

THE MUSIC IN THE WALLS

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It's late April in northern Indiana, and the stroke of spring's emerald brush has just begun to make its way from the south, dotting the oaks, maples, and dogwoods with fresh buds, their colors once again catching up to their evergreen and willow counterparts. Early bloomers are in the breadth of their short lives with their white, fuchsia, and plum flowers, some blooms already raining to the ground, forming a graceful skirt on the grass, its own hue deepening. Finches, sparrows, robins, and hummingbirds greet the warmth, relieved from winter's bitterness.

This lively hum of spring is mixed with low rumbles of thunder from gray-blue clouds. The sound is like music, accompanying the patter of my own footsteps as I wander aimlessly through rooms. Though I step lightly, my footfall seems to echo throughout the house, as though the walls whisper condolences

for my loneliness. But I'm not really alone. You're here, in this house, but somewhere else entirely. Always somewhere else these days.

I watch my pale bare feet step, left, right, left, right, like a heartbeat, a chanted prayer. Each motion feels heavy and laborious. The wooden floor is cool. I study the passing planks, rubbed in places from years of wear. They're like leaves of a book, each mark and indent holding a story, each stain and scrape a chapter.

My steps are without intention, and I find myself starting to spin, my arms spread outward, like I'm doing a rain dance. I imagine warm drops journeying through the roof's shingles, trickling over joists until they find me, seeping into my skin, and cleansing me. You'd love that. You'd write a song about it. I wish the reverberations of your music could permanently sink into these walls so I could extract them whenever I want, like sap drawn from a maple tree.

I imagine you at your piano, your foot always heavy on the damper pedal, dragging out the melody so that the notes flood my ears and head, dizzying me like the ascension of a plane. Your fingers trickle up and down the keys, translating into music the ebb and flow of the tide, a healing breath inhaled and expelled, the waxing and waning of moonlight. And then, as suddenly as ears pop with the relief of pressure, you would tap a witty staccato tune, pleasantly

unexpected. That's so like you. Smart, unpredictable. Full of passionate prose you assign to whatever melody your fingers seem to produce so spontaneously.

I've consumed each song you've ever written me like the most precious gift I've ever received. But I'd trade each of them, anything to erase those echoes of memories floating around in your head, the ones you won't speak of.

In our beginning, you walked me through your childhood, through your life before me, like a tour guide through a museum. I was oblivious to your evasiveness. I thought I knew you, all of you. Now, I notice shrouded figures in dark corners you've hidden from view. To what artist do you attribute those works? What burden, what shame do those pieces represent?

Before me, you were a rambling man. Your soul had never been home in one place. You drifted. When we met, instead of taking me home, introducing me to your family, you took me to the places that moved you, set your soul on fire. You loved the power of nature, how its vastness made you feel small. The intense beauty of a landscape could move you to tears.

You craved mountains, snow-tipped ones in California that stretched so high they seemed to break through the crust of the earth like a whale puncturing the ocean's surface. We gazed at them from below and felt shaken, as though experiencing the thunderous rumble from the moment they arose. We

were enchanted by the Redwood trees, embraced the way they made us feel as insignificant as a single breath. We traversed valleys, hilly landscapes blanketed in clover and wildflowers, fields—green, golden, sunflower-speckled, lined with lavender—all untamed... all beautiful. We stood in waves, heard their steady roar, watched as they unceasingly carved shores and rocky canyons. We sang with crashes of thunder during the most violent of storms. That was your music.

And then we stood at the top of a thirty-foot cliff, overlooking a waterfall that supplied frigid mountain water to a cool, crystal pond below, which then streamed steadily and smoothly into rapids. Around us, we were engulfed by trees, tall and green. People swam lazily in the shallower water; a few sat on the cliff near us, likely contemplating the jump.

I could see you were unafraid; you'd done this before. But you were patient with me. I can recall vividly the way your thick, sandy blonde hair was messy but looked like it shouldn't have been any other way. You ran your fingers through it and smiled down at me. You had a way of looking at me that made me want to press against you, to be as close as humanly possible. Even though there was never a way to be close enough. I knew already that I loved you.

I believe you were truly happy then. That the liveliness in your eyes was genuine, sincere. You'd found something you didn't know you were searching for.

We fell for what seemed like a long time. We'd been holding hands, but then you stretched your arms out, diving in headfirst, while I, pencil straight, held my nose, always cautious.

The collision with the water sent me tumbling downward. I spread my arms and legs to slow myself, and, disoriented, I opened my eyes, frantically searching for the direction of the surface. I swam toward it, both exhilarated and desperate to reach air.

