

Remembrance is Something Like a House  
By Will Ludwigsen

*(originally published in **Interfictions 2**, 2009)*

Every day for three decades, the abandoned house strains against its galling anchors, hoping to pull free. It has waited thirty years for its pipes and pilings to finally decay so it can leave for Florida to find the Macek family.

Nobody in its Milford neighborhood will likely miss the house or even notice its absence; it has hidden for decades behind overgrown bushes, weeds, and legends. When they talk about the house at all, the neighbors whisper about the child killer who lived there long ago with his family: a wife and five children who never knew their father kept his rotting playmate in the crawlspace until the police came.

The house, however, knows the truth and wants to confess it, even if it has to crawl eight hundred miles.

#

The house isn't stupid, of course. It knows that leaving in the morning when that middle-aged lady strolls across its overgrown lot would attract attention. So, too, would leaving at any other daylight hour, even though by then most of the neighbors have gone to work. A beginning is the most noticeable time of a secret journey.

The house is patient. It's waited three decades and it could probably wait another three, though it isn't sure if people live that long, especially its people. They seemed upset and harried when they left everything behind but what fit

in their arms, and that can't be a healthy way to live. The Maceks could well be dead but the house doesn't think so. It doesn't feel so, either.

At dusk the house decides to leave. Shadows from the rotting trees conceal its departure, though it isn't auspicious: the house shudders its frame and groans forward two inches. Afterwards, exhausted, it sighs through its yawning windows and leaking attic with a wood-filtered moan.

Then it tries another two inches, and another two after that. They get easier, once the house gets some practice and learns just how to tighten the posts and shuffle forward.

In the coming weeks, the walking lady doesn't notice the house is moving. She just changes her path to compensate, not even realizing she's doing it, until one day she stops coming around at all. Maybe she goes back to work or finds a brighter place to walk. Maybe she just gets a bad feeling about the lonely house in the woods, some chill that it was almost alive. The house gets that a lot.

With no witnesses, the house picks up speed and moves ten feet an hour on level ground during the daytime and even faster at night. The breeze passing through its dormers and eaves exhilarates the house, and sometimes it doesn't care if anybody sees its shadow crossing the rising moon.

#

The house keeps to the woods and meadows between properties because it wouldn't do to be found and restored. You can't go all the way to Florida with a family of four living in you, the house likes to say to itself. The house has lots

of wisdom to impart but nobody to whom it can impart it like a newer house or even a shed.

For instance, it would like to tell someone that traveling in the wilderness is risky. Sometimes the weather is bad and you slip down a hillside in the mud. Sometimes your shingles get scraped away by low-hanging brambles. More than once, raccoons tumble down the chimney or through a window to nose through food the Maceks left behind. The house tries to shimmy in a scary way, thumping the old black-and-white framed photos on the wall, but the raccoons don't seem to care. They pull away a fuzzy rotten chicken bone or a green roll while the house glowers.

When it rains, water seeps through the grey insulation and bulges in big lumps in the ceiling. Sometimes one will burst, splattering plaster and moldy water across the carpet. The house winces when this happens and tries to stick closer to the trees for shelter.

#

The house waits beside highway 61, wondering how it will ever get across. A car passes every few minutes, just enough to make a foot-by-foot march across the pavement risky.

The house squats by the side of the road, watching for the darkness to come. When it finally does, the house crosses the first two lanes of the road as best it can, rattling its windows and cracking its siding to all but gallop to the median. There it rests, hoping to look inconspicuous--like someone just built a house in the middle of the road, or like the state is preserving a historic

building by running the highway around it.

After the house has caught its second wind, it begins to cross the other lanes. Just when the dotted white line exactly bisects it, light fills all its easterly windows.

The house panics, though it isn't easy to tell: only an architect could see the corners go out of plumb and the walls buckle like that, though he or she wouldn't believe it.

Behind the windshield, the truck driver doesn't seem to believe it either. He blinks, screams, and veers the truck into the other lane. The steering wheel shudders in his hands as the trailer skids.

The house, not ready for 60,000 pounds of truck to crash through its timbers, shuffles as best it can to the other side. There it watches the wheels catch, lock, and then thump back onto the highway as the driver gains control again. The trailer totters left and then right, but the only likely casualty is the driver's heart rate. Probably the house's too, if it had one.

