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Portrait of a Broken Dollhouse by Annie Marhefka

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The dollhouse has a gaping hole on the side facing east, a four-inch hollow overlapping the first and second floors, its splintered edges stretching into the kitchen with the checkered floor and the bedroom with the rainbow rug and the canopy bed. The baseball that soared through the wall with wrecking-ball fury has long since been retrieved by its pitcher. In the house's attic, a girl's name is carved into the balsa wood flooring slats with blue ink from a ballpoint pen: *Annie*.

Annie's smudged thumbprint is still visible on the miniature plexiglass of the window in the bathroom. In the tub sits a toy dog. The toy dog is a poodle, and Annie's dog was a Labrador, but it was all pretend anyway. There is a wraparound porch extending around the front of the house, which is the back of the house if you are playing inside it. Annie's mother had always wanted a wraparound porch on their real home, so she got Annie a dollhouse with a wraparound porch, because that's what mothers do.

The dollhouse is exposed, one wall absent to allow its owner to move dolls and miniature furniture from room to room. Inside its three walls, there are four dolls representing the family: mother, father, sister, brother. Annie had two brothers, but the doll set only came with one, and that was fitting since one of her brothers died anyway. He went careening out of her life with the speed of his lobbed baseball, ejected through the windshield of his pickup truck, flesh striking black pavement like white leather crashing through the wood wall, swirls of red stitches around curved limbs.

After he died, she liked to trace her fingers along the splinters of the hole in the dollhouse's eastern wall, press her fingertip over the jagged spires to feel his absence as a prick. She preferred the tiny, needle-like stabbing sensation, to be up-close to it, to put her wrist through the gap between the shards. When she stood back, the hole was too all-consuming. She liked the way the dust built up. The way you couldn't notice a difference from one day to the next, but from one year to the next, you could see how time had passed. The way his absence coated the dollhouse's innards with a thick film that rested heavy, an anchor tethering her to the stillness of what used to be.

Annie Marhefka is a writer in Baltimore, Maryland. Her creative nonfiction and poetry have been published by Hobart, Pithead Chapel, Versification, Sledgehammer Lit, Anti-Heroic Chic, and Corporeal, among others. Annie is the Executive Director at Yellow Arrow Publishing, a Baltimore-based nonprofit supporting and empowering women writers, and is working on a memoir about mother/daughter relationships. You can find Annie's writing on Instagram @anniemarhefka, Twitter @charmcityannie, and at anniemarhefka.com.