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## Listening For A Life

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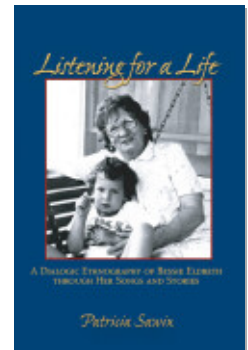
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## 5

*“He never did say anything about my dreams  
that would worry me after that”*

### Negotiating Gender and Power in Ghost Stories

*We have seen that the ghost imports a charged strangeness into the place or sphere it is haunting, thus unsettling the propriety and property lines that delimit a zone of activity or knowledge. I have also emphasized that the ghost is primarily a symptom of what is missing. It gives notice not only to itself but also to what it represents. What it represents is usually a loss, sometimes of life, sometimes of a path not taken. From a certain vantage point the ghost also simultaneously represents a future possibility, a hope. Finally, I have suggested that the ghost is alive, so to speak. We are in relation to it and it has designs on us such that we must reckon with it graciously, attempting to offer it a hospitable memory out of a concern for justice.*

—Avery Gordon

Bessie Eldreth tells ghost stories. More specifically, she tells stories about being haunted, of being visited—without warning or permission—by spiritual presences whose message or import she must struggle to interpret. In contrast to her ordinary stories of personal experience, which she only occasionally has an opportunity to insert into conversation (except with an endlessly receptive listener like me), these are stories people ask to hear. They are self-evidently interesting, eminently tellable. Her grandchildren begged her to terrify and delight them with these tales. She has been invited to perform them for public storytelling events along with other people who are happy to be identified as “story-tellers.” While these tales may thus appear innocuous and merely entertaining,

they recount experiences that Eldreth found deeply troubling at the time. Not only is the moment of contact unsettling and frightening in itself. The ghost's manifestation also propels Eldreth into difficult conversations and negotiations with the people around her. Unspeakable stories come back to life as those whom she presses for an explanation tell about past events that would otherwise have been left hidden. Men and women jockey for control, parlaying their own attempts at courage and their partner's fear into influence in their present relationship. These stories and those who tell and hear them are haunted by the injustice and inequality that constitute this society's dirty secrets, by the gender double standard, by men's sanctioned ability to control women, and by the wealthy's capacity to exploit the poor. The relationships between messenger and message and between message and interpretation exhibit an ambiguity and slippage equally appropriate to the uncanny and to the conception of subjectivity as negotiated in struggle with hegemonic forces. They tell us about the parts of Eldreth's life that she could not speak about directly, that flicker around the edge of her consciousness, and that she is as likely to repress as to acknowledge. Precisely because these ghost stories are eminently "presentable," however, they have served (in a way her more direct narratives of personal experience could not) as means of articulating coded protests against mistreatment to which she was subject because of her gender and her economic situation.

I too am troubled by these ghosts and struggle with how to make sense of Eldreth's stories about them. Appropriately, I have difficulty finding a comfortable space within which to elaborate my analysis. I obviously eschew the classic anthropological stance that strictly distinguished the scholar's "modern" rationality from the subject's "primitive" belief in magic. Neither, however, can I wholeheartedly embrace the current folkloristic remedy, which insists that the only respectful approach is to accept ghost stories at face value and argues that tracing a connection between uncanny events and social forces inevitably and inexcusably "explains away" our subjects' experience of the supernatural (Hinson 2000:327ff; Hufford 1982, 1983). Avery Gordon suggests a way to escape from this dichotomous way of thinking, arguing that "to write stories concerning exclusions and invisibilities is to write ghost stories. To write ghost stories implies that ghosts are real, that is to say, that they produce material effects" (1997:17). Everyone, Gordon reminds us, every society and individual, is haunted by injustices and violations, by all that structures of power seek to deny or keep at the margins to whisper about and scare people with. Whether we understand them in terms that are psychological (return of the repressed) or sociological (subjugated knowledges) or literal (supernatural agents), the ghosts lurk to remind us of what we forget at our peril. It helps to remember that Eldreth herself anticipates that her audience may have difficulty believing these accounts. "Now young'uns," she frequently remarks, "this may sound like ghost stories, but they's absolutely true."<sup>1</sup> To argue, as I do, that both the stories and the experiences they relate are in some senses "about" gender inequalities and the negotiation of

power does not, in my mind, preclude or contradict Eldreth's conviction that she has experienced contact with spiritual forces. I do not understand these stories in quite the same way that Eldreth does, but I feel impelled to grapple with them and with the difference between our understandings. I must, in Gordon's terms, "reckon with [them] graciously, . . . *out of a concern for justice*" (1997:64), out of a concern to make apparent the coded protests against injustice deeply buried in Eldreth's narration.

In Eldreth's practice, the convenient and apparently self-evident label "ghost stories" has an ironic effect in making the private and hidden public and publicizable. Because listeners recognize the genre as entertaining, exotic, and inherently significant quite apart from the identity of the narrator, Eldreth has been invited to tell these stories both by her grandchildren and by audiences interested in "storytelling" or in "Appalachian culture." Neither audience would similarly request the recitation of her personal narratives of ordinary experience, in part because such stories are not obviously performable, in part because the everyday events of an individual woman's life would not as readily be seen as interesting or significant. I vividly recall one of Eldreth's grandsons coming through the kitchen when we were taping an interview, pausing long enough to gather that she was telling one of her nonsupernatural stories, and remarking dismissively, "Mamaw, we've heard it." And I admit that I sometimes tire of hearing the same stories over again. In listening to tapes of her song performances, however, I was surprised to discover that in public she shares only a select few everyday stories, usually at the prompting of the presenters. The out-of-the-ordinary-ness of these ghost stories (which for nonlocals marks the distinctness of Appalachian culture as nonmodern) thus makes them the most welcome, public means for Eldreth to talk about her life experience. Given how prominent gender conflict is in these accounts, the ghost stories thus serve as a surprising vehicle through which Eldreth has been able to explore in covert form an issue that both she and many listeners would find too controversial if it were the evident topic.

Eldreth tells three distinguishable kinds of stories about encounters with the supernatural. We might call them moral exempla, ghost stories proper, and premonitions. Eldreth does not herself differentiate the first and second groups, speaking of both as "ghost stories." It is notable, however, that the stories she heard from her parents or grandparents involve unambiguous reward or punishment for unambiguously good or bad deeds. The stories about hauntings that Eldreth herself experienced or that she helped her mother, sister, or aunt make sense of, in contrast, involve confusion and negotiation over what happened, how to interpret it, who deserves blame or praise, and how to react. The "warnings" Eldreth has received are likewise ambiguous in that the meaning of the premonition and the very validity of her interpreting an experience as a premonition only gradually emerge. Because the ghost is a sign, stories of the supernatural necessarily have a double temporal grounding. The unexpected

appearance in the present refers to something other than itself, an event in the past or the future. The accounts of the two events, the story of the sign and the story of the signified, can be told in either order. The relationship between the temporal ordering of sign and signified and the ordering of the episodes in the story is likewise distinct and characteristic for each of the three types.

Because Eldreth has frequently been invited to tell her ghost stories, I have been able to draw texts from two earlier sources in addition to my own interviews. On March 19, 1980, Eldreth told ghost stories for one of "Four Evenings of Blue Ridge Tale Telling," organized and videotaped by Professor Thomas McGowan at Appalachian State University. McGowan generously offered me a copy of the tape. On April 28, 1981, Katie Spitzer and Judy Cornett audiotaped an interview with Eldreth in which they requested that she tell ghost stories. Spitzer was a student at ASU in a folklore course taught by Professor William Lightfoot and wrote her class paper on two of the ghost stories. She apparently asked Cornett, who was conducting oral histories in the area and had interviewed Eldreth previously, to arrange the introduction. Spitzer filed the tape, with permission for others to use it, in the Appalachian Collection at ASU. I am grateful to the scholars who provided me these resources. Eldreth, I consequently know, produces her ghost stories in similar but not identical ways in different tellings. The availability of multiple versions allows me to choose the best-crafted versions and to comment upon occasional significant variations.<sup>2</sup>

## EXEMPLA

Eldreth, as noted above, applies the single label "ghost story" to accounts of her own experiences with the supernatural, relatives' experiences in which she was peripherally involved, and others' experiences that they told her about after the fact, as well as to what we might call "traditional" ghost stories, that is, ones in which the characters are not identified as local or known. It consequently took me a while to notice that there are marked differences in structure and mood between tales that were probably presented to her as long past events and tales of her own experiences or those she was told as recent personal experiences whose meaning was still debatable.

This first group, then, consists of tales that Eldreth in effect retells, having heard them as stories (rather than having experienced the event and constructed the story), probably when she was a child. These stories also tend to revolve around relationships with neighbors rather than the more fraught family and romantic relationships that dominate the later, more personal ghost stories. They present the haunting as a distant *fait accompli*, and the ghosts in them tend to manifest themselves in relatively conventional forms. These stories are distinctive in the clarity of the moral they convey and the simplicity and directness of their

narrative structure. The tales begin with the event that will prompt the haunting and then proceed to the supernatural manifestation, so there is relatively little suspense. The fact that the event occurred and was resolved some time ago means there is little need or even room for negotiation over what the event might mean. Still, they model—for us as listeners as for Eldreth when she first heard them—the idea that the hauntings are meaningful, that it is their purpose both to impart hidden knowledge and (as Gordon argues [1997:64]) to correct an injustice. Interestingly, even though these stories seem to have quite distinct messages, Eldreth often suggests their linkage in her mind by telling them one after the other.

### *Pointing Hand*

BE: Here's another little | little ghost story. I call it a ghost story.

This girl was a-staying with, um, a lady, and *her* daughter had, uh, . . . stole some money this woman had. She just broke in the . . . her safe—whatever she had—and she stole it, her own daughter. And packed it on the innocent girl that was . . . a-working, a-staying with 'em. And they said that girl cried all the time, 'cause that she was 'cused of it, she didn't get it. Well, uh, . . . finally she killed herself, // 'cause //

KS: //The innocent one?//

BE: The innocent one, uh huh, she killed herself, 'cause it | they kept | 'cause that woman kept blaming it on her. And 'bout nine o'clock *every night* they was a hand on the wall. That hand would | a finger would point . . . at a certain place.

And they was so . . . disturbed about it that they wanted to know what was a-going on. Well, they tore the . . . the ce— | so much of the ceiling out, you know. And there's where that | her own girl had hid the money. And she had stole it herself and hid that money.

Well, after that girl died, it was her | it was *her* finger, it was her hand, that pointed that money till | till that woman found it. And after they . . . tore the ceiling out and got the money out the finger never pointed no more; the hand wasn't there on the wall no more.

And the girl . . . told her momma that she was the one got it, she couldn't live with it no longer without telling that she was the one who put the money there. And the innocent one . . . *killed* herself over it. And then they found it in the ceiling where that | where | the guilty one had put it there. And it her own daughter. Now I just can't . . . see things like that a-going on.