#

The house hates fences, especially the barbed wire ones. It has broken through many a wooden rail fence with relative ease, but the barbed wire ones drag behind the house for hundreds of yards. The house then has to gingerly slither across the wire to leave it behind, losing sometimes minutes or hours.

#

Probably fifty or sixty people have broken into the house since it left the foundation. The house grumbles at the lost time, but sometimes visitors are

nice, especially when they leave. Some of the kids break bottles and light bulbs, and the house doesn't appreciate that. Sometimes they take things, a couple of portraits or an old fork or some other souvenir of that "creepy shack in the woods." The house wishes it could stop them, but it already has one big job to finish.

Bums rarely stay the whole night. They'll nap a few hours on a bed and root around for some liquor but then something calls them back outside-- maybe a train whistle or an unfinished mission or an unpaid debt. Whatever it is, the last thing those guys seem to want is a house. Which is good because the last thing the house wants is a bum.

Nine couples have made out on the old moldy couch, green water squishing between their fingers from the cushions as they press together. The house remembers when Mr. and Mrs. Macek did that once when the couch was clean. They both were drunk on gin and tonics and she started it by unclasping the right shoulder of his overalls. The kissing kids aren't as smooth--they just shove each other on the couch, grope awhile, and then go straight to the thrusting.

#

Rivers and creeks are a mixed blessing. They're difficult to cross, but the current can take days or even weeks off the journey if the house navigates them right. It still floats more or less, though water washes in through the front door to the back, leaving behind silt and weeds and even flopping fish.

The house has never seen a waterfall, but it imagines one would be bad

news.

#

In North Carolina, the house has interesting visitors: two boys and a girl, early teenagers, sweaty and sunburned from a summer vacation spent running all over the wooded mountains.

The house can tell they're adventurous, like the Macek children were before Mrs. Macek took them away. Still, they're respectful--climbing in through the kitchen window, yes, but only one already shot out by a drunken hunter.

They walk around, peeking into the stove at Mrs. Macek's forgotten roast and flipping through the stack of brittle newspapers by the green chair. They talk about the big mystery, what had happened to the people inside.

"They left so much behind," says the girl. They call her Amanda, the house discovers.

"Look at this," says the bigger boy, Michael. "There's still food on the table."

Not much after so long, of course, just scattered pebbles of dried corn and black circles where rolls used to be. Muddy animal tracks speckle the table.

"It's like the Marie Celeste," says the smaller boy with the big eyes, Jeremy. "Lost at sea, adrift for months."

You don't know the half of it, rues the house to itself.

"You think they got killed?" asks Michael, the one who keeps looking at

the girl when she bends over the tables and shelves. The house doesn't appreciate him at all.

Neither does Amanda, it seems. She catches him staring and says, "Stop it." Then she turns to the smaller boy. "There's no sign of it. No blood or anything, at least."

"Maybe they were poisoned and they crawled outside, choking on arsenic to die in the yard or something," says the smaller boy. The house likes his insight: yes, the Maceks had been poisoned and crawled out all right. Just not by arsenic.

"Good theory," says Michael, punching him on the arm.

Amanda spreads out the newspapers on the table, the ones Mrs. Macek saved after Mr. Macek's arrest. After half a century, those lurid headlines crackle on the yellowed paper as the kids gingerly turn the pages with pinched fingers. Amanda reads them aloud, probably because Michael can't read. He looks the type.

"Local Girl Missing for Three Days," reads Amanda. The house remembers that, all right. Policemen walking the streets, swinging their lights from one side to the other, calling out her name. Women gathering in clots on each corner, whispering with their hands held to their mouths. Cub Scouts crawling in the bushes. Teenagers in trucks rumbling by late at night, chuckling over their dark jokes.

The house, of course, could do nothing to help.

Jeremy reads the next: "Body Found in Crawl Space by Detectives." That

actually wasn't true. A police bloodhound named Jenny dragged Kathy Henderson's bludgeoned body out from under the house while the detectives gaped. The dog pulled and pulled, and the house wished someone would just help, would just break through the rest of the rotten lattice to get her out. But they all just stared, and of course the house could do nothing.

