



BLACK  
& WHITE

LITERARY MAGAZINE

2025

VOL. XV





Western Connecticut  
State University



black & white  
vol. xv  
literary magazine  
2025

student  
publications

black&white  
literary magazine

President: Elizabeth Antedomenico

Vice President: Dan Silva

Editor of the Black & White: Linda Saad

Editor of the Echo: Niko Bass

Treasurer: K. Wilt

Secretary: Victor Johnston

Staff: Rihanna Ivery, Ian Hendrie, Sarah Marsh, Audrey Mercer

# LETTERS FROM THE EDITORS

## Linda Saad - Editor of the B&W

I'm thrilled and honored to be the editor of the 15<sup>th</sup> volume of WCSU's Black & White. It is a pleasure to compile the impactful works that showcase the talents and passions of the university's diverse creatives. Here, your breath will be taken away by bold, poetic pieces that don't hesitate to delve into important topics and intense emotions. I hope you find a piece that lingers with you when you close this book, and I hope to see your work next time around.

## Elizabeth Antedomenico - President

It's been such an incredible journey creating this magazine and getting to help such wonderful artists publish their work. I had such an amazing time working with the members of the Student Publication Board to get this magazine to print. I'm so proud of the work we've accomplished. I feel it is very important to help artists get published and take those risks with their art as well as receive recognition for that wonderful art that they make. I am so grateful to be a part of this process.

# Content Warning

This edition of the Black & White contains content that may not be suitable for all audiences. Pieces may include descriptions of or allusions to suicide, body horror, death, and strong language. We are avid supporters of artists' expression, though we acknowledge some content to be particularly confronting. We encourage readers to engage with each work at their own discretion, and to use their best judgement when reading.

# CONTENT

## POETRY

Battlefield	3
Decaying Love	4
My Soul's Melody	5
Remembrance	6
Sprawled suburban and then desolated	7
Time With You	8
The Bluest Monday / Black & Blue / Beauty	9
Untitled	10
Your Presence	11

## VISUAL ART

abandoned art	17
---------------	----

## FICTION

Accounted	21
Book of Joshua	29
Kissing the Stars	35
Paradox Lake	36
Summer Secrets	45
The Burn of Loneliness	47
The Stranger in my House	54



POETRY





# Battlefield

by Alexa Glaser

prove to yourself

you have that strength,  
that you have that courage,  
that you have that peace.

sometimes you have to pick up the pieces alone,

do not let that weigh you down.  
keep your head up.  
do not drag,  
and do not sit in sorrow.

soon you will know why it had to be this way.  
soon there will be nothing but harmony.

sometimes, the strongest souls face the toughest battles.

# Decaying Love

by Alexandra Rodrigues

I hold you in my arms till each decay  
And I am no longer lovely.  
Please never go away  
And always love me.  
So perfect, are you,  
Wrapped in my embrace.  
No longer is color a blue,  
While I gaze into your pretty face.  
It is so sunny here  
In my beating heart.  
Storm breaks and water clears,  
Whether we are near or apart.  
That laugh so grand,  
Purpose of life — easier to understand.

# My Soul's Melody

by MaryClare Maher

I was once a lost soul searching for my home.  
My brain and heart were fighting,  
fighting over whether or not something was good  
and truly meant for me.  
But then, something drew me in  
unexpectedly.

A beautiful melody started to play  
And it reignited a flame that had blown out long ago.

My lost soul.

# Remembrance

by Alexa Glaser

what do you have to lose

if you can't get them out of your head there's a reason.  
unbreakable,  
there is still a connection.

it's never going to go away.

forever engraved in your heart,  
forever buzzing in your head,  
forever stuck in those memories.  
bright and warm, scattered all around,  
light and colorful, written on the walls.

always reminded of what you could be;  
see where you land  
take the leap of faith.

# Sprawled suburban and then desolated...

by Dan Sousa Silva

Sprawled suburban and then desolated,  
Collect your sorrows and get out of here.  
Leave some of it behind, then all of you.

Are you so small here, or is life that size?  
Is all you want out there? Is it not here?  
Is it to live your life? You're living now.

And yet you are, yet you are, yet you are.  
Taste those waters, so much you wanna drown;  
All you will do is leave without leaving,  
Leave without leaving.

Cupping all of this to your chest; are you  
Potential? Excitement? Youth? All? Fuck you,  
You're fireflies in a jar, stomached alive.

Scream—Pluto style; are you frustrated yet?  
That's another question on top of all.  
Now look at yourself there—asking questions.

You're just young, and you're just getting older,  
Needing to leave your young bones for the next.  
Ask another question; out there and here,  
What is there for me?

# Time with You

by Alexandra Rodrigues

Faster does time fly,  
Talking to you—  
The day goes by.  
No longer withdrew

Within myself  
A source of happiness  
Which is him himself.  
Loving his idea of happiness,

Endless words spoken to me  
Of kindness and care—  
(My weakness to a degree)  
These feelings we share,

For which I hope grows,  
Yet, time only knows.

# The Bluest Monday

by Kadence Belton

One slipper on, one strap on my shoulder,  
Not getting any younger, only getting older.  
I'm tired today, and I'll be tired tomorrow.  
When you're someone like me,  
Stepping out into the world is plagued by unnecessary sorrows.

Money keeps flowing,  
The wind keeps blowing,  
But I gotta keep goin'  
Don't I?

# Black & Blue

by Kadence Belton

Seldom is it  
That I turn on the news  
And I see a **black** story  
That doesn't give me the **blues**

# Beauty

by Kadence Belton

I have eyes as bright as the stars,  
A soul as deep as the night.  
I have skin that thanks the sun  
And I take America by storm,  
All in spite.

# Untitled

by Dan Sousa Silva

It happens all the time;

those lights out in the dark  
are never enough anywhere.  
And I'm sat tired on a train for once,  
or twice, staring to the front of me.

My muscles are sore, and there's  
a bit of heat to my air.  
Just thinking of that nothing  
of a something.

That nothing  
of a something.

I could touch it,  
if I reached out enough.

Would I ever.

# Your Presence

by Alexandra Rodrigues

Your presence is enough  
To make me happy for eternity,  
Even when life gets rough  
And the pain is only internally.

Too much for anyone to handle,  
Though you are there by my side  
To keep me bright as a candle,  
The wax, falling as I cry.

Melting into an unknown shape,  
My form is manipulated into  
What you see, mouth agape.  
I am nervous to see how you

See me.  
Will I then be able to truly see?



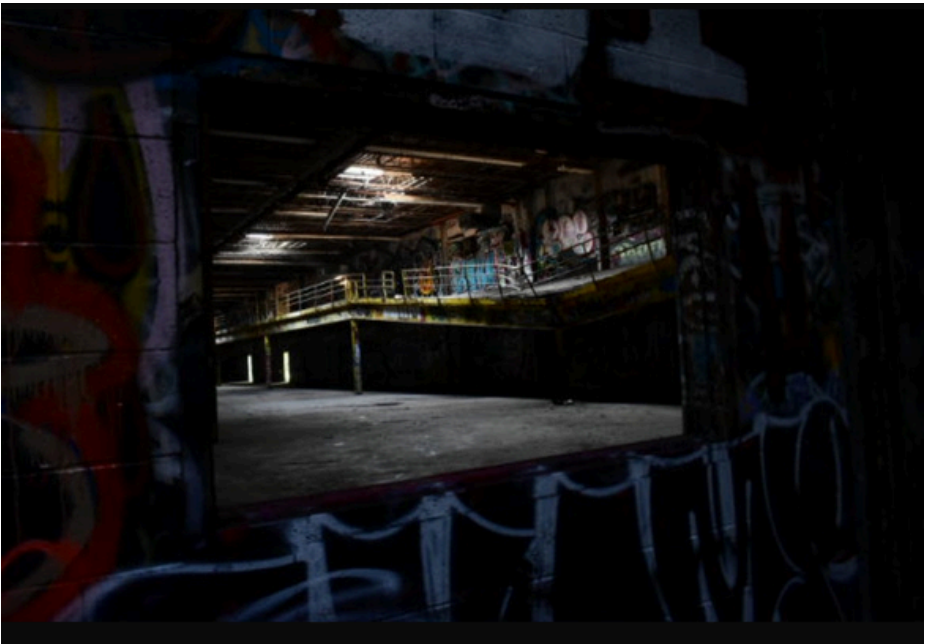
# VISUAL ART





# Abandoned Art

by Alexa Glaser





FICTION





# Accounted

by Daniel Ortiz

John hated his job. Though maybe that wasn't fair, or even necessarily true. It would perhaps be more apt to say that John hated what his job had become. Day in and day out, John tried to balance budget reports more top heavy than a sumo wrestler on a unicycle. Day in and day out, his employers found new ways to upset the incredibly fragile equilibrium.

When was the last time he had a day off? Fuzzy memories of a beach and ocean waves flickered behind his eyes, before the oppressive buzz of the fluorescent lights shattered them to pieces.

