

Paint of the Sea
By Milana Melnick

There stands a wraithlike, pale house. It dots a salty, tipped peak in eastern Long Island. Atlantic blue waves lap distantly below it. They butt into the smooth cliff face. The house seems to melt into the gradient precipice, as if painted in watercolor by its bitter inhabitant. An artist resides in the pale house, drawing life from the ocean.

On one particular humid and cloudy July day, the painter was rolling waves of blue onto a canvas with the guidance of his rusty lamp. A knock came at the door.

With hesitation, another followed. "Come in," the man said lightly, without looking up from his brushstrokes. The dark door slowly creaked open and the crooked hinges were pushed inside by the wind.

"Hello. You're the painter?" the figure by the door asked tentatively. She stepped into the orange light of the lamp. Her nails dug into her palm, but her eyes jumped around the room, latching onto every unfinished canvas and curious pile of seashells. A small blue door especially caught her attention, but she made no move toward it.

The painter finished highlighting the curve of a wave. "Yes," he finally answered.

"Can you take my fear?" she posed the question and strode forward. The floorboards creaked; she treaded back a bit.

The painter looked out the window and stilled. Previous visitors fell like dominoes in a spiral through his memory, their stories made of fuzzy dots. He remembered an instance when a poet had asked him to take away all of his joy. The poet explained that his writing was meaningless if clouded by the yellow light of a smile. The painter had refused him. The old artist decided who would change.

"Describe your fear to me," he asked. The painter's eyes narrowed and studied the girl. Her pearly boots were muddy. That made up his mind, but made no show of it.

"It's like a spirit. Or a shadow. Gray, I would say, with hints of mauve, that looms in front of me, pulling me before I take a step..."

The artist pulled out his easel and prompted her to continue talking. As his brush produced its own paint and water and bled onto the canvas.

The girl's heart lightened. Slowly, her speech came to an end, and the painter added one final touch. The hypnotic image seemed to rock about like a boat. The painter kept a firm hand

on it. "Thank you!" she exclaimed, and ran into the woods, into the coming rain, arms outstretched.

The man waited until nightfall to step out of the small blue door onto a thin cliff ledge. Drafts of overwhelmingly raw air battered him, swinging from all directions, pressing him into the blue door, tripping his feet on the curve of the ledge. The artist flung the painting of her fear out into the night in front of him. He pictured the girl's sour face. He could not hear it land, but the waves roared.

In the middle of the night, in the middle of the woods, in a pile of mud and twigs, the disheveled girl sat in her dirty boots. Something changed in her. After she had left the painter's house, no strings of fear pulled her in any direction. Her feet flew like chained wind that had been freed. But now, on the silent and frozen forest floor, a familiar fist gripped her. As the fresh air escaped her lungs, she thought of the painter, and the strings of fate he held in his brush.