

CATHERINE HOUSE by Elisabeth Thomas

Behind-the-Book Essay

I was raised to despise Yale University. My grandfather had been one of four black men in Yale's class of 1953; his dorm sat by a courtyard casually called the "slave quarters." When he realized the Yale Glee Club toured the segregated south, he hesitated, but joined anyway because he loved to sing. In the photos I've seen from this time, he stands alone among a sea of stern white faces, his own eyes stubborn and sad.

His son, my father, went to Yale too. My dad didn't fit in most places, but he especially didn't fit in at Yale. He spent his days wiring suitcase-sized speakers into the dorm bathroom (he wanted to listen to Chaka Khan while he showered) and his nights sleeping by the whirring mainframe in the computer science lab. He eventually took a mental health leave, then dropped out.

Like many black daughters, I was raised to trust in the weight of a good education. But I was also raised to beware of big, white, antiquated institutions. In our house, Yale reunion invites disappeared into the trash. Calls for alumni donations went straight to the answering machine. And when it was my turn to apply to college, my dad said, "You can go to any school you like, as long as it's not Yale."

I chose Yale, of course.

I've always loved fairy tales and lush gothic novels, stories of eerie woods and houses haunted by bloody secrets. At Yale, I walked among such houses every day. But I wasn't dazzled by its architecture or traditions. I felt no tenderness for the Good Old Yale lauded during convocation and exalted by the sweet-tongued Whiffenpoofs. I was a legacy, yes, but it was a legacy of racism and hurt. I just wanted to get my degree and get out.

But soon, I found myself slowing down. The campus was too handsome, lined with stately elms and flowering courtyards. The classes were difficult but thrilling. The meals were warm and generous, abundant with seasonal specialties, sundae bars, and salad spreads that seemed to stretch on for miles. I made wild, funny, brilliant friends who came from distant cities and countries but now lived right down the hall, ready for bid whist study breaks or midnight ABBA dance parties. I was happy.

Happy. Growing up, I hadn't dreamed of Yale, though I had dreamed of college: a place where I would be older but still not quite an adult, close to home but far enough, studious but free. Now I was there, and I was in love. The elms, the sundaes, the ABBA dance parties: every detail felt so critical and so fleeting. I could see myself, as if from above, in the young, glad moment. I smelled crisp, freshly mown grass, watched light shift on a classroom floor, heard my friends laughing in the hallway, and I thought, yes, here, right here: I am happy now.

When I graduated from college, I entered a difficult time in my life. My parents divorced; my dad died of a sudden illness; my friends' voices, crinkling over Skype calls, sounded very far away. I wrote one strange, rambling, inchoate novel, then another, then trashed them both. But I didn't realize how bad it was until the train ride back from my five-year reunion; I suddenly burst into ugly sobs. When my friend asked what was wrong, I could only gasp, "I want to go back."

"What are you talking about?" my friend asked. "Go back where?"

At that time, the news was rife with stories of campus sexual assault and the various ways colleges had mishandled these crimes. The stories didn't surprise me. I never believed that Yale was loyal to anyone or anything other than itself. I knew that like every cultural institution, Yale enriched itself by trading in impressions. For my grandfather, in the 1950s, it had been an impression of exclusivity, power, and prestige. By the 2000s, with its newly renovated dorms and myriad clubs, gleaming gyms and bountiful dining halls, Yale was selling quality of life, happiness. *Bright college years, with pleasure rife; the shortest, gladdest years of life.* I knew, but still I had bought in, because I wanted that: happiness. I wanted to be happy.

When I arrived home from the reunion, I reread the draft of the novel that later became CATHERINE HOUSE. I had set out to write the kind of story I'd loved as a girl, a tale of sorceresses and monsters, creaking floorboards and whispering winds, daring damsels trapped in ghostly, intricate manors. Now, I recognized the true horror of that damsel and the manor: She was trapped, yes, but she didn't care. She would live forever in that strange, magic, impossible house. She wanted to stay.