Too long. It had been too long, and yet, he didn't feel any incredible urge to go. Sitting here, in his cramped office with artificial lights, he found a strange sense of comfort. Though, 'comfort' didn't quite describe the feeling. Melancholy settled better. It was easier to sit here and think about what he'd rather be doing than it was to actually go do it.

John idly clicked his cheap pen and decided to keep doing nothing. Unfortunately, his office phone had no such inclination. He picked it up with a sigh.

"Hello—"

"Hi, Junior!" The cheery voice on the other end was strangled by the tinny quality of the speaker, rendering it into something like a sonic screech. John would recognize it anywhere.

"Hello, Angela." He should have never given his little sister his extension number. Lord knows she otherwise wouldn't have the patience to slog through the forty different layers of robotic questioning and dialing to reach him.

"There's a music festival tonight!"

"That's great!"

"...Well?" A note of expectation hung in the air.

"Well, what?"

"Aren't you gonna come?" She asked. John could almost picture her, phone cord twirled around her finger, pouting like a child.

“No.”

“No?! But you said no last time and last time before that time—”

“Times infinity, yes, I know Angie. I’m sorry.”

There was finally some quiet on the other end of the line, perhaps a rare moment of serious thought.

“All right,” was all she finally said.

“All right?” John said. He was mildly surprised; there was usually more of a fight.

“Yeah, all right. Goodnight, John.”

“Goodnight—” The line went dead with a click before he could finish. While somewhat disconcerting, it was far from the first time John had upset her. She’d be back, and with greater enthusiasm.

Now, for the task at hand. Which was...something. Probably important. John scanned his computer desktop, a blurry assortment of pixels portraying a beach at sunset. Maybe that’s where he had last gone on vacation, or maybe it was one of the default options. That aside, he had no apparent tasks. Simply impossible. John checked his carefully sorted spreadsheet collection, finding naught but painstakingly filled in boxes and black numbers. His physical desktop yielded similar results, there being only the usual piles of redundant paperwork he had printed.

Nothing.

Nothing?

Nothing.

John drummed his fingers along his desk in thought. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been all caught up. Not since the Non-Denominational Office Winter Party, for sure. After spending so long agonizing over work, ostensibly hating every second of it, John felt a most peculiar panic at having nothing to do.

The phone rang.

“Hello?” He welcomed the distraction from his apparent lack of work.

“...Hey, John,” Angela said with a voice sounding deflated.

“Hey, Ang.”

“I’m sorry I keep bothering you at work.”

“It’s okay.”

“It’s not. I know you’ve been working hard, for—for everything. I just miss hanging out.”

“Me too.”

There was a pause then, such that John felt compelled to say

something and yet came up empty.

“...Do you remember when we were little and climbed out onto the roof of the old house?” Angela said. As usual, she was the one to ultimately speak first.

John hadn’t remembered their rooftop escapades before she mentioned it, but hearing it in his sister’s voice brought back vibrant memories of abrasive shingles and cold air.

“The stars were all out, and you told me that they were asteroids about to hit the Earth,” she continued.

“I did not!”

He had.

“I had to sleep with Mom and Dad for a week because I thought we were going to die!”

John laughed, then. The sound felt alien in this space, and he got the most unpleasant feeling that he would somehow get in trouble for this rash breach of assumed severity.

“Don’t laugh at that,” Angela said, her voice betraying her delight. “It’s not funny.”

“No, you’re right. Of course it’s not.”

The ventilation overhead sounded louder in this new silence.

“So... are you still too busy for tonight?”

“Uh—” was all he managed before his computer chimed. An email. “Yeah, sorry. I have to go now.”

“That’s okay. Goodnight, Junior.”

“Goodnight, Ang.”

The dial tone was quickly muffled by the receiver as John opened his email. Why did it feel like such a relief to go back to work? Did he not just laugh and reminisce? Whatever the case may be, the computer’s fans roared to life as his inbox flashed onto the screen. Nothing. It was some policy change for an entirely separate department someone had tacked him to for whatever reason. Deleting it brought his mail count back to zero. That was what he had hung up on his sister for? The steady drumbeat of work, work, work echoed on in his head. He needed some fresh air.

His office had no windows. It was only natural, of course. He wasn’t important enough, and the outside would only be a distraction. The sun would stain his crisp paperwork as well, so really, it was for the better that he worked in this box. For the purpose of fresh air, however, it was a notable downside. Therefore, John had to venture out into the greater workplace.

Immediately, his senses were assailed by the smell of coffee and the sound of clicking keyboards. Voices murmured, phones rang, and a printer steadily spat out copies to an increasingly impatient coworker. It was by all means a normal workplace, and John couldn't help but feel a small amount of tension leave his body. Shut up in his little room as he so often was, it was easy to feel detached from the world. If "the world" consisted of some cubicles, a printer, and a dozen blank faces, that is.

What was he doing again? Oh yes, the fresh air. There were no windows in this room either, so he had a little more walking to do. As he was passing by his coworkers here, the closest ones muttering bland pleasantries, he was hit with a striking sense of unfamiliarity. Surely, he would've seen at least some of their faces as he went to and from his office; they did work right outside of it, after all. Yet, each and every one of them was a perfect stranger. More than that, he couldn't make out their faces at all.

John stood in the middle of the bland office space and watched as the faceless, vaguely humanoid forms of his coworkers imitated life. He rubbed his eyes and looked again.

"Are you all right?" asked Diane, his coworker.

John flinched as she appeared to materialize in front of him. A few glances around revealed everyone else to be perfectly normal and recognizable, a few even looking over to see what the commotion was.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm fine. I was just going for some fresh air." John rubbed his face. He must've been more tired than he felt.

"Well, take care of yourself, John," she said, her eyes searching his face for something, likely to make sure he was okay. She tucked her blonde hair (she had blonde hair, he remembered) behind her ear before gliding away to... work. That's right, because she worked here and so did he and he should really get back to—

John was already in his office before he remembered that he, as a matter of fact, still had no work to be doing. Though, since he was here anyway, he may as well check—

The phone rang.

"Hello?" He answered.

"Hiya, Junior," came the familiar, peppy rejoinder.

"I thought we said 'goodnight.'" John massaged his brow.

"I know... but! But, but, but... I forgot."

"You forgot," he deadpanned.

"Yeah. I had something really awesome to tell you." Angela

sounded confused.

“And this couldn’t wait for tomorrow?”

“No, it was important. For right now.” She sounded downright perplexed now.

John waited in silence, looking up at the yellowing ceiling tiles.

“I– I think it was–”

The phone beeped; there was another call waiting.

“I have a call right now, Ang, so you can tell me later, okay?”

“Okay...” Still strangely perturbed, Angela hung up.

“Hello?” John said as he straightened in his chair, prepared for some work. Except, there was no response. John checked to see that there was, in fact, a live call still (which there was) before speaking again.

“Hello? I can’t hear you. Can you hear me?”

Silence. Although, as he strained to listen, he did actually hear something. Breathing. It was a strange, almost wheezing gasp, just barely audible through the cheap phone speaker. John held his breath. He rationalized this in his head as being a measure to better listen, but a more primal part of him recognized something here. Like goosebumps running up your arms, like the hair on the back of your neck standing up; the feeling of being watched.

Of course, that was all silly nonsense. John knew and reminded himself just now in fact, that he was sitting at his desk, in his office, in the middle of an office building, in the middle of a very busy city. He was completely and perfectly safe, probably safer than he would be at home. With this in mind, and feeling quite foolish for even considering a phone call to be scary, John once more spoke:

“Could you please call back–” And the lights went out.

John would normally describe his office as pretty quiet, but that took into account the various background sounds his brain tuned out. The buzzing of the fluorescent lights, the hum of the computer, the clicking of the ventilation. All of these formed a sort of white noise so complete as to go unnoticed.

Until they were gone and true, complete silence asserted itself. Complete silence, that was, except for the phone in his hand. The phone, despite the apparent power outage, was still making that horrible wheezing breath, and in fact had only gotten louder. A thick, sloshy gurgling soon joined the horrific orchestra, growing louder and clearer until John finally snapped out of his stupor and

slammed the phone down on its receiver.

Except, the gasping wet breath was still loud in his ears. It wasn't coming from the phone, but from above. Calmly, very calmly and smoothly, John rose from his chair. He did not look up, because there was nothing to see there. There couldn't be. Instead, keeping his gaze perfectly level, John opened his office door and stepped out.

The lights were still on, and everyone appeared to be going about their day just the same as they've always had. His coworker at the photocopier was still there, the machine still printing out seemingly infinite papers which lay strewn across the floor as they fell out of the machine.

"Are you all right?" asked Diane.

"I'm fine." If John's voice sounded strained, Diane showed no sign of noticing. Instead, she once again searched his face with her piercing brown (had they always been brown?) eyes.

"Maybe you should sit down for a while, John." What should have been a caring suggestion came out almost like an order.

"No, I- uh, just really need some air."

"All right."

