

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/2

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Bring a Ghost to Life

After drawing a bath, you look at the water go still. You notice how high the water climbs, how close it comes to spilling over the edge of the tub, and you think that there's no way you could slide in without upsetting the balance that exists. You imagine the hot, bubbled water running over the lip of the tub, darkening the floor mat, suds gathering in the corners.

But when you submerge yourself, instantaneously pinkening your skin, you realize that the water, somehow, has not been displaced. There is no run-off, no mess to worry you. Somehow the bathwater parts, accepts you, but—and this is the part that bothers you the most—the longer you remain immersed, the more you recognize that the water seems to disappear. Where the water level once floated above your shoulder blades as you leaned back, it now reaches just above your nipples.

Your body has absorbed the water, you think as you press your thumb into the now soft, compliant skin at your elbow, your arm, your neck. Just another instance of your body taking something else on, weighing itself down with whatever overwhelms you, with whatever happens to consume you.

As you dress, you try not to stare too much at yourself in the mirror. Everyone has always marked you as beautiful, and despite what would seem to be a flattering comment, you can never come to any kind of understanding of what they see. So you've given up looking, and you spend as little time as possible in front of the sink, your reflection beckoning you to study what everyone else marvels at. But your eyes are too far apart, your lips thin and lifeless. You hate your nose, its length and pointedness, like a bird's beak. There have been people who've mistaken you as Jewish, clueless people, yes, but still, these thoughts exist. If you could, you'd flatten it, shortened it, mold it into something completely unrecognizable. But you are not God. You are not even sure He exists.

This is because your younger brother died, or more specifically was killed, only a few months back. Picked up as if by sunlight and dropped back to earth, his skateboard the only thing to make it through traffic. And in the aftermath, all you could think of was his smell. How a few short years ago, as a senior in high school, you'd admitted to a crush on a boy, your fondness for him rooted in a particular scent, something store-bought but somehow still mysterious. Then, you were reluctant to accept the fact that most boys watched you in the hallways, thought of you in their showers, so you were careful to whom you revealed this secret.

This brother, he was the middle child, the eldest boy. A good person to have on your side, even when he went out of his way to torment you, to make you question why you'd ever disclose your secrets to him in the first place. So of course, days later, he came into your room, smirk painted to his face, and you cringed, thinking he'd gone and told the entire school. But he shook his head and instead approached your bed where you lay reading, and with the confidence of someone much older than him, he sprawled out beside you, his boyish, bony arms, never to achieve full

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muscular potential, brushing against you, causing an unwanted sensation to travel the length of your spine. And he smiled, and that was when you noticed the scent, the very scent of the boy who unknowingly held your heart. He must've noticed your response, for your brother grinned, and you busied yourself with the suddenly difficult task of trying not to act as though you understood what he'd done.

You could hear his laughter from down the hallway, where you secluded yourself in the restroom for the next hour, frightened to emerge and admit to the feeling you'd had when first smelling the cologne.

And now, your skin returned to normal color, you finally face yourself in the mirror, prepared to head off to work, where today you'll begin training the boy you've recently hired, a boy just out of high school and set to begin college in a few months. You'd interviewed him, noticed the way his eyes shifted from one area of your body to the next, the awkwardness of such an effort. A young man, not yet a man but no longer a boy, no longer satisfied by sophomoric clowning around but with no idea what to replace it with. You'd caught a trace of his cologne, and the decision had been made all the easier.

You dab a bit of perfume behind your ears, pay careful attention to your eyes. Avoid the nose, just live with it. You tell yourself you're beautiful, make yourself believe it. And then you leave the apartment, prepared for work, prepared in your attempt to bring a ghost to life.