

## Our House

Norbert Kovacs

The two of us build the house with no hired help. Long, yellow planks of wood go into each room from basement to attic. The place comes together in tight blocks. I go through adding carpet to cover the floor in every room, except in the kitchen and the bathroom, as seems fit. I hang pictures on the wall that seem to study us more than we study them. Once I'm done, you say the new house makes you feel claustrophobic. You cut windows into the walls to view the fields better. You break open the floor and add cubbies beneath the boards. You stuff these with old keepsakes: photos, diaries, childhood toys. The horde rolls by itself into bundles under the boards. You add doors between rooms. When I open one, I see a door to the next close at hand.

The smell of the tar that holds our floors and walls together makes us uneasy. We wander the rooms, trying to forget it. In the study, we read our fill of moralistic books, then we eat in the kitchen while giving accounts of our lives. We pack the basement with junk. Old, angry notes from friends. Clothes torn in argument. Items we fear. The next thing, we head to the foyer where we smile and pretend happiness for our guests. The house surprises us into new attitudes all the time.

We tend to the place the best we can. We clean a room of the trash that settles on the floor due to our daily living. We collect the napkins that drop from our pockets. I brush into a bag the broken vase you had tipped from the shelf. The room is set to order. However, another room becomes a mess while we are cleaning. The bookcase falls and every book tumbles onto the study floor. The glass falls from the dish strainer and smashes in the kitchen. We go to tidy the spillage. The several messes puzzle us for they seem to come out of the blue. Time alone, we know, cannot cause them. However, we try to accept it. And we clean, so the house does not crumble onto our heads.

When we tire of our tasks around the house, we sit in the living room and try to enjoy our leisure. I read the paper; you watch TV. As if on cue, the voices start. We hear them throughout the house. One calls, a second responds. Then a third. Sometimes their words sound in agreement. At other times, challenge. Or provocation. We try to name and locate the voices, the two of us, the only people actually in the house. The calls and cries move among the rooms in

the meantime, joining in bizarre duets and choruses. My father's angry words migrate from the study as our friend's bark begins there. My former teenage crackle, unsure and lonely, leaves the guest room and joins the sound of our friend's spouse, moaning in the kitchen. We cannot ignore the voices, though we have heard them many times. They have become ingrained to our ears. I read their spoken words from my book in the study. In bed, we speak with the house's voices in our own. Or as our own, if you like.

We live in a peculiar house, you'd say. And we continue building it regardless. We are adding a new room on the remnants of our old patio this spring. We believe we should never stop building, moving through the rooms, and listening to the many voices that inhabit them. Our built strangeness is home. We have come to think any less would be our death.

Norbert Kovacs lives and writes in Hartford, Connecticut. His stories have appeared in *Thrice Fiction*, *Westview*, *Gravel*, *STORGY*, and *The Write Launch*. Norbert's website is [www.norbertkovacs.net](http://www.norbertkovacs.net).