The word was barely out of her mouth when John started running. The twisting corridors of this building seemed to snake and stretch in all directions, but still, he kept running. It wasn't this big, was it? Did he even know the way out? Of course he did; he must've. He had come into work that morning, hadn't he? Skidding to a breathless halt at a water cooler, John discovered that he could not recollect ever having come to work. He just remembers being there, working. Shocked, and in disbelief, John ran his hands through his hair. His hair. What color was his hair?

The phone rang.

He was back in his office.

"Hello?" John gasped.

"I remembered what I wanted to tell you!" Angela squealed.

"Remember... huh?"

"The thing I called about earlier. I was supposed to tell you that I baked cookies for you as a surprise!"

"Huh?" John said, his head still spinning.

"Though, I guess it's not really a surprise anymore since I just told you, but I was just too excited."

"Right. I'll be there soon."

"What, really!? That's awesome! See you soon!"

John once more got out of the chair he had never sat down in and opened the door he had never closed.

The coworkers were there, still, once more unfocused stand-ins. They mindlessly tacked away at keyboards, the computer monitors dark. All of the papers coming out of the printer were entirely blank. John reassured himself that this was fine, that all was well, and he calmly kept on walking. He still didn't know how to leave, but with his steady pace he could somehow tell that he was getting even closer to an exit. That's not to say that all was well, however. A constant shuffling of footsteps echoed behind him; he was being followed.

That was fine. He was fine. "Followed" did not mean "chased," and indeed the shambling mob kept a respectful distance behind him as he blindly navigated the labyrinthian hallways. His palms were slick with sweat, and his veins tingled with adrenaline, but still, he kept his careful stride.

Eventually, after however long, there were the doors. The final doors.

And Diane.

The woman no longer had any real form, merely an amorphous blob of suggestion.

"Where are you going?" It asked in much the same voice as before, but form changes perception.

"Out for some air."

"You lie." It wasn't a threat or an accusation, merely a statement of fact.

"You're right. I'm leaving."

"You are one of our best."

"I'm sorry."

"You balanced the books. That has never been done before."

It was impossible to tell, but there seemed to be a note of appraisal or even confoundment in that.

"I'm sorry." John didn't know what else to say. Well, he did have a few ideas, but something told him that remaining calm and amicable was his best bet.

"We would like to offer you a place in Corporate," the form buzzed.

The breathing was back. Nothing in the room had changed, the faceless coworkers remained static, and the lights buzzed, but the wretched wheezing coughed and sputtered just above John's head. He heard something thick and viscous plop onto the carpet

behind him.

“Thank you, but I’m going to be late for a music festival.”  
And so he was.

# Book of Joshua

by Zachary Rozell

Joshua Moses roams the lifeless streets of Torrent, Alaska. It's six AM. Though, even if it were twelve, it would still be this active. This town isn't exactly welcoming to visitors: entirely surrounded by water and placed between two bridges with hostile patrolmen. That makes Torrent a beach town. If you consider cold and dreary to be "beach."

Even the names of the stores sound overly pessimistic. Tackle N Bait. Torrent Lumber. Hot Dogs. Not Jamey's One-of-a-Kind Hot Dogs. Just hot dogs. The guy's really named Jamey, by the way. He should capitalize on such a friendly name.

Joshua sees a tropical Coca-Cola advertisement in a window. Big waves, glistening sun, a girl who's actually showing skin. It's a far cry from the world he lives in. Ironically, right next to her is the wetsuit shop, where she would probably cover up. After all, hypothermia killed three hundred Alaskans just last year.

*This town is truly purgatory. Seventeen years and I'm still in limbo. When I turn eighteen and can have my own place, I'm out of here. I wanna go somewhere you have all year to swim, not just one month in the summer.*

He's not being hyperbolic. July is the only month that anyone with surfing aspirations can dream of wiping out. Even then, if you wipe out more than once—especially without warming up before going back into the water—you might become one of those three hundred. Today is September fifth. Ten months until the waters are safe.

Sea Dog Dock comes into view. Its waters are seemingly the coldest in Torrent.

"Joshua! I'm glad you agreed to come along. I know last time didn't go the smoothest, and I'm not talking about the rocky journey."

"I told you it was fine, Dad. I know you didn't mean to yell."

"Great! Now come aboard the *Alaskan Thunderbird*. We've only got so much morning."

The morning was the best time for fishing as the waters were

especially calm—untainted by man. Alaska was also one of the biggest fishing contributors in the U.S. So, an Alaskan fishing morning couldn't be beat! However, Joshua couldn't be more unenthused.

"When are we going to leave? I'll go inside where it's warm if we're gonna take a while."

"Nope. Be on your toes. I just gotta notify the boss that we're heading out."

The lettering of the *Alaskan Thunderbird* is almost entirely peeled off. Joshua hops on the fishing boat which is underneath named the *Queen Mary*. The ship's significantly smaller than he remembers, like Peter sold off a few of the parts. In fact, Peter never used to tell anyone he was shoving off. He's the kind of person to take matters into his own hands.

Yet, there's still that mermaid figurehead like it's some eclectic pirate ship. She's grinning while holding her tail like she's a prize. The same expression his mom would make when fishing. Her tropical roots taunt Joshua.

"Alright, we've been given the go ahe—"

Peter notices him staring at the taken-apart hull.

"Yes, we've had to downsize, but the Moses's are still going strong."

Joshua's eyes are drawn to her face again.

"...Strong."

As the boat leaves the harbor, Joshua gets a better look at his father's logo—new and improved. Moses and Sons Stupendous Fishing. It's "sons" even though there's only one. He's the unfortunate person to inherit the business his father is in denial about.

The logo is a fish eating another fish. It should be barbaric, the cartoon bib makes it palatable. Well, as palatable as a crude drawing of a cod could be.

*Why is my dad the most lively thing on this island? I guess that's where I got my love for all things colorful. A lobster shirt and a pair of jean shorts. An American flag tank top with khakis. Though, these days I'm wearing more muted tones.*

He looks at the logo in a muted way.

*That's why we're here. That's why I can't leave this hell.*

The voyage out to sea is a long and monotonous one. To fend off his boredom, Joshua employs his personal radio. The Olympics are going on and they recently added surfing as a sport—finally

recognizing talent.

“Angel has just wiped out again! Oh, will he ever make a recovery?”

*Dammit. I might loathe the man, but he's Team USA's only representative.*

Angel Fallon used to be his hero, but ever since the cheating debacle, he's been rooting against him in competitions. It's a shame too. Angel could pull off maneuvers so impressive, it made even his old-fashioned dad speechless.

“Turn that off. I can't hear the ship's radio.”

“I can't. We're in the process of seeing if Angel can redeem himself. No cheating necessary.”

Peter cranks Joshua's fully turned radio knob in the opposite direction.

“Hey!”

He then turns to the ship's radio. “Charon, this is Thunderbird. We hear you loud and clear. Moving past you.”

Peter puts his fingers to the bridge of his nose, like he was wondering how he should go about this.

“Our safety is more important than some dumb sport.”

“And fishing isn't some dumb sport?”

“...”

“Fishing is our life. It puts a roof over our heads,” Peter says.

“It's *your* life. Whatever, you're just in denial anyway.

Those big schooners are taking over the market and pretty soon lil' tugs like us will be- Well, we'll be the Angel Fallons of the world.”

“Argh, you always do this. You're always looking for a fight. Why can't you just enjoy one of these trips? There's so much to see out here, and yet you ignore it for the bridge.”

His father heads for the door. He's too heated for anything productive to happen.

“I'm at least going to appreciate the scenery,” Peter says.

Joshua doesn't leave the bridge but pivots toward the window. They're far enough out to sea that the island is fully visible, including its two bridges.

*It's so... small.*

He hopes he's on the Truman Show. The Moses Show. And that his life is more important than this. No, the book of Joshua would be lucky to find a publisher. He's not interesting enough. He's no Angel Fallon.

Joshua, growing antsy by the close surfing competition, turns

off the radio. He leaves the stuffy cabin like his father. Though, it's for fresh air, not the glistening glaciers. He was never good with suspense. Partially why, the time between the fish biting and reeling it onto the boat, was so discomforting.

Big, beautiful glaciers continue to border their right. They're imposing even with their beauty. So sharp, they could snap the tug in two. And, of course, dangerous places bring dangerous species.

Whoosh.

The boat rocks as a large shadow zips past it.

"Whoa, Nelly. That could pay for a new hull! Quick son, grab a rod!"

Joshua—unfortunately, the closest to a fishing pole—has to do more than react. He knows they only have a second before the beast gets away. It's been a while, but from what he remembers, you open the bail, pinch the line, and cast—letting the line slip through your fingers like how you would for Torrent's tall blades of grass.

"Excellent form! I taught you well. That was a big piece of bait, too. He'll definitely take it."

Like the expert fisherman he is, Peter predicts the creature's sudden U-turn.

*Crrreeaaaakkk.*

"Hold steady!"

"I'm holding, Dad."

