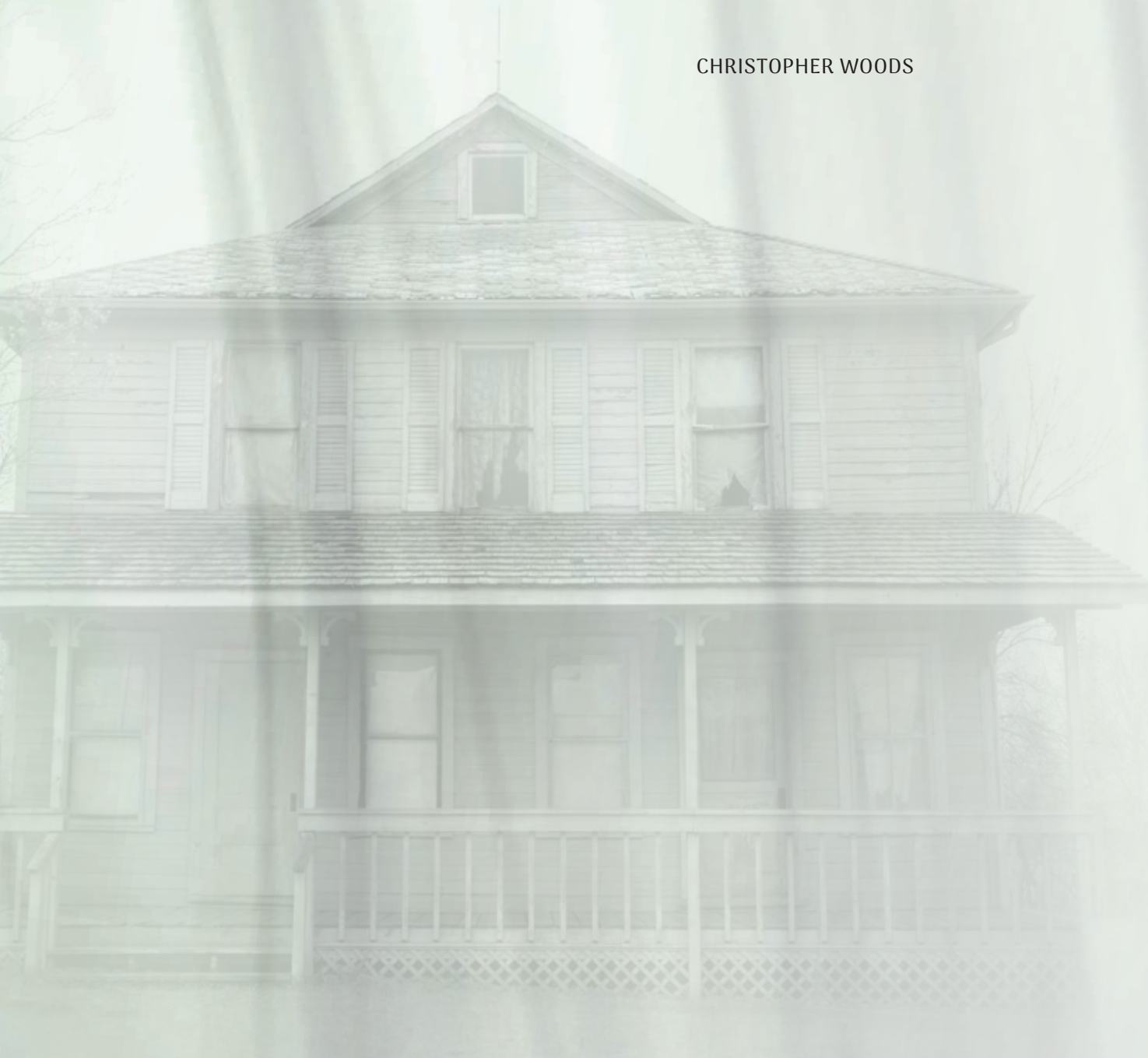


# My Father's Memory House

CHRISTOPHER WOODS



**I**T'S A COLD FEBRUARY MORNING WHEN MY father and I drive north on the interstate to the small town where he grew up. He was born there, in a house his father had built. More than anything else, I know that this is a memory trip for my father. His health is not good.

I have noticed that he has recently developed a new habit of gazing into the past. It is a kind of looking-over-the-shoulder game that memory plays so well. But I also know that there is more space and time, and dance of life, in the past for someone whose future is so uncertain.

We drive slowly down Main Street in his old hometown. He studies every sign and storefront, as if he is trying to memorize them. To me this is like a town gone elsewhere, without people, with a boarded-up drugstore and a long-closed five & dime. The theater sports a blank marquee, and a church seems abandoned except for birds nesting in its eaves. It seems as though the people had departed, leaving only neglected artifacts behind.

Stopped at a corner, he points to a shuttered cafe where he and his friends ate nickel hamburgers. His memory is being coaxed, stirred from the shadows of what to me now seems like a ghost town childhood.

A surprise awaits us. When we arrive at his old address on Main Street where huge oaks buckle the sidewalk and forlorn leaves on tree limbs pulsate in the cool air, there is nothing where his house had stood, only a set of concrete steps announce what was once a threshold. My father's house is gone. Now, in its place, is an imaginary house open to the elements, a refuge for memory.

Memory, I know, can be like a piece of splintered wood, jagged and uneven. Or, perhaps it is like a poem, only half remembered. Memory can be summoned if it is to serve. It must be awakened like sleepy monks for morning prayers. Memory, sometimes, needs to be shaken and shoved so that it can sing again.

And it happens. Whether or not his house still stands doesn't matter to my father. I follow him into his memory house. He points to a place in midair where a frosted window had been, a milk-

colored glass that glistened by day and became a glossy charcoal by night. I can see it even now.

With his hands, he measures the length and width of the front porch swing, then the porch itself as it wrapped around the house, hugging it from every side. He shows me the infamous woodshed, scene of occasional whippings administered by his own father.

I listen well, try desperately to see his house as he still does, how it stands, proud and high on stone blocks in a wide clearing between oak trees. The house is painted green and white, with tall gables. Listening, I begin to understand how the real house no longer matters. There are things passed down, one generation to the next. This house, his old home, is one of those things.

Maybe I don't know many things, but I feel this visit is important. If waves and melodies and falling stars cease to exist, they will all be lost unless they become part of a tale that is told again and again.

My father's house is no different. But there are some things he does not have to tell me about. I know them from my own life. The smell of summer in a dusty Southern town where shadows dance with heat. Or how June bugs shine and why they fear the dawn. Why, in winter, the icebound trees seem to have stars hung from every limb.

The frigid air bites at our skin as we head back to the car. My father turns and takes one last look at the house that no longer exists. Later, on the drive home, the heater on high, we speak little. There is no need for words. The memory of his house has been passed down. It is complete. It is now a part of me.

Now, many years later, I go easy on my memory when I am dredging it. It comes like a shrouded figure, a Lazarus emerging from a cave perhaps. Once I have coaxed it into the light, I study it to see what remains from before. Memory being a human thing, I am sometimes disappointed.

But sometimes I am pleased. All this time gone by, my father's house is still there. It is as real as the wind that blows through its windows to awaken the ghosts and send the lace curtains flying. ❀

previously published in *Story Time, Idaho*, 1982