### *Aunt Polly Reynolds*

PS: What's the story about, um, there was a | oh, I know the one, but it was somebody's, um, a woman that it was either you or your momma took care of and then . . . the | finding the money in her—?

BE: Polly Reynolds.

PS: —in her clothes, yeah.

BE: Yeah . . . uh, she | it was | that was a lady used to live up on, uh, | over on Three Top, up, called it, up Ben Bolden. And, uh, one day Grandma decided she'd go see her. And she said when she went in, she said Aunt Polly—we always called her Aunt Polly—said, when she went in said, Aunt Polly said, “Miz Milam, I have been laying here just a-praying that you would come.”

And Grandma said, “Well, Aunt Polly, would you like to go home and stay with . . . with me?” And she said, “Yeah, I would, I'd give anything in the world to go stay with you.” And she said, “Well, I'll go home and I'll send Lindsey after you with the . . . horse and wagon. And bring you down here.”

And she went home and told Grandpa and he went and got her. And took her to their house. And she was real sick 'n she didn't live too long.

And when she passed away Grandma had all of her | she had . . . some awful pretty . . . things, you know, and, uh, said 'bout as pretty a bedspread as she ever laid her eyes on. And Grandma folded them up and | and buried 'em with her, put 'em in the casket with her. And, uh, she had some | her clothes, now, that she had, Grandpa took *them* and dug a hole at the lower side of the garden and put 'em in and buried 'em.

And, uh, the next night they saw a light down there. They said they just kept | said every night for—well, I don't know just how many nights—but they saw a light down there where Grandpa buried the clothes. So he told Grandma | so he told Grandma, said, uh—no, *she* said, “Lindsey, go down there and | and dig them clothes up.” Said, uh, “I c— | every night since you buried them clothes there they've been a light down there.”

And he went and dug 'em up. And they went through 'em, through the clothes. And, uh, in the hem of her . . . petticoat, why, they found three hundred dollars where she had it sewed in her | in the hem, you know, of her slip. And, uh, they got that out and, uh, buried the clothes back. And said they | from that day till | till this they's never no light seen there any more.

PS: Wow.

BE: After they got the . . . the money out.

The old stories that Eldreth has incorporated into her own repertoire are probably not the only ones she heard as a child. But it is not hard to see why these particular tales are ones that would appeal to Eldreth and that she would want to perpetuate. “Aunt Polly Reynolds” depicts her beloved maternal grandparents as generous, selfless, and unconcerned with material things and shows them being richly rewarded for their kindness to a neighbor in need. This story is almost a parable in depicting the unexpected rewards that will be given to those who, in proper Christian fashion, show kindness to the poor and weak in their community. In another version Eldreth even reports that her grandfather slaughtered a yearling cow (an unconscious approximation of the “fatted calf?”)

so Aunt Polly could have a last meal of beef that she craved. The “Pointing Hand” story is equally clear in condemning theft and deception but also has an edge of class criticism. I imagine that Eldreth, who supported her family cleaning houses and hoeing fields for her neighbors, must have come to identify with the hired girl who is victimized but also triumphantly vindicated. The poor working person has no social standing, no ground upon which to combat the unfair accusation, and is driven to despair and suicide. As a ghost, however, she returns with power not only to prove her innocence but also to impel the true thief to confess and presumably save her own soul. Ultimately, she is revealed as more moral than her rich employer. In both instances the ghost rights a wrong, in the one case simply insuring that generous people are suitably rewarded, in the other actually vindicating the falsely accused and punishing the exploiter.

From an early age, then, Eldreth was given to understand that supernatural forces could come into ordinary lives, that the dead could return to complete unfinished business, that as ghosts they might wield more power than they had when alive, and that ghosts might seek to right injustice. Although another story describes a man frightened to death by a supernatural encounter without explaining what he did to deserve that fate, these childhood stories that Eldreth retells predominantly depict supernatural intervention as a force for social good, a means of making things as they ought to be. The ghosts Eldreth was thus alerted to recognize seem to have been primarily what Gillian Bennett calls “benevolent manifestations,” which “are not only caused by events in the mundane world, but are also purposefully *directed* towards them” (1987:52). In these formative stories the meaning of the ghostly sign is obvious to listeners, and the characters in the story, likewise, seem to find the spectral hand and the sourceless light easy to interpret or resolve. In both instances the people who see the sign understand fairly quickly that they need to explore the physical location to which the ghost calls their attention, and they immediately receive an unambiguous explanation. Consequently, although atypically for Eldreth’s stories, reported conversation, if included at all, portrays agreement rather than argument or negotiation. “Pointing Hand” involves no speech (a probable indication that this was a traditional tale, not an account of the experience of an acquaintance). “Aunt Polly Reynolds” employs speech either to make a request that is immediately complied with (“And [Grandma] said, ‘Well, I’ll go home and I’ll send Lindsey after you with the horse and wagon. And bring you down here.’ And she went home and told Grandpa and he went and got her”) or to show that people are already in accord (“Aunt Polly said, ‘Miz Milam, I have been laying here just a-praying that you would come.’ And Grandma said, ‘Well, Aunt Polly, would you like to go home and stay with me?’ And she said, ‘Yeah, I would.’”) The disfluency Eldreth displays when describing the conversation over how to respond to the light (“So he told Grandma, said, uh—no, *she* said, ‘Lindsey, go down there and dig them clothes up’”) only reveals uncertainty about who told whom, since they had both already arrived at the same conclusion.



Gender seems not to be a major issue in these stories. The acts that are rewarded or punished—generosity and theft—would be regarded in the same light for either men or women. And the one couple portrayed, Eldreth's grandparents, is striking for being so thoroughly congruent in their wishes and plans and so supportive of each other. The problematic issue of class difference is not far beneath the surface, however. Eldreth's relatively well-to-do grandparents are arguably commended for making appropriate use of their surplus, sharing the wealth with a neighbor in need, while the employer's daughter is punished for being greedy herself, for playing upon the stereotype of the poor as desperate enough to steal, and for taking advantage of someone whose social subordination robs her of any recourse.

## GHOST STORIES

Once she is a little older, Eldreth begins to experience supernatural encounters herself, as, at about the same age, do other women she knows. These ghosts, however, seem quite different from the purposeful and potentially benevolent actors about whom she had been told. These manifestations are disturbing and potentially frightening. There is no unanimity among those affected about the significance of a ghostly appearance or how to respond to it. These supernatural actors resemble the traditional evil ghosts of British and American lore who haunt the sites of their lives or deaths and whom Bennett identifies by their lack of evident purpose: "Evil occurrences are meaningless and intrusive disturbances of the natural order; they have causes but not functions" (1987:52). Although these stories all concern either Eldreth's own experiences or events she heard about from her female relatives very soon after their occurrence, they likewise follow the narrative structure of a conventional suspenseful ghost story, beginning with the haunting and then going back in time to discover its source. Because of the need for those who experienced the haunting to seek explanations, these accounts are almost always constructed with a story within the story in which someone describes what happened previously in that house. These stories are also full of contentious reported conversation, as husbands and wives negotiate over how to respond to the crisis.

Four stories—three of Eldreth's own experience and one from one of her sisters—will serve as examples to establish a pattern regarding the import and impact of supernatural experiences in these young women's lives. The particular stories that I include in full span a transitional period, from the time when Eldreth is old enough to be left to take care of younger siblings through the early years of her marriage. Pay attention as you read them to the signs that indicate the presence of the ghost, the explanations offered for the haunting and who supplies them, Eldreth's own changing feelings, and the conversations as those affected work out how to respond.

### *Doctor Graham House*

PS: You were telling | you told me about that | the one . . . house, the haunted house, but | and then there's another one where the babies were . . . crying.

BE: That was over on Buffalo, when my little brother was small. Yeah, now that was, uh, that was the Doctor Graham house.

Momma had went somewhere and she hadn't got back. And it's | it's real dark. And she'd left the baby with us to take care of. And we's setting on the steps and we heard this baby a-crying. It wasn't | it wasn't the little baby of Momma's; it | we just heard the baby a-crying, you know.

We got up and run in the house. It went just like it's a-coming to the door. We run in there to the bedroom and it was sound asleep, which it wasn't big enough to even a stoo—; it wasn't even sitting alone; it's a real tiny baby. I don't know why we 'ud a thought it was *it*. And we run back outside and sit down on the steps and we heard . . . heard | went like babies crying again and we . . . run in there and got the baby up and set on the porch with it.

And, uh, then some time after that, Doctor Graham, he come over there. And he always liked me. I was just a young'un, but he was . . . he was seventy-five. And I's in there making up the bed. And he said, uh, he asked me if I wasn't afraid in there. And I told him, "No." And he said, uh, "Well, Mary Black . . . Mary Black's twins—she had twins and they both died in there in that room."

And, uh, so I didn't . . . I didn't think anything about it at the time. But, anyway, he | he said that house is haunted. "This house is haunted." Now he was | he was serious about . . . haunt tales. And, uh, so then I asked him after that, got talking about it, and he said that, uh, they'd heard babies cry there ever since Mary Black's twins died in that room in there.

But | but my momma told me after that that—now she lived close when her and Dad was . . . well, you know, years ago, us children wasn't nothing like grown. Well, I don't even remember . . . that, but she said that, uh, that they said that Mary Black killed both of the babies, that she was unmarried? and that she killed both the babies when they were born in that | at that house. And, now, Doctor Graham, he didn't tell me that she killed 'em, but he said, "Mary Black's twins both died in that room in there."

So, now, I don't know. Momma told me that . . . that she killed 'em.

### *Bob Barr House*

Now, this is the Bob Barr house at Creston. I stayed with my Aunt Edna Milam down there. And Uncle Carter carried the mail. And they had a little baby. And, uh, they had, uh, this was a great old big old-timey house.

And I slept off in the bedroom and they slept kinda like the living room, but they slept over in another room. And I kept hearing things in there. And I kept

telling Aunt Edna, I did, I told her that I was afraid. And, uh, you'd just hear groans and moans and things just like that somebody's a-turning over . . . noise or something.

So I told Edna I was going to go home, that I couldn't I was afraid to sleep in there. And she pulled my bed up to the door—left the door open and pulled my bed up to the door—and said, “Now, if you hear anything,” says, “you jump out and run to me and call.” And, uh, so she got my bed up to the door. Well, I heard that same noise and I jumped out and run to I to her and Uncle Carter?

And, uh, he carried I he—sometimes he carried the mail and he did, well, he carried the mail all the time, but sometimes he'd come in so late, you know, way in the night. And, uh, we could light a I a lantern, now a *lantern*, in that . . . bedroom, where I slept, and you couldn't to save your life make that lantern burn. It'd go out. And you'd carry it on the porch, it'd go out. Get down in the yard, and as long as you was up on that little knoll, going off of there, that lantern would go out. And when we'd get off of that little knoll, light that lantern, we'd carry it for a mile and it wouldn't go out.

