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Editor's Note

Our one-hundred-and-ninth issue is something of an anomaly, as it contains much loss and destruction—of the environment, of others, of the self. Yet as the nettle's sting is soothed by the jewelweed that grows alongside it, each piece holds some key ingredient that makes its burdens easier to bear: beauty, laughter, resilience.

There are so many things to worry about right now, and trying to keep up with what we need to do, to think, and to feel threatens to overwhelm us at every moment. We hope the words in these pages will provide an antidote to despair.

— Laura Garrison

The Spare Child

K. Noel Moore

After Nellie started working at the Wisteria Street Preschool, they gave her a grace period of two months before they sent Remy home with her. That was a long time, Greer told her. Most new hires didn't get that long. If she wasn't used to the idea of Remy by then, it might be best for her to find a different place of work.

She wasn't used to the idea. In fact, it creeped her out more than it had at the start. But there was nowhere else willing to hire her, so she played along. She agreed to be the little ghost's mother, just for one night.

The Twos class at Wisteria Street had eleven children in it, but no teacher other than Nellie would acknowledge that fact. Twelve seats were put out for snacks, twelve cots for naps. Twelve heads were counted at recess. Twelve names were called out as parents arrived—*"Look who's come to see you!"* Sarah, Alexei, Natalie, Emi, Grace, Tanner, Oliver, Roman, Tavien, Luke, Jonathan. Remy. On her lunch break her second day there, Nellie Googled *mass hysteria* on her phone. She Googled *communal grieving rituals* and *death rituals worldwide* to see if there was any place where this practice of pretending the dead were yet alive was normal. (There was; there were several, in fact. In certain parts of Indonesia, for example, families might keep treating their dead as living for twenty years. Giving food or clothes to ancestor spirits was the norm in the Eastern world; in the Western world, one only saw it a few times a year, on Day of the Dead or Samhain, but one might see it.) She

decided her coworkers were crazy, but she was willing to play along. She had nowhere else to go.

It took about three weeks before she started to go crazy along with them.

Nellie had never believed in ghosts, but this twelfth child wasn't a ghost, exactly. He couldn't be. Even an apparition had presence, it took up space; little Remy was an *absence*. He was a hollowed-out space in the air where a child should have been. If you looked closely, maybe you could detect light bending, a shimmer like movement. Otherwise, he was only *felt*, as a nagging sensation that something was missing from the room.

The day she was to take him home, Nellie Googled *tulpa effect*. She Googled *explaining hauntings* and found plenty of examples.

She felt him as she bleached every surface twice and rearranged shelves of toys. Emi was the last to go that Thursday. Emi's mother was German, and she spoke with a thick accent that sometimes made her incomprehensible, but Nellie liked her best out of all the parents. She was calm; she was kind. She didn't ask too many questions or set too many rules for her daughter's caretakers.

"How are you, Nellie?" she asked. "You look tired."

"*Ich bin ein bisschen müde, Frau Kellerman,"* she replied. Nellie had taken German in high school. She didn't remember much, but the Kellerman parents appreciated her efforts at small talk anyway. They appreciated that Nellie was teaching Emi's little friends to count in German. *Eins, zwei, drei, fier, fünf….*

Elf Kinder. Zwölf Kinder. Eleven children and Remy.

"More than a little bit, I think. Have the children been giving you much trouble?"

"The usual. You know what that feels like, I'm sure."

Frau Kellerman laughed. “Yes, I do. Believe me, I do.”

Nellie wanted to ask her about Remy. Had she ever taken him home? Did she know when the custom had started? Did she believe in ghosts, or did she think it was insanity, or did she accept it as a legitimate communal ritual? But these were personal questions, and far beyond what Nellie had the vocabulary in any language to ask.

She waved goodbye to Frau Kellerman and Emi, then crossed over to the corner where she felt Remy’s presence. Thought she felt it. She took a deep breath and reminded herself to go with it. *What you think you feel, you feel. What you think you see, you see. You can hypothesize about tulpas in the morning. Tonight, if you want to keep your job and your sanity, everything is real.*

“Ready to go, sweetie?” she chirruped. “You’re going to stay with Miss Nellie tonight. I think we’ll have fun together, won’t we?” Nellie extended her hand.

She gathered his bag and his car seat (who had they originally belonged to?), and walked out with a closed empty fist hanging at her side. The seat barely fit in her tiny Spark.

“You’ll be okay, Remy,” she cooed as she wrestled it into the backseat. “It’s only a short drive. You’ll be just fine.”

She drew the seatbelt tight, and she drove him home.

Nellie had no trouble cooking dinner for a child; her diet was already the rough equivalent of a ten-year-old’s. She cooked up buttered noodles and carrots—Remy’s she steamed and mashed, but hers she ate raw. She wondered what to do with his food. Eat it? Or leave it untouched, like an offering to the gods? (Come to think of it, what exactly *did* people do with offerings to the gods?)

In the end she left it. She didn't even clean it up; she decided to do it in the morning, when Remy was gone. *In case he wants it later.* When he was gone—when someone else had him—she'd throw the food away.

There was nowhere in her tiny home for him to sleep. She made up a cot for him out of blankets, and decided she'd sleep on the floor next to him. Nellie couldn't bear the thought of laying a child down in such an uncomfortable bed, while she slept on a mattress herself. At least on the floor he couldn't roll around and hurt himself—could he? Maybe he could. Remy had once died from SIDS. (No, he hadn't. That was a fact unspoken, and a fact unspoken was no fact at all.)

Nellie knew she wouldn't be sleeping much that night.

