well dries up, leaving behind only the scars of their terrible taste (plus probably some scars on the landscape too, track marks from the other black tar). I dropped by on Halloween the year after we moved—all my friends were still in that old neighborhood and our new house was well within walking distance across a small horse pasture, so it made sense to do my trick-or-treating there. I thought they'd love to see me and maybe exchange some stories from their first year. We showed up at the doorstep towards the end of the night.

“Trick or treat!” my friends and I said in chorus.

“Here you go” Oil Man held out the candy bowl unceremoniously.

“I used to live here! You actually bought the house from my parents,” I prompted.

“Oh uhhh...that's pretty neat.”

“So...do you love it?” I asked.

“Yeah, it's nice. Good house.”

“...”

“Well, have a good night!”

So much for the innate warmth of the place. He moved out just two years later. Now the house looks, in person, more like the fluid vessel that it is than the immutable structure in my memory. Every time I think of the place, though, my mental map of the layout gets a little more uncertain, accentuated by the feverishly distorted size of a childhood place revisited—I drove past fairly recently, and the castle of juniper which my friends and I would climb all over, making a game out of defending the top tier, is no taller than my current self. No more anchor of reality to my memory exists considering the house’s modifications and fresh occupants, and the recollected version is fading. Someday the last grain of truth in my mental version will be rewritten like the last board replaced on Theseus’ proverbial ship, and my old home as it really was will be lost completely. Corrupted in indifferent reality and loved too aggressively in my mind.

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My grandparents’ old house in Lake Forest, Illinois, occupies a similar space for me mentally, only more fractured, less concrete. They moved to their (now only his) retirement home at Lake Forest Place around 2004 when I was just 8, so what memories I have of the house are only visible through the quasi-psychedelic sheer of a kid’s underdeveloped brain—a composite of vivid senses only recalled individually, disconnected from narrative or scene.

The *pud* of the garage door as us kids passed the time till dinner with games of wall ball, the frustration of being constantly outmaneuvered by older brother, sister, cousins, and the anxious hope that by sheer luck or Grace of God I could come out on top of a single round.

Smell of spilt pool water and loam out back, the deck flanked on either side by lush flower beds cared for (deeply) by no other than my grandfather. My mother taught me how to

deadhead flowers for when she wouldn't be home in later summers, but made sure to teach me, too, that she had been taught by her dad—one of those things that sticks out for some reason, I'm sure it'll be important later.

It's humid in the Lake Forest summer, stiflingly so, and hot. Shoes don't rise but peel off of pavement, and no shower can get rid of the slightly dirty feeling of damp skin. In fact a shower will only, obviously, add to it. What works much better than a shower for achieving that Grand Junction, Colorado, high mountain desert on a cool day-dry feeling of clean is central AC, and that house had it in spades...Coming in from the pool, one step into the mudroom and the film of water on skin will converge in unbridled, terrified retreat from that massive moisture gradient. Water knows that it's got safety in volume, so will form droplets with a much higher surface area to volume ratio than a thin, even coating over a small child. When that happens, said child who so clearly imagined he was dry enough for inside will tramp right over the tile floor and onto hardwood where the first drop always lands, cringe when his grandmother raises her voice to inform him that he needs to towel himself off before coming inside, obviously, even though he could swear that he already did...

The only real story I have of my grandparents' old home, the only one not reconstructed from fragmentary senses but which actually exists as a narrative in the leftovers of my child mind, takes place at the table just beside that pool, set close up to the brick wall of the house half-eaten by green leaves of euonymus trimmed with white. It was near my birthday, which rarely took place at home given its timing (dead of summer, middle of the middle month). Anyway, my aunt on the other side of the family had made cookies for me as she did every year for every niece or nephew's birthday; my grandparents on that side had seven kids—you can imag-

ine there were a lot of us. And these were not ordinary cookies. A sugar cookie base got cut into various shapes and then iced over in all different colors to make all sorts of lovely creatures and objects and shapes to chomp on, sometimes with classy flourishes of different candies—the swan always had a little, glistening, silver crunchy bit for the eye; I’ve got no idea how she sourced these things. Not just that, though, the taste was something out of Paris or a Disney movie. They were perfectly sweet, never cloying, nutty and crunchy even in the liquid summer air, resolving back into butter and caramelized sugar and bourbon vanilla on the tongue. A teenage girl from the neighborhood had stopped by to clean the pool or something, and we gave her one. She put her hand to her mouth as if to make sure it stayed in there, and sort of hopped around a little.

“Oh my god! These cookies are like HEAVEN!”

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We would only ever get those cookies three times a year, once each for my sister, brother, and I. As a kid, I naturally wanted them with more frequency and more at a time. Now, I’m in some sense glad that they exist only as a memory; no cookie could be as greatly exaggerated as those in my head—they’re the stuff of legends precisely because they hold such a significant role in my personal mythology, and they never would have attained such a role if I never wanted more of them. Our minds are essentially recognizers of difference, which fact is demonstrated by, for example, the down regulation of opioid receptors in the brain of a heroin addict. That is, overuse of the feeling of pure pleasure to a greater or lesser degree disables our ability to feel pleasure. Those cookies are in fact exactly analogous to heroin. The point being, intensity of feeling is only a product of disparity. If my childhood house lived on in perpetuity, bronzed like a baby’s shoes, it would be much too grounded in reality. It would cease to be such an emotionally

resonant place, would never even become one. My grandparents' old place embodies what that house will become after interminable decades of recollection: a flood of aged emotions; a dusting off of cobwebbed places and people, still and paled from the paltry attic sun; the flash and fading afterimage of a long and vivid dream.

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### Sources

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