Well, me and Edna used to run and I and hide behind the side of the little big gate where Carter'd come in—we didn't want him to know we was scared to death. And, uh, after he'd go up, then, we'd slip along behind the car and while he parked the car we'd run I run in the front door. And, uh, he finally found out how scared we was, 'cause we got to leaving and going to a neighbor's house, to Bill Osborne's over across at Creston, staying there till—sometimes it'd be twelve o'clock before he I before he'd come in.

And, uh, and they said it was I said that Bob Barr died in that room. Now, I don't know what happened, but . . . but he was a real old man; he died in that room.

### *First Married*

Let me check my list what I'm gonna tell you first.

Now this story that I'm going to tell you tonight happened in 1930 in November. Me and my husband had just got married and we moved to a I a two-story house and, uh, no one had ever told us this house was haunted.

So one evening I's sitting there and I's a-piecing on some little quilts. And, uh, while I's a-sitting there I heard just like a clothesline upstairs—I'd never been up the stairs—but it went just like the clothesline was real tight, you know, and some-one hitting on this clothesline.

And, uh, when my husband came in I said, uh, “Go upstairs and get me that clothesline.” He said, “What clothesline?” I said, “There's one up there, because I heard it.” So I insisted and he went on up there and he said, “There's not a clothesline up them stairs nowhere.” And I said, “Well, I heard that clothesline.”

Well, he went on out to chopping some wood. And, uh, then, uh, I had fastened the door good when he went out and when he went on out, why, the door slammed

and it | I had it fastened real good. And the door slammed real hard. And I jumped up and ran in there in the kitchen to . . . close the door—I thought it had blown open—and it was just like I left it. So I just went back and sit down in the living room, started back at my | piecing my quilt. And this door slammed again. And I ran in there again and it was still like I left it.

Well, I began to sort of wonder then about that door, so—we had a pretty big flat rock in the house—and, uh, I propped the door open wide and went back, and when I sat down here come that door slam again. And I went back and it was just like I propped it open. Well, it did that the second time.

Well, the second time I decided they must be something wrong and, uh, I ran back through and I | I went outside. I just had on a short-sleeved dress, and it was a-snowing; it was cold. And he said, “What are you out here without a | without a coat on for? It’s cold out here.” I said, “I’m going to stand here till you cut the wood.” And [laughs] I didn’t tell him that I’d got scared. So he cut the wood and I took me a load in and he took in a load. We went on in the house and set down.

Well, the very next morning my Grandad Milam come up and wanted him to help butcher hogs. Well, he went on down there to butcher hogs and, uh, I kept hearing these sounds and I | I got a little afraid. And, uh, I just kept going on with my work because it was too cold to a walked about three mile in the snow and the wind a-blowing like it was. And when he came in I told him about again | about sorta being afraid, but I didn’t want him to know that I had really got afraid.

So, uh, that night we went to bed and, uh, about two o’clock in the morning, I have never heard such a pitiful . . . moans and groans and crying and taking on. And, uh, I just laid there and listened to it. And I never said a word to him. But, really, I enjoyed it, hit sounded just like a lovers’ quarrel. They would cry—this man and woman both [who were going by?] or whatever. They would cry and then they would, uh, like that they was a . . . in an argument again.

And, uh, the next morning when we got up my husband said, “Let’s go down to | let’s go up to Pap’s and stay tonight.” And I said, “It’s too cold.” We didn’t have a vehicle then. I said, “It’s too cold and I’m not going anywhere.” And, uh, he said, “Well, let’s go down to your Grandpa Milam’s and stay tonight.” And I said, “I told you, I’m not going *nowhere*.” He said, “Well, you can stay here if you want to, but I’m not staying.” He said [laughs], he said, “Did you hear that here last night?” [Audience laughter.] And, uh, I said, “Yes, I heard it, but I was enjoying it.” [Audience laughter.] “And, uh, it | it really thrilled me.” So he said, uh, “Was you awake?” I said, “Yes, I laid and listened to it.” And, uh, I said, “Did you hear it?” And he said, “Yes, I heard it.” And I said, “Well, why didn’t you . . . say something?” He said, “I was too scared.” [Audience laughter.] He said, “I wasn’t gonna say nothing ’cause . . . it’d a scared me to death if you’d | I’d a knew you was asleep.”

So, uh, when he | I saw how bad he was scared then I grabbed my coat and we went to Grandpa’s. And it was down at Creston—we lived at Longhope then—so we went to Creston. And, uh, when we went in my grandpa said, uh | Ed got talking about us a-getting scared. And, uh, Grandpa laughed real big and he said, uh,

“You got scared out, didn’t you?” And, uh, I didn’t want to own that I was a little scared, too, at the time, and then after I saw he was scared, I was scared. So the faster I | we went down that road, I was a-looking back because I didn’t know what was gonna be behind me, ’cause I *had* really got scared then.

Got on down there and, uh, Grandpa got to teasing us about being scared. Uh, I said, uh, “Grandma,” I said, “this sound[ed] just like Maimie—that was my aunt—and, uh, B.J.” I said, uh, “It had their voices,” and I said, “they cried and they quarrelled and they took on,” and I said, “something awful.” And, uh, Grandma said, “Well, now, I’m not going to tell you this to scare you out, but,” she said, uh, “we had to move from that house on that account.” She said, “Maimie would a went stone crazy if she’d a had to a stayed there. She said she couldn’t stand it.”

And, uh, so after they told us about the | about the house *was* haunted, then, uh, the next morning we come back to the house, but we went on, we didn’t | I don’t remember whether we even stopped or not. We went on to *his* Daddy’s and we got a wagon and a team of horses and we moved out.

And [laughs] so we didn’t | we didn’t go back to visit that house anymore, but later one of my neighbors and friends, he asked me if, uh, I wasn’t afraid in that house. And I said, “No, I wasn’t afraid.” Well, he said, “this house is haunted.” And, uh, he said they was, uh, an old lady that was found out there in the ditch lying at the back of this house. And said nobody knowed whether she had just died there or whether she had been murdered. And said nobody never found out. But, you know, we never did go back to visit the haunted house anymore. We was too scared [laughs].

### *Bad Girls*

Well, I’m going to tell you one about, uh, when my sister moved to Virginia, her and her husband, that was when they first got married. And they moved in a big old house and, uh, no one didn’t tell *them* it was haunted.

And, uh, my sister was setting there and she was | she had her nephew with her, and her husband had went down to a | a house to get some chickens to bring up and some of their stuff. And, uh, they heard some noises in the house and went like they’s a-going around the house. And, uh, she got afraid, so her and this | her nephew left with her and they went to, uh, down to where, uh, they’d went after chickens. So they slipped along behind her husband and this | and this boy’s father to keep them from knowing that they’d got skeered. And they’d caught the chickens; and they [sister and nephew] hid behind the chicken house till they got the chickens and then they walked along . . . out of . . . kindly out of sight till they got back home.

And, uh, it was a big old dark hall and they couldn’t keep a light a-burning. And they lit the lantern and it would go out. So they lit the lantern and started off the bank and it went out. Well, then, after they got off the hill, why, the lantern would burn.

And when they got back they hadn't been to bed but a little while till they heard these | these babies a-screaming. And it'd sound just like that they'd start at, uh, one end of the house [gesture with right hand to indicate one side] and they just scream, and cry, and go plumb around the house [circular hand motion with right hand]. It was a real big house.

And, uh, my sister tried to get her husband to leave the house that night and he was afraid, too, but, anyway, they didn't leave that night. And the next day they went to this | to their landlord, the one that owned the home, and asked him if they was anything to be heard there that | told them about the babies crying so much around the house.

And, uh, this lady said, [elbow propped on chair arm; leans head on fingertips] "Well, now, it's not a thing in the world to hurt you all, but if you see it's the imps it could scare you to death."

And, uh, they went back and, uh, that night it started again, the same babies a-screaming. And, uh, she give, uh, her husband right smart of money to leave the house, so they left that night.

And, uh, that woman said | when they went back again she said, "Well, I'll just tell you," she said, uh, "they was some bad women that lived in this house. And, uh, they had some little babies and they drowned them in the well." And, uh, they had been using the water out of the well, and she hadn't told them. And, uh, after they'd | after they left, why, they got someone to clean the well out [raises hand away from body, hand closed], and they found about three or four skeletons of little babies in the well where these bad girls had drowned the babies. And that's what happened.

Now that | they say that was really true that these bad girls had drowned the babies and they had been drinking the water off of the [nods] off of the bones in the bottom of the well. That was in Virginia. [Smiles and gets answering laughter from audience, then drops right hand back into lap and tips head back with a sharp exhalation, whoosh, as if to comment on story—that's an intense one—then a little chuckle as if to comment on her own tendency to tell such stories.]

It cannot be a coincidence that Eldreth's experiences with supernatural agents begin at about the time that she becomes marriageable and end with the end of her marriage. Her first awareness of a ghost (in a slightly earlier episode in a series of stories about Doctor Graham's house, to be considered in the next chapter) occurs when she is trying to find a place in the attic to hide love letters. The last incident of which she has told me (and which we will consider later in this chapter) happens just after her husband's death. Whether one posits that sexual maturity or sharing one's life with a man heightens a woman's sensitivity to the supernatural or, in a more sociological vein, that the ghosts are in some sense attracted by or a manifestation of the tensions in the relationship, it does appear that Eldreth is visited by ghosts during precisely the same years when she has to negotiate her status as a sexual being and her power relative to men. Eldreth's experiences with these

ghosts differ in interesting ways from those of the one other group for which the gender implications of narratives of supernatural contact have been extensively considered: middle-class British women of about the same age as Eldreth studied by Bennett (1985, 1987). The British women almost never expressed belief in traditional malevolent ghosts, but the extent of their belief in the benevolent intervention of the “good dead” in the activities of the living was surprisingly high. A substantial proportion of believers talked about deceased husbands, mothers, or other beloved relatives who remained present in the house or came to the teller in a time of crisis (1987:50; 1985:94). Bennett correlates this tendency with these women’s devotion to and satisfaction in lives of service to their husbands and families, noting that such experiences “give the highest sanction to traditional female values and are thus the strongest justification for the lives the women have led and the duties which they have given their lives to performing” (1987:212; see also 1985:96). Eldreth has arguably had less exposure than those middle-class, urban women to rationalizing “traditions of disbelief” (Bennett 1987; Hufford 1982). Indeed, other people whom she respects shared and modeled her beliefs. Still, particularly given her awareness of counterexamples—like the “Aunt Polly Reynolds” story—that closely resemble the British women’s stories, it appears that Eldreth’s experience of what she and others interpret as conventional, purposeless, evil haunting is connected with her troubled and contentious marriage, her dissatisfaction with the role she was forced to adopt. Ghosts, Gordon reminds us, are “symptom[s] of what is missing” (1997:63), and so much was missing in Eldreth’s life: her husband’s respect and love, adequate material provision, emotional and financial security. These are certainly ghosts with which we must reckon out of a concern for justice.

