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Childhood Homes in Lidia Vianu's Novel *Kaleidoscope*

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About "Kaleidoscope", Lidia Vianu said that "what happens there is my life, everyone's life, it is the communism and post-communism of an intellectual who has been studying English" (TVR Cultural, Jurnal cultural 2023). Several narrations in the novel focus around two houses in Bucharest where the author spent her childhood. During the 1950s, the scarcity of homes and the running of an intensive housing policy led to the nationalisation of the largest houses in Bucharest. Previous owners had to live in smaller quarters in their own houses and had to share the habitable space with tenants who paid rent to the state (Mihail and Voinea, 22–26). The narratives related to the author's childhood homes issue from the author's recollections and relate the years before the author's coming of age alongside descriptions of places, environments, people, and moments in Bucharest under the communist regime.

Keywords: *communism, post-communism, theosis.*

1. Introduction

This paper delves into aspects regarding those parts in Lidia Vianu's novel *Kaleidoscope* which are strictly related to revealing events or stories, people, environments, and intimate insights which refer to the author's childhood homes. Though the narratives are not chronological, most of them respect the classical units of time and place—for example, most narratives in the novel centre around a certain age or time in the author's life. This is the case for the narratives where the author was three-, four-, five-, nine-, ten-years old, or in her teenage years. In such cases, the narratives present a distinct literary character. When *Kaleidoscope* delves into the author's adulthood, the narratives become a little more developed and diverse—as does the style.

The construction of the novel alone prompts one to think of a symphony. Though not fluently running from one age of the author to another in a chronological fashion, the narratives in the novel inspire a three-dimensional reading—one in which the text extends in length and width, but at the same time the interlacing of

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the narratives in a random way inspires a reading with depth and height. One might ask why not only depth or only height. The answer is precisely in the symphonic structure of the work as a whole. The author's reminiscences of the early and youth years form a luminous, lucid, almost fairy-tale first movement of such a vertical reading. Then, a slow movement gathers from all those tedious narratives relating the time spent during the years of communist higher education. The American experience which the author lived happily with her daughter, Alma, hints at a minuet. The last movement comes at an older age, when the author has regained a sense of equanimity and serenity as luminous as in her earlier years, suggesting her life as a path to *theosis*.

This paper focuses on the reminiscences of the early years of the author. Several narratives in the novel focus around two houses in Bucharest where the author spent her childhood. During the 1950s, the largest houses in Bucharest were nationalised because of the scarcity of homes and the running of an intensive housing policy. Previous owners had to live in smaller quarters in their own houses and had to share the habitable space with tenants who paid rent to the state (Mihail and Voinea, 22–26). This was the case of both houses where the author spent her childhood. In one, her nuclear family shared the large hall, the kitchen, and the bathroom in a large flat with other people. The other house belonged to the author's ancestors, but it was nationalised and the author's grandmother "had been pushed" to live from "five sumptuous rooms" "into the smallest room, that faced the back yard" (Vianu 2023, 30). The narrative writing is cinematic, lucid, and declarative. The narrations related to the author's childhood homes issue from the author's recollections and relate the years before the author's coming of age alongside descriptions of places, environments, people, and moments in Bucharest under the communist regime, with sporadic post-communist overtones.

2. From three- to four-year old

Lidia Vianu writes that she was born in Bucharest, in a hundred-year old house situated in the Calea Călărași neighbourhood (2023, 500) close to Hala Traian (2023, 106; 296). In that neighbourhood, she lived for thirty years (2023, 230) in an apartment which her parents had to share with other people (2023, 148). Valentin Mandache, an architectural historian, writes that Calea Călărași, a road in the Central–Eastern part of the old town, began to develop in the first part of the 19th century along a way leading to the then Turkish ports on the Danube River and the Black Sea (2016). The neighbourhood was cosmopolitan, including an important Jewish community blended with other communities of Balkan ethnicity.