Mrs. Macek fainted on the porch. Mr. Macek had a lot of questions for the police, but they didn't speak Polish. Not that they were listening anyway.

"Foreign Handyman Arrested," says Michael. He would pick that one, wouldn't he, the article with the picture of Mr. Macek being dragged from the house in his grey overalls, squinting in the flash bulbs, wincing as cops twisted his arm more sharply than they had to? There were lots of boys like him back then, too. They just happened to be wearing uniforms.

The house remembers the casseroles brought for Mrs. Macek and her children right after the arrest, the offerings of neighbors who didn't believe her husband could do such a horrible thing.

"Immigrant Pleads Not Guilty to Child Murder," crows the next headline in Michael's voice. "Dude looks crazy." He sidles closer to Amanda, but she sidles just as far away. "The kind of guy who'd kill a girl and stuff her under the house."

"Crazed Handyman Offers Garbled Defense at Trial," whispers Jeremy.

The house remembers, too, how the casseroles came fewer and fewer, stopping altogether when the autopsy photos were shown. The Macek daughters came home from the park crying, and the Macek boys came home



from the baseball diamond angry.

Amanda doesn't have to read the last one: Guilty. It's from August 9th, 1938 and nobody bothered to cut it from the newspaper like the others. The kids can read advertisements for \$50 refrigerators if they want to, but they're all just staring at Mr. Macek's horrified expression instead.

August 9th, 1938--the day Mrs. Macek, mortified by her husband's guilt and their neighbors' reaction, ordered the children to take whatever they could carry and stuff it into the car. The day they left everything behind, not just dishes and pictures but questions, too. The day the doors clattered, the lights dimmed, and the house was left to itself.

"Cool!" says Michael. "It's a Kill House!"

The house hates to be called that.

"I wonder where he did it." He looks around, grinning. "I bet there's a ring of blood still in the tub."

He leaves to go check and Amanda follows.

Jeremy squints at the newspapers and says to nobody, "Wait. These newspapers are from Ohio."

He follows his friends, silent now as though afraid to wake up the house, and steps gently down the hallway, looking into each of the bedrooms. Blank patches on the yellow wallpaper show the ghosts of pictures fallen from the walls.

The first bedroom looks like three boys shared it, two in bunk beds and one in his own. Their dresser drawers are still open with pants and sweaters

spilling out of them, and metal toy soldiers lay wounded on the floor. Jeremy picks one up but then puts it back.

The second bedroom seems to have been for the girls of the family, two of them if the beds are any sign. They'd left everything behind like their brothers had: a few drawings from school hang crookedly above one bed, and a bundle of letters tied in a pink ribbon rest on a nightstand beside the other. The letter on top has the print of someone's lips. Amanda holds it up and sniffs it.

In the master bedroom, the blankets are thrown back from one bed but the other is still made. An old clock has wound down, dying three minutes past eleven. An oval dresser mirror leans away from the wall, its left half broken away. Rusted hairpins lay beneath. A closet door swings from one hinge. Metal hangers dangle between coats and dresses with ragged sleeves.

Michael leans over a nightstand to pick up a wallet. It's the one Mr. Macek had taken from his overalls when the police came. He flips it open. It has long ago been emptied of cash, but he grins and slips it in his pocket anyway.

"What are you doing?" asks Jeremy.

"I'm just taking a little something away, that's all. A real-life murderer's wallet."

"You can't just take that."

"It's not like he'll need it. Guy's long been executed."

The walls of the house creak as though resisting a heavy wind. Through the windows, however, the leaves hang motionless.

“Put it back.” Jeremy points, his finger shaking.

“It’s like robbing a grave,” says Amanda from the doorway. “It isn’t right.”

Michael laughs and steps backward. He jumps up onto a bed and spreads open his arms. “You gonna take it from me?”

The house wishes the ceiling hadn't already collapsed above him some half a decade ago.

“Come get it, Amanda,” Michael says, swaying his hips.

Jeremy and Amanda trade glances and frown. Then they both step forward.

The bed creaks beneath Michael's weight as he bounces on his heels. The tired wooden frame finally gives way and he falls backward to the floor, crunching on broken glass. He groans though he isn't cut. The house had hoped otherwise, but then it realizes that it doesn't want to carry a corpse to Florida.