Gender figures especially prominently in these accounts. Two unusual features immediately jump out at me from these and Eldreth’s other ghost stories. First, women are frequently to blame for the haunting, and their crimes involve violating women’s specific roles as wives and mothers. Second, women are very reluctant to let men know when they are frightened by the ghosts. Several additional features also merit our attention: the relationship between those who experience the haunting and those who can explain it; the relationship between the situation of those who caused the haunting and the situation of those who experience it; and the specific qualities of the sign whereby the ghost manifests its presence.

These stories can be confusing. I admit that they tend to blur together in my mind. The wealth of circumstantial detail combined with the consistent structure tends to make the incidents seem interchangeable; it is not easy to remember which death created which kind of haunting for which people with which response. Indeed Eldreth’s obsession with names and specifics of action that mean nothing to her listeners suggests that, in contrast to polished storytellers who self-consciously adapt their rendition to the understandings and interests of an audience (Bauman 1986, chap. 5), she is still using these stories to work through issues primarily of concern to herself. Additionally, I believe the stories

can feel confusing or conflicted because Eldreth is often talking at cross-purposes, in some respects condemning women in the most conventional patriarchal terms, in others standing up for women's rights to have a say in decisions within marriage and even subtly criticizing men's abuse of their power. Indeed, this is one of the places where the "non-unitary" nature of women's subjectivity (Hollway 1984) is evident not only in contrasts between the different genres that Eldreth employs but within a single genre and even a single story. In responding to contradictory demands, confronting the injustices she and other women experience, yet grasping at opportunities to bolster her social standing, Eldreth cannot enact herself as a consistent individual.

Multiple discourses are intertwined in these stories. I will tease out three in particular: one having to do with the cause of the haunting, one to do with fear management and the appropriate response to a haunting, and one to do with the social implications of the haunted house.

### Cause

Hauntings, in Eldreth's stories as very commonly in the British and American ghost-story tradition, are caused by deaths, sometimes just mysterious or lonely deaths, but often murders. The implication is that the dead cannot rest and must return to call attention to the unusual circumstances of their deaths or to expose the murderer.<sup>3</sup> Eldreth's repertoire includes murders blamed on men and women in approximately equal numbers. Given the actual preponderance of male murderers and the prevailing sense among Eldreth's neighbors specifically (as well as in American culture generally) that men are wilder than women and more prone to violence,<sup>4</sup> the disproportionate incidence of women as murderers exaggerates and calls attention to the possibility of women's misbehavior. When men murder in Eldreth's ghost stories, it seems to come out of nowhere; no explanation is asked for or offered beyond simple "meanness." When women murder, in contrast, their crime is clearly an extension of a prior abrogation of their proper role as submissive wives and devoted mothers. Mary Black, who murders her twins, is unmarried. The women who drown their babies in the well are "bad women," that is, presumably, prostitutes. In a later story, a "woman who was going with her uncle" (note, not "a man who was going with his niece") is identified as the protagonist, accused of arranging for the uncle to murder her husband and suspected of subsequently murdering her uncle/lover/accomplice as well.

It is not part of the convention of the ghost story to inquire into the motives of the murderer. Still, it is worth noting that neither Eldreth nor her sister is represented as asking those who report the originating events about the motivations or background of the women who murdered their babies and husband. Nor does Eldreth as narrator evince the least sympathy for these women's probable desperation or entertain the idea that they might have been driven to do what they



did by unbending social conventions or by violent, exploitative, irresponsible men who should share the blame for these tragedies. What made the “bad girls” turn to prostitution? Had they been deserted by their families or perhaps raped and dishonored so that no one would marry them? How many other babies were they feeding when they despaired of caring for more and drowned the latest arrivals? Where was the father of Mary Black’s twins? Was he willing to help take care of her and them? What would have happened to her and them if they had lived? Was the woman who convinced her lover to kill her husband evil, or might she have been abused, terrified, and out of options? Eldreth certainly knew from experience both how difficult life could be with an unkind and uncaring husband and how much more terrifying it seemed, in the face of social condemnation, for a woman to try to make it on her own. Additionally, the model of the murdered girl ballads that she learned from her grandmother would have informed her that a living child would constitute a strong paternity claim that could expose an unmarried mother to grave danger from her erstwhile lover. Given the availability of pat answers from those who offer explanatory stories, however, she neither asks further questions nor compares these instances with those described in other genres or with her own experience.

These female characters supply the only models in Eldreth’s imaginative universe of women who do the things that she was prevented from doing by the pressures of convention—with incalculably destructive effects in her own life. These are women who choose their partners, who act to end bad marriages, who control their sexuality and fertility. Images of unruly women like these, when tolerated as part of ludic enactments, have served through the centuries to keep the idea of female autonomy, equality, and self-determination alive (Davis 1975:142–151). In Eldreth’s stories the women are ghosts as surely as their murdered babies. These ghosts speak to Eldreth not only of their own tragedies but also, as Gordon suggests, of losses and paths not taken in her own life (1997:63), of the tragedy of being trapped in a loveless marriage and the possibility, however perilous, of a woman refusing a husband’s control. It is probably unreasonable to suppose that Eldreth would overtly sympathize or identify with baby murderers, but her use of these characters suggests how established discourses make women complicit in their own disempowerment. Eldreth takes up a position within this discourse in implicit contrast to the bad women. She is the good woman who *has* taken care of her babies (and grandbabies), no matter how little support she got from her husband, and who *has* honored her marriage vows, even though she was not happy. By supporting the status quo and joining in the unquestioning condemnation of these other women, she can clearly and immediately get credit for the way she has lived her life.

The precariousness of Eldreth’s own economic and moral standing probably made it especially risky for her to explore controversial issues. She could not afford, as I can, to “reckon graciously” with these ghosts, to listen when they speak of other options, to risk being seen as like them, and condemned like them,

if she reveals any sympathy. Rather she is, in Bourdieu's terms, an "agent who 'regularizes' [her] situation . . . win[ning] the group over to [her] side by ostentatiously honoring the values the group honors" (1977:22). I hesitate to call Eldreth's approach "resistance" of any sort, but there is a significant parallel between her self-positioning in this discourse and the "everyday forms of resistance" that, as James C. Scott argues, allow the powerless to "defend [their] interests as best [they] can" without venturing open rebellion (1985:29). Such techniques may succeed in defending the practitioners against the most onerous demands of the system without exposing them to the dangers of direct repressive response from those in power. However, women who do not explicitly analyze and challenge the gender system (like peasants who do not explicitly analyze and challenge the class system) buy certain practical gains at the cost of leaving the hegemonic order intact or possibly even strengthening it by their appearance of assent (1985:32–33). Eldreth acquires the immediate tactical advantage of positioning herself (and thus potentially being perceived) as virtuous but in so doing actually strengthens the gender order that condemns women who seek to control their own sexuality, fertility, or life choices, the very system that made other options unthinkable for her. What we witness here is the effective, self-stabilizing functioning of a gender hegemony (R. Williams 1977:110) and its articulation with the discursive construction of the self.

It is commonly assumed that evil and frightening ghosts are random and purposeless. Their appearance is not ordinarily thought to be related to the activities of those whom they haunt. Those who experience ghosts are simply victims who happen to end up in the place to which the ghost is tied. Eldreth's anxiety about her family's standing, however, seems to impel her to anticipate and defend herself against negative assumptions—namely that the haunting was brought on by immoral behavior—that her present listeners seem unlikely to make. In another version of the story at the Doctor Graham house, Eldreth actually establishes the idea of a linkage herself—"And, uh, my Momma and Poppa used to drink a lot. My Momma's oldest sister had went to look for them. And left us there with the baby"—and is then able to offer only a feeble excuse—"You know, things like that happens." In a story that occurs much later in her life, however, Eldreth again informs us that on a particular day she heard ghostly footsteps in her kitchen at precisely those moments when she allowed herself to read her daughter's romance magazine, but she then vigorously defends herself against the implication that she was doing anything wrong or avoiding her woman's responsibilities, insisting "I never did make it a practice reading *True Stories*" and "I'd got all my washing and I'd scrubbed the floors and had everything done up." In terms of both cause and trigger, then, Eldreth positions herself discursively as a virtuous, responsible, and compliant woman, and in so doing reinforces the gender double standard and the condemnation of women who refuse to be controlled by a social system hostile to them. At the same time, however, by continuing to tell these stories, she does repeatedly juxtapose herself and these tragic,

audacious women in listeners' minds, keeping open the possibility that someone will listen differently to these ghosts. Eldreth can go only as far as to say to these female ghosts, these other mistreated, marginalized women, "I see you are not there" (Gordon 1997:16). She dares not tell their stories from their point of view, give them a voice, or acknowledge that they were dealt with unjustly, since she is herself so hard-pressed to retain her own respectability. She, at least, however, lets them linger as shadows, absences that hint at a presence, silences that adumbrate the challenging that could be spoken, the accusations that could be leveled, and the alternatives for women that could be articulated.

## Fear

Significantly, the people who experience ghosts in these stories are girls of an age to be interested in boyfriends and marriage or young couples attempting to set up new collaborative households. In contrast to Grandma and Grandpa Milam's long-standing, harmonious relationship, which brought them a benevolent haunting, these unsettled new or potential relationships are vulnerable to malevolent influences, to flitting, half-seen images of all that they want not to be. The senseless, frightening invasion of the house by the ghost may mirror the sense that one's body and sphere of action have been invaded by an alien force. Lonely deaths and marriages that never got started, spouse murder and infanticide quite appropriately haunt the promising new marriage and test the partners. It makes good sense that those who are haunted would be afraid of all that they wish to repress, deny, and banish from the realm of possibility.

I cannot tell you in a single word whether Eldreth is or is not, was or was not, afraid of the ghosts whose manifestations she encountered. She says different things at different times about different experiences, and her feelings often change in the course of the events she narrates. Nevertheless, it is extremely striking that, while other actors are universally and automatically frightened by the ghosts, Eldreth in at least some instances portrays herself as initially unconcerned and even pleased. Of the ghost voices she and her husband heard in their first house, she remarks: "I have never heard such a pitiful . . . moans and groans and crying and taking on. And, uh, I just laid there and listened to it. And I never said a word to him. But, really, I enjoyed it, hit sounded just like a lovers' quarrel." She rarely persists in this attitude, even when she achieves it, and in another version of the "First Married" story she actually laughs at herself for feeling that way: "As Momma used to say, maybe I didn't have sense enough to *get skeered*." Still, she calls attention repeatedly to what may be either unusual courage or some sense of kinship or lack of difference that keeps her from finding the ghosts alien and frightening. In thus acknowledging the ghosts, Eldreth at least partially domesticates them. A ghost dragged into the light is much less frightening than one relegated to the shadows. Certainly after years of a disappointing

marriage, and perhaps even as it was beginning, Eldreth seems to know that looking straight at the worst that can happen diminishes its power to hurt you, although she shares this revelation only in the veiled generic form of a ghost story. I even wonder if Eldreth herself partly recognizes that these “supernatural” forces are simply not that foreign. They are manifestations of the lives and relationships of other people—people not so different from herself—and if they continue to manifest themselves and to try to influence the lives of the living, that is not incomprehensible or so different from supposedly normal practices, like telling stories of one’s own experiences to teach and warn members of younger generations. Men, who have the power to counter force with force directly, see these manifestations as foreign and threatening. Women, who are used to paying attention to relationships, waiting for opportunities, and finding indirect ways to get things done, may feel that these spirits are kindred spirits, that their indirect and misunderstood ways of operating are an extension of the way women must work in a world where they have little overt power.