For a preschool teacher, Nellie's knowledge of lullabies was sorry. The simple nursery songs didn't stick in her head the way other teachers complained they did. They washed right over her. When the time came to rock the baby to sleep, then—after playing blocks with him after dinner—she turned to the classics her father had sung to her. "Bye Bye Blackbird." "Sweet Georgia Brown." "I Can't Give You Anything But Love." Hummed half-remembered versions of Sinatra and Dean Martin. Nellie's father had never known many nursery songs, either. (The man could *sing*, though. He sang like he should have been on Broadway.)

Nellie sat with him, rocking him in her arms and swaying. They fell asleep like that, with Nellie lying on her back, Remy on her chest. Her fears were assuaged, in the end: when she woke, the weight that wasn't quite a child remained, unreal and alive as anything, on her chest.

K. NOEL MOORE is an Atlanta-based genre writer and poet. They have two historical fantasy novellas, 'Undertown' (July 2018) and 'Incendiary Devices,' (December 2019) up to buy on Kindle, and work available to read 100% free all around the journal-sphere. You can find them on twitter @mysterioustales; feel free to ask about their weird and wild experiences with ghosts, children, or any combination thereof.

Drawing an Eyebrow

Ali A. Ünal

I caught the kid staring at me. He raised his hand timidly and waved, not looking quite sure if I would recognize him. I smiled without showing any teeth and turned back to my dinner. The production crew, of which I was a member, had already been served. The set workers were now getting their food from the caterers. The assistant director, the cameraman, the gaffer and sound guys were eating at the table behind me. I chose to sit and dine alone. They didn't invite me to join them anyway and why should they?

It was not them but the kid who had welcomed me when I arrived at the set two days ago. Even though he wasn't even working for our production, he showed me around, took me to the other studios within the complex where two other shows were being filmed, and introduced me to the other set workers. He must have felt the awkward stranger in me on my first day. I was grateful to him for his acceptance and willing to be friends, but I wanted to eat alone. There was an important kitchen scene I had to prepare after the break. I had been dreading it since morning. As a guy who was hired only because I was the close friend of the producer, I thought this was my chance to prove my credentials.

Ten minutes later, though, when the kid came up to my table and asked if he could join me, I nodded and pointed to the chair across me. He wore a filthy painter's overalls he didn't bother to change for dinner. I watched him put his food tray on the table,

unfold a paper tissue, spread it on his lap and take a large chunk off of his bread.

"Smoke coming out of your brain, Sir Galip," he said, dipping a piece of bread into his broth. "You thinking a lot."

The meat balls were floating freely in the broth He kept the bread in until it was fully soaked. Then he brought it up to his mouth without dripping one single drop. He had a large nose that almost touched the bread.

"Are you from the Black Sea?" I asked.

"True, Sir," he said, stroking the bridge of his nose. "It always sticks out. Like Pa's. I got his nose and temper, I did. Mom says the two walks hand in hand up north."

He grabbed the spoon to scoop as many meat balls as possible in one motion. As I watched him eat, my fork stayed submerged in my spaghetti. I didn't have it in me to twirl the fork. He ate as if he enjoyed more than food. That was encouraging not for him, but for everyone around him, I thought.

Someone touched my shoulder. The young assistant director from the table behind us had turned sideways in her chair. She handed me the finalized shooting schedule. She said I would have to set up the kitchen scene on my own because the set workers had other jobs to do.

"Don't be late," she said, tapping the sheet with her index finger twice. I stared at the exact spot she'd tapped. She was marginally older than my daughter. The kid was trying to catch a glimpse of the schedule. He gave me an anxious smile when our eyes met.

"I got my orders," I said.

"You did," he said with a smile. I put the fork down and leaned back. I couldn't remember the kid's name. I was sure he'd told me when we met.

"When did you come to İstanbul?" I asked.

"Last year, Sir. Mom and I took the bus from Trabzon."

"So your parents are here, too?"

"No, Sir. Ma went back home, Allah willing. They can never leave Trabzon… Stubborn as a pair of mules. I'm staying at my uncle's in Dudullu. Do you know Dudullu? … A shithole of a neighborhood, if you ask me … The power cuts off all the time. Roads are bumpy as hell, too… People say we'll be better off when the government transfers better houses and roads."

He never stopped eating as he spoke. His enthusiasm for survival was riveting. A friend of his came and handed the kid his hammer he'd left on the second floor. The kid thanked his friend, propped the hammer against the table, and went back to eating his pasta, twirling the strings majestically.

"Were you a painter back in Trabzon, too?"

"Me? No, Sir. My uncle is a painter himself, so he learned me how to do it… I'm his pupil, you see. May Allah bless him… Or I'd haul cement bags on construction sites for peanuts."

"You didn't go to a college, then?"

He smiled an embarrassed smile. There was a hidden joy in his eyes as if he was also proud. "I've got lots of friends who been to school, but they ain't better than me. Some of them doesn't even have a job."

If it were another time and if I were the man I had been, I would have embarrassed him in front of everyone for coming to the cafeteria without changing his overalls. I would have called him

out as yet another misguided "country man" who came to İstanbul to pursue his dreams, but ended up destroying it. I would have reminded him that İstanbul wasn't his little town anymore; this was the metropolis he'd decided to migrate to, so he had to follow its rules like everybody else.

I kept my mouth shut. I let him be and eat peacefully. The production crew was now smoking in the special area designated for smokers, throwing glances at me and talking among themselves. I wanted to go there and yell at them that it was okay not to go to college for Allah's sake; stop being a douchebag for once.

"How old are you, Sir?" the kid asked. He was done with the main course. He pulled the dessert bowl in front of him.