An ancestor of the author came to the Wallachian Principality in the 16th century, during the rule of prince Michael the Brave. Mann—by his name—was a clockmaker who had fled Spain. Once in Bucharest, he received a right to settle, and started to build a house:

> The house was begun by Mann, clockmaker to the king Michael the Brave, in the sixteenth century. He settled in Bucharest, coming all the way from Spain. (2023, 518)
> Mann had lived on [the Metropolitan Hill] till he had built his own house, where his grandchildren and great-great-great-grandchildren had been born. It was the place where Mann had received the запись to settle down. (2023, 520–522)

The house was a block of flats and was accompanied by a villa. They were the author's heritage, which, however, her family lost to the communists. In an unassuming manner, the author blends bits of her biography with demystifying acts concerning the policy of housing as she saw them during the communist era:

> My mother was born on the first floor of the block, where they lived in five sumptuous rooms, four of which looked onto the street allowing in light at all hours of the day.
> We have not seen that apartment since 1971, when my grandmother died. Back then, my grandmother had been pushed into the smallest room, that faced the back yard, drab and lightless. (2023, 30)
> The villa was confiscated by communists in the 1940s. (2023, 30)

as well as, again, during the recent, post-communist years:

> [The villa] was bought from the state by its tenant, despite the fact that I had already claimed it in Court. (2023, 30)

Had her family not been deprived of the two houses, the author's mother would have inherited the villa as her dowry (2023, 30), and the author would have been born in a bourgeois environment. To this effect, the author relates one of her grandmother's habits which used to make the author feel "important and civilised" (2023, 32). Using a narration proper to a four-year old—short, simple sentences, though featuring epithets which reveal an aptitude for introspection and the knack for articulating the sensations and emotions aroused by the respective habit—she describes how she would enjoy spending time with her grandmother and her uncle

in the small room her grandmother was allowed to inhabit in their nationalised house. The small room had been used by a former servant—her grandmother's maid (2023, 138). Nonetheless, the little girl's narrative chooses to stress the atmosphere aroused by her grandmother's wont.

The author writes how her grandmother would bring in trays with "crystal glasses in silver holders" (2023, 32) filled with hot, sweetened tea and buttered brown bread to go with the tea. The colour of the tea is metaphorically rendered by using the epithet "amber", which designates both the yellowish-brown colour as such, but also an expensive resin used to make jewellery and beautiful objects. The association of amber accentuates even more the idea of elegance initiated by mentioning such materials as crystal and silver in the description of her grandmother's habit. Hence, the little girl's sense of civilised attitude and the emotion of feeling important:

> Grandmother comes in, carrying a tray with crystal glasses in silver holders. The amber tea is hot, the butter is spread on brown bread, and I know for sure that the tea has sugar, a lot of sugar in it. It tastes delicious. (2023, 32)

Her grandmother's tea habit was not unique in indicating the elegant bourgeois character of the family. There was one more in this regard. The maid's room overlooked the grey courtyard behind the block; however, it featured a three-mirror dressing table and a glass box adorned with lotus flowers on the lid:

> A splendid dressing table with three mirrors, and a greenish glass box with lotus flowers on the copper lid was in there. Inside it there were all sorts of treasures: small silver hair pins, safety pins. (2023, 138)

Silver is mentioned again, this time in connection with the precious women's accessories in the glass box: "hair pins, safety pins", and a silver brooch. Either because of the material of which the accessories were made or simply because of their appearance, these little things were dubbed "treasures" by the little girl—another word meant to show the status of the people who owned such precious things.

Furthermore, the narrative introduces the unfriendliness—to say the least—between the author's grandmother and the neighbouring tenants of the "sumptuous" space they were supposed to share. The clue: the silver brooch. The incident: the theft of the silver brooch on the very day the author's grandmother died. The circumstances: because the grandmother was very ill at the time of her

death, she was living with her daughter's family—the family of the author's mother. The culprits: the grandmother's neighbours:

> When she fell ill and came to live with us, Grandmother told me:
> "Look in the glass box and take the silver brooch. I have saved it for you."
> Her neighbours stole her things the day she died. (2023, 138)

A simple and direct description of such an incident makes a powerful statement about the relations between the former owners of nationalised places and the tenants of those redistributed places.

Similar relations have also been described elsewhere. The book *Communist Football and Urban History in Bucharest*, by Andrei Tudor Mihail and Andrei Răzvan Voinea, describes the favours which football players with significant results in sport benefited from the government by being lodged in the capital. The book explains and documents the legislative background of the housing manoeuvres of the time—the 1950s—, the owners' pleas for their rights, and the government encroachment on the properties of such owners who, according to the law in effect at the time, had to restrict themselves to a limited surface of eight square metres per person within their former properties (22–26).

