

## ***The Dybbukast***

### **Season 3, Episode 4: "The Imagined Childhood"**

#### **Transcription**

**An actor reads from "The Imagined Childhood":**

**Actor:** I grew up in Baghdad's Christian neighbourhood, al-Bataween, in two homes, with only a narrow lane between them. The first house, we left when I was six years old. It was in the second house that I spent all of my school years, from year one through to high school graduation. The first house was one of three in a cul-de-sac, wedged right in the middle; its walls brushing against those of the neighbours on either side. To our right lived a well-to-do Jewish family whose home was by far the biggest and most lavish on the lane. A cone-shaped streetlight hung at the front, made of colourful glass panels, and encased in this jagged tin that served as its crown. Come nightfall, upon hearing the street patrolman's heavy footsteps, I would dart towards the window to catch a glimpse of his silhouette in the dark, leaning a wooden ladder against the wall and climbing it to light the lamp.

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**Host Aaron Henne:** Welcome to Episode Four of the third season of theatre dybbuk's *The Dybbukast*. I'm Aaron Henne, artistic director of theatre dybbuk. We're happy to present the second in our five-episode series in partnership with the Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies at Brandeis University.

In this episode, we explore a short story, originally published in Hebrew in 1979, called "The Imagined Childhood," written by the prolific 20th-century Iraqi-born Israeli writer Shimon Ballas. The story served as an epilogue to a collection of short stories whose narratives intersect with the author's early life in Baghdad.

You heard actor Jonathan C.K. Williams read a selection from the story at the top. He will continue to read portions of it throughout the episode. Dr. Yuval Evri, Assistant Professor of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies and the Marash and Ocuin Chair in

Ottoman, Mizrahi, and Sephardic Jewish Studies, takes us through the author's immigrant history and his multilingual engagement in Arabic, Hebrew, and French throughout his body of work.

And now, Season 3, Episode 4: "The Imagined Childhood."



**Dr. Yuval Evri:** "Imagined Childhood" was published as an epilogue to a collection of stories titled *Ba-Ir Ha-Tachtit*, or *Downtown*, which Shimon Ballas published in 1979. The book includes six short stories, most of which are located in Baghdad during the late 1940s, with some autobiographical notes into it. The epilogue is written as a mix of, I would say, memoir or essay, and fiction, and gives some personal and historical background to the stories.

This is a good way to start our conversation on the work of Shimon Ballas, 'cause his work in many ways is focusing on the question of memory, the question of autobiography, the question of our writing a personal story and a national story.

**Actor:** *The wick's flame would dance across his scorched, gaunt face, making his dark eyes sparkle the most sinister shade. I would then watch him descend and carry the ladder on his back all the way to the top of the lane until he disappeared from view.*

**Yuval:** Shimon Ballas was born in 1930 in Baghdad into a, I would say, middle class Jewish family in the vibrant and multicultural neighborhood of Bataween. He passed away in 2019 in Tel Aviv. Throughout his many years of literary activity in Hebrew and Arabic, he published more than 10 novels, several story collections, two children's books, a memoir, and several research books and articles on Arabic literature.

**Actor:** *I couldn't say how old I was at the time; however, I do recall that long before we moved out of the cul-de-sac, the colourful streetlight had been replaced with a miniscule electric bulb which a mystery hand would switch on at the exact same time.*

**Yuval:** The neighborhood that he was born in, the Christian quarter in Baghdad, that is very multicultural, multilingual with the churches and the soundscape of that area, the Jewish community over there, the Muslim Shia community that was part of it.

**Actor:** *Many Jewish families lived in the Christian neighbourhood, where signs of the Sabbath and high holidays were ever prominent in its alleyways.*

**Yuval:** When we go into narratives about Iraqi Jewish history, it usually either depicts only the Jewish history in Iraq as a isolated, not connected to the general story, or the Jewish as a minority in a big Muslim majority society. And I think what Ballas is showing us in his stories, in his writings, in his memoirs; he's showing us Iraq that is multicultural and very diverse. So you don't have only Muslim— one Muslim majority, and only Jewish community that is the minority. You have many other minorities.

**Actor:** *To our left lived an elderly Armenian couple – refugees from the Turkish pogrom. Their front door had an immaculately polished brass knocker affixed to it, and late at night, the door would open to the sound of its knocking.*

**Yuval:** Through that, he showed the story of the Armenians that went away from persecution under the Ottomans and their displacement as well; the fact that their Arabic is their foreign language and they're not really connected. They connect, but disconnect. And he, as a kid, feel really— felt very close to them.