"I'm a lot of years, kid." I gave a beat and added. "Sorry. I'm 40. Married, or about to get unmarried. Whatever. I have a daughter. I'm 5 foot 5. A mechanical engineer from İstanbul, but here I am, being an assistant to the art director for reason I don't even know."

"Did you quit being an engineer because the money wasn't good?" he asked.

"I quit being me," I said. Because I wasn't any good. He nodded. I wondered if he really got it. If he did, I could have asked him to explain it to me.

"You're like my Pa. He is 39, and I'll turn 18 this summer, Allah willing. Then they'll start paying me 20 liras a day. Now I make 15." He shrugged. "Better than nothing, Sir. The job has lots of benefits. Social security, pension plan, catering, shuttle, and all. Thank Allah, ain't complaining. İstanbul gives, always gives."

He ate his rice pudding while throwing furtive glances towards the schedule. I was sure he would have done a better job than me. I

could simply grab his hammer and hand him the schedule. I could quit being an assistant just as easily. I was cheap, I had turned cheap. Perhaps, we'd both be better off. After all, I was always a better destroyer than I was a builder. Nobody could now say I was the product of rampant nepotism in the TV industry, either. It would be a fair exchange.

"İstanbul takes too," I said. "There's going to be an earthquake in İstanbul, the big one. Almost half the buildings will be demolished. We all might die."

"It ain't gonna happen in another fifty years. So science people say."

"They say that, don't they? Hope we won't have to wait that long."

He looked bewildered for a second, then let out a cheerful and loud laughter. A few people glanced at us. I didn't care. I joined him to laugh as loudly. I wasn't going to eat my pudding, so I gave him mine. He beamed.

"You're like me, Sir," he said, rubbing his hands together. "I help people, too. Allah sees helpers. We're blood brothers, eh?"

I was not like him, I was not. I was not even like me. I went to college to become a mechanical engineer and had other people paint my houses. I was once happily married. I didn't migrate to İstanbul, but was born in it. Alas, we were not alike. The kid was just about to start being a man whereas I had to destroy this lump of meat.

When he went quiet, I took the pen, turned the schedule paper over and explained to him what an engineer did even though he hadn't asked. An engineer designed systems and tolerances so that people like him could drive by bus from Trabzon to İstanbul safely

to look for something larger than themselves. Thanks to engineers like me, I told him, he'd stay warm inside his uncle's apartment in winters, or cool in summers. I demonstrated with arrows and speech bubbles that mechanical engineers built things in a world that was being destroyed constantly by itself. We were walking paradoxes.

He was nodding, but I sensed he was not there yet.

I took the time to explain how our universe moved towards chaos since its conception and there was no way to stop the decay. It was called entropy and found in lakes, craters, marriages. Earthquakes were a part of that, too. TV shows. Breaking hearts, cheatings, many departures. When a wine glass was shattered into pieces, the kid couldn't have it back; when he cheated his wife and broke her heart one day, and he would because he was becoming a man, there would be no way to mend it; when she kicked him out of her life, and she should, he'd never be able to return to his original life where everything made sense. Even for the engineers, things were irreversible, earthquakes were destructive, film studios were fraudulent. There would be nothing new. The old would be recycled, I told him. It was called entropy, not a mistake, and it was out loud. Fraudulent men was inevitable.

My arrows, words, schematics on the paper looked like a comedy. I folded the filming schedule and put it in my pocket.

"You know Ma digs your dating show," he said as he finished the second helping of pudding and leaned back with a sigh. "I tell her it's a ruse, those couples are just actors and all, but she won't listen to me. She texts votes all the time." He started picking his teeth. "This work, I'm telling you, Sir, is tough. Real or not, ruse or not, it's rough, that's for sure. Cracks even the best man. Be

prepared. You work day and night, sometimes two days without seeing your wife and kids and your people. Family goes first."

Such a graduate of the manhood, such a bright young man. I wanted to shake his hand and welcome him to his bitter world.

The assistant director came back. She was marginally taller than my daughter, but I still couldn't warm up to her. She said that I should probably head back to the studio and start setting up the kitchen scene, or we'd all fall behind the schedule. Nobody would want that, didn't they?

"I gotta go back to work," I said to the kid. "It was great talking to you."

"Me too, Sir Galip," he said. "I'll be upstairs after midnight. I already talked to Yakup. The albino kid, remember? You won't miss him. Red eyes, snow white, like a vampire. I carry garlic in my pocket, haha. Anyway, find him if you need anything. He'll fix it for you." I thanked him. "Of course, Sir. Don't even mention it. And just don't fret on things too much. You'll beat it."

He went out to the smoking area, walked up to the handrails, and lighted up a cigarette. He propped himself on his elbows and smoked there, all alone. He'd again forgotten his hammer.

Our studio was empty when I got back. I sat at the kitchen table and went over the schedule. Seven couples had already been eliminated on our date show, leaving the final two couples to fight for the ultimate prize of marrying for 500,000 liras. This would be the episode where the vote count would determine the winning couple. The assistant director had written "the kitchen and the dinner have to look impeccable."

All the windows in our studio were covered by thick black tarps to prevent the outside light from seeping in. The fake windows

around the kitchen table had cardboards of the Bosporus Bridge behind them. They showed a bright İstanbul and the morning traffic. I made a mental note to change them to the evening Bosporus traffic for dinner.

The studio was not only empty, but eerily quiet. Even the boom mics dangling from the ceiling like puppets couldn't record this silence. That was fine. I always liked those unruly mics. They always did their work well and behind the curtain. A bit like engineers. But sometimes, especially with wide lenses, they could get in the shot and ruin the fiction. A director worth his salt would never stop the camera roll, though, because post-production editors could get rid of those mics later by a technique called *drawing an eyebrow*—one black strip along the upper edge and one black strip along the lower edge, and puff… Mics would become invisible in the frame.