Jeremy pulls the wallet from Michael's hand and sets it back into the dustless square on the nightstand while Michael staggers to his feet.

“I could be dead,” he whines. “Stupid kill house.”

Neither of his friends say anything. Quiet and maybe embarrassed, they return to the kitchen and climb back out through the window.

Michael stomps the faucet before slithering through.

#

The hardest thing about crawling across the country is keeping plumb. Even if you're a good 1921 Craftsman-style bungalow, your beams and

crosspieces will be torqued to their limits over all that terrain in all that weather.

Tornadoes hit in Georgia, some forty years after the house leaves Ohio. By now, the house is gray and its siding curls at the ends like a dead man's fingernails. The wind, green with stolen earth, blasts through the broken windows and tears the curtains away. Moss on the roof peels from the corner like a scab before tumbling into the vortex.

The hail rattles against the roof. The rain shoots sideways through the door. The newspapers dissolve. The couch bloats.

With nowhere for the wind to grab hold, the tornadoes move on to more satisfying victims. They wobble away, leaving the house bewildered in the middle of a field.

The house gathers its wits and crawls away through the broken branches, onward to Florida.

#

There aren't houses like this house near Fernandina Beach, and you'd think it would be embarrassed. It isn't. The clean adobe houses in the retirement community are full of Formica and fiberglass, slathered pink and teal with concrete seashells hanging by their doors. They've never had a baby born inside. They've never seen a really good teenage argument or a night of gin spilled in the master bedroom. Their pastel walls flicker with reruns.

The house sticks to the woods on the edge of the development, circling from the north and sensing the last of the Macek family, the commander of the

toy soldiers, Julian Macek.

#

Of course he likes to walk still, young Julian. He always liked it back in Ohio, even in the middle of the night. He'd sneak out of his window and patrol his town like an amateur watchman. Of course he still does that today, eight hundred miles and seventy years away.

Now he carries a broom handle walking stick. He's driven a finishing nail headfirst into the end, just the thing for spearing a paper cup or an attacking animal's eyeball. He shakes it much like his father did at the kids who rush past his house on their bicycles and skateboards, not quite sure if he's missing something important and American.

The house watches Julian on his daily patrol. He follows the walkways through the golf course though he does not play. He squints at the other old men in their plaid hats and white shoes, sometimes raising the broom handle at them in either salute or warning. They chuckle and wave back.

The house realizes that it has never thought of how to call attention to itself. On windy days, you can hear the groan of rotting joists and the whistle of split shingles, but the air is stagnant during the Florida summer and the high drone of locusts would conceal them anyway. It can't whistle or snap its fingers, and houses can only whisper to their occupants.

After a week of waiting fifty yards off the seventh hole for Julian Macek to get a funny feeling on the back of his neck, the house decides to risk everything and just edges its corner onto the fairway.

Julian Macek sees it first one rainy morning. His broom handle clunks upon the concrete but stops about thirty feet from the house. He stoops, peering past the pine trees and curving palms at the leaning wreck, more snail than house.

Julian looks over his shoulder to the left and then to the right. He steps across the grass and touches the corner. A charge crackles along the old cloth-sheathed wiring.

Come inside, the house wants to say.

Julian limps around the house, examining every side: the missing back steps, the jagged windows, the wavy porch planks. The house waits and hopes for any sign of recognition.

Julian staggers back, holding his hand over his mouth. He bends gasping toward the ground while the house worries.

I traveled a long way, the house wants to say. Come inside.

Julian's face is white, but he steps onto the porch and tries the door. The last few months of humidity and vibration have finally rusted away the tumblers in the lock. The knob falls into Julian's hand and the door swings open.

Come inside.

Julian, holding his broom handle like a spear, walks into a living room he last saw over his mother's shoulder. He grimaces at the kitchen table. Cans and candy wrappers crunch under his feet as he shuffles from one room to the next.

In the master bedroom, he picks up his father's wallet in his shaking hand. He opens it, sees the Ohio license, and then drops it to the floor.

He runs now through the house, crashing into one wall and then the next, clutching his narrow ring of white hair. He drops his broom handle in the hallway. He slips on the mold-slick carpet and crawls the rest of the way from the house.