What had it looked like as I was buried fifteen feet or so under the cross-roads of water and air? Had the noon sun's rays twirled through the water to the rhythm of the crinkled surface's movement? Was the water illuminated emerald around me? Or turquoise? Or teal? I'll never know.

But for you, it was different. You took your time, made my heart sink as I frantically searched for you until you emerged a minute later. I imagine that you let yourself feel the cold current as it swayed you gently toward the rapids, fully embraced the thrill of being submerged, the beauty of the sunrays dancing through the crystal water, the sensation of the air pockets your body had

thrust into the water enveloping you like a cocoon before you came back to me.

I saw you as deep, attune to your surroundings. I chalked it up to having an appreciation for what made you feel more alive. But now, I recognize the recklessness, the extremities. What hurt made you desperate to be ever-alert to your mortality? I can't say that I consider it a complete mystery. I've stitched together clues you've let slip, mostly unintentionally. But it isn't my place to name it for you.

Sometimes I miss the old fire in your eyes, the thrill I found so enthralling. But that sadness was always there alongside the fire. I just didn't recognize it. Over time, your façade started to dwindle, and I saw the vulnerability beneath.

I remember once when I came home to find you lying on the living room floor, staring at the ceiling. There was a sad song playing that I didn't recognize. The music was so loud that each note plucked on the guitar rang sharp through the house. A woman's voice, sweet, almost childlike filled the room. Then, I saw you were crying. It should have been a shock, but somehow, I wasn't surprised to find you there. You didn't seem to acknowledge me, and I wasn't sure what to do. I didn't want to embarrass you, but I was nearly overcome with the urge to sit next to you, put your head in my lap, touch your

face. But then, eyes still on the ceiling, voice calm, you asked me to come lie down.

We held hands there on the floor for a long time. I felt you wanted to tell me then. I smelled alcohol on your breath—sweet and woody. I thought you might let me in. But when I questioned you, I could feel you tense, immediately start to retreat. But we aren't in battle. I'm on your side. I want to defend you. How can I fight a ghost, even one so vivid, so real and ever-present for you?

I replay our memories like a home movie. Sometimes I wonder, if given the chance, would I rewind to just before I met you, nudge myself onto another path. I can't say I haven't fabricated that alternate journey, wondered to where it might have led. As Robert Frost stares down two roads diverging in a yellow wood.

How did we get from Point A to Point B? Our roadmap weaves, twists, overlaps like warm and cold currents. Trying to make sense of it would be like trying to trace the winds.

At some point, I've stopped dancing. I absentmindedly sweep my fingers over the windowsill, stopping to stare at a spiderweb stretched outside between the window and the white wooden siding. I imagine what kind of spider might make such a web, so intricately woven that it looks nearly like a solid piece of silk, the vastness of details so great that they seemingly blur themselves into unrecognition. Such care, such time it takes to fabricate a dwelling place.

The web flutters gently in the breeze, each gust marked by a smooth wave from one end to the next, hardly causing a disturbance. It seems equally delicate and inviolable. I can recall cleaning days when I simply twisted spiderwebs, just like this one, with a straw broom and then scraped them free from the bristles into the grass, a regular and mundane task performed without a second thought. What a shame it seems now to destroy such art, to ruthlessly destroy a home, even if only a spider's.

Our home isn't being destroyed by such an obvious outside force. I have no homewrecker, no specific person, no event I can blame. Instead, what attacks our home is a toxin, a mold—undetectable, slowly deteriorating the

frame, the beams, the loadbearing walls, thoroughly damaging the home's inhabitants before any affect is traced. Before we even know to search for a source.

I don't want to leave this place, to leave our story chiseled in the floorboards, etched in woodwork, absorbed by wallpaper, never to be deciphered or repeated. To be buried in an unmarked grave.

I feel like a painter, standing back to observe the mess of oils we've smeared onto our canvas. There's no going back, no extracting the paint from the woven linen fibers. But new layers can be added. We can be made beautiful, with elegant impasto, lighter hues contrasting dark, a Chiaroscuro masterpiece. Gather up the brushes, the smock and paints, hand them back to the Artist. Let's rest there, in grace, in peace. Amen, amen.

I open the window. I want to flood the room with the sounds of spring. Let's drown in it, be reborn in it. Its unapologetic, genuine liveliness. Music, I pray, will once again permeate your walls.

JESSICA MARTINOVIC's fiction and poetry have appeared in *Amarillo Bay* and *The Lighter* and have received awards from the Indiana Collegiate Press Association. Jessica attended Valparaiso University and lives in the area with her favorite people, her husband and their two little girls. She is a follower of Christ and a lover of books, coffee, and spending time with her family and friends.