

Grave Triplets: Bruno Schulz, Dmitri Shostakovich, James Castle
Part I: Stored Things

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When I was a child, I had a hard time finding things. I was often sent by my mother into the basement of our eastern Idaho home to retrieve a jar of peanut butter, or a small sack of flour, or any number of more or less familiar objects from the cold storage room. The cold storage room was directly beneath the front porch, and the cement walls were probably the very cement of the house's foundation. These walls were lined with wooden shelves, which, to my small body, appeared deep, too deep to reach to the back of without following my extended hand with my head in between the wooden slats.

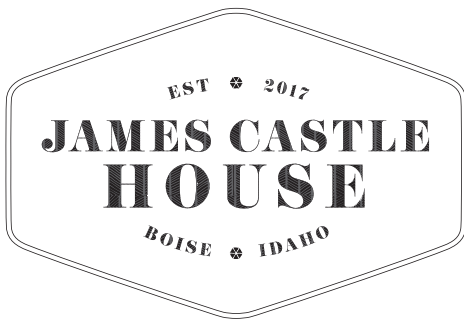
Of course, there was an organizational structure to the way things were laid out on the shelves. Cream of chicken soup was always in the same place, and the peanut butter and powdered sugar and green beans were also presumably to be found in the same place every time over the years. However, I never learned the system, and often would reach the top of the stairs, calling "We're out!" of whatever I'd been sent to find, if I even remembered after climbing the stairs running on all fours as children do.

And anyway, there was always someone else, better at finding, who my mother could send after her object of need.

To this day, I have a hard time finding things I am looking for, whether it's on a store's shelf, or my own bookcase, or in the bed of my pickup. Maybe this is just a core feature of my brain, or my eyes, or the way I look at the world. I don't pretend to know myself well enough to know why this was (and is) the case, but I do have very specific and guttural memories associated with these childhood searches, memories which become more prominent as I get older and more prone to reflection.

This feeling that I remember having while searching in the storage room was one of a specific type of fear. At least *fear* is the word I use to describe the memory to myself, since emotions aren't so easily retrievable from memory as words. It was a sort of fear of the hidden





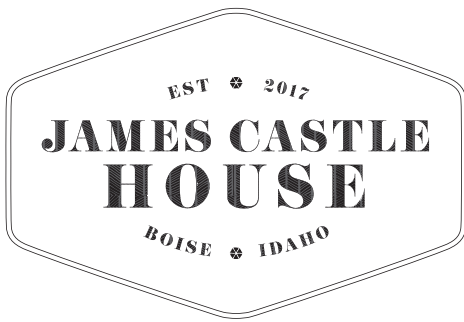
lives of the things I was looking for. That there was a whole different realm of existence in the house that I was not privy to, and did not want to be privy to. And that maybe I myself, or at least my words or movements, might be the key to unlocking this subliminal existence of things in the house. In my imperfect recollection, I cannot remember if I was afraid of the things, or afraid of myself.

It is difficult for me now, decades later, to disentangle the feeling of standing on the concrete floor, looking at deep shelves deeply stacked with stored goods, from the consequent memories of running fearfully out of the cold storage room, past the other storage room, the unfinished one with the ribs of walls still visible and a strange L-shape with the skinny end running back into a dead end, haphazardly stuffed with the dormant Christmas decorations and other clutter of years past, finally past the crawl space I was also viscerally scared of, which space sat just at the junction of the stairs and the large, windowless family room where the TV and Nintendo and bookshelves were.

Similarly, just as the cold storage room and failure to locate are connected in my memory to sprinting out of the basement into the light of upstairs, these memories are also mercilessly linked to my encounters with the spiders, the hobos (*Eratigena agrestis*), that would zip supernaturally fast from a dark corner across the floor, ostensibly seeking out the commercial blue light of the television, often the only light source in the windowless midnight room. Some of my earliest experiences with spine-puckering, adrenaline-aftermath terror are of seeing the unmistakable motion of a large spider at night. I would jump for a light switch and a VHS tape (my sister's Disney movies? My little brother's Star Wars? Me and my older brother's Ninja Turtles?) to squash what I perceived as an intruder. I would look at its mangled self against the child-directed images of the VHS's cardboard sheath. Then feel itchy all night in bed, struggling to fall asleep, thinking of spiders, scratching myself red and welty.

Gratefully, though, I don't think that I made all these connections as a child, or even as a younger adult. The cold storage room was just the cold storage room. The spiders were just spiders. The itching was just itching. If I had collected these different aspects of childhood fear into a single web of experience, the basement might have become impenetrable to me. Luckily, I am opaque enough to myself to make it through the fearful times, realizing only much later how different parts of life reach toward each other, forming secret interconnections.