**Actor:** *Foreign hymns were heard coming from inside the house – mournful tunes which, at times, were accompanied by the sound of loud male chatter, and boisterous female laughter.*

**Yuval:** in his stories, the sound of the church's bells are very important. And the, you know, – different kind of linguistics that coming along. We have to remember there is different kind of Christian sects in Iraq at the time: Armenians, and he talks about Catholics, and there is, of course, the Syriac – the biggest Syriac community that are very localized, and others.

**Actor:** *There were a great many churches in the neighbourhood and their bells would chime daily, at regular intervals, summoning the worshippers for prayer services. I knew the chiming of those bells and could recognise each and every one of them. The big Catholic church bell's ringing was as heavy and lumbering as the priest's own march to the pulpit. In contrast, when the Armenian church's miniscule bell chimed, it just about managed a thin, timid ringing.*

**Yuval:** He was living with his mother and one sister and one brother. His father wasn't really living with them. He was living in Shatrah, in a city in the south. They had the business there.

**Actor:** *My father was a fabric retailer in southern Iraq and would only call on us once a month or every other month, when the shop was running low on stock, and he had to head up to the capital to replenish his supplies.*

**Yuval:** from what you can read from the stories, Ballas doesn't have a good depiction of his father. His father won't leave with them in 1951. They will leave Iraq without him. And he will come only in 1970, very sick, to Israel, and when Ballas will be in Paris and won't have even the chance to say goodbye to him.

**Actor:** *Whenever he showed up, pandemonium swept over the house; already at the door, he was calling my mother and the maid over, whilst shouting warnings at the porter carrying his luggage, lest he damage anything.*

**Yuval:** Shimon Ballas immigrated to Israel in 1951 and couldn't, like most of the community, go back and visit his homeland, his childhood neighborhood. It was only one-way journey from Baghdad to Israel or to other places, but without option to return.

And in many ways for Shimon Ballas' literary work – and not only him, many other Iraqi Jewish writers – the literature became as a container, or possibility of returning to Baghdad, reimagining Baghdad, reimagining the homeland, reimagining the neighborhood that he was born in, reimagining the situation that he was part of.

**Actor:** *There were two basements in our house, an upper basement and a lower one. The upper basement would don a festive cloak in the summer months, seeing as it was there that we spent the scorching afternoon hours: the room was always chilly, with the most blissful breeze coming through the chimney air vents. The lower basement filled me with dread. A great many stairs led down there, with the last ones all but consumed by darkness. From spring through to midsummer, it would become waterlogged and a nest of snakes would come fleeing from it into the house, in search of shelter.*

**Yuval:** While he wants to go back to this childhood, or to Baghdad, and to this place, the Arabic literature, to the language, to the streets, to the issues, the same time, he is very much suspicious, maybe as a communist Marxist writer, of this kind of nostalgia.

**Actor:** *I recall this one particular story that I'd heard from my mother time and time again, growing up. She had gone up to the attic that was used as a storage space for an assortment of old bric-a-brac, and as she was reaching for a wicker basket, a spotted snake leapt out at her. Overcome with such fear, she became petrified in place as the erect snake hissed furiously at her. The only memory she had of that hair-raising moment was the magic chant she had learnt at her childhood home from her parents, which their ancestors had bequeathed unto them:*

*"House snake, house snake, you shan't hurt us, and we shan't hurt you."*

*And indeed, it obliged her pleas and resumed its position curled-up on the floor in a large circle.*

**Yuval:** He doesn't want to be nostalgic about these places. He doesn't want to try to portray there black and white, you know, the childhood as the harmonious time, and then, growing up as an immigrant, shows us only the pain and suffer of the immigrant. So he does't want to be nostalgic, but in the same time, he is drawn to this kinda memories and he always dealing with it.