Apart from ours, two other TV shows were being filmed on this side of the complex—one was a historical series on the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the other was a *True Blood* rip-off. Through the open door, I caught the sight of the cast and crew members of those shows, running back and forth; 17th century janissaries and post-modern vampires, sometimes joking with each other, sometimes furious or confused, ready to rule or bite. I also saw the kid several times as he walked past in his messy overalls, always carrying a ladder on his shoulder like a memory he couldn't shake off.

I hadn't told him that "transferring houses and roads" probably meant urban transformation, which would ultimately destroy his uncle's apartment and all the others in that dingy, poor Dudullu. It would be done ostensibly as part of the preparation for the big

İstanbul earthquake. The aim was actually to force the poor migrant families to go back to their hometowns or at least push them out to the fringes of İstanbul so that luxury apartments could be built for the rich. The kid didn't need to hear that. He was so kind, cheerful as he ate the second helping of the pudding. Besides, he was going to turn 18 soon. He was going to be a man. He didn't need to be destroyed just yet.

Fewer and fewer vampires ran the corridor. There was also less war. I hadn't seen the kid in a while now. The evening shift must have started. Our crew was still nowhere to be seen. There were three cameras set up around the dinner table for parallel shooting and reaction close-ups. The main camera was facing me.

The whole floor was devoid of any sound or movement. Not even time would pass, it seemed. I checked the Bosporus Bridge and yes, it was still morning, and yes, the cars still weren't moving. I should start arranging the plates, forks and spoons according to my impeccable entropy sketch. I should start building the chaotic kitchen scene. I should change the Bosporus Bridge cardboard soon and made the cars move. I should start building something.

The hammer was sitting on the table. It was a beautiful piece of tool with a nice heft to it and a red handle where the kid had chiseled his name: Hasan. I turned it in my hand—the tool of chaos. I felt home. I was part of it. I was it. I was Hasan, the youthful agent of entropy.

I walked to the door and checked the corridor. All empty. I closed the door and locked it. When I turned to my back, I saw an old man from İstanbul, sitting at the kitchen table, his back hunched over a piece of paper. I was sorry for him. I pitied him. The cars were moving on the cardboard, the Bosporus Bridge was

bringing the city's two sides together, the main camera was rolling, and the mics were recording. The fraud was on.

I tightened my grab around the hammer's handle and started towards the old man. He would not hear coming. I would surely get in the shot, but didn't mind. The editors would know what to do. I hoped Hasan's mother would appreciate the scene and vote for me.

ALI A. ÜNAL is a writer from Turkey. He received his MFA in creative writing from University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He has several publications in his native language. His first publication in English, "Everybody Needs Some Saving," has appeared in the *Quarterly West*. He is currently a Ph.D. candidate in English at University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

In the lands of landfill lords

Namit V. Shah

The very land of landfill lords
is alive;
A crude creature in itself,
The sizzling scrap and smoke
its skin
and the bubbling browny broth
its blood.

The landfill lords,
a hundred half living
dead dreaming skeletons,
churn and churn
and split apart
by the great crude
creature's heavy heart.

The landfill lords
own everything
left unowned,
and digging by
their destined graves
still search
for something shiny
in their worldfuls of dirt.

NAMIT V. SHAH, from Ahmedabad, India, has been writing poetry almost five years now. Some of his poems have been featured on online poetry sites such as 'PoetrySoup' and 'HelloPoetry.' His poems apply an acerbic approach towards expression and exude a certain sense of brevity, all the while remaining visually engaging.

Amid the Frolicking Penguins

Robert Garnham

It's bloody cold in the Antarctic at the best of times, so I don't even know why we needed a refrigerator. The only things we kept in it were yoghurt and penguin urine, both of which had to be kept at a certain maintained temperature, but this could very well have been achieved by leaving them out on the work surface, that's how cold it was. I suspect it was only on the third week of the expedition that I began to have my suspicions that the refrigerator was actually my old friend Pat.

'Come to keep me company, eh?' I'd say, every time I went to the kitchen of the research station living quarters.

I'd pat the side of the fridge.

'Don't drink the lemonade, Steve', Sandra said, for the umpteenth time.

I hadn't seen her standing there.

I'd go to bed each night in my quarters, wrapped up against the cold, feeling kind of comforted to know that Pat was there. The refrigerator made a prolonged humming sound, and the light inside of it wasn't very bright, and every now and then it would emit a weird farting sound. It was definitely Pat.

'Alright, Steve?', I wanted it to say to me. But it kept obstinately quiet. Pat was a man of few words at the best of times.

* * *

Oh, the hours we would spend out on the ice. The thrill of seeing a penguin wears off after the first half hour. Secretive bastards, they shuffle along and one day Sandra got pecked real bad.

'Bloody thing!'

'Hey', I'd say to her, just to take her mind off the penguin peck. 'If we walked inside a giant refrigerator right now, do you think it would actually feel warmer?'

'Jeez, that thing gave me a nasty nip'.

Back in the safety of our primary coloured research station, its tin sides contrasted against the pure white snow like some kind of 1980s synth pop album cover, I lingered in the kitchen for a bit.

'Pat?', I whispered, 'is that you?"

The refrigerator hummed in a contented sort of way.

'Remember that time we played badminton at the leisure centre? Remember that? And the man on the court next to us collapsed and died . . . '

And we'd had to forfeit our game, not that we ever took it too seriously. I'd rolled up my towel and put it under the poor man's head while they were pumping away on his chest. Ten minutes later I had a shower and . . Oh no . . Where's my towel?