3. The way of the four-year old's narration

The four-year old child's manner of narration is simple, straight, without tropes:

> It is cold and dark outside.
> Emmanuel is my uncle—my mother's brother.
> I am four.
> I do not feel alone or insecure with him and my grandmother. (2023, 32)

It is proper to mention here that the words narrative, narration, and narrator in the paper have the sense given to them by Norman Friedman. Therefore, *narrative* stands for the story told, *narration* stands for the telling of the story, *narrator* for "the agent that fictionally tells the story", and *text* defines "the specific medium in which the telling is embodied" (Wilson 2011).

The speech of the little girl in the novel is exactly that of a four-year-old child. There are no superfluous words. However, it is telling because even though it is stylised in the way of speaking of a child, because the content is related to the author at the age of childhood, this child knows a lot of things. She knows the materials of

which crockery is made—“crystal glasses in silver holders” (2023, 32). She knows how to read the word «Blaupunkt» on a radio box (2023, 32). She knows the sequence of events and takes into account their causality:

> There is a concert on the radio. It is a radio on which I decipher the word “Blaupunkt”. It has a small green light inside when you turn it on. (2023, 32)

Her sentences are powerful and determined. Her thoughts are clear and transparent. Her mind is present and receptive. It makes her feel what her uncle must be feeling. So she intimates to the reader what she thinks about her uncle—a lot, to this effect, and her thoughts appear to be phenomenological:

> Seated in the rocking chair, which Emmanuel always lets me have, although I know he loves it himself, I allow the music to float by my ears. He says it is a wonderful concert. I plunge my hand into the box of stamps. Emmanuel says they are all precious, and I feel sadness in his fingers as he shows me the faded, light brown little pictures. His melancholy eyes see something beyond that, and I can feel his yearning. Would he like to be somewhere else right now? (2023, 34)

Because her sentences flow into a straight, logical, and causal chain from one episodic recollection to another, the way they follow one after another might as well be compared with a stream of consciousness. However, there are no authorial interpretations in any of these sentences, no doubling of the stream of recollections with avalanches of thoughts impinging one onto another. On the contrary, the simple narration and the straightforward dialogues impress the reader as if being indeed thought, formulated, and expressed by a four-year old child.

In an Aristotelian perspective, the author uses diegesis in narration and mimesis in dialogue (Surdulescu, 72). By employing the dramatic mode, the narrator effaces herself—that is, the four-year old relates only the essential dialogues and the basic recollections to familiarise the reader with her evolution in her childhood environment. For example, she relates little things, little anecdotes which show her adopting a historical perspective, like in the case of Marc Chagall who left Russia for France and painted pogroms. Then, the author uses dialogue between her characters (Emmanuel and her grandmother, in this case) in order to give life to the story. Not only does she show a superior level of understanding, but also a prolific way to put her stories in words:

> I often looked with Emmanuel at the pages of an old album with Chagall's paintings. Running from Russia to France, he had painted погромы, souls burdened by sadness. But, in his paintings, even after the worst tortures, people won: they soared, they never fell. [. . .]
> "She is only a toddler," my grandmother would scold him when she found us perusing the album again and again. "How can you tell a three-year-old such horrors?" (2023, 520)

3.1. The communist era through the eyes of the four-year-old child

With the novel being widely interspersed with impressions from the communist era in Bucharest, a remarkable thing is that such impressions have insinuated themselves into it ever since the author was three to four years old. One such example is when the little girl is told by her uncle that the Chagall album was brought from Paris:

> "This book is only four years older than you," Emmanuel would say, remembering the day when his father, my grandfather, had come home with the Chagall album from the largest bookshop in the city, where he had ordered it to be brought from Paris. (2023, 520)

Nothing out of the ordinary up to here. However, when the author comes up with her part of the story—the history related to her own thoughts and biography—, the girl imagines Paris to be a bigger version of her uncle's room:

> When Emmanuel told me that, I wondered about "Paris". I decided it was a place just like Emmanuel's room, only bigger. (2023, 520)