**Actor:** *The second home we moved into was also a snake-infested den. They fed on mice and lived in the wooden ceilings. We would hear them slithering about above our heads, and their incessant, insipid hissing. A giant black snake took up residence in the kitchen and on hot days, it would come out of hiding in search of water. We memorised the magic chant and recited it in our prayers.*

**Yuval:** Shimon Ballas was born in 1930 in Baghdad, nine years after the establishment of the constitutional monarchy of Iraq. By appointing King Faisal Al-Hashemi, there was a new era of Iraq, post-Ottoman era, with the backing, of course, of the British Empire. King Faisal really wanted to build a unifying Iraqi identity that is transcending sects, differentiation between Shia and Sunni, and Kurdish and Arab, and, of course, Muslims, Christians, and Jews. And Jews had – they were very much invested in this kind of a project of unifying or reinventing what is to be Iraqi. And of course this is – created the new questions of what is the role of Jewishness in that project.

And many of the Iraqi Jewish intellectuals went to embrace this kind of an Arab-Jewish identity, Iraqi identity. They were very much active in the literary circles of Iraq in the 1920s, '30s – some very important writers, translators, journalists, politicians. They were very much invested in the merchant sector, in the administration, because they were – some of them were bilingual or trilingual. That was very important in this process. In cultural life, in music had a really major role – the Jewish Iraqi musician had a major role in the establishment of the Iraqi music scene and the Iraqi radio. So Jews in, in that sense, were part of this project.

And when Ballas getting into his teenager, you know, era, there is already a shift in Iraq, mostly by some of the Iraqi Jewish youth. And he was part of it; to go to the left wing parties to be part of this kind of a socialist, anti-imperial – becoming very critical about the British control of the Iraqi system in the time, and taking control of the oil and the other infrastructures that they've been to.

And the Jews, I think – many of the younger Jewish activists that were part of it, I think felt very much identifying with this, kind of transcend this religious identity and try to – maybe a national identity – into something more cosmopolitan. So Baghdad and Iraq

in the 1920s, '30s was very thriving place, very multicultural, very vibrant intellectually. Things are changing very quickly. And politically, the communist party is taking an interesting role in that process, and many of young Jewish middle class – most of them, but not only, Iraqi Jews – are drawn to this kind of circles, and Shimon Ballas is one of them.

**Actor:** *None of us knew, and I, for one still haven't a clue to this day why we should have been flying kites on Tisha B'Av. There wasn't a single Jewish child who wasn't flying a kite on Tisha B'Av. Granted, it was by far one of our favourite pastimes throughout the whole of summer but on that special day, the kite would take on an altogether ritualistic meaning. We would assemble it with our own fair hands, decorate it with a range of colourful tails, and compete amongst ourselves over who had the prettiest kite, and whose was the one that best "sat" up in the sky.*

**Yuval:** In 1946, he joins the Communist Party, of course, as an underground activity. He writes a bit about it. He doesn't have a main role in it, but it's very influential, I think, for him. And the same time, he's finding a job, a bit writing to a newspaper, some film reviews. But his main job would be, in the last years of his living in Iraq, would be with the Iraqi senator, very prominent figure in Iraq, that he was his private secretary and did his personal work. So for Ballas the last years of his living in Iraq are very stimulating intellectually, politically. It's where is the formation of it; his intellectual journey will start.

**Actor:** *On summer nights, the Baghdad sky would fill up with kites of all colours. We would tie the end of the string to a ledge, or a random lamppost and leave the kite suspended in the sky all night. On summer nights, Baghdad would slumber on rooftops, whilst the sound of kites fluttering under the stars was like a children's lullaby.*

**Yuval:** But the interesting thing is, we are talking about the grand narrative, the national narrative of the exodus of the Iraqi Jews from Iraq. So most of the people would say either they were victims and they were forced to leave, or some of them were very Zionist and wanted to leave. But you know, in Shimon Ballas' story, it's not that and not that: he was persecuted as communist, not as a Jew in his point of view. And he wanted to fled to a place that he can, you know, be safe in that sense.

And in that time they were starting to – after 1948, there was a few incidents that the communist had – starting to have really strong opposition to the government. So the government decided to try to destroy, then eliminate the Communist Party, and really went strongly after all the activist. And he had to go underground. So he decided the best solution is to leave Iraq. And he is not the only one.

And when he arrived to Israel, the first thing that he – you know, he and his family had been settled in the transit camp in the south – where is today's Ashkelon, back then it's called Migdal Bet – the first thing he is looking for, is the communist connection. First of all, you know, he sees newspapers of the communist, Palestinian – or Palestine and Israeli Communist Party. And they had the, you know, given newspapers out in the day. And he was really surprised because in Iraq it had to be very much underground.

