

**January 32<sup>nd</sup>**

by Bex Peyton

The difference between warmth and heat is how it makes you feel. On the inside, I mean. Warmth holds, wraps. Warmth is safety, comfort. Heat pushes, prods like it needs to get through you, sharp and focused and nothing like warmth. I lie face down on the warm sand, and each time the waves break over my body, the salt seeps deeper into my flayed back.

Something's happening to me. Something's always happening to me, I mean. This time it's something that's real, and I don't know if I'll live through it. Well, a part of me knows, so I guess I shouldn't have brought it up. I think I always wanted something serious to happen to me. Something cosmic, dangerous. When I got what I wanted, when I get what I wanted, I won't even be able to recognize it. My name is Molly and I'm watching myself die.

I'm sorry if I don't make any sense, but fear is scrambling. You'd think a natural response like fear would help clarify things, but I lie with my thoughts floating ten feet above me. Bounding and rebounding like this, it drives me insane. July, maybe January. It's happening, maybe already has. It's like I'm being chased down a dark and wet street. Well, not so much chased but rather, attempting to stay in the middle, between something that's gorging itself on everything behind me and something that's waiting for me to run into its grasp. I don't know.

I know now. What it is. What it was. Fear means nothing when you know the results are unavoidable. When I was a kid, I loved the beach. When we, me and the rest of the girls I mean, would make it to that time of year where classes were suspended, we'd be taken about an hour west to a small shore which was only used by our school. The time of year specifically is something I forget, but it was never too hot or too cold, always comfortable and warm. I thought of the sun as our final instructor, a giant matriarch who could hug us all at once.

One year, I wandered off without my friends as the sun was just setting. I managed to find my way to a rocky part of the shore where, once I climbed around for a while, I discovered dozens of little tide pools. I was entirely fascinated, watching the starfish hang off the walls of the pools, almost fluorescent green barnacles cushioning their falls to the bottom. Somewhere, when circling a pool to get a better look, I took a wrong step, and I was suddenly falling backwards into the water like the starfish I was observing. Instinctively, I pushed my arms down and barely caught myself before I got my dress wet. I remained suspended above the water for a moment, trying to regain my strength to push myself back up to standing. Once the moment came and I looked back into the pool that had nearly swallowed me, I felt a coldness run down my back. In the middle of the water, inches below where I was just suspended, a jagged rock rose from the pool floor; its pointed tip just piercing the water's surface.

I miss those girls, and will miss them more than anything soon. To die before you live is a pain I don't think I could express. A constant fear, yes, but something more that doesn't feel acceptable. Not having the ability to be accepted, I mean. Like the thought that you can never truly look at your own face without a reflection. Wishing you could just rip it off and hold it in your hands and stare right into it. Your own face. December, maybe August. Something, maybe nothing at all. When I think about it, was I ever really a kid? Doesn't everyone feel like they have only ever been what they are in this moment? If I ripped off my face and looked at it, I don't think I would recognize it.

I don't know how, but I was locked out of time. Am. Would be. When I was a kid, I used to cry when it snowed. Overwhelming, I guess, as if the planet was so tired of being cold that it dropped everything it was holding. That's because I thought when I saw snow, the whole world did. I think I wanted to believe the world was small enough that I could know every person

living in it. Everyone would know me, everyone would be my friend, everyone would see the snow. It's not easy to die like this, with no one, no one to think about, no one to say: "Molly? But, I just saw her last-". To disappear is sad, to be forgotten before you die, I think is the loneliest thing that could happen.

I couldn't cry. Can't. Won't be able to. Snow is different when you're lying face down in it. It freezes your underside to a numbness that makes it feel like you're lying on a piece of wood. When you can hear it, snow I mean, stacking carefully on the edges of a wound, it's more like a parasite than precipitation. I imagine the heat from the inside of my back quickly melts the flakes that make it inside, but the ones that just miss the opening accumulate around it. Heat, not warmth. Snow, not salt. Snow, not now. There is no salt in snow. There is no way this is happening.