

Memphis, TN: The South and Me

When you go to the south and you come from the west you exchange a crystalline climactic simplicity for a descent into a landscape saturated in dripping mystery. Even in winter. Even when the trees are stripped bare and the grass is parched and brown.

Quite simply, it's another world. Something about the outlines of things obscured so that you can't easily identify what you are looking at.

Our little bed and breakfast inn was in the residential area of Memphis. We had made a conscious choice to expose ourselves to the rhythm and blues of Beale St and downtown only when it was dark and glamorous. The rest of the time we wanted immersion in a quintessentially southern residence.

Bridgestone House is just that but it wasn't always. Once an old schoolhouse complete with high ceilings and tall windows and a potbellied stove in each of the schoolrooms it is now a particularly opulent version of southern hospitality. Which is a bit like saying it's a particularly opulent version of southern opulence.

When you come from the west, the south can be confusing to look at. Apart from everything not being exactly what it seems, the southern way loves to cover every surface with carefully organized paraphernalia. Blank space is an affront to the southern eye.

In Bridgestone House there are knickknacks everywhere, layers of them, piles of them, festoons of them. There is a confusion of stuff. When you come from the wide-open plains this feels oppressive. At first.

When I stood in the doorway of our bedroom it took me a while to discern the four-poster bed. The room was dim, the wood was dark and everything was heavily padded and brocaded. And then of course there were the things...

I felt I would never get rest in there. I felt I might be compelled to lie awake counting the stuff, cataloging it as if ordering it would somehow dispel the clutter. It took awhile for my mind to collapse. The way an ungainly body would in a sagging chair.

I was sliding down some sort of rabbit hole. The open plains were up top and where I was going was dark like a womb. There was something deliciously regressive about it. Like death but without the bright light.

The south felt like being underwater. Not cold, inhospitable water, more like amniotic fluid. Floating weightless surrounded by stuff. None of the stuff had hard edges almost everything was covered in floral fabric. I was underwater in some upholstered floral womb.

I thought it was time for me to climb on the bed. There was nothing on its plain-like surface except bedding. I thought perhaps it could save me. I couldn't get onto the bed without coming at it from a bit of a run.

Being on it was worth it though. I was afloat on a wide open plain in a sea of cluttered amniotic fluid. I was beginning to get into it.

Sleeping in the south is obviously something the south does well. Sleep or stages of it appear to be so revered that our hostess, who we didn't know from Eve, entertained us in her nightgown. Granted it was not your average nightgown. It was not my nightgown either. This one was floor to ceiling midnight blue velvet. It made me think of whole days when you didn't get dressed.

Not rushing is the thing in the south. You may not be sleeping but you are not rushing. If you are not in bed you are in your nightgown. Failing that you're wearing something as elaborate as the décor that took hours, possibly days, to prepare.

In the south we ate lots of deepfried stuff quickly. And lots of double deep fried stuff. We tried to eat it all, a lifetime's worth, so that we wouldn't have to do it again. Ever. Southern deep fried comfort food is like that: yummy and then, within the next few bites, you're cured.

We stayed two days. That's all it took. There was this little table in the room, I found it eventually. The stuff it had on it I could use. I had left my fragrance at home. At least I had left the bottles there, my own peculiar fragrance insisted on following me wherever I went. The partly hidden table harbored the tail ends of the hostess's passé perfumes.

I became heavily involved with some powerful deep magnolia ones. I think I was under some sort of spell. I wore them the entire time I was there. By the time I left I felt southern. I was okay with the endless layers of things. I knew it would take a lifetime to fathom them but that was fine with me.

When we got back to Colorado I looked for the trees. I looked for the forest. I couldn't see the forest or the trees. The absence of mystery depressed me. There was nothing deep and smoky dark, nothing that would take me a lifetime to discern. In Colorado what you see is what you get. Unfortunately who I am is changed forever.