

The night is thick and heavy with clouds when I paint the front of The House yellow. I paint quickly and quietly. I don't want to wake my neighbor up. The brush goes shhh shhh against the wall and even that is loud. My feet crunch on gravel as I finish up and slip into my home. My neighbor's cursing wakes me up in the morning. I hear fuck! and shit! I split the blinds with two fingers. The sun shines very bright and I squint to see my other neighbors file outside. They see the yellow paint and shake their heads. One of them points at my home. I come away from the window. Knock knock. I do not answer. I make myself toast with a poached egg. I eat it plain. Butter has a strange, slimy texture and most jams are too sweet for my taste. They pound on the door. The doorknob rattles in its socket before I hear silence on my front porch again. My neighbors assume I painted The House. They are right, but it's still insulting that they point to me first. Upon purchase, my new neighbor repainted The House beige before moving equally bland furniture (and herself) inside. I must fix it. She does not understand that each house claims life as we do. Their creaks are small sighs and groans, their breath the wind that flutters curtains when their mouths are unlocked. Each house is individual in personality. They have different mannerisms, likes and dislikes that can influence whoever its inhabitant might be at the time. Often, though, its influence is overruled by tenants that bustle about, creating their own noises that muffle their homes. I can hear them. I hear anger when doors slam shut, peace when furniture is aligned and floors are swept clean. Houses do not have control over their appearance, so I help them. I listen and give them a color true to their individuality. The House in question, which you could say is my current "client," is bubbly, but prone to sickness and somewhat oblivious to the struggles of others. It loves its inhabitants—most of the time—and wishes to give them a cozy embrace. Most of all, The House is very particular about its appearance and becomes incensed when the smallest thing is not quite right. Right now, it is sulking. The little yellow I gave it placated it, but soon it will demand more. In the afternoon I hear the grrr grrr of trucks and metallic clanking and deep voices shouting. Big men in loose denim pants and ugly T-shirts paint The House back to beige. My neighbor comes onto her lawn to survey the men, pointing out the spots that need extra paint. The painters finish quickly, taking my neighbor's cash and leaving extra paint cans and brushes and crinkled plastic tarps. The House strains against its new skin. It pummels its beige bonds with angry fists and wails It's so ugly! The neighboring houses think it silly and childish, but they are too old to remember what it was like to be a child. I will The House to be patient. Its paint is still wet. The sun burns hot, then abruptly cools in the evening. Rain is predicted in the next few days, so the air hangs thick like soaked velvet. I shift from chair to chair, unable to settle. I need distraction, so a sandwich is readily made and quickly eaten. I flip through books before putting them down. I stack the books. I eat some mini-pretzels. I play a movie and turn the volume up loud. All is drowned out by The House's pouts and whines. I doze fitfully and when I sleep, I dream of an infant pouring a dripping yellow sky onto little people that drown in thick sunflower puddles. The night I return to soothe The House, a small red eye blinks from the corner of its porch. A camera makes my job harder, but it is only one. My neighbor is either lazy, or thinks that its presence is enough to deter me. Either way, that is her mistake. I open my paint can and approach from an angle. I grab a handful of viscous yellow and smear it over the lens. The paint is cool and slippery, coating the lens completely while the excess puddles in the dirt below. After that, it is a simple matter to paint as much yellow as I can in the time that I have. I cannot fully free The House, but its grouching quiets and it settles more comfortably into its foundations. There is more cursing in the morning and more banging against my door. This time, my neighbor screams through the door. She says open up or I'll break the fucking door down. My own home is a demure thing sheathed in light brown. A broken door will cause it tremendous pain and that will not do. My neighbor's hair is unbrushed and sticks out like fur. She wears a big t-shirt and no shoes. I wish she was wearing shoes. I think feet are so foreign. I forget I have feet until I look down and wonder how something so strange could be attached to me. I know it's you, she says. I'm quiet. I'll hear what she has to say. My

neighbor turns red. Say something, she says. You are the only person here who would paint my house yellow every fucking night. I moved here and I heard stories about you. You stare at all the houses and peek in the windows and you talk to yourself more than you talk to other people. My neighbor goes on and on. She is quite incensed. Spittle flies from her lips and she jerks her hands about to show just how angry she is. She says, You're free to do what you want, but Jesus Christ, you have to know you look absolutely fucking crazy. The house was one thing, the camera is just ridiculous. I could put in a report for vandalism! I could call the police! What are you gonna do, deny it? You stupid bitch, I should report you right— I don't deny it, I say. Her mouth gapes. In addition to a hot temper, she also has strange rules about what is right and what is wrong. The rules of her world apply to everyone. She straightens my trash bins on trash day to match her own. She quips often about the unique color of our shared fence, which is blue, though the blue is not on her side. I'm not bothered by it. My ambivalence (or apathy, in her mind) infuriates her. It's amusing to see her realize that I won't fight her, not in this way. She opens and closes her mouth and turns more red. Just stop painting my fucking house, she says. And then she hacks a glob of spit onto my porch and leaves. I see her painting over the yellow with rough strokes of beige paint. Her work is streaky and thick globs drip down the woodwork. It will harden and texture The House, which it will not like. More cameras go up too, one in the opposing corner of the front porch and two more on the corner nearest to my home. At night, I cover my face and approach not from my home, but through the backyards of neighboring houses. I tell the houses hello and they breathe creaky whistles in return. Many of the houses in this neighborhood are like my own: plain, ordinary, normal. They do not require the same attention as The House. I use paint again to cover the cameras. My work is sloppier than previous nights and The House complains. I tell it that its tenant has made my work more difficult and this is the best that I can do. The House asks if it should do something to stop its tenant. I say no, that goes too far. I try to smooth out the streaky bits, apologize again, then come home. My hands shake as I wash out my paintbrush and dry my hands. I suppose I'm nervous about my neighbor's threat. I don't fear the police or the possibility of arrest, but rather I fear that if I am taken away, The House will not be cared for. Who else can do what I do? Without me, The House will push against its bland exterior and cry and cry. Its caterwauling would also bother the other houses on the street, kind as they are. At night I dream again of a yellow paint sky, but this time I am drowning and the viscous liquid is rising and I cannot see through the lemon film that covers my eyes. I am enveloped and smothered in an inward explosion of death. I wake early. I sip tea and let the hot mug burn my hands crimson while I peer through the window. I stand there for an hour, maybe longer, until my tea has gone cold and I find myself shifting from foot to foot. I still when the door of The House opens and my neighbor steps out onto the porch. She sees the damage to the cameras and the return of the yellow paint. She stands there for a moment, then turns back inside. I turn away from the window. She has seen what I've done, yes, but what is to come of it? I go through the motions of my morning, washing my face, changing into day clothes and making a bowl of cereal. My ears hear The House's moans and its companions' whispers of encouragement, but no sirens. Clouds veil the sun as it dips and a gentle rain coats my neighborhood. An earthy, slightly bitter scent emanates from the lawns and swathes of asphalt. Petrichor: a phenomenon both clean and dirty, clinging and cleansing. The houses love it. They inhale and exhale, inhale and exhale. The rain calms me. I see no flashes of blue and red or the slap of heavy tires on wet asphalt. I don't know why my neighbor failed to follow through on her threat. Maybe she forgot. Maybe she wants to keep me in suspense and prolong my anxiety. Maybe, far-fetched as it is, she hopes to continue this little feud because she loves a good fight. This will turn into a game, a competition between two stubborn women: one who refuses to admit fault, and one who will never stop. I will know tomorrow.