'Remember how we were given a free game by the leisure centre the next week? And they put us on the same court where the chap had died. And you came over all superstitious?'

'Who are you talking to?', Sandra asked.

'No-one.'

'There's just you, me, and the fridge . . . '

'How's your hand?'

‘Throbbing like a bastard.

That night I looked out from the window of my quarters at the long shadows thrown by the penguins in the setting sun. I watched as they shuffled back and forth and I thought, *has there ever been a more gormless creature*? And then I remembered my Aunt Cindy.

I went along the corridor to the kitchen and I said hi to Pat.

‘Remember that story Aunt Cindy used to tell? I don’t know what medication she was on . . . Went to the zoo with her neighbour and her neighbour’s kid. And they had a picnic. And the kid walks off and then comes back all wet. He’s been in the pond. And the neighbour says, *that’s it, you’ve ruined our day out*, so they all go home, and when they arrive home they open up the kids backpack and he’s got a penguin in it. A real live penguin. So she phones the zoo, ha ha, and they say, *keep it in the bath, we’ll be round in half an hour*.’

The refrigerator hummed in agreement, possibly laughter.

The next day we went out on snowmobiles, me and Sandra. We were well protected against the biting cold. We took photos of a crevice in the ice where two of the glacial ice shelves meet.

‘We’ve taken a shelfie!’ I said.

‘What?’, she yelled, above the biting, whistling wind.

‘Shelfie!’

There’s a severe storm coming in, we can both feel it.

‘If this ice shelf drifts apart’, she yelled, ‘we’ll have to be rescued by a naval vessel’.

'What's that? A ship dedicated to belly buttons?'

'I'm worried about you', she said.

'What?'

'I said, I'm worried about you!'

The research station awaited us. There's something comforting about it's primary colours. Penguins frolicked beneath its spindly legs.

'We may have to move', Sandra told the assembled scientists. 'If the wind changes direction, we could be cast adrift on the open sea. This whole ice shelf, it's the size of Yorkshire, but it could just drift off at any time. We'd have to abandon the research station completely'.

'That's a sensible course of action', Professor Carver said.

'But what about the fridge?', I asked.

And they all looked at me.

That night, having tired of watching the penguins, I went to the kitchen to find a man sent by the research company, testing all of the electrical appliances for faults.

'Portable Appliance testing', he explained.

I kind of lingered while he worked. I leaned on the work surface and stared out the window at the white landscape. There wasn't really much to say.

ROBERT GARNHAM has been performing comedy poetry around the UK for ten years at various fringes and festivals, and has had two collections published by Burning Eye. He has made a few short TV adverts for a certain bank, and a joke from one of his shows was listed as one of the funniest of the Edinburgh Fringe. He was recently an answer on the TV quiz show Pointless. Lately he has been writing short stories for magazines and a humorous column in the *Herald Express* newspaper.

The Yellowbird House

James Donlon

When the Lord first appeared to me, he was in a blue mechanic's coverall with a rifle on his shoulder. In the winter, my Daddy's farm got desperate cold. We would work out in the field for hours, working to set up oil-lamp heaters every six feet or so. The tomatoes were green and hard in December. You could crack them between your fingers like glass.

My mother spun old records on cold days like that. Dusted vinyl crooned out of every window. God himself approached the gate alongside Yellowbird Road on the west side of the farm. My brother and I worked at the heaters while my Daddy approached the Almighty. The conversation was brief and sacred with both men huddled in intense recollection. My mother's records faded from song to song, the needle nodding along the ridges. My Daddy didn't move much in his enunciations. He was a short and respectful man in holy company. I'll never forget the loose skin draped over the stranger's bones. It seemed to sway into the breeze like cloth.

The sun was fixing to set and when we gathered for dinner that evening the house was damp and silent. My father told us the man with the gun used to live nearby and wanted to see how things held up. He said they had been friends as kids. My father called him Jim. He told us not to mind the rifle, said he wouldn't be coming back any time soon. He lived the next month on the edge of his nerve, watching the road while we worked. He glazed over the dirt with long and deliberate breath, lungs keeping time with the

music from inside. Records faded in and out from song to song just about all winter long, with each pause a dead stress lingered about the farm like a stale mist. My brother and I counted the clouds above and called out their shapes. *Bears, bowling pins, old men in rocking chairs.* Vapor gave way to the wind. Heavy shapes formed, stretched, and thinned out across our horizon. *A baby, a bride, an old grandfather clock stuck at noon*.

My brother and I are two years apart. As the oldest, I was expected to do half the teaching that my parents didn't have the energy for. Connor is a sweet kid, but painfully eager and gullible. When the cops brought him home one night for drinking with his friends in the high school parking lot, we were both thankful I was the only one there. Hot temper and heavy drinking was a family affair, taught young and hidden well. He always got mixed up in things. Connor and Dick, the Agnoson boys, the Wild Dogs of Yellowbird Road.

I carried my accent through college. A wistful disregard for finishing certain words and a chipper twang that holds the vowels in the top-back of my throat. I love my voice. My mother's pacing, my father's dialect. Overtime, my father's tongue faded into my own. We had a tense time before I went off on my way. He would've kept me locked up there forever if he had the heart. I didn't know what it was like to see your son age into the best and worst parts of you. I didn't know much back then.

I can't find exactly where to start with the sad bits of this whole thing. I've repeated it so much in my head. I get lost now. It's real tough to feel it all at the same intensity I felt it before. I'm jealous of it. That instinctual passion opens up for a more dramatic retelling of what happened. Tears have some kaleidoscopic effect on the

past. The boring details, when you jumble them up, have a way of settling into a story of their own.