Wait. Wait.

Julian Macek, the son of a convicted and executed child murderer, scrambles for his life from his childhood home.

#

That's not the way it was supposed to go at all, thinks the house. Confession turns out to be harder than it expected.

The house has a speech prepared, though it has no way to deliver it. "We're brothers, you and I," it would like very much to say. "Maybe we both crawled to get here, but we're both still standing. We wouldn't have made it this far carrying the things we know if your father hadn't done a good job. He was for building things, not destroying them."

But eloquence doesn't come easy to a house when all its words are only architecture. There's only so much to say by standing still, by still standing.

Just as the house resolves to finish the journey and crawl the quarter mile to Julian's backyard, a flashlight beam bobs over the fairway, coming closer. Julian, a bottle in one hand and the light in the other, cracks his knees against the porch and curses. He totters back and walks up to the door.

"I've spent my whole goddamned life running from you, and now here you are," he says, narrowing his eyes to focus through the dusty glass.

You didn't have to, the house wants to say. That's what I've come to tell you.

Julian can't hear it, of course. He stomps into the house, crunching across a fish skeleton from somewhere in Kentucky. He glares down at it confused. Then he stops at the doorway of the room he shared with his brothers, dead twenty years ago. He bends to the floor and picks up one of his old soldiers. Clutching it in his fist, he continues to his parents' bedroom.

There he sways, staring at their beds.

"I watched everything I did, just in case," whispers Julian. "I stayed away from children, even my own, just in case. I stayed away from girls. I married late, too late. I yelled and fumed to let out whatever he might have given me. All I wanted was to forget him, but here you are to remind me."

It was me, the house wants to say.

"Is this like the mystery stories? The scene of the crime comes back to visit the criminal?" Julian stamps his foot and pipes clank against the beams.

The house tenses, hoping he'll hear, hoping he'll do it again if he doesn't.

"They already got him," shouts Julian. "Are you happy?"

No, thinks the house. I killed her.

Julian shatters the bottle against the wall and vodka soaks into the yellowed wallpaper. He watches it, considering. Then he stoops and flicks open a lighter. Flames crawl up the wall.



Julian's father built the house almost entirely from wood that came on a truck as a kit from Sears. Niklas Macek, a skilled carpenter, carefully fitted each piece to the other and nailed them square enough to travel eight hundred miles further than any architect had ever imagined.

Fire scurries from joist to joist and beam to beam while the insulation smolders. Paint bubbles on the walls in streaks. Plaster crumbles and furniture flares. The house holds together.

Julian stares at the empty squares where the family portraits once hung. Mama died soon after the move. Anja and Maria left as soon as they could, marrying the first cretins they met hoping to start better families than their own. Theodore ran away to the war, and Peter was spacey and silent the rest of his life. They're all dead now.

The house can't get away, even if it wanted to, not with fire to spread like typhoid anywhere it goes. It can't just die, either, not yet, not with Julian still mistaken.

The house inhales. Hot air flows up to the attic and cool air sucks in through the broken windows. It has no lungs or voice box, but the fire itself will have to do. Maybe a ten penny nail shrieks from two boards prying apart or expanding gases split an ancient rusted pipe; all the house knows is that it manages a single scream--one very much like Kathy Henderson's all those decades ago.

The difference is that someone hears it this time. Julian spins to his left and to his right, looking for the source. Was there someone still in the house?

His worry clears his mind enough so he can race from room to room to find her.

Of course it is a her.

Unable to find anyone, Julian lopes outside and searches around the foundations. He bends to check the crawlspace, and glowing embers barely show the pipe, black and rusty and blood-stained. Can he see?

She crawled under after a cat, the house wants to explain. One of the calicos from Mrs. Pettyjohn's yard. She crawled under and cracked her head. She bled all over, and I couldn't stop it. I'm sorry. It happened so fast, too fast for a house.

Julian crawls backward to escape the crashing beams and soaring sparks, and the house wonders if he understands. Blood and mud and rust look a lot alike, after all. It's a long shot, much like coming all the way to Florida in the first place. Julian does look amazed, surprised, his eyes wide. He doesn't look as slumped and heavy, at least.

Relieved, it settles exhausted into the fire and sleeps.