He is becoming very active in the transit camp and then being involved in the newspapers in Arabic, as I said, and then becoming really a stable writer in Hebrew in the, what's called *Kol Ha'Am*, the Hebrew newspaper of the Communist Party.

Because of his background, he was forced to become the Arab expert in the newspaper. He said he was struck by how the Jewish communist leaders doesn't know anything about the Middle East. Of course they don't know Arabic. So he was the one that gave them some background and wrote in the newspaper.

So he started writing in Hebrew in the newspaper and – but continue writing in Arabic, short stories that were published in *al-Jadid*, a communist newspaper's literary supplement.

And during these years, you know, he and his colleagues – mostly Iraqi Jewish communist writers, colleagues like Sami Michael, Sasson Somekh, David Semah, and others – are forming a community of what's they call the lovers of Arabic language. And together with communist writers, Palestinian writers like Emile Habibi, and later on, even young Mahmoud Darwish and others are trying to meet together and speak: How



we gonna put together the Arabic literature and Hebrew literature and the Arabs and the Jews?

And in these meetings, the issue of the language, written language, is coming into the fore. What we should do? We are the Iraqi Jews, and we are – we want people to read our literature. Should we now transfer, leave the Arabic and start writing in Hebrew or stay in Arabic? And in these meetings, Shimon Ballas recall in one of his interviews, he was really strong supporter of stay in Arabic – still, you know, continue writing in your mother tongue. That's the only way to do it.

**Actor:** *Countless funeral processions passed by our window. The first to emerge, as they turned into the cul-de-sac were the teenage boys in their pristine white gowns, holding candles; behind them came the priests in their black robes, and in the very centre - the priest leading the procession. Behind them were the pallbearers, and behind them, the family, and their companions. All sounds of praying would cease the moment they entered the cul-de-sac and were not heard again until they had finished crossing it.*

**Yuval:** And he said, for me, I only moved from one place and other place in the Middle East. I didn't go to Europe or to America or to other places. I moved between places in the Middle East, and Arabic's supposed to be the language that connect with him. That's why he was insisting of calling himself, or identify himself, as an Arab Jew. But, when he said an Arab Jew, it was a big resistance to his declaration. Even though it's quite, you know, simple: if there is an Arab Christian, as there is Arab Muslim, definitely you have an Arab Jew.

**Actor:** *You would never hear those fake cries of professional wailers at Christian funerals. That was the Jews' and Muslims' lot. On my way to school, I would sometimes cross paths with Jewish or Muslim funerals that bore an uncanny resemblance to one another. The coffin was carried on the mourners' shoulders, whilst the wailers beat their chests and pulled out their hair, as everyone rushed ahead in a great big commotion.*

**Yuval:** He continued publishing short stories in this literary supplement. But then he even finished a novel in Arabic that never been published, because when he finished the novel, he understand that there's not really a literary community in Arabic. So it's what Sasson Somekh later will say: it's writers without an audience.

So, until 1948, most of the people that lived in then Palestine, and later Israel, were speaking Arabic. So even Jews, some of the Jews that were indigenous Jews of the place, Arabic was their first language. Most of them gradually spoke also Hebrew, but Arabic wasn't foreign to most of the people living in the land. So 1948 was dramatic time of displacement of the Arabic speaking community. But, in the same time, came a big community – almost 1 million during the 1950s – of Jews speaking Arabic into the same place. But Arabic wasn't welcomed in that process.

The Palestinians that stayed in Israel, you know, the 20% of the former community, are not really interested in stories of Jews from Iraq, and Iraqi Jewish community is already not reading Arabic because it's becoming very, you know, associated with an enemy. The Arabic literary milieu was in many ways disappearing, and he didn't have a place to continue writing in Arabic. And then he, with a big debate – he decided to move to write in Hebrew.

In many ways, he used Hebrew as a tool, as he said, without the Judeo-centric of elements of Hebrew, and try to use Hebrew only as a language that he can, through that, speak about an Arabic, maybe, space. Some of the novels are all in Iraq or Paris or other places.