My father is memorialized in the vague phrases people say in reference to exactly *how* he died. No one takes time to mention who he was, what he was like. I've found the whole affair to be a mess. I can't figure all the details and I'm not confident in the ones I have. There are some police reports I've kept if you need them. The short of it is this: Jeb Agnoson was found in his Cadillac with two holes poked out of him. Blood on the dashboard, blood in the weeds. That's what the pictures showed, anyway.

A year before I left for school, some northern company bought up all the land surrounding our farm and hired us to work for them. My father used the money to make the house real nice for my mother. White panel walls and a new porch. Dad called it his castle. Connor and I just call it "The Yellowbird House." It sat in a clearing of an unnamed forest. Trees tapered off to either side of a long stretch of grass. The house was an old hunting shack from the 1800s that my parents bought and redesigned every three years or so. As a toddler, the place was a charming farmhouse with wallpaper and refurbished farm equipment on the walls. At one time it was a minimalist, art deco nightmare. Today the structure is a Frankenstein's monster of 20th century architectural movements. One room is feathered with ornate, faux-gold trimming and dark oak, another is a plush, white-cotton dream. No amount of money could fix the tackiness that was my mother's taste. Her vision was confined to a three-bedroom in the middle of nowhere. She tended to her animals and her garden. *No lilies*, she'd say, *too much dead around here already*. When she passed away, he kept everything isolated and untouched, leaving everything as if it was the day

before she died. He slept on the couch for months as not to disrupt the order she set in stone in their bed.

Jeanette Agnoson stayed whole til the end. The lump in her throat grew and grew and wrapped itself around her windpipe like ivy. We all watched her change, watched her solidify details of her life and how she'd want to be remembered. She'd say *I was never a looker to begin with* and *don't tell people I was kind*. The records rung out of the house until March of 1972.

At my mother's funeral, my father didn't cry. He held my brother together as they lowered her into the ground. I tried to fight away feeling any particular way about it. I wanted to look strong or something. We had known for a while this was coming. I spoke after the priest did. *She was my mother. She was kind.* I said some sweet things about her cooking and compassion for animals. There's no brilliant way to eulogize anyone. In the coffin, they painted her face up with reds and pinks and a bitter pale death. They don't tell you how much the dead change all gussied up. I suppose it makes it easier to pour dirt on a face you don't recognize. I suppose it's sadder to witness the way death hits people than it is to be hit yourself. Sort of like a car crash.

In 1954, our dad was a ghost to us. The company gave him more work across the state. He was some big farm overseer. A boss with a boss with a boss, lost in the web of corporate bureaucracy. We'd find things shuffled up, half eaten, and left open, but we'd rarely find him. He'd take us shooting sometimes or drive down to a plot of land to get some dirt under our fingernails. I could tell the other kids at school had more involved parents. I could tell they were told to be nicer than usual to Connor and I.

Darcy-Ann was a rare image in my life before then. It wasn't long after my mother went cold she started sticking her nose in my father's private life. She would show up on his hip at church dinners. She had red, rotten hair that flew from her scalp like feathers. Her earrings were cracked pearls. She wore tight dresses that tucked in under her loose hanging belly, full of corporate finger foods and flavors she could only earn on her knees. She kept her lips scarlet and throbbing. Even now I have to admit, she was beautiful in a fleeting way. Like a stranger on the train platform, blurred and grotesque and awe-droppingly memorable.

Once, I drove her to get her hair done. Darcy-Ann never drove, she *never learned how.* Georgia summers were hot and dry in our neck of the woods. She asked that I sit with her through the performance. The woman doing the trimming spoke like a fortune teller; through her gum-smacking and nail clicking she wove gossip and bitterness into Darcy-Ann's hair. I learned about the mutual friends Darcy-Ann and the hairdresser had. Thomas was out of work. Betty was a gapped-tooth slut. Henrietta's husband had an acquired taste for women who were not Henrietta. None of these women were in my parent's friend group. My father only ever saw his friends at funerals. It was like a secret society of creeps had been in our town, right under our noses, and we never crossed paths with any of them.

In the back of the parlor was a man who I would come to know as ~~Yahweh~~. The same man with the loose skin and rifle all those years before. He swept up the hair after the cutting was done and collected it in canvas bags before disappearing behind the lime-green curtain. In 1974 his teeth were gray and crooked like

tombstones. He smiled at me from the dim back office of the salon and faded out the back door.

Darcy-Ann had tired eyes and hip bones that jutted out like clothes hangers in a trash bag, but my father found her remarkable. *Look at this woman* he said *the spark of my life*. She was young in body and spirit. She got my father off the couch. She made us dinner on special occasion. The two of them argued twice a week. Once when she'd come home late, heels in hand, after a night at The Fitz. Again when she'd return from the department store, complaining about money or the house or my father's low burnt wick.

Darcy-Ann bided her time until the will came. They would eat and drink and smoke all day. She was rolling him toward the trash shoot one sip at a time. She wrote herself into the cracks of our broken family and slid out when her mercy ran dry. Connor and I watched from a distance as our father's tired skin folded into a smile. Darcy, her sex and her perfume, were the last relief my father's worn body could handle. He cuddled up to the first piece of comfort available to him and held on until the end. And who was I to blame him.

In 1976, my father left Yellowbird in his Cadillac with Darcy-Ann in the passenger seat. The police told me that after a full dinner at Gio's, the couple headed toward the bridge over Sugarcane Creek. At some point, Darcy-Ann had asked to drive home. It was at that point, a man entered the car and shot out two holes in my father. One in his brain and one near his liver. After a brief and unsatisfying investigation, the case went cold. My father carried dirt to the underworld on his chest. This time, my brother didn't cry. It was a Monday. At the service I saw the Lord in the back row, with dry eyes and a smirk under his nose.