His dad, as old as he may be, still had the spirit of a young fisherman who was hellbent on achieving his dreams—catching that fish. He reels and reels and when he feels fatigued, he reels some more. When the thing that couldn't even be called a fish flops on deck, the two raise it above their heads like a gold medal at the Olympics.

"Wow, that was... fun."

"See! Aren't you glad you gave fishing another chance?"

"I guess it's not as dumb as I thought. Well, when you're catching big stuff."

"How's about you keep accompanying me on these trips? Ever since the plate in my arm, my cast isn't what it used to be. You, though, casted just like a Moses should."

"Dad."

"I'll let you handle the important equipment, even steer the ship."

"Dad, I don't-"

“And you can finally give up that silly dream of surfing in the south.”

“Dad!”

“What?”

“I don’t wanna be a fisherman. I hate it here. This place is Hell but frozen over.”

“Maybe you should value what you have. Maybe there are people in this world who can’t brace that frost. Without warm clothes or a place to stay.”

“I’m not literally saying this place is Hell. I’m saying it’s not for me. And staying here is torture. Sorry, I mean it’s inconvenient.”

Joshua’s eyes settle on the figurehead again. It’s taken a beating since the fish encounter.

“You know Mom wouldn’t—”

“Oh, don’t you start about your mother! This is exactly why we fought last time and what led to our father-and-son three-week hiatus.”

“Why are you raising your voice? I’m right next to you,” Joshua says.

“I’m raising my voice because I’m not getting through to you. You can surf when you’re sixty, like me with guitar. At least honor the family business first.”

“I’m too old even now. The pros start when they’re super young. Even if I go South next year, I’ll be lucky to place in any sort of competition, including the retiree cup. I’ll never be anything special. For the rest of my life, I’ll be a nobody from Torrent, Alaska. You screwed me! If only I’d gone with Mom I’d—”

In the same way as when the large fish appeared, the boat rocks side to side. His father disappears. He doesn’t have to say anything to make an impact. The silence mixed with crashing waves is deafening.

Only a little later on, Joshua slinks to the bridge, the night air getting to him. *Damn, if it was anywhere but Alaska, maybe I could spend the night out here.*

He doesn’t even look his father in the eye. He just goes to the chair he was sitting in earlier. To avoid the awkward silence, he turns on the radio. However, the dial is only turned slightly.

“This just in, Angel has just won the tight competition! Let’s meet him now for an interview.”

“Yeah, even though I grew up in a small town in Minnesota,

I've always had a love for surfing. Hell, I'd say the combination of my hometown and my unsupportive parents pushed me to actually achieve my dreams."

*Huh?*

"You heard it here first, folks. Even you, yes you, listening right now, could one day be Angel Fallon."

"You just have to be full of vim and vigor," Angel says.

*Vigor?*

Joshua turns toward his grumpy dad who's pretending like he's not listening to the broadcast.

*He's the only one in this town who's ever enthusiastic (maybe a bit too much sometimes), while everyone else is so cold and jaded.*

Joshua turns off the radio and gets up from his comfortable seat. He thought he'd spend the night in complete silence, but God had other plans. After all, the book of Joshua, penned by God, should have a happy ending. It might not be a bestseller at Barnes and Noble, but it sure as hell is on the shelf. He walks over to his father and gives him a hug.

# Kissing the Stars

by Alexandra Rodrigues

It wasn't a wall this time. The cold tile of my shower clashed with the hot water pouring on me. It wasn't that either. I had to practice it in some way; I couldn't be unprepared when it happened. Or, so I thought. But the first time, it felt like a wall. A scary, unknown wall illuminated behind the gas station lights. There was no way home, so I thought kissing the wall would guarantee my safe return. At that moment, I would graduate from my shower wall. I hadn't planned anything more than past that. The wall had told me I was pretty and used my tongue.

Yet, the second time felt like a wall, too. A warmer wall in some ways. One which said there was a future together from my sparkling eyes. I agreed. The wall felt colder than my past endeavors. Lukewarm was what I considered hot. How could I base it upon something I never felt? There was no future in the present with the wall and me.

A part of me thought this time would be another wall again. I go first to the wall and kiss on my accord, but the wall was human. It was a person, scolding and full of dreams. The freckles on their face resembled constellations of stars. For which they wished upon each of them. To be loved. I feel a spark of stars when my eyes close and my lips touch theirs. I want to visit all of them, granting them a wish, for they answered mine now.

# Paradox Lake

by Jade Christos

5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

“Why do you think they call it Paradox Lake?” Lyn asked.

Another wave rocked the boat. Molly set her beer can down and sighed.

“When the British settlers first came to this area, there was a freak windstorm.” She knew the words by heart at this point. “The wind blew the water on this side one way and on that side...” she pointed past the massive island in the middle of the lake, “the other. With no better explanation, the settlers assumed it was a river that somehow flowed into itself. That it was...”

Molly sighed before continuing.

“...A loop. Because that’s impossible, they called it Paradox River.” She picked her drink back up. “And they eventually renamed Paradox Lake once the winds settled.”

Lyn looked shocked, like she always did. “Woah. You just knew that?”

“Yep,” Molly grunted. She chugged the rest of her beer and threw the can behind her into the water.

“What are you doing?” Lyn said, and stood up. “Why did you throw that?”

Molly shrugged. “It’s not a big deal. It won’t be there next time.”

“Next time? I think you’re way too drunk. I’m getting us to land.” Lyn sat in front of the steering wheel. “I don’t know what’s gotten into you.”

Molly’s eyes widened. She checked her watch. Ten forty-five. If her theory was right, she only had a few seconds.

“Wait, Lyn!” She reached for the other woman’s arm.

“What?”

“There’s something I have to tell you.”

Lyn gave her a look that said, “get on with it.”

“I-I’m,” Molly stuttered. This part never got easier. “I’m stuck in a time—”

There was a tug at Molly’s stomach and everything went dark.

\*\*\*

Molly lurched forward in her bed. Her alarm clock beeped and beeped until she slammed the snooze button with enough anger to shatter it. Molly put her head in her hands.

The loops were definitely getting shorter.

Last time, she had done everything the exact same. Inviting Lyn on the boat, explaining the lake's name, and even throwing the beer can into the water. The only difference is that last time, she was able to get the word "loop" out and see Lyn's confused reaction before the same tug and the same darkness that had plagued her for so long caught her and brought her back to the beginning.

Molly slid out of bed and trudged to the bathroom. She glared at herself in the mirror. Her messy hair, bloodshot eyes, and yellowing teeth stared back. Her eyelids were like concrete, too heavy to keep open. She kept staring at her reflection, waiting for her to blink.

"What if I just stay here?" Molly asked the mirror. "What if I spend the entire day staring at you? Would that do anything?"

Her reflection mimicked her movements, but remained silent.

Molly clenched her fist, her blood boiling. The memory of the pain from the last time she punched out the mirror was drowned by her seething rage. But before she could swing, her phone rang.

Without even checking, she knew it was Lyn. Every time, she called at exactly six fifty-seven. If Molly ignored the call, she'd call back instantly. Then again at ten fourteen. Again at four thirty-four. Then silence. Molly wasn't in the mood. She let her phone ring and ring as she grabbed her keys and left.

The dock was never busy. Not many people were antsy to go boating on a cold November morning. At first, that had been a saving grace for Molly. She pretty much had the lake all to herself. Hundreds of loops later, though, she found herself yearning for the tourist-filled summer or frozen winter. Something different. Something other than fall. She used to think fall was beautiful. But after seeing the exact same leaves fall the exact same way for so long, there was nothing beautiful about it.

Molly jammed the key into her boat's ignition. She backed up, careful not to hit the surrounding boats. Hitting the boats didn't matter; they would all be fixed by the next loop. It was her own boat she was worried about. She didn't want it damaged yet.

The boat's speedometer had been at max for a few minutes straight. It bounced along the wavy water, staying airborne for as long as a few seconds. Molly's hair whipped fervently, threatening to fall right out. The whistling wind drowned her thoughts, assuming she had any. The large central island came closer and closer. Molly made no effort to slow down. The tip of the boat pointed directly at a stony cliff face.

"Will it be different this time?" Molly asked the rocks.

They gave no response.

"Only one way to find out."

The tip of the boat crumpled on impact. Molly flew out of her seat and collided head first with the wall of stone. In an instant, she heard a crack and felt a pain immeasurable. The next instant, it was over.

Then she woke up in bed to the sound of an alarm.

"Heyyy, Molly!" Lyn's voice came through the phone.

"Hey, Lyn." Molly knew the script at this point.

"Are you okay? You sound tired."

"I am tired." True statement. "You remember last night?"

"Oh yeah! That was crazy! Hope you're doing alright after all that."

Molly had no idea what happened the night before the loop. It was so long ago it might as well not have happened. She tried racking her brain for any memory of what occurred, but nothing surfaced. Blurs of drinking, smoking, drowning, eating cake, cutting skin open, fist-fighting, blinding lights, and screaming flashed in her mind. But all of that was from inside the loop.

