Foundations for an oneiric house
Nicholas Keys

"Something closed must retain our memories, while leaving them their original value as images. Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home and, by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams; we are never real historians, but always near poets, and our emotion is perhaps nothing but an expression of poetry that was lost."

_Gaston Bachelard_¹.

"It is our unconscious force that crystallizes our remotest memories."

_Gaston Bachelard_².

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There's a house in a gully. It's a small house for the area, small for the block, smaller because it's tucked into the gully. In the house, four sisters share one room. The room reverberates with screams of sibling cruelty and is silent with shared intimacy. The second youngest daughter, the shorthaired ratbag whose lisp prevents her from pronouncing her name properly - Ruth - has stoked the ire of her father again. He is chasing her around the small house with a broom, which he intends to smack her with. But she is nimble and sleuths back inside the house and into her hiding nook. He fumes around the diameter.

This girl is my mother.

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There's a brick house on a road that fronts the shore of a basin. St. George's basin they call it. The path from the house to the shore is steep with sharp rocks. You'll be dancing if you don't have footwear. The grass by the shore, on the other hand, is soft and spongy. There's a patch that's been mowed shorter, for use as a cricket pitch. An overturned boat is dripping dry. It's chained to a tree that dangles over the water. There's an inside out car tyre tied to a rope that sways from its branch. A slight

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southerly gives the waves little white horses on their tips. A grandfather holds the hand of his grandson as they wade out into the water in late afternoon light. The basin means it's shallow and warm for hundreds of metres. The clear water is made a urine colour by the sand so the grandfather doesn't notice the boy pissing. They make their way out, stopping to pick up shells that are always smaller than they look from the surface. Eventually, when the water level is getting above the boy's waist, they reach the blue. The boy wonders why the water changes from yellow to blue and his grandfather explains that this is where the shelf of the basin gets much deeper. For evermore, the boy will think of colour and depth as connected.

This boy is me.

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Gaston Bachelard says that the secret to moving the reader with the values of intimacy is not the brilliance with which you explicate your childhood memory, but if you can open a door of memory for them. The aim being not to glue their eyes to the page, but to make them leave the page, to let their imagination swell over and deep-colour their own memories. For Gaston, this is the poetic of the essence, and the essence of the poetic. This is not the standard rhetoric you get from writers, who are more intent on 'hooking' or 'gripping' or 'immersing' readers than deliberately trying to force them away from the text and into themselves. Which is to say two things: firstly, a compliment to Bachelard for his understanding of the modern psyche, and secondly, to laugh once again at the narcissistic anachronism that is the author, who continues to speak from the grave. And among them, myself, booming with the worst.

But the most salient thing here for my purposes is the nexus of imagination and memory, and the role it plays in the inhabitation of houses. Or more precisely: the way that houses form a reservoir for imagination and memory, how houses surround memory, how imagination gives tonality to housed memory and how through houses I might be able to salvage memories of those who lived in them. Another way of

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4 Dylan Thomas, from *An Irreverent Preamble*, which is the title of the preamble he gave before reading his poems whilst touring in America. Thomas, Dylan. *A Visit To America and Poems; An Irreverant Preamble*. Taken from CD 5 of *Dylan Thomas: The Caedmon Collection*. Harper Collins Publishers, London. 2002
saying this is: I'm deeply scared about forgetting my grandparents and I need to build an oneiric house to remember them in. This is why I need to build this daydream/memory house:

**Reasons to build an oneiric house: 1:**

It's now three years since my grandfather died. He was kept alive for three years longer than he should have. I got used to seeing that *I'm over it; I want to go now* look as we visited him in countless different caring homes and hospitals, all of which would have felt like the same wretched prison to him. But that's our style, us techno-capitalist moderns with our Judeo-Christian tradition. We prolong life as long as we can because we are hopeless at dealing with death. We even legislate it so it's illegal to go, even at your own choosing. I said nothing about it at the time (the family's decision-making processes are worse than the UTS bureaucracy, so mum didn't need me complicating things further) but it set a fire off inside me. I decided two things. One: our society is highly fascist. Two: you don't get to choose life, so if you've got a right to do anything at all, it must be the right to choose death.

I spoke at the funeral, which I was happy to do for mum, though I resented the solemn tone of the stranger, who having never met him, talked about my grandfather while indirectly profiting from his death. (Does the fact that funeral services make their money from people dying bother you as much as it does me?) Firstly I talked about memories connected to photographs, which seem to come just after (and in many ways usurp) the gravestone as the memorial medium of choice. But I wouldn't make mention of photos if I was given my time again. I've come to think that photos monopolise and retard forms of memory as much as they trigger and retain them.

What I would say again, just like I did at the funeral, was how the night previous I had sat up late reading on the lounge, in the same spot and under the same lamplight my grandfather used to sit for his ritual pre-dawn reading session. I didn't mention how haunting a feeling it was sitting there, occupying the same shadows he'd done for so many years. But I did say how powerfully the image returned to me, like it does now, of him sitting there, legs crossed, glasses on the end of the nose, the first rays of morning pursuing through the curtains and reflecting off the lens.