Then, she connects what she found out about the books with Chagall's paintings of pogroms with the fact that the house where the author's grandmother and uncle were living had been nationalised. The author makes a subtle reference to the way the housing property of the former owners was divided between them and the tenants of the state when the girl says that the room where someone whom she euphemistically calls "our neighbour" lives had actually been her mother's room:

> There were numberless Chagall books spread everywhere, and nobody told us, "Shush, our neighbour is sleeping in the room that used to be your mother's". (2023, 520)

Consequently, the "five sumptuous rooms" (2023, 30) formerly occupied by her grandmother's family had been redistributed to other people. Closely connected to this, there is a reference to the "common room" in the nationalised house and the number of objects of the same kind in the kitchen:

> Outside Emmanuel's room, there is a cold common room, full of doors. They never make a fire there. Then a narrow corridor leads to the common kitchen — with four gas ovens, four tables, many chairs, and the balcony, where I blow soap bubbles in the morning [. . .]. (2023, 32–34)

Through the words of a four-year old, the author sheds any trace of passion with respect to losing her family homes to the oppressive communist regime. The four-year old's narrative is styled so as to show that, in spite of the unthinkable things which happened under communism, the author has wiped out all resentment and disapproval. However, this might just be owing only to the way in which the four-year old girl's discourse has been styled.

The narrative of the four-year old in *Kaleidoscope* might be perceived as a kind of prayer. Genuine prayer comes from the heart. As difficult as it is to explain this without providing references from the writings of the Church Fathers—and, for that matter, a great number—, a little insight from the writings of Monks Callistus and Ignatius might help. They write that one should pray "purely [. . .], without fantasies, imaginings or images, with [one's] whole mind, whole soul and whole heart" (Kadloubovsky and Palmer 1977, 236). Although formulated mentally, the prayer should begin from the heart. It should be perceived as a whole, as if there could be no other thought coming from the same place. It should fill the heart with the thought which consists of the words of the prayer. This lends a certain crystalline integrity and a natural, logical, and unadulterated sequencing of the thought. Not only does this kind of prayer have an effect on the lay thinking—unrelated to prayer, that is—but it also extends beyond the originator of the prayer and has an impact on the environment.

The four-year old girl's narration comes alive the moment she makes it. No ulterior motives. It all starts from the clarity of the conscious mind. To clarify this, an example should be provided. This is taken from *Measure for Measure*, where there is a clash between expressed thoughts and unexpressed intentions. In one of her dialogues with Lord Angelo, Isabela makes a distinction between asking the commutation of the death sentence as an act of mercy and committing a sin of fornication as an act of charity (Barba 2023, 10). Through this, Shakespeare shows that a character can have hidden intentions. Isabela begs Angelo for her brother to live, as she is moved by her feelings of pity for him, even though she hates his sin.

Angelo asks Isabela to show charity to her brother by giving herself to him, as he is moved by his unexpected desire for her. However, he tells her that what she is asking for is similar to what he is asking for (Traversi 1942, 50). In fact, they both vocalise only the top of their thoughts. Their deep, inner motives remain hidden.

In *Kaleidoscope*, it is the little girl's deep thought that emerges in the narrative. It comes from her immediate perception of her environment. Through diegesis and mimesis, the author makes, self-effacingly, implicit statements about communist mores, human character, and other aspects of the communist era. None of these come across as if the four-year old meant to. None of these implicit statements streaming from her narrative suggest the existence of intruding thoughts which might need to be spoken.

In connection with the clear narrative of the girl when she was only a child, it is worth mentioning her habit of praying. At around the age of ten, she thought that there must exist something greater than "this world":

> There is an order in this world. This world is not the only one. I just can't see others. But they exist.
> No name will work.
> There is no name.
> Supreme Force.
> Yes.
> That is who I am praying to. (2023, 236)

At the tender age of ten, the author's conscious mind prompted her to pray and provided a reason for doing it.

4. From the age of four onwards

At the age of five, the author's narratives delve into descriptions of the neighbourhood of her parents' place. She concentrates on the intricacies of the relations between the people who lived there and the particularities of the places where they lived. The longest, however, are the descriptions of the connections and the relations which existed between the author and her neighbours. The author's musings accompanying her narratives are also present.