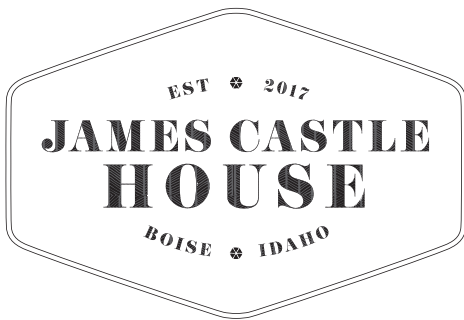
And these realizations don't usually even come from my own recollection, but are usually born from the gentle prodding of long-dead artists.

Although I had been an active recreational reader throughout my childhood and adolescence in eastern Idaho, during my first few years of college in northern Utah I began to get interested in literature as a way of interacting with *humanness*, or the human condition, or whatever you may call this *thing* that is *being human*. At around the same time, I started watching movies with the same seriousness that I was reading books. In other words, as a way of figuring out this whole business of humanity. And being in Utah, the state where my parents were born and raised, and where I was born but not raised, I became interested in the history of my European family on this American continent.

One of the first 'serious' films that I remember watching was Ingmar Bergman's *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961), which is still one of my favorite movies. I don't necessarily remember what it was about that film that caught my attention so forcefully. Perhaps it was simply the fact that it's a Swedish film, which lined it up squarely with my new interest in my family's history. My grandmother's father, the most recent ancestor of mine to have come to this continent from Europe, arrived in the States in 1911, from northern Sweden.

When I watch *Through a Glass Darkly* now, after the sort of awakening that my experiences with James Castle, Bruno Schulz, and Dmitri Shostakovich have provoked in my memories, it is spooky how closely this film matches up with my own emotional reality during childhood. At one point in the film, one of the protagonists, Karin, who had recently been released from an asylum where she was being treated for schizophrenia, is found in the attic whispering to the wallpaper, communicating with what she describes as a god. Near the end of the film, Karin's communication with the attic reaches fulfillment. She stands looking toward what appears to be a closet, reverentially intoning what seem to be magic words, "I understand," as she waits for the appearance of her god. When the god appears, she collapses into a fit, and is sedated by her psychiatrist/husband, played by the recently-late Max von Sydow. After the intravenous sedative has taken effect, Karin explains her experience in the room. "I was frightened. The door opened. But the god that came out was a spider."





Now, after years of remembering and reflecting, and rebuilding my childhood basement in my mind, I'm not sure that fear is really what I felt while I stood, afraid to move or speak in the cold storage room. Perhaps it was somewhat more neutral than fear, something like an awareness of the hidden lives of the stacked things, thoughtfully saved for later use. Or perhaps I sensed the same thing that Karin did, the presence of a god in the places of storage. But where I reacted with cowardice and silence, she used courage and language to find fulfillment of the religious awe that she felt in that purgatory of things. Having witnessed her own completion, though, I am grateful to have reacted so cravenly. The surprise hobo on the floor was more than enough fear for me, without considering the god-spider of the Swedes.

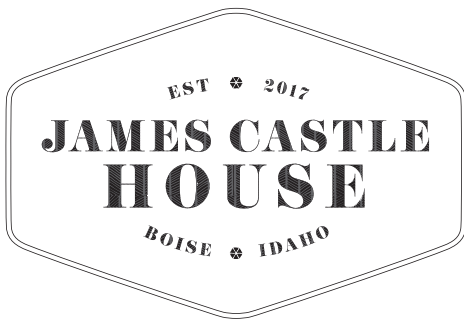
This experience with Bergman's film made a real impact on me, and I've come to think of it as a primer for what was to come as I discovered the works of the Polish writer Bruno Schulz, the Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich, and the Idaho artist James Castle. In this story, all roads have ended up leading to Idaho, and childhood, and a number of rooms loaded with objects that are, in turn, loaded with their own kind of life that I do not understand.

And so, I remember myself again as a child, bare feet on cold concrete, searching full shelves for something I've forgotten. The vague sensation that perhaps I was the one with the power to say or do something to unleash the stored lives of common things is still strong inside me. In many ways, it persists undiminished by time, maybe even strengthened through art. There are times to this day that I am as afraid to move as I was then, for perhaps those specific movements of my hand and arm and fingers reaching are some kind of token, a key that will unlock a door into a realm that is best kept hidden. I am still often afraid to speak, or whisper, or hum, for the same reason. Perhaps my voice, my words, my melodies hold within themselves the password to bring forth new, hitherto secret lives and beings.

Maybe my insufficiency at finding objects has been some kind of defense mechanism, my subconscious coming to my aid, blinding me to the apricot jam or saltine crackers or Crisco, saving me from reaching and awakening.

At the end of the day, I find it is much simpler to reconstruct my childhood *basement* in my mind than it is to reconstruct my childhood *mind* in my mind. I no longer know exactly what I was feeling in those exposed moments. Too many threads have become attached to those





memories over the years. I've become unable to distinguish between the *pure* memories (if such a thing exists), and those versions of my memories that have now been steeped in the art of Schulz, and Shostakovich, and Castle. Their work has become as real to me as the basement where I spent my childhood. While I can see the cold storage room distinctly, the mind of the little boy standing before the shelves has become as opaque to me as the animacy of the shelved objects were to that child.