Two teenagers had been wading in the creek when the shots went off. When the police showed me a sketch of the man who shot my father, I already knew who it was. His eyes were sunken and beating. The Lord's hairline recedes. White, thick yarn diving back toward his neck. His chin was wide and swollen. I remembered his baggy skin and the liquid mass mixed up underneath it. He looked like a monster from an old horror flick.

I looked for him. In the dark space under the Sugarcane bridge I found matchboxes and sewing kits but nothing that led me to the man who killed my father. The police called the murder a *random act of terror*. Despite no apparent bruising, Darcy-Ann claimed to have been knocked out for the whole affair. Connor and I knew better.

Whatever wrath Darcy-Ann had was sucked dry after that. In the living room that night, after the police left and the sun set and the street lights out on the distant highway that padded the empty night between the trees had reached their brightest, she sat alone in the living room and cried. Whatever she wanted, whatever she saw in that car that night had peeled her eyelids into an open state of shock. On October 31st, 1976 she drove my father's car off the Sugarcane bridge into the black shallow water. They found a clump of red-yarn hair spun up in a beaver dam three miles south. Her body, however, must've sank somewhere far below the river bed.

My own life flashed by in images. 'Til 18, Connor was put under my care. Whatever poison that had found its way into our home had killed the people my parents raised. Connor finished high school and we both got sympathy jobs at my father's old company. *Some people* Connor said *see such a concentrated amount of life as kids that the rest of their lives are unremarkable as atonement.*

A baby, a wedding, an old clock in the den that never chimes. I moved west until the smell of the morning was dry. For a long time I was bitter and angry and broke. Connor and I put the house up for sale but left it abandoned after rumors of ghosts and curses and ancient burial grounds made their way around the town and killed the market value.

I tried, for a time, to be more than broken and, for a long while, I was. A husband, a father, a lawyer. I fought it off, those titles and faces people fashion when you make yourself vulnerable to them. In a way, Connor was right about the un-remarkability of life after what we had seen. I was colder then. Empty. My own son grew away from me, as I had from my father. The good fathers die early, before they see their sons grow into strangers.

I returned to the Yellowbird House only once. In 1994 I was an old man, the same age my father was when the Lord took him home. I drove up Yellowbird as the sun settled down into dusk. The fields were layered in a lilac rotten haze. Dead tomato plants whispered above the mist. The castle was wet and grey and sinking into the earth. The wind picked up a low constant tune, humming and buzzing through shattered windows. I saw the house as it was in my memories. White paneled walls, gaudy floral wallpaper, memories in the hallway pinned behind glass. Things had changed over time. The windows were blown out, the roof caved in at parts, and over the front door a black hand print, pressed with charcoal, stretched it's fingers up toward the gutters. There were papers and things on the dining room table. Dirty dishes, wet in the sink. Someone was home.

I first heard the hymns echoing through the forest. A shoeless pilgrimage made its way from the distance blur of the streetlights,

up the dirt path, and gathered on the lawn. Leading the group, a familiar silhouette filled the doorway, soaking in everything through his shallow eyes. I noticed the round divot in the center-right of his forehead. A smile smoldering beneath a familiar skin. My Daddy's pelt swaddled another man's bones.

When God entered the room the wind got louder outside, the sky ran wildly passed the ears of the congregation who had gathered in the wake of our misery. Beneath the floorboards I heard my Daddy's heartbeat pumping up through the walls. Before me, the Lord stood naked, draped in my Daddy's skin. The fires had no heat. The music was tasteless. I noticed a hole through his torso. He offered me cake and coffee and invited me to stick around for the party. I was told I would be lending a hand in the evening's ceremony, that they had been expecting me. One by one, the people came in and shook our crooked hands. They sat on our tables and the floor and filed in anywhere they could.

The house began to bulge out of its sides. Moaning, creaking under the pressure. Each one got a number and a call time. On a marble altar he had bashed into the floor, we would take them, one by one, and fillet their skin into wide ribbons. He carved their eyes out with careful serrated lunges. The moon lit up the room like a spotlight. People traded small talk. This or that, the trip over, the weather. With folded legs, children mumbled and giggled from the floor. Over a metal rack he dried out each figure's flesh. We took notes on the lives of each stray on their way out the door. On heavy paper, I wrote out notes for each one in plum-colored ink. Next-of-kin, loose assets, the address of the person they'd be leaving behind. I remember how strange I felt at how clinical it all was,

how organized and taught the labor appeared to be. The skinless bodies hunched out into the rain, into the forest, into vapor.

In an hour, no bloodied shadows remained in the house. We stitched the skin together, one line at a time. Each character had directions, specified locations, a deadline.

He snipped each wire holding my father's figure to his own and allowed his dark purple shoulders to stretch out across the ceiling. With calloused hands, he split my stomach and crawled inside my gut. We left the house in my skin. His bones became neighbors to my own and when he laughs his teeth scrape my liver.

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Magic Wand

Nick Olson

I'm getting to the part in brainspotting now where I can see what he looked like in the hospital, after they'd hauled him out of the river, and the way the red on his arms had diluted into a faint pink, a perfect Crayola pink set against the wrappings they'd put on to keep him looking decent for the family.

For a couple months, that was just a blank. I'd say brain, recall seeing brother for the last time, and it'd give me nothing. There was nothing there.