This is the first image of my oneiric house. It's a fixed image, in that it's a part of a fixation (the fixation of memory which dogs us all) but it can be explored in infinite
curvatures and tones, which has all to do with imagination and nothing to do with the illusion of photo-realistic memory. It carries a universe of phenomenological reverberations. It's also a starting point that leads to more memories: I wake up to first light, go to find Pa - that's where the first image is - and then we start preparing breakfast, the table, the placemats, the crockery, the toaster with the automatic lever, the walk down to the corner store. Thanks to that single, found house image, my oneiric kitchen is filling fast and I can see the gestures and movements of my grandfather in it. Cheers Gaston.

Reasons to build an oneiric house: 2:

Pa's wake was truly awful. The family sprawled out through the house with incredible amnesia. Fat arrogant uncles swigged beer and scoffed down cheese biscuits as they cascaded through a line-up of the most abhorrent corporate jargonism. Oblivion swallowed their faces as they turned in the rotating seats that I used to spiral around endlessly in, and which Pa yelled at me for. I said as little as possible, waiting for an uncle to move so I could territorialise one of the chairs, which was the only thing I could think to do to halt this blind bastardisation. Finally, one of the fat cunts got off his arse and I swooped on the seat. For the first time in my life, I sat completely still in that chair, not one squeak did I let out from it. I didn't cry at the service, I never cry, boys don't apparently, but as I sat there I could have, I wanted to, but I didn't of course.

Reasons to build an oneiric house: 3:

Nan kept living in the house for a while. When she started forgetting whether she'd eaten or not, the family arranged for home delivery meals. Twice a day, a nurse would turn up, wait till Nan had eaten, and then leave. Eventually, the family's fear of her falling over or requiring urgent medical attention took over, and without being asked, Nan was told she was moving into a home. Nan is habitually agreeable in the way I imagine women of her generation were brought up to be, but apparently when told she was being moved into a home she retorted sharply: but I already have a home.

Despite it's leafy upper North Shore locale, despite that it's only a few hundred metres away from the house she grew up in, Lady Gowrie' lodge is no home. The place suffocates you with death, it's stained into the institutional carpet, it's a residual
layering on the walls, and the air is stuffy with it. Nan's room is a slender little thing, a
ward really. She has a nice balcony, and she used to feed the birds. One day she
had the whole tree next to her balcony full of cockatoos, more than 50 she said. The
next day, again without anyone asking her, they took her bird feed and a sign
appeared on the balcony door: *Please Do Not Feed The Birds.*

They've moved a few bits of furniture from her house to her new room, a whole
bunch of photos and some artwork. I'm not sure whether it makes her feel more or
less at home, but I know what I think about the whole thing. There's the cabinet from
the dining room, the only thing slim enough to fit in this new space comfortably. It
used to be where the potato chips were hidden, readying themselves for the 5 o'clock
drinks and nibbles. These days for Nan, 5 o'clock is when all the lodgers at Lady
Gowrie's have dinner. The cabinet was where all the family photos were kept and
they've been restored to that order, but it's a hollow reconstruction, like it's a failed
reconstruction of Nan's home.

**Reasons to build an oneiric house: 4:**

My phone rang. It was mum. She was down at Nan and Pa's place with one of her
sisters. The house was soon to be sold to finance Nan's move to her unchosen new
residence. They'd gone down there to figure out who was going to get what,
apparently with a wish list from grandchildren trying to get first dibs on things. That
was it for me. I lost the plot:
- **so that it's hey? you're just gonna divy up your parents life into boxes and hand them out to whoever will take them. what about the leftovers?**
- **i suppose jan and john plan to have a garage sale.**
- **a garage sale! a fucking garage sale! mum, everything in that house carries the memory of your parents' lives, one of whom is gone and the other who is on the way out. it's not enough to move nan out of the house without asking her, now we've got to sell the place and then get rid of all her things. that's total bullshit, that's what that is.**

I calmed down after a while, and I tried to explain to mum that as materialist beings,
dispersing peoples' things without thinking (not to mention asking them first) is akin to
memory murder. Mum didn't really understand, she thought I was being dramatic and
wrote my sentiments off in that infuriating way she does, thinking I just wanted it all
for myself.
-no, i don't want everything. this is not about me, this is not even about objects, it's about preserving memory. if it can't be kept as a whole, then at least keep it in sets. if someone wants glasses, give them the whole set, but make them promise to keep them together. if someone wants a couch, give them all three of them...
-it's unrealistic nicholas. it will start more fights if some people get more than others.
-but no one is going to own anything, they are just caretakers, we can own things as a family still can't we...

But it was never going to happen. Families like mine are broken down and isolated into economic units of the most cruel kind, to the point where siblings get in a shit fight over their parents' possessions. And for me, that says it all. Even my grandfather's meagre book collection was to be dispersed. Mum picked me out the best of the selection: Dickens, Kipling, Shakespeare and the like. I also got some cups and glasses (not as a set). I've tried to cherish these things, but they are lonely and sad like displaced things are, and they don't produce memories other than a general remembrance.

There is a positive here amongst all this detestable fracturing: I have one of the rotating chairs. It's been separated from its three siblings, but it still rotates and it still squeaks. I'm sitting on it now as I write this, and I think, with Bachelard's help, it will take up a fine place in my oneiric house, which by now, I hope you see why I need to build.