Whatever Eldreth’s “real” feelings when she encountered those ghosts, however, it is clear that the acknowledgement of fear or the representation of fearfulness is something that women, including Eldreth, must carefully manage. Men, because they are presumed to be brave and because they have the controlling power in the relationship with their wives, tend to be direct in admitting their fear. Women, however, are quite willing to admit their fear to each other but are reluctant to admit it to men. When Eldreth stayed with her Aunt Edna and Uncle Carter in the Bob Barr house, she unabashedly reports: “I kept hearing things in there. And I kept telling Aunt Edna, I did, I told her that I was afraid.” Her aunt comes up with a sympathetic solution: “So I told Edna I was going to go home, that I was afraid to sleep in there. And she pulled my bed up to the door . . . and said, ‘Now, if you hear anything,’ says, ‘you jump out and run to me and call.’” At the same time, however, Edna models the imperative to withhold knowledge of her fear from her husband: “Well, me and Edna used to run and hide behind the side of the little big gate where Carter’d come in—we didn’t want him to know we was scared to death. And, uh, after he’d go up, then, we’d slip along behind the car and while he parked the car we’d run in the front door.” Similarly, when Eldreth’s sister and her nephew were too afraid to stay alone in the house in Virginia, “they slipped along behind her husband and this boy’s father to keep them from knowing that they’d got skeered.”

Following those models, when Eldreth repeatedly heard a tightly fastened door “slam open” in the house she and her husband rented just after they got married, she ran out into a snowstorm in a short-sleeved dress but made excuses about her behavior to her husband: “And he said, ‘What are you out here without a coat on for? It’s cold out here.’ I said, ‘I’m going to stand here till you cut the wood.’ And I didn’t tell him that I’d got scared.” Eldreth’s sister’s experience in the “Bad Girls” story reveals that a woman’s admission of fear gives her husband a means to control her or extract concessions. Having “tried to get her husband to leave the

house [one] night” and had him refuse even though he was afraid, too, the sister must eventually “give her husband right smart of money to leave the house.” Thus, in this discourse men and women hold the same position relative to the supernatural, but different positions relative to each other. Men have little to lose by admitting fear; women risk handing their husbands a tool with which to consolidate their control. Eldreth’s treatment of the subject does not explicitly criticize this power imbalance, but she does repeatedly impress upon listeners that fear of the supernatural not only operates on individuals but also influences relationships *between* the men and women who have these experiences.

Furthermore, even in a society where gender roles and expectations are very structured and set, there is some possibility at this early stage for marriage partners to negotiate the modes of interaction and the balance of power that will prevail between them. The characteristic extended dialogues in these stories show the new couples establishing patterns for reacting to the crises that will affect their families. Although, as discussed in the previous chapter, Eldreth evidently lost and only much later regained any right to promote her own opinions and contest her husband’s, in these stories she depicts herself holding her own, asserting a lack of fear, which she may or may not really feel, to be sure that her husband perceives her as the stronger one in this interaction. (This is most evident in another version of the “First Married” story.)

Next evening he said, “Let’s go down to your grandpa’s and stay all night tonight.”

I said, “I’m not going down there.” I said, “It’s too cold.” You see, we’d a had to walked and it’s about three mile.

And, uh, he said, “Well, you can sta—” | he said, “Let’s go up to Pap’s and stay then tonight.”

And I said, “No, I’m a-staying right here.”

He said, “Well, you can stay if you want to.” But he said, “I’m a-leaving; I ain’t a-going to stay.” He said, “Didn’t you hear that last night?”

And, uh, I said, “Yeah, I heard it, but I liked to hear it.” I enjoyed it.

Thus even in these stories of frightening hauntings, supernatural presences that are welcomed open up a space within which the conventions of gendered power become negotiable, anticipating the friendly and supportive spirits who later visit Eldreth with empowering premonitions.

A related and highly distinctive feature of the hauntings is the uniqueness and specificity of the signs through which the spirits manifest their presence. Sometimes there is a logical and poetic connection between the sound and the ostensible cause, as when they hear baby steps or baby cries in the houses where babies were killed. Other times the association seems arbitrary, as when they hear a lovers’ quarrel in the house where an old woman died. In contrast, however, to the highly conventional signs like the ghostly light that reveals the treasure in the “Aunt Polly Reynolds” story (Baughman 1966, motif E371.10\*), Eldreth

hears not just the sound of ghosts quarrelling (1966, motif E402.1.1.8\*) but the voices of her Aunt Maimie and Uncle B.J. She likewise experiences not just a ghost opening doors and windows repeatedly (1966, motif E338.1c) but the sound of a specific door slamming, even though she has propped it open with a rock. In a later story the ghost of a drowned man makes itself known with what Eldreth describes as “the sound of a car door falling in the creek.” In the version of the “First Married” story given in full above she gives an even more precise and concrete characterization of the sound, “I heard just like a clothesline upstairs—I’d never been up the stairs—but it went just like the clothesline was real tight, you know, and someone hitting on this clothesline.” And in another version she adds yet another detail: “But it went just exactly like somebody hitting a clothesline with a knife, you know, how they rattle? where it’s . . . drawn tight?” Sound is a fascinating medium for the ghosts to employ because a listener automatically forms a very specific image of the source without having to (or in these instances being able to) secure visual corroboration. The clarity of the sound image gives Eldreth the confidence to persist in her interpretation—despite contradictory evidence—with her husband: “And, uh, when my husband came in I said, uh, ‘Go upstairs and get me that clothesline.’ He said, ‘What clothesline?’ I said, ‘There’s one up there, because I heard it.’ So I insisted and he went on up there and he said, ‘There’s not a clothesline up them stairs nowhere.’ And I said, ‘Well, I heard that clothesline.’” This bolstering of faith in her own perceptions and analysis likewise anticipates the supernatural support she receives in later premonition encounters.

### Haunted Houses

A third discourse in which Eldreth positions other characters more obviously than herself inquires who is to blame for any injuries that the residents of a haunted house suffer. One kind of answer is supplied by the “cause” discourse, and it is emphasized by being situated as the last word in many of the tales. About the “Bob Barr House,” “they said that Bob Barr died in that room. Now, I don’t know what happened, but he was a real old man; he died in that room.” And about the house where she and Ed lived when they were “First Married,” a neighbor “said they was an old lady that was found out there in the ditch lying at the back of this house. And said nobody knowed whether she had just died there or whether she had been murdered. And said nobody never found out.” In these instances, then, no one is obviously to blame, and the sources of the inconclusive information are left correspondingly vague. At the “Doctor Graham House,” however, Eldreth hears from two authoritative sources: “Doctor Graham, he didn’t tell me that she killed ’em, but he said, ‘Mary Black’s twins both died in that room in there.’ So, now, I don’t know. Momma told me that she killed ’em.” And at the house where the “Bad Girls” had lived, the owner is

likewise the source of the information that “these bad girls had drowned the babies.” Blame is firmly fixed, both by Eldreth’s mother, whom we can easily imagine being motivated to instruct her daughter about the terrible things that can happen to an unmarried woman who gets pregnant, and by the landlords, who have good reason to deflect responsibility from themselves.

Another kind of answer is supplied by the opening lines of several stories: “And [my sister and her husband] moved in a big old house and, uh, no one didn’t tell *them* it was haunted”; “Me and my husband had just got married and we moved to a two-story house and, uh, no one had ever told us this house was haunted.” People who can anticipate what the new resident will experience but withhold that information are also, in Eldreth’s construction, culpable. The almost identical phraseology emphasizes that this is how she is inclined to begin a ghost story if left to her own devices and not prompted by a question that steals some of the introductory material. The pause marked by an “uh” calls attention to the linkage between the two clauses and to the evaluation implied. Eldreth does not seem inclined to blame Doctor Graham, who (she often remarks) was “sweet on” her and who volunteers the information, perhaps to tease her, in the least frightening form. Nor is she evidently critical of her grandparents, even though “Grandpa laughed real big and he said, ‘You got scared out, didn’t you?’” and her Grandma eventually admits, “Well, now, I’m not going to tell you this to scare you out, but,’ she said, uh, ‘we had to move from that house on that account.’ She said, ‘Maimie would a went stone crazy if she’d a had to a stayed there. She said she couldn’t stand it. ” Eldreth paints a similarly respectful portrait of Jack Holman, another neighbor and landlord, who answers her directly when she tells him what she has experienced in his house:

And then I asked him, I told him what I’d been a-hearing.

And he said, “Well, I told you that I’d tell you the truth.” He said, “This house is haunted.” He said, “We started hearing things in the house and outside and ’round the house right after I found Dad dead.”

Eldreth expresses outrage, however, at the landlady who not only failed to warn her sister that prostitutes had lived in the house and were suspected of drowning their babies in the well but also lied about it, answering initial queries with a fiction about “imps.”

When they went back again she said, “Well, I’ll just tell you,” she said, uh, “they was some bad women that lived in this house. And, uh, they had some little babies and they drowned them in the well.” And, uh, they had been using the water out of the well, and she hadn’t told them. And, uh, after they left, why, they got someone to clean the well out, and they found about three or four skeletons of little babies in the well where these bad girls had drowned the babies. And that’s what happened.



Now that I they say that was really true that these bad girls had drowned the babies and they had been drinking the water off of the I off of the bones in the bottom of the well.

It is significant that (with one exception to be discussed in the next section) all of the hauntings that Eldreth experiences in a house occur in a *rented* house. We spoke earlier of the vulnerability and suspect respectability of those identified by the community as “just renters” (Batteau 1983:148). Typically, in southern mountain speechways, the “old home place” continues to be known by the owner’s name, regardless of who actually lives there (Allen 1990:162). Eldreth reveals her tenuous claim to these homes by labeling many of the houses and stories about the events that transpired there with the owner’s name: “Now, this is the Bob Barr house at Creston.” The owners know the houses are haunted, but they withhold that information to their own advantage. They cannot be sure that renters will experience the hauntings or find them intolerable if they do, but they prefer not to risk the reluctance to rent the house that might be inspired by the news that other people have encountered a ghost there. Renters’ lack of full rights is reinforced, however, by the owner’s assumed privilege of judging what the renter will find adequate and acceptable (Batteau 1983:148). In this respect the ghosts materialize the potential for a landlord to turn the necessary provision of shelter into a grossly lopsided and exploitative interaction by supplying an unsafe or unwholesome place to live. Eldreth does not lay blame on landlords who are neighbors and who care about her and treat her with respect, thus banishing the specter of exploitation. She does castigate the nameless landlord (interestingly, a woman) who dishonestly tries to pretend there is no problem and exposes her tenants not only to the risk of being frightened but to the loathsome experience of drinking water steeped in murdered babies’ bones. Class divisions exist and pose a danger, but their effects, in Eldreth’s experience, can be mitigated by neighborly concern and respect.