In a neighbouring courtyard, there was a house with "four rooms opening into one another like a train with carriages" (2023, 220). The house belonged to a "landlady", Missie, who had a daughter, Stella (2023, 218). Not all four rooms were occupied by the two: in the room facing the street lived Mila, a "nasty neighbour"

(2023, 224), with her two mothers. Another room was occupied by Kaya, the author's friend, and "her sister, father and mother" (2023, 220).

The author paints a colourful picture of both the way houses and courtyards were at the time and the mores of the time. Her recollections are clear and detailed: "Kaya has no bathroom. She has a stove at the entrance, next to their room, and there is a sink next to the stove" (2023, 220). Mila and her mothers (*sic*) "use the same sink as Kaya's mother" (2023, 224). Both Kaya's father, who is a tailor, and Mila's mothers, who are shoemakers, work in the room in which they live. Neither is there any need to complain about the living conditions, nor to describe them: the short, concise sentences form a pictorial narrative, more suggestive than any other form or style.

The author also mentions the baker's place, which was "across the road" (2023, 220) from Kaya's courtyard, and the place where the woman who made borsch lived, which was next to the baker's place. In this context, she intercalates her insightful observations on the mores. She describes the way Kaya's mother, who sells bread across the road, would favour her when she would go buy bread from her:

> When my mother sends me to buy bread, Kaya's mother takes the money from my hand, puts the change back, and she gives me a nice loaf of white bread from under the counter. But I like brown bread better. (2023, 220)

In the neat narrative above, by simply thinking about her favourite kind of bread, the author makes a statement about the way people like Kaya's mother used to think in those days. With the author's father being a doctor with bourgeois status before the communist regime, it can be assumed that Kaya's mother intended to do a favour to the author's family by giving them white bread instead of the usual brown. The facts are presented just as they appear to the five-year old girl and mingle with her own thoughts. The presumption about Kaya's mother's motives comes to life only in perspective—looking back after the period has ended.

Interspersed within the narratives, there are short mentions about the author's preferences for the nature around. The mentions about the "yellow-red-brown flowers called French marigolds" (2023, 218) in the courtyard where Kaya lives, "the snails and the grasshoppers" (2023, 222) in the small garden in the post office courtyard, and "the vine which covers the walls" (2023, 224) and "the moonflowers" (2023, 224) in the author's courtyard are as many occasions to give biographical sketches about the author.

Whereas the three-to-four-year-old's candid narratives are from her grandmother's house and are sketches of the interior, the five-year-old's are from her parents' neighbourhood and about the people and their condition, houses, and

courtyards. As for the courtyards, there is also a memory of a very snowy winter, when her father and her neighbours had to dig a high-walled path through the snow from the door to the gate. The path was so high that the five-year-old was unable to see the snowman which her father had made for her. The girl muses that she would have liked to sled down from the first-floor window. However, she confesses that she neither liked the winter season nor the winter games.

Also from her parents' place come her recollections from when she was seven. Then, a neighbouring dog called Dracula would bark at her, frightening her whenever he would see her. She would walk together with her six-year old neighbour Kaya, and they would rather talk than play with other, noisy children:

> I walked round the house in circles with Kaya, avoiding the noisy games of the other children. I was seven, she was six, and, instead of hide-and-seek, we talked, looked into shabby courtyards and were startled by dogs barking angrily. (2023, 90)

Around the same time, from her parents' place, she remembers what a typical day was like. Every morning, she had to wash in "a room crammed with two beds, a table, [and] a wardrobe" (2023, 204). Her parents would fetch her a basin of warm water from the bathroom, because the bathroom was being taken by a neighbour who had to shave. This shows how oppressive it was to have to share the apartment with another family. Another memory as appalling as the last is of the harsh living conditions at the time since neither the bathroom nor the rest of the house were heated, and, when the author returned from school, she used to warm her hands while gazing "at the embers in the stove" (2023, 204). Then, the girl would have lunch with her grandmother and uncle, and would do her homework while her grandmother "tried to make no noise" (2023, 204).