"Molly, are you okay?" Lyn asked.

Molly was taken aback. "Y-yeah?"

"You've been quiet for a bit."

Molly gulped. "No, yeah, I'm...good."

"Well, if you say so." She was silent for a moment. "Are you going to Brad's party tonight?"

*Didn't take long to get back on track*, Molly thought. "Yeah, I'll be there."

"Great!" she could hear Lyn smiling through the phone. "See you then!"

She hung up.

"Just stick to the script," she muttered to herself. "Just stick to the script. Just stick to the script. Just. Stick. To. The. Script." Tears tried to form on her face, but she ran out long ago.

Calling it a party was an overstatement. Never were there more than ten people at Brad's house. People was an overstatement too. These people were so uninteresting that Molly thought of them as nothing more than extras on a film set, barring Lyn of course. She knew exactly how they would move, exactly what they would say, and exactly how they'd react to every different thing Molly tried. So, she sat on the recliner like the uncle at a family reunion and chugged her third beer bottle.

Carol Anderson, wife of Brad, entered the living room from the kitchen. Molly knew about the affair she was having with Jack Beuber, one of the men sitting on the couch. In just under an hour, Carol would excuse herself and Jack would do the same shortly after. They'd go into the guest bedroom upstairs and fuck while Brad was none the wiser. But for now, she sat on the couch next to her husband, leaning against his shoulder.

Molly turned her attention to the conversation between Jimmy Ganova and Beatrice Smith. She knew everything they were going to say. First, Jimmy would ask about Beatrice's work. Beatrice would tell him,

"I work as a secretary for the governor." Right on cue, like an actress delivering her lines.

Jimmy's eyes widened. "Wow. That must be stressful."

Beatrice shrugged. "Not really. Around election time, it gets way more hectic, but most of the time, it's just taking calls."

"Have you had to deal with any crazies?"

Beatrice nodded. "Oh yeah. Legally, I can't give you exact details, but there's been so many cases of..." She trailed off and turned to Molly. "What are you doing?"

Molly snapped back into reality. Everyone was looking at her with faces of fear and confusion. Lyn's face faded into a brilliant shade of concern.

"What-what's wrong?"

"You've..." Lyn spoke up. "You've been perfectly mouthing the words to their conversation."

"What?" Molly said. She had no memory of this.

"Down to the exact word," Lyn said, shaking her head.

"How did you know what we were going to say?" Beatrice asked, crossing her arms.

Molly's eyes widened. She felt around the chair for something to grab onto. Her hand met one of the empty beer bottles. She proudly held it up.

“I’m drunk as shit.”

The rest of the partygoers looked at each other, concerned, but this excuse seemed to pacify their fears. Lyn collected the bottles surrounding Molly and left them in the kitchen. She came back and laid down in Molly’s lap.

Molly had no reaction.

Time passed. Just as expected, Carol rose from the couch and excused herself. A few minutes later, Jack did the same. Brad, eternally a moron, didn’t find it suspicious at all. He just kept talking, drinking, and watching TV. Every single time Molly came to this party, he was always the same. While some people had different responses to Molly’s unique actions between loops, Brad was always quick to write them off and get his train back on track. He would never know that his wife was cheating on him with one of his close friends. In fact, as far as Molly knew, he would never know anything beyond today. He was just as trapped as Molly was. The only difference is that she was aware of it. Brad’s existence was one of ignorance.

*That is*, Molly thought, *assuming he exists at all*. How did she know for absolute certain that any of this was real? She knew she was real, but everyone else? Everything else? Everything just got reset. People said the same things, day in and day out. They weren’t people! They were actors!

Molly wanted to laugh, but nothing was funny.

“Molly, are you okay?” Lyn asked yet again. It was getting annoying.

“I’m fine.”

“You look so pale.”

Molly moved to get up. Lyn fumbled her way to the floor.

“Where are Carol and Jack?” Molly asked, emotionless.

Brad frowned. “I’m not sure. I’ll go look for them.”

“I’ll come too,” Molly said. “In fact, we should all go.”

Everyone looked at each other and shrugged. Molly knew they would come; they had nothing better to do. She confidently led everyone upstairs to the door of the guest bedroom.

“What makes you think they’re in there?” Brad asked.

Molly didn’t answer. She just swung the door open to two half-naked adults on a bed, in the dark. Gasps erupted from the peanut gallery as they rushed into the room. Arguments between Brad and Carol, Jack and his wife, anyone with anyone else they had a slight problem with. Molly remained silent. No matter what,

every time this situation played out, nothing she did made a difference. She looked to the door, hoping to make an escape. Her eyes widened.

Another Molly was standing at the door. Something that looked exactly like her. But it couldn't have been her. She was her. Right? The other Molly mimicked the motion of opening the door. She stepped through and made eye contact with the Molly already in the room. They stared, paralyzed, mouths agape. The same thoughts flooded through both heads, yet none were heard. It was noise, a mental cacophony, as the rest of the world faded. The arguing died down, the walls and floor disappeared, and even Molly's alcohol buzz turned into a memory. The only things that existed in that moment were Molly and Molly, and as Molly looked at the fear in her reflection's face, she realized—

There was a tug at her stomach and everything went black.

“What am I supposed to do with this?” Lyn said, holding up the straitjacket.

They were on the boat again, anchored at the halfway point between the mainland and the central island. Molly's watch read three fifty-seven. Just two more hours until this loop ended, assuming she lasted that long.

“I just need you to put it on me.”

“Not until you tell me why.”

Molly sighed. “I told you already. I've been repeating today over and over again. I'm trying everything I can to break the loop.”

“I believe you, but what does the straitjacket have to do with that? And why are we out on the lake?” Lyn thought for a moment, and then gasped. “Please don't be doing what I think you're doing.”

Molly stared.

“Molly. No. No. NO. You can't. I'm not doing that.”

“It's fine, Lyn. I'll just come back and everything will be the same. You won't remember any of this.”

“Then why do it at all?”

Molly glared at her. “Because I have to know what happens.”

“What if this breaks the loop? What if the world continues on and you're just dead? Gone forever?”

“That's the goal.” Molly stood up, grabbing the straitjacket and sliding her arms through. “Tighten it.”

Lyn, tears in her eyes, stood up and tied the sleeves behind Molly's back. “I hate that I'm doing this.”

“It’ll be fine. Most likely, I’ll just wake up in my bed at the start of today.”

“And if you don’t?”

Molly looked out over the lake. “Then you can rest easy knowing I’m in a better place.” Arms sufficiently tied, she turned around.

“Goodbye, Molly.”

“Goodbye, Lyn.” Molly leaned back off the edge of the boat sank into the blue abyss.

Molly sank past the groves of seaweed, following the chain of her boat’s anchor. Fish scattered away from her. Bubbles escaped from her throat. Every second was agonizingly long as more and more water entered her lungs. But still, she sank.

Paradox Lake was deep, about a hundred feet deep to be exact. There was no way Molly would reach the bottom. But, as she sank, she noticed something floating in the water. It was too far down to see clearly, but it was larger than any fish that could live in the lake. As she sank, details of the shape came more into view.

It was a corpse. No. It was Molly’s corpse. Dead eyes left open. Hair floating around her like a halo. A massive dent carved into her head. Molly kicked the body away, but when she looked around in panic, she saw another. And another. And another. A menagerie of corpses. Her corpses. Floating at the bottom of the lake. For the first time in unknowable ages, Molly was afraid.

Molly was sure she would have run out of air at this point. More of her own bodies floated around her. Too many to push away. She looked down. Even more corpses. Each corpse had something unique to it. Some had bullet wounds. Some were frothing at the mouth. Some were missing limbs or even heads. As she approached the lake’s bottom, she realized it wasn’t the bottom at all. A mountain of identical corpses, piled up like discarded Barbie dolls. They stretched for miles in all directions.

As Molly landed at the very top of the mountain, she saw what the anchor had latched onto. It was trapped in the grip of several bodies’ dead hands. And, as the last bit of air escaped Molly’s throat, millions of eyes closed with hers, and her body joined the others.

The next loop, Molly spent an hour laying in bed. Then another. And another. Then, slowly, she got out of bed. She put on her clothes. She ate a granola bar. She avoided the bathroom mirror. She took a deep breath, in and out. When she was ready,

she left. She left her front door unlocked and walked all the way to the dock.

The cold wind blew her hair in every direction. She didn't care. The hot sun beat down, making her sweat. She didn't care. Her duplicate bodies now floated on the lake's surface. She didn't care. She watched a clone of herself take her boat out of its spot and drive into a wall. She didn't care. She reached the outskirts of town. She didn't care. The outside world had been reduced to nothing but a sandy desert. She didn't care. She kept walking. And walking. And walking. Her throat became dry. Her stomach growled. The tips of her fingers turned blue. Her arms screamed from the heat. She didn't care. The sun passed over her head. She didn't care.