By pointing a finger of blame at the owners but then shifting her gaze, Eldreth also hints that there is another responsible party, though she dare not speak his name, and that the ostensible class issue camouflages a gender issue. Throughout her marriage, Eldreth, as she now says, “ain’t never lived in nothing but a shack from here to yonder.” She lived and raised her family in substandard housing—including two houses that burned down and one swept away by a flood—because her husband was unwilling or unable to work hard enough to provide better. The first and only house she has ever owned was one that she saved the money for out of her own labor and that her sons built for her when she was almost sixty years old. Until she built her own snug house and carved her initials on the doorstep, Eldreth existed among those marginal “people who [because they] do not own the land they live on are automatically excluded from” what Barbara Allen calls “the genealogical landscape” (1990:162). Eldreth thus positions herself as a victim, not of the ghosts, but of her husband’s laziness and irresponsibil-



ity. He had the responsibility for providing a home for his family; he was the one who exposed that family to threat—ghostly and substantial—by failing to provide their own home and land and keeping them instead in rented places that were still “possessed” in two senses by potentially threatening others. The cruelest and most evasive ghost in these houses is her husband’s neglect, a ghost that retains its power because for so many years Eldreth cannot name it aloud, though she can use her popular ghost stories to hint obliquely at its presence.

## PREMONITIONS

Eldreth, even as a young woman, is not always frightened by the ostensibly purposeless and hostile supernatural visitors that other people automatically find terrifying. As she matures, she continues to encounter such “ghosts,” but she also periodically receives supernatural “warnings” which, though troubling, are ultimately beneficial and thus presumably beneficent. The possibility of such premonitions is also something Eldreth learned about as a child:

And I knew one family that—well, Momma said that they was six children and a father and mother and they all got that flu.

Well, said that [sighs] this woman told some of ’em, said, “I had the saddest dream a week or two ago that, uh, I’s in the prettiest green field and all the | the little green grasses withered and died.”

And, uh, ’bout | ’bout a week or two weeks later they every one took that flu and all six of her children died with it.

And they said she | Momma said she never did go back to the table to eat, said she’d just get her a little saucer or something and set down in the corner somewhere, wouldn’t go about a table ’cause | on account of the children all dying.

These visitations may take several forms: a feeling, a presence, a dream. In contrast to the ghosts, whom others also perceive and know about, these warnings come to Eldreth alone. Lacking corroboration, she must defend not only the significance of these uncanny experiences but also the very validity of her own perceptions and her decision to interpret them as “warnings.” Eldreth’s stories about her premonitions have a typical and consistent structure that, logically, reverses the ordering of episodes in the ghost stories. The warning arrives first. Eldreth recognizes that it is a sign of something, but she is not provided with foreknowledge of what that will be, and she responds, if at all, on the basis of instinct rather than informed preparation. This generates suspense until, in the fullness of time, it becomes apparent to what calamity the premonition was referring, and Eldreth is vindicated for interpreting it as a warning. In only one instance of the three she has related to me is Eldreth empowered to protect her family and then only at the cost of suffering a lesser injury herself. Because her

husband is the primary doubter, however, these supernatural manifestations create rare opportunities for Eldreth to speak back to him and to insist upon the validity of her own perceptions and interpretations. These are the apparitions who, in Eldreth's experience, "also simultaneously represent a future possibility, a hope" (Gordon 1997:63), an alternative life in which Eldreth can dare to contest her husband's control.

In one story, probably from the 1960s, Eldreth invites her husband, "Ed, go to church with me," even though he usually refuses. The invitation is an appropriate act for a believer, since it opens the possibility that she could serve as an instrument for God to touch his recalcitrant heart. When Ed retorts, "I ain't a-going to church tonight," Eldreth finds herself gripped by an inexplicable "feeling" and surprises herself and him by exclaiming, "I hope and pray to God, something shakes you out before I get back." When she gets home from church Ed reluctantly admits that they had an earth tremor (which affected the house but not the church) and Eldreth gets to exult that what she involuntarily prayed for actually came to pass.

In a story from the early 1970s, shortly after she has moved the family to her own new house, Eldreth senses a figure that appears to be her daughter-in-law come into her bedroom during the night, approach the bed, and pinch her. In the morning Eldreth, again without knowing precisely why, becomes upset at the idea of her son going down the mountain to his job in North Wilkesboro and convinces him to stay home. Later that day, she and her daughter-in-law go out to do errands, taking the car he would have driven, and the brakes fail. Fortunately, since they were on their way to the hospital to pay a bill, they crash in a place where they can receive immediate help, whereas the son would probably have been killed had the brakes given out on the tortuous grade down off the Blue Ridge escarpment between Boone and Wilkesboro. When the women arrive home, however, their husbands express more concern about the damage to the car and the uncompleted chores than about their wives' injuries, although they eventually apologize.

Eldreth's most poetic story, concerning the great flood in 1940 that wreaked so much destruction in the mountains, is also the earliest incident and the one in which she most conclusively and satisfyingly proves herself right. In this particular telling, her handling of my interruption also demonstrates how much she regards this story as a polished piece, not, as I initially imagined, as just a conversation about the facts of a historical event.

### *The Flood*

And during the flood we went through all that mess. That's the 1940 flood. Everything we had washed out. My husband's sister, everything she had washed away. Aw, they was chickens, calves, and hogs, and . . . everything else that washed out in that flood. And then they's over on | next to Jefferson, over on Beaver

Creek that . . . two or three or four that drowned. And I | they's one child, and man and a woman. It was | it was rough.

PS: How did people keep from going hungry if everything had gotten . . .

BE: Well . . .

PS: washed away?

BE: Well, I reckon they, as the saying is, I reckon they survived.

I had the prettiest garden that time that I ever had in my life. And the prettiest peas; they was | they was every bit of waist high and hanging just as *full* as they could hang of peas. And had an awful pretty sweet potato patch . . . in the garden, prettiest you ever saw, and it was | it was in August, and the flood. And hit | hit just, well, the water was . . . from bank to bank, just as muddy as it could be. And when that house . . . bursted loose it was just | hit just spread out on that water.

I'd canned over 500 cans that summer. I just worked like everything filling cans, you know? I had ninety-some cans of strawberries and strawberry preserves, wild ones that I had picked back on the mountain and carried 'em off and canned 'em and everything. And when it . . . everything just . . . seemed like it went smooth and easy.

And three weeks before that, I told . . . Ed, I said, uh, "I had the awfulest dream last night." And he said, "You're always dreaming something." And I said, "Well, I | I never dreamed a dream in my life that worried me but what something didn't happen." And I said, "I dreamed that me and you was going up and down the creek bank through here picking up naked chickens." And I said, "They didn't even have a feather on 'em."

And, uh, about three weeks later . . . it started raining. And it was rain, rain, rain, raining. The water kept getting up and it'd softened the mountains, you know, and everything, till it come them slides out.

And, uh, after the water went down . . . we had a hundred and sixty-eight head of chickens. And we had one hen and some little biddies was all we had left. And a rooster. And that rooster, hit had got up on a stake up on the bank a little bit—the water was surrounded around the stake—and it stayed up on that stake and crowed . . . just as hard as it could crow. But it never | it didn't wash it off of the stake. It was | hit'd got up above the water, you know, on the bank. Oh, if it had been down any further, why, the water was higher than this house, . . . muddy water and logs a-rolling and everything else.

And after the water went down I went down through there; me and Ed was walking along the creek bank. And I don't know how many chickens I picked up, just took 'em by the feet and held 'em up. And I said, "Ed," I said, "you hooted at me," I said, "three weeks ago when I told you I dreamed of walking up and down the creek bank picking up naked chickens." And, young'uns, they was just exactly like they'd been picked; they didn't have a feather on 'em. And I just held 'em up and showed him. I said, "Right here is what I told you three weeks ago." He never did say anything about my . . . dreams that would worry me after that.

Eldreth's accounts of the premonitions are revolutionary in decisively depicting her as a knower and her intuitive perceptions, however inchoate, as a valid form of knowledge (Harding 1987:3; Belenky et al. 1986:18–19). As Catharine MacKinnon has argued, to be *objectified*, to be the *object* of knowledge and action (never the subject) is what defines women as a class in patriarchal culture, while men are defined as those who know and act upon women (1982:536–541). Eldreth's husband wants to deny her the status of knower/subject in these extraordinary cases, as in everyday life, but in these few instances she fights back and wins. She may not know *what* the premonitions mean, but she knows that they are meaningful. When her husband challenges her claim, he is proved wrong. The supernatural becomes a powerful ally, enabling Eldreth to stand her ground.

As with “women's intuitions” more generally, however, the source and nature of Eldreth's special knowledge expose her to accusations of irrationality. In the flood story, her husband initially dismisses her belief that the worrisome dream could be a premonition: “You're always dreaming something.” And in the earthquake story, he responds to the coincidence of the tremor with her prayer for something to “shake him out” by accusing her of being “crazy” rather than admitting the possibility that she possesses foreknowledge or extraordinary capacities. Eldreth, however, is consequently empowered and vindicated in direct correlation to her husband's being subordinated and proved wrong. Ed never gives his wife the satisfaction of apologizing for his doubt or actually conceding that she was right, but he must at least shut up and keep his criticism and doubts to himself: “He never did say anything about my dreams that would worry me after that.” His attempt to discredit her as “crazy” serves only to reveal his fear and resentment of a woman he cannot, in this respect, control. In the pinch story, Eldreth's son, who, in marked contrast to his father, accepts the validity of his mother's foreknowledge or at least honors her concern enough to act upon her recommendation, is consequently saved from death.

Eldreth's sensitivity to “warnings” is not an unmitigated benefit. The supernatural visitations can be frightening. The knowledge she receives is only partial. It allows her to save Carl from the car wreck but not to protect herself and Libby. Nor does it enable her to keep the products of so much of her labor from going to waste in the flood. As in the ghost stories, then, the supernatural intervention seems to have more to do with the imbalances in intimate human relationships than with the material world or other aspects of people's lives. Like the vision of the children's deaths experienced by her mother's friend, the premonitions do not confer the kind of usable foresight (for instance, explicit warning that a flood was coming) that might drastically alter Eldreth's life or establish her conclusively as the possessor of extraordinary knowledge. They do, however, provide sufficiently specific images (the desire for a “shake-out,” the vision of naked chickens on the creek bank, the conviction that Carl should not go to work that day) to give her the satisfaction of being proved right in the end. Like her lack

of fear of ghosts, her premonitions embolden Eldreth to stand up for herself and to extract a modicum of respect from her husband. In this respect, also, Eldreth's application of the experience exceeds the model she learned as a child.

