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Forever

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Forever

James Calvin Schaap

“...and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever...”

“In any story by Edgar Allen Poe,” someone once said, “no one ever eats breakfast.”

That’s a great line. Poe’s characters aren’t really meant to be human because Poe loved characters and worlds that didn’t exist, in part because he found this one so very difficult.

I’ve never been a big Poe fan, but one aspect of his stories I find really appealing, even though silly. If you look closely at many Poe stories—say, “The Fall of the House of Usher,” for instance—the physical house itself, and its own walls, seem to breathe, seem to have their own life. They’re hardly inanimate.

Last night I drove through the pick-up lane at a Hardees restaurant in the neighborhood where we used to live and saw, once again, the upstairs window I used to look out of when putting our baby son to sleep. The floor plan of that home will never leave me. On the east side, upstairs, my little daughter used to sleep beneath windows where dawn turned the whole world glorious. In the room between, my wife and I shared intimacies that seem now almost furtive, between our two little kids.

Down in the basement, south east corner, on a cement floor covered with series of second-hand rugs I continuously replaced after heavy spring rains, I wrote more than a few books. One of them paid for the gas furnace, the one that replaced the old oil burner down there. There’s a wall-sized book rack we made in the family room, and in one of my short stories there’s a description of the way

the January sun used to slant through the windows of the living room.

I don’t know who lives there now, but whoever it is knows absolutely nothing about the life the Schaap family invested in that place, our first Iowa home. Maybe that’s why I like Poe’s living houses; their walls seem to breathe, to pulsate. Maybe they have memories. But then, his houses, like his characters, never really eat breakfast.

Any story of King David’s life has to include his deep, life-long passion for building the house of the Lord, his burning desire to want to create an intimate space for God. That was not to be. The Lord God almighty didn’t want David’s hands on the tools. “You are a man of war and have shed blood,” God told him. Incredible, for a man who loved God as much as he did, and who was loved as deeply.

That passion—and the rejection—is part of the baggage of this famous last line of this famous short psalm. Here’s a man who couldn’t do what he wanted to. His resolution is the stronger for having been once forbidden.

And that makes the forever-ness of this verse so memorable. King David’s heart nearly explodes when he testifies here that he’s not going to move, that he’s not going to leave anything behind, that there will be no history, only a present, in this forever house of the Lord, the one he’s wanted for so long. There’s an assertion in this final verse of the psalm, an assertion with attitude. “That’s where I’m going to be,” says the rejected builder, “and that’s where I’m going to live forever.”

See him pointing? And he’s smiling. Forever. What a story. What a line. What a believer.