Why am I doing this? She thought. This doesn't matter. I'm just going to—

There was a tug at her stomach and everything went black.

Molly woke up in bed. She got up immediately. She rushed to the front door, threw it open, and ran outside. She made it halfway to Lyn's house before—

There was a tug at her stomach and everything went black.

She made it to the kitchen. She peeled the plastic off the granola bar. She barely sunk her teeth into the oats when—

There was a tug at her stomach and everything went black.

Molly cried. She lied in bed and cried.

"Whatever's doing this to me, whatever mysterious force you are...please. Please stop. Please, set me free."

But the mysterious force remained silent.

There was a tug at her stomach and everything went black.

Molly opened her eyes.

There was a tug at her stomach and everything went black.

Molly let out a breath.

There was a tug at her stomach and everything went black.

Molly—

There was a tug at her stomach and everything went black.

M—

There was a tug at her stomach and everything went black.

—

There was no stomach to tug and nothing to go black.

# Summer Secrets

by Allison Sammel

Marina spent every summer on Nantucket, an island just off the coast of Cape Cod, MA. Ever since she was a young girl, she would spend, from June until the end of August, at her family's beach house. A long cobblestone driveway makes its way to a circular drive as it meets the quaint front porch decorated with white Adirondack chairs, hanging ferns, and potted white flowers that mark the borders of the front steps. The home belongs to Marina's late father. The walls of the spacious home hold history, secrets, celebrations, and love affairs left to nothing but a mere faint memory.

As the years went by, Marina and her siblings started families of their own. The siblings would split their time at the beach house. Sometimes all three families would be there at once for celebrations such as the Fourth of July and Marina's birthday. Throughout the lengthy summer months, they would independently spend a few weeks in the Nantucket beach home.

Marina was turning thirty-two that summer. Her birthday fell at the end of July, so that month was dedicated to her husband Anthony, their three-year-old daughter Shelby, and Marina. The couple married young, at age twenty-three, just out of college, and settled in a gorgeous brownstone in Boston. Escaping the city life for the summer was a break that Marina needed desperately. She very much looked forward to her time on the beach. It gave her space to clear her head and reset. Anthony would have to leave Marina and Shelby during the weekdays as he traveled back to Boston for work.

Once the family settled in at the beach house, Marina took Shelby to the market to purchase food needed to fill their pantry and refrigerator. They were the first of the siblings to arrive for the summer. Shelby was sitting in the cart as Marina pushed her down the produce aisle when she heard a familiar male voice. It was deeper than she remembered, being that they were just teenagers all those summer ago.

“Marina! I can’t believe it’s you. It’s been so long since I have seen you, what a welcomed surprise!” Marcus exclaimed.

Marina stared in disbelief. She was shocked. Marcus was the last person she expected to run into. After high school, he moved to California, and she had never heard from him again.

“Mar—Marcus,” she stumbled to say. “How are you? It’s been... I can’t even remember the last time we saw each other. What are you doing here?”

“I moved back to the east after my divorce,” he said with a wink. “I can’t believe that it’s you. We need to catch up. How about coffee? Wednesday morning right across the street at the café?”

Marina froze. Without thinking, she said, “Yes, I would love to. Does ten o’clock work?”

As Monday approached, Anthony got in the car and headed towards the city for the week. Marina couldn’t bring herself to tell her husband about Marcus. She was ashamed. As she began to get ready on Wednesday morning, she put great thought into what she was going to wear: the proper selection of perfume, and just the right amount of makeup allowing for a lasting impression.

As Marina sat outside of the café with Marcus, laughing and reminiscing, Shelby sat in her stroller while making a mess of the croissant she was ripping apart. As the ocean breeze blew through Marina’s long blonde hair, Marcus reached across the table to gently brush the hair away from her eyes. As he did so, she found herself reaching for his hand to hold it as she pressed it against her cheek.

Anthony decided to surprise Marina and came home early. He wanted to stop at the market to pick up some flowers for her. As he pulled up to Main Street, something caught his eye: Marina. She sat smiling and laughing, while holding the hand of another man, in front of his daughter.

# The Burn of Loneliness

by Carrie Boyd

“I seen it with my own two eyes! I know who done it!” I kept yelling at every official-looking person rushing by, but no one would give me the time of day. Then again, who cares about a bum on the street? After a few minutes of yelling, I finally gave up and sat down next to Bernice, my best friend who has been by my side through everything. As I sat there, the wind began to smell like fire, and smoke began to give the air a hazy gleam.

I turned to Bernice and asked her incredulously, “Can you believe this?! I seen it all, and no one gives a damn!” I shook my head and turned back to the scene in front of me. The giant building that I had been staring at for the last seven years was engulfed in angry red and orange flames. They spread and devoured the structure with what seemed like a mind of its own, and smoke twirled around the aged, crumbling bricks like fog swirling on a morning lake.

Firemen and police officers were everywhere, and people stood around, huddled in groups to ward off the cool autumn air that seemed to seep into every crack and pore. One lady was crying and describing the events to a bored-looking officer, tears leaving gray trails in the dark soot on her face. But she didn’t know who caused that fire! I did! Does anyone ask the bum what he saw? Nope! No one cares.

I turned back to Bernice, still shaking my head. “They are all wasting their time! I could save that officer a lot of trouble if she’d just come over to me. But she’s too interested in the things that lady don’t even know! I tell you; I do!”

Unfortunately, I am used to it by now. People don’t see the bum that sees everything. I see the pickpockets and how they are able to lift a man’s wallet without even a rustle of the pants. I saw a purse-snatcher sneakily grab a woman’s bag and walk away; she didn’t even notice it was gone for at least an hour. I even saw a man get shot! I was sittin’ there, minding my own damn business, when right in front of me, a man pulled out a revolver and shot another man. He didn’t even think I was important enough to get rid of, and

did anyone ask what I saw? Not a single goddamn one ever did.

I put my arm around Bernice and sat silently, contemplating, while the world ran itself ragged around me. Even though there were people surrounding me, it still felt as though I was drowning in loneliness.

“I wasn’t always like this, Bernice,” I said, my tone quiet and sad, “I wasn’t always on the street, but sometimes, that’s where life leads and leaves you.”

I have always loved that walk down memory lane, to think about how things were when I had a home and a family. I thought about the love of my life: my high school sweetheart, Emily. We spent hours in the park, watching the kids play and talked about our futures. She always dragged me to the park because she said she loved the feeling of the wind in her hair, but I knew the truth. It was so I’d keep my wandering hands to myself. I chuckled a little as I thought about the times she would smack me and tell me to behave. Her mouth would turn down in a scowl, her cheeks turning crimson with embarrassment, but her eyes always had a spark of light that I loved.

It was then that I started drinking. It was just a glass here or there, and I told myself I could stop at any time. But those glasses turned into bottles, and it wasn’t long before I had to admit to myself that I wanted to quit, but couldn’t. The last time I saw her, that spark I loved so much was gone. There was no sign of anything on her face—only a blank, tired exhaustion that clouded her once youthful smile. She stood in front of me with her shoulders sagging and tears running down her once rosy cheeks. She was speaking, but the words were distant, and all I could focus on were the sad cornflower blue eyes of my little girl, peeking at me behind her. Tiny fingers wound so tightly into her mother’s skirt; they were almost fused. Her blond hair hanging in ringlets over her face, and those beautiful blue eyes with that unnatural brightness from tears. That was the last time I gathered them both in my arms and swore things would change, the drinking would stop, and things would get better. How I kissed my little Emma on the forehead and swore things would be better.

But then, work got busy, life got hard, and drinking got its hands on me again. The more I drank, the harder life became. In the blink of an eye, my family was gone, my job didn’t know me, and my home was the street. But that alcohol is a harsh mistress, and she won’t let you forget her once she has a hold on you.

With that thought, I reached into my pocket and pulled out my last bottle of Georgie. I unscrewed the lid and, before I raised it to my lips, I remembered my manners.

“Here you are, my oldest and dearest friend, would you like a swig?” I asked in my best and most polite voice. As always, Bernice couldn’t be bothered to respond, not even to refuse a drink, and that didn’t bother me none.

“More for me!” I sang merrily as I took a long swig from the bottle. The clear liquid ran down my throat, leaving a trail of fire all the way to my poor, abused stomach. As I coughed and gagged, I elbowed Bernice.

“This is going to be the death of me yet,” I chuckled. She wasn’t there when the doctor told me if I didn’t stop drinking, my liver would leave me high and dry. And here I am now, not so high and definitely not dry. Maybe I would have taken the doctor more seriously if she had been with me. I laughed again and elbowed Bernice. “My best and loyal friend. You’ll never leave me.”

I placed the bottle back in my pocket. It was indeed my last, and I should save it. You never know when you’ll get another one. It was then that I saw a policeman watching me, and my heart raced. Is someone going to ask for my help this time? Will someone finally acknowledge that I exist and that I am a member of this society?