Another memory from when she was seven is of Jessie. Jessie's mother, "Tante Irma", was her grandfather's elder sister, who had to take care of the author's grandfather from the age of ten because they were alone. The author's great-grandmother had died and her great-grandfather had left the country for Germany, his homeland. When the author was seven years old and had hepatitis, Jessie paid her a visit which made a lasting memory on the author:

> She exuded warmth. At the age of seven, I could always tell when somebody loved me. It is my secret laser. I can X-ray with my soul. (2023, 228)

When she was nine years old, also at her parents' place, the author would be dismayed by a popular song heard on a New Year's Eve in their "only heated room, with [her] small bed squeezed near the stove":

> "Tractor driver, wait for me, I will bring fresh bread and glee. Hop, and hop, and hop, and hop, gallop horse and never stop! . . . " (2023, 74)

The dismay was not just at the pathetic tune but also at the fake festive season. Communism had changed 'Santa Claus' with 'Father Frost' ever since 1947, when the author was born. Besides, her mother came from work late at night. On the table were "canned fish [. . .], butter, cheese, bread, and not much more" beside grilled "pork chops" (2023, 76).

Among her childhood stories, the author mentions the events surrounding the death of Layla, who gave her a kaleidoscope for Christmas. Layla was another neighbour of her parents. She lived in an attic room—next door to another neighbour, Baba. It is a saddening recollection of the time when Layla's place caught fire, causing her death. The author remembers the two rooms in the attic which had no bathroom and Baba who never washed. She remembers paying a visit to the cellar of the post office with Baba. The cellar was on the ground floor of her parents' house and was full of "discarded chairs, registers, cardboard boxes, carbon paper" (2023, 384). She recounts what it was like to live in those years of "destitution and famine" (2023, 384). As for hunger, the author has a memory of a meal when her grandmother divided the food equally between the three of them: Emmanuel, her grandmother, and herself. While she wasn't very hungry she felt that Emmanuel was. She would have wanted to share her food with him but held back because she didn't want to hurt his feelings. The sad sequence of memories ends with the news of Layla's death. Her room is then obnoxiously occupied by another neighbour who had shared a "tiny basement room in the building" with her sister's family.

5. Recapturing serenity in the end

Apart from the narratives describing the author's early years, much of the novel recounts the author's efforts to become an academic and a writer, the tense atmosphere in the high school and the college where she taught English literature during the communist era, and her troubles in reclaiming her ancestral block and villa in the post-communist years. However, the end of the novel brings an air of relief due to the author's detachment from all previous situations in her life.

A first inkling about the author's attaining detachment from life's tribulations comes right at the age of nineteen, when she recounts the way she found the magic of writing:

> My thoughts are all about writing. I do not seem to be able to invent life. Mother may be right, I may have to copy it first. If I could. But I can't. Either I am myself, or I do not exist.
> I sit down, look at the pen and paper and wait. Noises come first, then light, atmosphere, people who are not me, and who look for my words.
> I no longer hunt the right word. It is rather the right sentence now.
> I felt useless for a long time in my childhood, till I found myself writing words on paper, and then all was right with my world. (2023, 438–440)

Then, close to the point when she declares her detachment from even her most cherished work—that of Professor of English literature at the University of Bucharest—the author describes how writing delivered her from the fog of life:

> I went about my life as my parents steered me. On the whole, I was a good little girl, trained to spend all day by myself and obey orders.
> I had my refuge, though. I had a secret wish. I wanted to put into words the ball of unutterable grief in my heart. I was living in a world of clouds, rainbows, snows, snails, nice or ugly grown-ups, empty Sunday afternoons, lonely camps, winters when your feet froze.
> A broken Kaleidoscope which I alone could mend. By writing it. (2023, 508)

Apart from the association with life, the metaphor of kaleidoscope is also associated, by one of the author's Professors and beloved friends, with a metaphor which may define spirituality; and that is *light*: "In order to rejoice in the life of the Kaleidoscope, one thing is necessary: Light. Where there is no Light, there are no colours" (Vianu 2023, 528). These are the words which end the novel with a connotation of elevating the spirit towards "Light" through love. Light may be as well the emission of photons, the enlightenment of the spirit, the deliverance from the burdens of life. It can even reveal attaining *theosis*—which Archimandrite George avows that is the way through which man is called upon "to become a god by Grace" (2006, 21).

The autobiographical novel *Kaleidoscope* shows the author's way out of the communist nightmare and towards serenity on a path of *theosis*. Serenity is frankly declared by the author in the end of the novel: "I am self-contained and isolated again, just as I started" (2023, 504). The novel ends in the bright tones in which the author spent her childhood years in the homes of her parents and grandparents.

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