In the ghost stories, neighbors or relatives often step in to provide information and guide the interpretation. Eldreth uses reported speech in those narratives not only to depict the affected couple's negotiations but also to portray wider conversations about how to interpret the haunting or to allow the owner or previous resident of the house to offer an explanation of prior events. That is, she demonstrates that knowledge and authority are shared and negotiable among friends and family members, and she often depicts someone outside the marital dyad as the source of authoritative knowledge. In the premonition stories, Eldreth departs radically from that practice and presents herself in unambiguous terms as the authoritative speaker. She quotes her own retort to her husband, often more than once, and concludes the narrative briskly with an authorial evaluation confirming and insisting upon the rectitude of her stance. In the earthquake story, "I said, 'I *told* you,' that's the way I spoke it, I said, 'I *told* you I hope and pray to God something shook you out before I got back.' [. . .] And it did." In the flood story, "And I said, 'Ed,' I said, 'you hooted at me,' I said, 'three weeks ago when I told you I dreamed of walking up and down the creek bank picking up naked chickens.' And, young'uns, they was just exactly like they'd been picked; they didn't have a feather on 'em."

It is also important to note that Eldreth does not draw a firm line between spiritual supporters conceived as ghostlike and personal intervention by God. It is not clear, for instance, what exactly inspired her to blurt out the remark to Ed about something shaking him out. She has no doubts, however, about who caused the subsequent earthquake. She concluded one telling of that story by remarking:

They've never been but one perfect person on this earth and it was God. [. . .] But I'm gonna tell you something, if I'm not serious . . . I'd better not pray . . . for something to happen, 'cause it will. [. . .] Now I have prayed prayers that would absolutely shock me when I *knew* they was answered. Now that's the dying truth.

I was never able to get Eldreth to discuss her conception of the relationship between God and ghosts or supernatural actors. In her experience, however, God himself may be one of the sources or even the ultimate source of the intuitive support that occasionally enabled her to portray herself as an authoritative knower and renegotiate the balance of power with her husband. Her practice thus appears to resemble instances of ritual spirit possession (those that have been analyzed as enabling women to express discontent and manipulate men without fully taking responsibility for nonapproved behavior or directly criticizing the system [for example, Lewis 1971:116]) more closely than the kind of explicit attack on societal gender norms voiced by nineteenth-century American spiritualist mediums

(who lectured while in trance about marriage based on economic necessity rather than on love as the root of women's oppression [Braude 1989:117–118]). Still, while Eldreth could argue that she acts involuntarily—as the spirit moves her—in the premonition stories, she far exceeds her own practice in the ghost stories, portraying herself as—rather than in contrast to—a woman who takes responsibility for interpreting her own experience. These are apparitions with whom Eldreth can reckon graciously—since their origin is unknown and possibly heavenly—and they empower her to expose and confront her husband's lack of appreciation. Indeed, it long struck me as strange that Eldreth could simultaneously maintain beliefs as divergent as those implied respectively by the ghost and premonition stories. In part this seems to be explained by the separability of distinct discourses or conversations and the self-positioning they offer. When talking about the causes of hauntings, Eldreth can situate herself in opposition to unconventional women, while when talking about premonitions, she can portray herself as unconventional without sensing a contradiction. It may also reflect cognitive processes, according to which beliefs acquired from an explicit verbal source are readily isolated from beliefs acquired through direct experience (Strauss 1992). Eldreth's most recent uncanny experience, however, forces her to breach the boundaries between these discourses and ways of thinking.

## A FINAL REVENANT

Once Eldreth moves into the house that she owns and paid for with her own hard-won earnings, she appears to be safe from threatening ghosts, although she continues to experience empowering premonitions. The most recent ghost experience that she narrates, however, occurred in her new house shortly after her husband's death. This latest story is distinctive in being the only one in which not only the process of interpreting the uncanny event according to given models but even the process of deciding which models to employ is played out in the course of narration.

### *Light in the Bedroom*

(Eldreth had just finished telling the story about “Aunt Polly Reynolds.”)

You know, I've thought about that, about | when my husband died, he | they was | about that light, you know, that would flash up in my bedroom so much. Did I ever tell you about it?

PS: I think so.

BE: And, uh, it was | for a long time it would kindly | it'd dashed me, you know. But I got till I, when I'd turn the light off I'd close my eyes real tight. But now, honestly, that light would go down in under the cover with me. It did. That light'd | when I'd turn that cover down and after the light was turned off, that light'd go down under that cover as pretty as I ever saw a light in my life.

And, uh, I had a quilt on my bed that I thought might be the cause of it, that I that was on *his* bed when I before he died. And I rolled that quilt up and sent it to the dump. Because I felt like that maybe that's the reason.

But I still saw the light. It didn't make I it didn't change a thing. But the light . . . for a long time, well, for two or three year or longer . . . probably than that, that light would flash up.

But I've not seen it now in a good while.

I told this I I was talking to somebody about this where I'd went to sing one time, and these people said, "Well, you know, maybe," said, "maybe it was the Good Lord watching over you." I said, "Well, I've thought of that, 'cause," I said, "it was I it was as bright a light as I ever saw." And, I said, "I I a few times I've thought, well, it might be my husband."

And I thought I and then I said, "But he wasn't that protective over me when he's living." [Laughs.] I had them all laughing, those people, I said that.

In the formation of narratives from experience, contradictions may be exposed when the narrator is forced to choose among available models both for understanding and reacting to events and for constructing a narrative about them. In Eldreth's case, the opportunity to perform her stories and the incorporation of metastories about storytelling into the texts themselves also prove to be important resources in completing a small but significant shift in self-presentation.

The light that "flashes up" in her bedroom and even follows her under the covers frightens Eldreth. As she says, "It'd dashed me." She needs to find an interpretation. The possibility that the light might be a premonition is summarily ruled out by the lack of a subsequent remarkable event. However, given that this house has no previous owners or residents to ask for advice or information, she is not going to be provided a ready-made explanation as in the ghost stories. Rather Eldreth must choose an explanatory model to account for the phenomenon and, as in the premonition stories, arrive at and maintain an analysis entirely on her own authority. Three kinds of models suggest themselves. First Eldreth considers and rules out ordinary causes. In another rendition she begins the story by describing that process explicitly:

Well, shortly after my husband passed away, I went in the bedroom to get ready to go to bed. And they was the prettiest light; it was something like . . . that big [uses both hands to indicate a circle the size of a softball]. Hit was so bright that it hurt your eyes. And it was just I just going all over my bed. And I looked at the windows. I thought, "Well, could that be a flashlight, someone's flashing a light in at the window?" Well, no, it wasn't; it was too bright for that. And then, uh, I had curtains, you know. I keep curtains over my windows good.

The next obvious possibility is to equate this light with the light in the story of her grandparents' caring for Aunt Polly Reynolds. This comparison provides

both an explanation and a model for action, since it connects the ghostly light to the possessions of the recently deceased person. Such a possibility would make sense, since the quilt on Eldreth's bed is one her husband slept under before he died. And although Eldreth does not articulate the further comparison, it is potentially complimentary to imply that the light could be intended to reveal something Ed had hidden to reward her for nursing him during his long, agonizing battle with emphysema, just as her grandparents selflessly nursed their neighbor. The very structure of the story implies a mismatch, however, since this story must begin with the unexplained light rather than with a report of what she did for her husband. Eldreth nevertheless acts on that potential connection and throws the quilt away: "And I rolled that quilt up and sent it to the dump. Because I felt like that maybe that's the reason." Her grandparents responded to the light they saw by bringing back into the house apparently worthless clothes that had belonged to a destitute woman, and they were rewarded. Eldreth, in contrast, far from receiving a reward, has to sacrifice something valuable, a quilt she had probably made with her own hands. Her willingness to make such a drastic move suggests how threatening she finds the light and how much she is willing to give up in order to get rid of it. But the technique proposed by her grandparents' model does not work: "But I still saw the light. It didn't change a thing."

This leaves Eldreth with a model that she mobilizes only implicitly. If the light is not a natural phenomenon or a premonition or a clue to a reward or just a bit of spirit tied to the deceased's possessions, then it must be a hostile ghost. Since hauntings, as she understands them, are always caused by deaths in the haunted location and since Eldreth's house is quite new and has never belonged to anyone else, she is sure that her husband is the only person who has died there. It thus seems clear that this revenant is her husband. This conclusion has a number of unpalatable corollaries, however. First, comparison with the causes of haunting in Eldreth's other stories might imply that this ghost's appearance results from evil behavior by a woman who stepped outside her proper role. Such a conclusion hardly seems fair, given how dutifully Eldreth nursed her husband through years of disability and illness, but the bad feelings she harbored toward him may not have let her conscience rest easy. Second, her husband's return in the form of the light (which even shares her bed) suggests that she will never be rid of him, that he will always be there to observe and control her. Furthermore, as a ghost, Ed finds a peculiarly effective means of striking at his wife. Her sensitivity to supernatural contact provided her with one of the few means she ever had to challenge her husband's domination, and he did not like that. Once he is dead, he enters that supernatural realm and can contact her as a ghost. The supernatural channel had supplied Eldreth with knowledge and power to fight her husband; he takes over that channel and uses it to punish and frighten her.

Furthermore, as both Ed and Bessie Eldreth knew from the model of earlier stories and from their own common experience in the house they lived in early in their marriage, the only way to escape from this kind of senseless, malevolent



haunting is to abandon the house to which the ghost is tied. Given their history together, Eldreth's new house—the one she paid for herself without his help—must have been a daily reproach to her husband, a concrete reminder of his failure to fulfill his responsibilities. Eldreth is proud of that house and happier and more secure there than she ever was in any of the homes he provided. Driving her out would be a logical and terrible revenge, one that Eldreth is determined to resist. Eldreth does not dare to state this conclusion overtly, but the behavior that she reports as a continuation of the story allows her to give some strong hints of what she is thinking.

In various versions of the story, Eldreth describes herself as responding in two ways to the light once her quilt ploy fails to banish it. First, she simply resigns herself to its continued presence—“But the light . . . for a long time, well, for two or three year or longer . . . probably than that, that light would flash up”—and tries to find ways to keep it from bothering her—“And I got till I wouldn't . . . I would *not* turn the light off, my bedroom light, till I got ready to crawl in the bed and then I'd close my eyes real tight to get in the bed.” This simple decision is more significant than it may appear. Ed Eldreth is dead and should, at last, be out of his wife's life. But as a ghost, he refuses to disappear and leave her alone. Even more frightening in this form because less predictable, he haunts her. Clinging to patriarchal power, he lingers vindictively, half-absent, half-present, refusing to allow Eldreth the closure his full absence would confer, refusing to let her get on with a new life from which he is absent (Gordon 1997:64). In determining to find a way to ignore the light and not to be frightened, Eldreth harkens back to the spunky, curious girl she was when she first married Ed and to the actual lack of fear she felt when encountering some of her first ghost experiences. She also demonstrates that she has internalized the lesson that she articulates in the discourse about fear of the supernatural, namely, that men can control women if women admit fear. Perhaps most importantly, she determines to pit her will against Ed in a way she rarely dared to when he was alive. This encounter with the revenant light represents her first exercise in practicing the freedoms of widowhood. Earlier ghost experiences became part of the negotiation between members of a couple as they passed through the liminal stage occasioned by their entering into a marriage. Here we see Eldreth again negotiating power with her husband as she passes through the liminal stage involved in reconstituting her identity as she moves back out of the marriage because of Ed's death.

