2014

Short Circuit II

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Recommended Citation
Rajnicek, Michael (2014) "Short Circuit II," Fishladder: A Student Journal of Art and Writing: Vol. 12: Iss. 1, Article 10. Available at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/fishladder/vol12/iss1/10

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As he stepped over the white-painted threshold into the basement hall, Kaden Duffy removed the knitted wool hat he’d worn for the five-minute walk from his apartment. He slid off his tan jacket one shoulder at a time, slowly revealing the light-gray Penn State crewneck he wore almost every day to combat the cold air that breathed from the vents along the ceiling, even in the deepest winter months.

The first snowfall of the season had begun shortly after Kaden left home, giving a damp start to his last day of employment at Amara Funeral Parlor. He hung his cap and his jacket to dry on the same brass hook he’d used for the last twelve years. He ran his hand through his hair, brushing the remaining snowflakes from among the strands of his bangs that had faintly started to gray.

As he moved along the hallway, the shined black dress shoes Kaden was required to wear clicked against the dark cement floor. He rubbed his ears as he walked, wringing the warmth back into them; he spared a few extra seconds on his right earlobe, where a chunk had been missing since his fifth birthday.

The overhead lights flickered to life as Kaden made his way into the main room of the lower level. He would miss the constant hum he had grown accustomed to over the years. He found it comforting. It offered a reprieve from the dead silence of the apartment he returned to every evening, and he seemed to accomplish more with its white noise than he did without. He would find himself reading the paperback murder mysteries stacked on his desk much faster than he would at home, sometimes finishing one in a single day as he waited either for bodies to arrive or for those he had already checked in to finish in the cremation chamber built into the southern wall.

While the majority of the funeral home had been renovated countless times—new carpeting in the front entrance, fresh wallpaper in the viewing room—the basement had remained untouched since being built nearly a century before and, due to a faulty rusted hinge, the door to the retort where the bodies were incinerated stood completely open whenever the space was vacant. The inside had blackened over time and the stone chimney that rose from the back was so dark it was...