Still looking at me off and on, the officer began to make his way over. He was doing his best to not trip over the tangle of fire hoses, to not get his feet wet from the rivers of water gushing everywhere and bypass the dozens of people huddled and scared. My heartbeat even faster as I elbowed Bernice.

“Look at that! Someone is actually coming to talk to me! What should I say?” Once again, she was of no help in the matter. So, I started rehearsing exactly what I would say to him. “Good evening officer, lovely night,” I practiced under my breath. “Did I see anything? Why yes, indeed I did, officer!”

While I rehearsed, I straightened up my coat and ran my fingers through my greasy, knotted hair. After all, the key witness has to look good for the papers, and they’re bound to all want me on the cover.

“How do I look Bernice? Hmph! Never mind. Not like you’ll give me any good advice.” As the officer approached, I sat up straight, squared my shoulders, and prepared myself for the oncoming onslaught of questions. As I opened my mouth to greet

him, he stopped and gave me that disgusted look I always get. It was then that he brushed past me, continuing down the road and out of sight.

My racing heart slowed down, the excited shaking in my hands went away, and the dryness in my mouth became unbearable. I pulled the bottle out of my pocket and took another swig.

“That was close, ay, Bernice?” I laughed, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible. But the ocean of sadness in my soul swelled and threatened to drown me. “I guess he don’t want to be no officer of the year, cause I’d get him that! I’d hand him the culprit right now!” I chuckled as I downed the last of my Georgie in one gulp.

Now, the air was thick with acrid smoke, and the smell of burning was so strong it almost singed my nose hairs. I continued to watch the people rush back and forth. I watched the firemen yell at each other, talk into their radios, and run in every direction with all kinds of supplies. The police officers were still there, but not many were left. Some were still asking witnesses for statements, while others stood around with coffee in hand, treating this whole thing like it was a live show.

Every person that went by worked hard to not make eye contact. What was I going to do? Bite ‘em?! This made me laugh again and elbow Bernice. “You know, it wasn’t always like this. I used to be the good Samaritan of the year! I told them every little thing I saw until they stopped listening.” I shook my head and wished I had another bottle of Georgie to drown these crushing emotions.

I sighed and ran my hand across my lips. “Maybe I yelled too much. Maybe I cried for their attention too many times. Maybe people wouldn’t have stopped listening to me if I hadn’t wasted their precious seconds!”

I shook my head and elbowed Bernice again. “Here I am, going down that dark hole again!” I laughed as I looked back at the chaotic scene in front of me. The darkened old bricks could no longer be seen. Instead, the cherry red and orange flames swirled around the building, mixed with smoke that dissipated into the dark night sky.

It was then that I noticed the two tiny blue eyes staring at me through a dirty little face. She couldn’t have been more than nine, maybe ten, and she was the calmest person in this madness. She was covered head to toe with soot, and her blond ponytails hung

limp from smoke and sweat. We made eye contact, and she didn't look away.

I risked a little hand wave, and she waved back with a tiny smile showing through the black soot. Oh, how she reminded me of my own little girl. Those beautiful blue eyes looked just like my Emma's. I'd rush home from work just to see that little head of blond hair and those big blue eyes peeking over the window sill.

As soon as my car pulled into the driveway, I could hear that tiny voice screeching "DADDY! DADDY!" as the screen door would fly open, and her stubby little legs would move as fast as they could. I would launch myself out of my car just to catch her and throw her in the air, those strawberry blond curls flying everywhere, and those bright blue eyes shining like a million stars. She would wrap her arms around me and squeeze me as hard as her little arms could. The scent of lavender would fill my nostrils as I pulled her in tight and buried my face in her hair. It was the scent her mother loved more than anything, and it was the pure essence of my love for them.

Before I even realized what was happening, she was standing in front of me, yanking me out of my daydream. All she was wrapped up to protect her from the night was a thin Red Cross blanket.

"Is that all you got?!" I asked, even though I knew it was. She nodded and shivered a little to emphasize how thin it was. I reached behind me and grabbed a bag. Even though all my worldly possessions were stored in black garbage bags, I knew exactly what was in each of them. I pulled the one I kept all my bedding in and pulled out the cleanest blanket I could find. As I wrapped it around the girl, I had to justify myself to Bernice.

"I know it is my best blanket, but she's cold and don't got got nothing else," I snapped at her. "Besides, what's it to you?!"

The young girl's eyebrows knit together, and she turned her head ever so slightly to the side. She almost reminded me of a confused puppy.

"Who are you talking to?" she asked.

"Where's my manners?!" I exclaimed, jumping up quickly. I made the deepest bow I could, almost causing my aged bowler to fall off my head. I steadied my hat and put on the most sophisticated voice I could muster.

"I'm talking to my best friend in the world—Bernice! Bernice, say hi to the nice young lady."

Even though she still looked confused, she waved, and said with a big grin, "Nice to meet you." But when her eyes met mine, she continued to look unsure.

"Can I ask you a question, sir?"

Sir? I hadn't been called sir in ages!

"I ain't no sir, young lady! But you can call me J."

Her face lit up and she asked, "Is that your real name? J?"

"Well, it's close enough, young lady. And what would you like me to call you?"

She thought for a moment, and with a childish grin said, "Can you call me Spot? I've always wanted a dog to name Spot, but my mom says no, so I guess it'll never happen."

I laughed so hard my ribs hurt. "Spot? You want to be called Spot?!"

She grinned sheepishly and nodded.

"Well ok! Spot it is!" This made me elbow Bernice again with gusto. "You hearing this? Ain't this the funniest shit you never heard?!" My whole body shook with laughter. The smile left her face as the confusion replaced it.

"Can I ask that question, J?" The sudden change in tone made me stop laughing, and I nodded.

"Who are you talking to?"

I jerked my head towards my best friend. "I'm talking to Bernice, of course."

She didn't look convinced. "But she looks like one of those people that stand in the windows, where my mom shops."

I gave her a wry smile. "You mean a mannequin?"

"Yes! That's what I mean!" she shouted triumphantly. Then, she quickly became somber again. "Why do you talk to her? Does she talk back?"

I sighed and shook my head. "She's my best friend in the whole world, and no, she doesn't talk to me." This time I couldn't keep the sadness out of my voice; my best friend in the whole world is a fashionably dressed hunk of plastic.

"Why is she your best friend? Don't you have other friends?" She asked with that childlike innocence I used to love in my little girl. Days like these made me think about her more. I wonder where she and her mother are, and if they are happy.

"Nope, I don't need no other friends," I stated firmly, but sadly. Then I saw her face light up as she exclaimed, "She's not your only friend! I'm your friend, too!"

I couldn't help but laugh at her exuberance. Suddenly, a woman appeared out of the smoke and grabbed the child's arm, frantically shouting, "Where have you been? I've been looking everywhere!" She gave me a sideways glare before she began to pull her daughter away. Right before the smoky air enveloped her, she yelled, "Bye, friend J!" And then she was gone.

I chuckled and yelled after her, "Goodbye Emma! My friend!" and laughed to myself, listening to her voice fade as she was pulled away. The words "But my name isn't Emma!" yanked me back to reality.

She wasn't my daughter. I could dream all I wanted, but no one will ever be her. That's when the sadness came rushing back. She had the same beautiful blond hair, and the same stunning blue eyes, but she wasn't my Emma.

I longed for another bottle of Georgie. Just a little sip would be enough. I began to look through my bags again, knowing there weren't any left. I shook my head for some clarity and elbowed Bernice again.

"Imagine that! You ain't my only friend now. Don't be getting jealous on me, you hear?" I chuckled to myself.

"Is this the end for me?" I sighed, running my hands through my hair. "Is this who I was meant to be until the day I die?" The expected silence followed, so I settled back to watch the show.

The fire was mostly out by now, but I continued to watch the people going by. A police officer walked passed, and I once again yelled, "I seen it! I know who done it!" But all I got was the quick glare he always gave me as he turned to walk the other way.

"You know Bernice, if they'd only come talk to me. I'd hand them the bad guy no problem, but ain't nobody gonna talk to me." I just shook my head and watched the people go by.

"How sad is that, Bernice? I start a fire, and still can't get nobody to talk to me!"

# The Stranger in My House

by Zoe Zheng

There's a stranger in my house, inhabiting the body of the man I once called my husband. It dons his face like a mask, even going as far as to imitate his every mannerism in its attempts to deceive me. It tries its hardest, and I'll admit, it plays the facade of 'husband' well enough to the untrained eye, but it can't fool me.

The eyes of the thing that has infiltrated my home are what give it away. They're cold, empty, and indifferent; nothing like the eyes of the man I married, which beamed with the love and trust we shared. Now, when it looks at me, there was no spark, no recognition. Just a blank, lifeless stare. The warmth and connection my husband and I shared is absent, replaced by something clinical and detached.

The more I observe the stranger, the more cracks appear in its illusions. The stranger is becoming careless. It used to put up a decent front, but now, it makes no attempts to disguise its desires to control me. The stranger stalks me in my own home, insisting on "helping" me with even the simplest tasks. It's always watching me out of the corner of its eye, as if afraid I'll escape its grasp when it's not watching. It even tries to trick me into taking some "medication" that only makes me sicker.