Eldreth's second technique for responding to the light specifically involves talk and storytelling: she goes on discussing the experience as an unexplained phenomenon, which invites other people to offer interpretations. In so doing, she follows the same procedure as for her other ghost experiences and acts in an appropriately unassuming fashion, even though in this instance she has no expectation that anyone else can actually tell her more than she already knows. If friends or family members offered suggestions, these are not preserved in her current narratives, but eventually an audience member at an Elderhostel

performance gives Eldreth just the opening she wants (as she describes in another version of the story):

And I told them about this at Camp Broadstone and one of the guys asked me, said, "Well, did you ever think about it that, uh, about it could be . . . the Good Lord, watching over you?" I said, "I did think one time that, uh, hit might be that it was my husband, that light keep coming back. And I said, "But I don't believe that now because he wasn't that protective over me when he was living."

In the guise of a sassy and sarcastic quip appropriate to the mood of her singing performances, Eldreth finally gets to say what she really means. Her husband "wasn't that protective over [her] when he was living." He did not take care of her as he should have. He did not fulfill his responsibilities. A good, loving, responsible husband might conceivably come back in the form of a beneficent light to watch over his grieving widow, but not Ed. Although she has no direct model for it in her experience or tradition, Eldreth here refers implicitly to the concept of the caring, protective dead that Bennett's informants found so persuasive (1985). Eldreth, it appears, can imagine the good dead, but not her husband among them. Her immediate rejection of the idea that the light represented the "Good Lord" watching over her seems out of character for a woman with such a strong faith in a personal and loving God and a conviction that the divine and the ghostly may not be all that separate.<sup>5</sup> Her unwillingness even to entertain this well-meant and comforting suggestion is, however, in character with her general tendency to turn conversational openings to her own predetermined purposes. It also lends strong support to the notion that she had been waiting for someone to utter a remark that would allow her to advance her own hypothesis in response without introducing the idea unprepared. She cannot directly exorcise the frightening ghost light, but by asserting her own interpretation of it and implicitly criticizing her husband out loud in public, she can defeat Ed's intention and thus quench the light in a different dimension.

Significantly, this metastory about the conversation at the Elderhostel performance with emphasis on the audience's responding laughter has become an essential part of the story about the light. Including this episode enables Eldreth to voice her critical statement quite overtly while pretending that she is simply quoting a cute, funny remark that she happened to make on one occasion. The audience's laughter—that reported in the story and that evoked by each new telling of the story—is an important component that accomplishes two rhetorical goals simultaneously. In one sense it helps to mask Eldreth's critical intent; if people laughed at the original comment and still laugh when she reports it, it cannot have been too threatening. Note, however, that Eldreth very carefully cultivates this response by framing the statement as a mere throwaway line. Here Eldreth employs a strategy—common in the efforts of women and other

oppressed groups to give covert expression to ideas that the dominant group would not tolerate if overtly expressed—that Radner and Lanser label “trivialization.” She employs “a form, mode, or genre that the dominant culture considers to be unimportant, innocuous, or irrelevant” and hence inherently unthreatening (1993:19).

Eldreth also cannily exploits the difference between her former and present audiences. The cultural tourism in which festival and Elderhostel audiences engage offers her (like many performers transforming their material to appeal to tourists) an opportunity to include different messages than she would for local listeners (E. Cohen 1988). Mountain neighbors and grandchildren took the possibility of haunting seriously and could honestly be frightened, if simultaneously entertained, by the stories. The conventionally well-educated, nonlocal people who make up her current public audiences may enjoy the chill of a well-told ghost story, but they are also prone to laugh off that feeling in order to confirm their disbelief. Although Eldreth would absolutely reject their lack of belief, she encourages that laughter and turns it to her purposes. In telling “Light in the Bedroom,” she manages to mobilize her audiences to laugh not only at her witty remark—“He wasn’t that protective over me when he was living”—but also at her husband, about whom the remark is made. The comment is funny in being unexpected. If the husband of an evidently virtuous woman shows up as a ghost, it should be to protect and watch over her.<sup>6</sup> Eldreth’s audiences may not believe that she sees ghosts, and they probably know little of her married life; but if they laugh at her story, then a whole roomful of intelligent adults has effectively confirmed that Ed Eldreth did not fulfill his marital responsibilities. Audience response is crucial to the dynamic of this story; the laughter provides the only closure possible. Eldreth cannot actually get rid of the light; she has exhausted the techniques she knows about for banishing it to no avail and has resolved herself to wait until it goes away. She cannot entirely keep the light from frightening her, and she cannot even openly articulate what she thinks is happening. She can, however, beat her husband at the game she perceives him to be playing. He is trying to get revenge on her and to scare her out of her precious house. She can strengthen her own resolve and prevent the light from having too severe an effect on her if she can get other people, through their confirming laughter, to agree with her that Ed was in the wrong in the past and that she is a good person, while he was not.

## CONCLUSIONS

Ghosts are inherently ambiguous, and therein lies their power. Neither fully present nor fully absent, they keep us from forgetting things we ought to remember and things it would be better to forget. They may represent the alternative that we can recuperate in order to challenge a hegemony—or the stubborn

vestiges of a hegemony—that we seek to banish. They are strange and challenging and frightening. Over the course of her life, Eldreth has developed narrative means of making sense and use of her ghosts in order to bolster her precarious social position. Ghosts that speak of women's exploitation and cry out for justice are so threatening that she can just barely give them a hearing, although she does not banish them entirely. Those that offer the power of knowledge to a person who will take the smaller risk of admitting her sensitivity she welcomes more openly.

The experiences of "Light in the Bedroom" present Eldreth with an unprecedented narrative task. She is convinced that the repeated appearance of the light constitutes a haunting, not a premonition, but there is no one else who has greater knowledge of what has happened in her own house than she does and consequently no one to turn to for an explanation. If the event is to be made meaningful, Eldreth herself must make that meaning. This is what happened with her premonition experiences, but in those cases Eldreth had an ally. She dared to take interpretation into her own hands—and even to defy her husband when he tried to deny that the experiences were meaningful—because she felt she had a strong, benevolent supernatural force behind her. In the premonition stories Eldreth acts on the basis of her own impressions, conclusions, and interpretations, thus treating this intuitive, women's understanding as a valid form of knowledge. But because she is buoyed along by benevolent supernatural support, she is not required fully to acknowledge that that is what she is doing.

The experience of the light in her bedroom requires Eldreth to take that last risky step. Here the supernatural apparition reverts to its old, frightening, senseless form. The light must be a manifestation of her husband's not-necessarily-friendly ghost, rather than a benevolent supernatural force sent to warn, protect, and aid her. Yet unlike in her other ghost experiences, in this case she has more extensive knowledge of relevant prior events than anyone else. The onus for interpreting the experience falls on her, and she must acknowledge that interpretation as her own. The ghost stories and the premonition stories have been constructed in terms of opposed ideologies: "women must be tightly controlled within patriarchal gender roles or evil will result" versus "women have valid knowledge and the right both to act upon it and to defend it against male doubts." Thus, her ghost stories condemn unruly women and elevate Eldreth herself in contrast as obedient and self-sacrificing, while in her premonition stories—where supernatural forces support rather than threaten her—she justifies and celebrates her own rare acts of defying her husband and proving him wrong. The ghost stories concede, even declare, that it is wrong for women to think, choose, and act on their own initiative, whereas the premonition stories insist upon the validity of women's independent reasoning from their own experiences. Eldreth has evidently been able to keep these ideas separate in her mind by restricting them to different discourses in differently structured story types. With "Light in the Bedroom" the two narrative structures collide and with them the

dominant discourses and inherent ideologies of each type. Eldreth is trying to tell a story of her own ghost experience, but she finds herself constrained to use something more like the premonition story structure. The resulting process of reexamining generic expectations and renegotiating the fit between content and form appears to precipitate in Eldreth's mind a similar reexamination of the ideological underpinnings of the two story types. This process is neither fully conscious nor articulated in explicit ideological statements. The narrative produced, however, provides evidence of the kind of growth resulting from perceptions of discourse conflict that the model of nonunitary, discursively constituted subjectivity predicts (Hollway 1984; Weedon 1997).

Eldreth's marriage to an irresponsible and unkind husband exposed her in an extreme degree to the abuses inherent in a cultural system that expects women to submit to men simply because of the gender difference. A patriarchal society positions women so that their hegemonic formation and their life experience are likely to be odds: the rewards promised to women for compliance with the system are rarely as great as those that perceptive women recognize are being withheld and accorded to men. It is fully to be expected that a woman for whom the contrast was especially stark should feel motivated to invest both in conventional definitions of good and bad behavior for women and in vehicles for fighting back against specific gender-based abuses and that she would consequently need to develop a discursive and structural system for compartmentalizing opposing ideas. The example of Eldreth's supernatural repertoire also demonstrates, however, that a system developed to deny contradiction and to contain its power also sets up the conditions for comparing new, unclassified experiences against the range of models and structures through which particular kinds of experiences have been expressed. "Light in the Bedroom," the culmination of Eldreth's ghost-story repertoire, reveals in detail how the opportunity to compare and choose between alternatives in a structural and discursive system can result in a new expressive form and an accompanying movement in gendered self-definition. Ghosts, to the extent that they offer unsettling alternatives to the status quo, represent a hope for change, a hope for a different future.

Still, it is important to remember that Eldreth continues to tell all of these stories and that the transformation I identify in "Light in the Bedroom" is only a part of her ongoing narrative self-construction. The conservative (and, from my point of view, deeply counterproductive) representation of herself as virtuous in the ghost stories continues to be as valuable and appealing to her as the direct representation of herself as empowered in the premonition stories. Few listeners, hearing a handful of stories in a performance, are probably even aware of the change over the course of her lifetime that I have traced. Furthermore, the framing of these accounts within the genre of entertaining "ghost stories"—a label encouraged by folklorists but proposed and happily accepted by Eldreth—serves further to trivialize or distract from their potentially controversial subject matter. These stories are as much about male-female relations and the shaping of gendered

identity as they are about ghosts and premonitions. During her husband's lifetime, they served as thoroughly camouflaged ways of exploring not only her supernatural experiences but also the intolerable stresses of her life as a woman and the unfairness of having to obey and serve a man far less hardworking and moral than she was. That even years after his death she still feels comfortable addressing these issues only in an oblique and deniable form exemplifies the recursive nature of self-construction and the consequent near impossibility of complete self-transformation. Ghosts are frightening; it is not easy to tell allies from enemies. As a feminist reader, I regret that Eldreth does not recognize the maltreated women as her ghostly sisters or banish her husband in more-than-symbolic terms; but I acknowledge the courage she has exercised in dealing with what are, after all, *her* ghosts.