**Actor:** *The landlady – a short and stout, corpulent woman was the cul-de-sac's unofficial queen – revered by the older residents and referred to as "auntie" by the younger ones. The children were particularly keen on her, for hers would be the place of refuge they would seek whenever they found themselves on the receiving end of their parents' wrath. She would serve them sweets, but would not spare them any admonishing words.*

**Yuval:** In parallel to his work as a Hebrew writer, he was also a pioneer and had the pioneering role in the foundation of Arabic-to-Hebrew translation in Israel. And during the 1960s and in '70s, he edited the first anthologies, translated then – anthologies of Palestinian literature in Hebrew. He did the move from writing – being Arab writer to Hebrew writer, and left his first, you know, attempt to be in writing in Arabic into writing in Hebrew, but at the same time kept his Arabic in many ways: in his research, in his translation.

**Actor:** *In summertime, she would sit outside her home, doing lacework. And when she noticed me watching her, she would beckon me to come over and sit at her side and tell me tales of another world.*

**Yuval:** And it's interesting to see that the Palestinian writers that start writing in Hebrew later on, like Anton Shammas in the 1980s – '70s and '80s. He refers to Ballas as another option, like him, of an Arab writing Hebrew without the national or Zionist elements of Hebrew. That we can use Hebrew as a language of writing without accepting all the framework, the ideological framework of the nation state.

**Actor:** *When eventually I was summoned back home, I would get up, ashamed, and drag my feet. Her husband would walk me to the door and deposit a sweet in my hand. He would then bolt the door shut. I never knew what went on behind that door and whenever I asked my mother, she would scold and condemn me to silence.*

**Yuval:** Another language that was always there – again, many times they are trying to put him only between Arabic and Hebrew, but French was very strong in Shimon Ballas. He was educated in the French Alliance school in Baghdad. In Baghdad, there was, in the Jewish community, there was really good modern schools. Some of them were of more English orientation, some of them were more Arabic, Iraqi orientation. Some of them had the French. He went to the French.

**Actor:** *I would often frequent this one French mission monastery. This particular monastery, that was used as a girls' school, held afternoon piano lessons. Several times*

*a day, I would make a point of walking past the monastery, yearning to know the mystery piano that delivered such wonderfully mellifluous melodies into the world.*

**Yuval:** In 1970, he moves to Paris, and writes his doctoral research, his dissertation in the Sorbonne University and a depiction of the Israeli Palestinian conflict in Arabic literature, which was later published as a book in Hebrew titled *Arabic Literature in the Shadow of the War*, in 1978, and the book was also published in French, the original French that it was written in, and was translated into Arabic.

He met a lot of exiles and was part of a group of political exiles from the Arab world in general, but from Iraq as well. So French was always there. And, in certain time of life, he even had a house in Paris. He used to constantly go to Paris with his wife Gila, and spend time there. He wrote most of his novels in the 1980s and '90s in Paris. He wrote his research in French. So French is also there in his linguistic imagination.

**Actor:** *The Mother Superior always greeted me with a smile and would ask me all kinds of questions. She was a beautiful woman, and the white veil that adorned her head gave her a saint-like aura. Everyone would address her as "Ma mère"; as did I.*

**Yuval:** Also the urban space of Paris, Baghdad, and Tel Aviv are interchangeable together with the languages. So I think that many ways to understand Ballas is to get a more nuanced reading that are more close to heteroglossic uses of language; of ways that language, you know, interfere, definitely when Arabic and Hebrew are so close to each other.

**Actor:** *Do the two houses I grew up in still stand? A young Iraqi friend I made in Paris couldn't quite answer my question, however he was able to get me a map of the city; the kind they give out to tourists. On it, I found all kinds of streets and gardens, public squares and bridges, and housing estates on the city outskirts.*

**Yuval:** He wants to try to show how language can travel. We can write Iraqi novel, as he did, in 1991. In many ways, that was the only novel that was transferred to English. *Outcast* is an Iraqi novel and it was seen as such. It's about the Iraqi Jew that convert to

Islam in the 1930s and stayed in Iraq. So it's a novel that is mostly in the 1970s in Iraq, but he wrote it in Hebrew. So how can you write an Iraqi novel in Hebrew? How can you write, as Anton Shammas did, a Palestinian novel in Hebrew?

These kind of questions are forcing us to be more critical about this kind of, you know, linkage between territory and national identity. He is not only doing that with languages; also focusing on figures that, in many ways, like him, are living in the borderlands of the cultural, the linguistic, the national borderlands – that are having multiple identities, multiple linguistic affiliation. Some of them are exiles in Paris, either Moroccan or Egyptians, or Iraqi; or in London, or Palestinians in Israel, or, you know, Iraqi Jews in Israel or in Iraq. You know, people that are not really fit to the national narrative or the national cartography of identities and loyalties and affiliation. People that have hyphenated identities like Arab-Jews or Palestinian-Israeli.