The most telling slip up came when I refused to take that junk after the first few times. The stranger's face, for a brief moment, twisted in anger before smoothing over into a neutral expression. Even if it was just for a moment, I became certain: that's not the face of the man I love.

After that, the stranger refused to let it go, insisting that I take the pills. Why is the stranger so determined to get me to take the medication? I don't know, but I don't bother asking. There's no logic in the stranger's words. The stranger claims it will help me, but time and time again, it's brought me nothing but harm.

It's frustrating, because this stranger—this *impostor*—has done a better job of convincing everyone around me than I could've ever imagined. My friends humor me, but I can tell they aren't really taking what I say seriously. My family insists I'm imagining things,

and that old age is getting to me. I know my husband though, better than any of them, and I can't unsee it now. He's gone, and something else is wearing his skin.

For weeks after my revelation, I was miserable, burdened with the knowledge that only I held. I'm stuck with this hollow shell of a man who says all the right things, and performs all the right motions, but it's all a facade. It's all a performance, put on by the stranger who has infiltrated my husband's body. These thoughts come on especially strong at night, leaving me restless and worn out the following morning. Even on the nights when I am able to drift off, I can't escape the nightmare that's become my reality.

When I open my eyes again, I'm staring at the ceiling of my bedroom, but something is off. The room is wrong. The walls are too close, too short, and there's a distant sound like faint footsteps approaching the bed. I turn sluggishly, forcing my body to move against the paralysis weighing my body down. What I see nearly makes my heart burst out of my chest.

It's *him*. Or, rather, it's the thing that wears his skin.

Its face isn't quite right. It looks like my husband, but its features are contorted, stretched, and twisted in ways that look... inhuman. His eyes are wide open, fixed on me with that cold, lifeless gaze. I opened my mouth to scream as the stranger took a seat on my bed, but no sound came out. The shadows in the room grow thicker, reaching out toward me and pulling me deeper into the nightmare. The impostor's grin widens, the skin of its face stretching impossibly. I watch in horror as the edges of its lips crack, the smile becoming more grotesque with every inch it grows. It leans close, its breath cool against my skin, its lips brushing against my ear.

"You knew what was happening," it whispers, the voice chilling and unfamiliar, yet, still vaguely *his*. "Yet you couldn't stop me. I've already replaced him."

I try to push it away, but my hands pass through its body like it's made of mist, like it isn't even real. My chest tightens. For a split second, I allow myself to wonder, what if none of this is real? What if I'm still asleep?

The thing tilts its head, its eyes narrowing as if it can read my thoughts. It laughs, the sound hollow and mocking.

"You're still trying to deny it," it taunts, leaning in closer. The stranger smells faintly of the old cologne my husband used to wear. "I see it in your eyes. You thought you could wake up from this,

didn't you? Thought you could run from it. But it's too late."

I recoil, trying to move away, but I'm rooted to my spot on the bed. It's like my body is made of stone, too heavy to lift.

"No," I whisper, the words barely audible. "This isn't real. It's just a dream." I'm the one who said it, but I didn't know if I could believe that. I'm trapped.

"Don't you see?" it whispers again, the voice soft now, almost coaxing. "It's all gone. He's gone. I've taken his place. He's nothing but a shadow, a faint echo. And you..." It pauses, studying me, its eyes gleaming with something sinister. "You were always too weak to stop it. Too weak to stop *me*."

The space between us warps. The room begins to tilt. The walls cave in. I try to move away from the stranger, but my body remains weighed down. I can't move. I'm helpless as the stranger's grotesque smile moves closer and closer until...

The world goes black.

When I wake, I'm gasping and drenched in sweat. My heart is still hammering in my chest. I reach out instinctively for my husband, but his side of the bed is cold. Empty.

The feeling of dread settles in again, heavier than before, and I wonder if I'm still in the dream. Maybe I never woke up. Maybe this whole house is just another twisted version of the nightmare. I close my eyes, trying to ground myself.

The silence in the room is deafening, broken only by my ragged breathing. I can still feel the weight of the nightmare clinging to me, the memory of the stranger fresh in my mind. My hands shake as I clutch the blankets, trying to steady myself. The air feels thick, as though the walls are closing in once again, the shadows creeping back toward me.

Then I hear it: the sound of footsteps. Soft, but unmistakable. I don't want to turn. I don't want to look, because I know what I'll see. I know what's waiting for me in the darkness.

"Darling?"

A familiar voice cuts through the fog of panic that clouds my mind. I freeze, my pulse spiking once more. It sounds like my husband, but is it really him? I want to plead, to scream, to beg him to prove it's him. Even so, I can't bring myself to move. I find myself trapped in my own mind, lost in a maze of confusion.

When I eventually summon the courage to turn and face the figure waiting for me, I see not the stranger, but my husband. He's standing at the foot of the bed, looking at me with a tender

expression, nothing like the stranger's. I observe him carefully. He may not look like the stranger, but is he really my husband?

"Darling," he says again, his voice softer this time, as he tentatively steps forward. "What's wrong?"

I can't stop the tremor in my voice as I croak, "you don't belong here. I don't know who you are, but you're not my husband."

He stops, his expression pained. "Darling, please, listen to me. I *am* your husband. I'm right here."

I back away, my breath quickening. "You don't get it! You don't...!" I stop myself, my voice faltering. " No. No, you're not. You're... You're a fake hiding in his body."

His face fell. "I know you're scared. I know this is hard for you," he says gently, his hands slowly reaching toward me. "I'm not out to get you. I'm trying to help you. You're sick, darling, and I know it's terrifying. Please believe me when I say I'm your husband, and there's no impersonators here. *Please*, listen to me."

Tears well up in my eyes, and I shake my head violently. "No! No, this is just another one of your lies! It's *not you*. He's gone, he's gone, and you...!"

He's at my side now, his hand on my arm in an attempt to ground me. "I *am* him," he says, his voice breaking. "I'm not gone. I'm right here. I know things haven't been easy for you lately. You're sick, love. You're dealing with an illness that's making you forget things, and making you see the world differently. But I'm still your husband. The same one who vowed to stay with you through both health and sickness, and I plan to stick to it."

I can't look at him. The words don't make sense. I'm not sick. I'm not forgetting anything. I close my eyes and try to recall the last few weeks, desperate to prove him wrong. Yet, the more I try to piece together the memories, the harder it becomes. Faces blur, and events that seemed so recent suddenly felt distant, as if they had happened to someone else. Everything feels distorted, warped. This isn't real. This *can't* be real.

"I... I don't remember," I hear myself say distantly. "I really can't remember... You were... Were you always like this? Always this... different? Wait, no. It's like you're, you're someone else. But... maybe I just..."

My thoughts keep jumbling together. My words don't come out right. What was I saying? Why did I sound like this? Have I always sounded like this?

"Please," he continues, his voice gentle but steady, "I can't even

begin to imagine how you must be feeling right now, but I swear, I'm here. Look at me, really look at me, darling. I'm not going anywhere. You have to believe me."

I pull away from him, the walls of my mind closing in tighter. "I can't... I can't believe you. I can't believe anything anymore." My chest tightens. There's not enough air. The world is slipping through my fingers.

He kneels in front of me, his eyes filled with a tenderness that's almost unbearable. "I know, I know it's hard. But you're not alone in this, okay? I'm not going anywhere. I'm right here with you, no matter what you see, no matter how much it hurts. We're going to get through this together."

His voice, the softness of it, reaches deep into me. I want to believe him. My heart aches with the desire to believe him, to trust that the man I love is still here. Even so, doubt and fear claws at me like an unshakable shadow.

"I feel like I'm losing my mind," I admit shakily.

He doesn't let go of me, his hand on my arm warm and reassuring. "You're not losing your mind," he says, his voice low. "But you're struggling. You're hurting. You don't have to fight this alone. We can get you help. I'll be right here with you, every step of the way."

I feel a tear slide down my cheek as I let out a broken sob. The relief is bittersweet as the weight of my own mind continues to press against me. Is he real? Is this really my husband?

I had my doubts, but I looked at him. I really examined the man who called himself my husband. His eyes reflect nothing but love and worry. It's him. I want to believe that it's really him.

I nod shakily. "Okay," I whisper, my voice trembling. "Okay... I'll try."

"Alright," he says, pulling me into his arms. "We'll take it one step at a time."

As I relax into his embrace, I let myself believe that maybe, just maybe, he's telling the truth. My fears still weigh on me heavily, but his steady heartbeat beneath my ear and the warmth of his arms around me feel grounding. The world feels just a little bit less warped, a little less threatening. There's no cure-all and no sudden clarity, but maybe his support can be enough to guide me to a better path. Perhaps, together, we can rebuild what's been broken. I cling to that thought, fragile as it is, and for the first time in what feels like forever, I feel a flicker of hope.