The way the therapist explains trauma to me makes sense, for the most part. She talks about replaying tapes in the mind and memories lodged that need to be un-lodged, of things that happened months or years ago being processed as if they're happening again, right now, and that the tightness in my chest and numbness in my arm isn't a heart attack, but it's not just in my head, either. That deep emotional pain can manifest itself physically. It all tracks.

She's got this pointer she uses for sessions, has me follow it with my eyes as I go over the memory. I see her pointer, and I think of magic wands we'd get at the dollar store with grandma, waving our abracadabras and having wizard battles out in the snow, pretending our breath was smoke that we'd conjured. Then, when one of us had slain the other, using our magic wands to bring our opponent back to life. To reconcile and join forces to face a greater evil together.

I try grounding. I put my bare feet in the grass, connect thumb and forefinger, and sip my tea slowly as the wind comes in to cool it down. She has me processing the trauma in the present tense, which feels weird at first but makes more sense the further we go. She picks up the plastic bottle on her desk, the one filled mostly with water but with a little bit of sand too. She knows I've heard it a thousand times, but she reminds me that the brain is like this bottle. After a shake or two, it's cloudy. She reminds me that we just need to let it settle. But I'm not sure what I'm supposed to let it settle on. I'm watching my brother live out a parallel life beside me. Two lines headed in the same direction but which can never intersect. I want to tell my therapist, but I don't. It's not a delusion if you know it's not real. If it's just that you want it to be real.

There's a different kind of forgetting. Other things are coming back now, in pieces. Glimpses of being swung by my arms in an empty park, my brother keeping the centrifugal force going and the way my feet would lift then dip then lift again as I spun, seeing only flashes of green and brown behind him as we went. That's where it stopped before, but there's more now. When his arms got tired, my brother would let me down onto the ground, try not to tip over from balance compensation, and we'd sprawl out with the dandelions coming in, and to be out here was better than being inside with our parents whose moods we couldn't chart, couldn't fathom. My brother would make a game out of distracting me when their moods would flare up into a full-on fight. He'd put on a show he knew I liked, probably The Wiggles back then, and he'd pump up the volume, and we'd just catch flashes of the fight outside our door, peeking when it got really bad, pretending to

watch the show when it quieted down, and then a McDonald's run when dad would storm out of the house, going who-knows-where.

I passed this tendency onto my little brother, with only the distraction changing—something like Nintendo Wii or early YouTube. And he stayed there as long as he could, my big brother did, stayed past the divorce and the way my mother became symptomatic, and we learned that we were the biggest targets when she was manic, even if we didn't have the words for it back then. He stayed and took the hits for us, and it wasn't until later, when he finally had to leave and she set her sights on me that I realized just how much he had put up with. How much he had shielded from us.

So much of my brother is an unknown. Beyond the stuff I talk with my therapist about—the expected "Why did he do it?" "What could I have done to prevent it?" and "Was it my fault somehow?" that comes with having a family member die of suicide, I wanted to solve for that unknown variable of his internal life. With my brother, you only saw what he wanted to show. The rest was simply inaccessible.

I haven't talked to my mother since just after the funeral. She went through the cycle of questions that I would later, once the shock had faded a bit, and I assured her that no, it wasn't her fault, because regardless of what she might've said or done, I wasn't going to be cruel. And dad like prey staring down its own end as he sat there, wide-eyed, across the funeral home from my mother, staring at the box they'd put my brother in.

I'm making serious progress, my therapist tells me. She doesn't make a habit of telling clients this, but she can see how much it'll mean to me, how much it'll help. She says things like keep putting

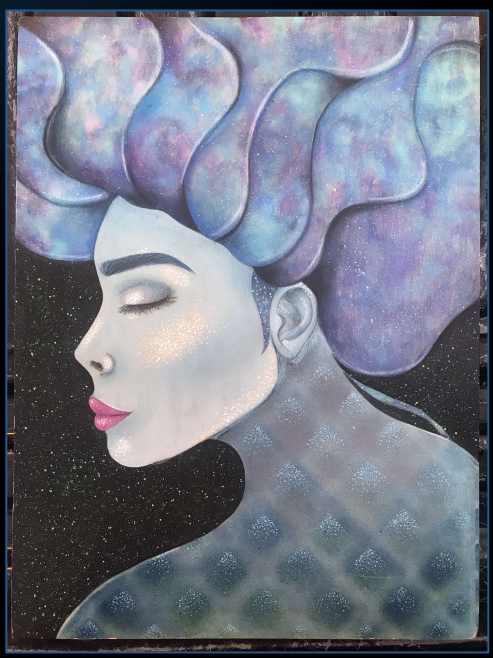
in the work, keep reaching out, and one foot in front of the other. I see hope peeking past professionalism, so it makes me hopeful too. I don't know what else to do, what else to be. She picks up this pointer that isn't a magic wand but could be. And we go again.

NICK OLSON is a writer and editor from Chicagoland now living in North Carolina. He was a finalist for *Glimmer Train's* Very Short Fiction Award, and he's been published in *SmokeLong Quarterly, Hobart, decomP*, and other fine places. When he's not writing his own work, he's sharing the wonderful work of others over at (mac)ro(mic). His debut novel, *Here's Waldo*, is forthcoming from Atmosphere Press, and he tweets updates @nickolsonbooks.

On the cover:

"Mind Over Matter"

ANGELICA GONZALEZ grew up in a small town in South Texas known as Rio Grande City. She had an affinity for drawing and painting at a young age since her dad would show her how to draw simple household objects. In high school, she started competing against others at local fairs. Her art teacher, Felix Lopez, literally taught her all the knows. She continues to paint and draw while attending college.



Her work is available on Instagram at @art.at.7am.