**Actor:** *"I have a different map," I told him. "One of curved, intersecting alleyways like a tight-knit network of spiderwebs. I can sketch it out on paper, for I remember every twist and turn, every nook and cranny, every arch, every window, and every protruding house corner that stuck out at a sharp angle, where men used to hang about, relieving themselves."*

**Yuval:** So in many ways, in the epilogue, he's also drawing us through the map – the official map of Iraq, and then his own imaginary map – into this ending. There is no really one story, a childhood memory. It's only like a dream, that something is not really organized in a really, you know, official structure of geography, of language, of identity, of belonging.

That's where he feels more secure, to these kind of places that are outside of the official place: on the seamline, on the contact zones. Liminal places that are not really belonging to any place. But this is the place that maybe someone that have multiple identity and doesn't really fit, maybe that's the only place that he can find himself.

**Actor:** *"They've razed loads of neighbourhoods," replied my friend in a very fact-of-the-matter way, "yours could have been one of them."*

**Yuval:** The fact that he's not translated to English, it's something that, even though I think he's very important writer, I think it's – part of it is because it's really hard to identify him or to put him: as a Hebrew literature, a Jewish literature an Arab Jewish literature...?

There's even no place to teach his stuff. You know, I'm now doing the course here and I'm probably the only one, the first one to teach Shimon Ballas in Brandeis. So where do you teach him? In Middle Eastern studies, in Jewish studies, in Arabic, in Hebrew? Most of the research now on Shimon Ballas is in Arabic, in Baghdad, and Egypt and other places. So it's interesting to maybe open a wider window of figures like Shimon Ballas.

**Actor:** *Whether razed or not, does it even matter? I daresay it will forever remain standing. The world of childhood is a timeless place that is far more rooted in the imaginary than in real life.*

**Yuval:** In English, Ballas will resonate, I think, to different, even bigger audience, because he won't resonate only for either Arab Jews or Mizrahi Jews or Palestinians, maybe. I think he will resonate for many postcolonial writers as well: Tunisian writers that wrote in French and move from Arabic; to Indian subcontinent writers, like Salman Rushdie and others that wrote in English, but about their memories that were probably in Urdu and Hindi and in different languages; of course, Albert Memmi and others. People will be able to read them along this kind of a larger community of writers; hybrid, postcolonial writers that are multilingual, that are bringing us a different kind of world that is transcending national boundaries. You can't really read them under a very strict national framework in that sense, or monolingual framework.

**Actor:** *We are accustomed to telling stories that make sense. The languages that we speak follow fixed sets of rules and adhere to concepts of time. For every effect there is cause, and that thread of causality runs through every sentence that passes our lips, for were it not so, we would be rendered unintelligible to all. How do we relate a dream? How does one recount an experience that transcends time?*



**Aaron:** Thank you for listening to this episode of *The Dybbukast*, “The Imagined Childhood.” The text featured in this episode was read by Jonathan C.K. Williams. Thank you to Dr. Yuval Evri for sharing his insights. Our theme music is composed by Michael Skloff and produced by Sam K.S. Story editing was led by Julie Lockhart, with support from me, Aaron Henne. This episode was edited by Mark McClain Wilson.

Please visit us at [theatredybbuk.org](http://theatredybbuk.org), where you will find links to a wide variety of materials which expand upon the episode’s explorations. And if you want to know more about theatre dybbuk’s work in general, please sign up for our mailing list on that same website.

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*The Dybbukast* is produced by theatre dybbuk.



**Actor:** Childhood experiences cannot truly be shared unless one is willing to submit them to the confinements of time and bind them to the chains and shackles of cause and effect. Such are the childhood stories that we read. They are just that - stories. A faded silhouette or the polished reflection of an imaginary experience. I don’t put much trust in childhood stories, just as I have equally little trust in dream narratives. I especially distrust authors’ childhood stories; those who thrive in fiction have proven

themselves the least reliable in relating things as they are; as they have been from childhood.

The house I grew up in, my neighbourhood, my childhood — a wondrous dream, a flight of fancy, the most marvellous vision. No, I could not possibly put any of it into words.