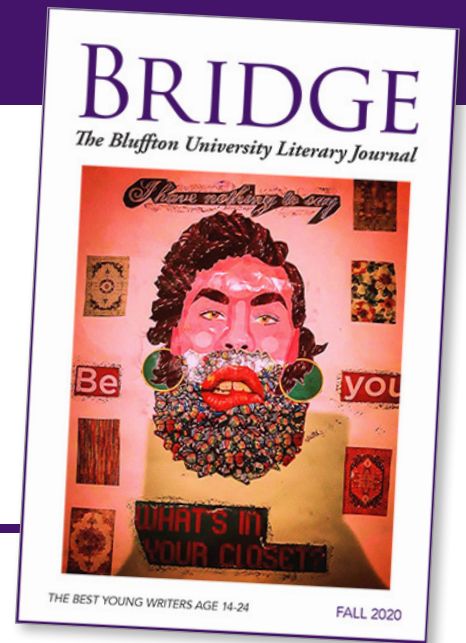


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TO THE BOY THAT PAINTED HIS FACE BROWN WITH MUD TO MATCH MINE

Elyse Thomas

I was in pre-k and you were in kindergarten. I don't remember when we first met or if we became friends through the cliché, *Hi, my name is [insert name here] and let's be best friends* phenomenon, but I still clearly remember you over a decade later. You were pale and blonde and blue-eyed like the glacier that sank the Titanic. I was browned by the playground sun and muddy-eyed, my head holding curls that tangled themselves like our limbs on the playground. *An unconventional match*, put by adults, and yet we became best friends.

I was four, but I knew I loved you the way I loved crayons—enticed by each misplaced scribble drawn over the lines of a coloring book. Only now do I recall these little things about you.

You bought me heart-shaped chocolates on Valentine's day. I saved them for two weeks in my refrigerator without ever consuming a single one. When my father asked why I never ate them, I shook my head, stating I wanted to preserve them like how they were given to me—untouched and pure. But later, in the midst of night, when the refrigerator hummed in the cool of its slumber and the day's yellowed afterglow shown from its opened door, I fitted each individual heart-shaped

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chocolate in between my frail, cupped hands, only releasing control of their dark brown bodies when I was validated enough by your simple gesture of love.

I still remember sleeping at your house one Saturday night, us sitting in the bath tub as milky bubbles commenced in high tide and rose over the flattened landscapes of our chests. Afterwards, your mother, platinum blonde ponytail slipping over her globed shoulders, placed us in your checkered race car bed. You were a blanket hog in your sleep, and you created an endless wrestle of the sheets in the night until I gave up fighting for them—like it always feels I am doing now.

When picking you up afterschool, your mother would pinch our cheeks and sigh, *My little sugar cookie and chocolate chip cookie always together.* And we'd laugh while I secretly wished I was a sugar cookie, too.

At times, I relish in these memories of my youth. Yet often, I neglect to remember the point in my childhood in which I realized the genuine repercussions of my race.

One afternoon, my father received a call from school with news you had painted your face brown with mud—the kind that's viscous and sloppy and only used in preschool attempts at blackface. The principal continued, *When the teachers caught him, he smiled, 'I'm just trying to look like her.'* She laughed as the cellphone static layered her ignorance to the phone call at the mention of your impersonation of my blackness. She finished, *Isn't that cute? You know kids. What can you do?* My dad allowed a bitter chuckle to escape his mouth as he hung up the phone.

I now wonder if my father imagined the soft laughter of the teachers as they wiped your face clean of mud with soggy paper towels and told you the soil was dirty. I wonder if he had hoped someone said your actions were wrong and explained to never do them again. I woefully know that deep inside that wish was never answered.

At my father's initial narration of your muddy adventure to me, I took your

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actions as a sign of admiration and became enamored by, what I believed to be, your declaration of love for me. With very little knowledge of my race at the time, your actions seemed to express your longing to understand my four-year-old self in all of its difference from you. *Oh, that's funny*, I responded before running to my room, acknowledging the sidestep shuffle of my heart echoing in my chest.

Only now do I look back on your actions and am aware of the error in your ways. The subtle reinforcement of the school's administration as they laughed at your young and shy hints of blackface. My father's forced chuckle as adults allowed these unignorably racist issues slip through your muddy fingers. My naïve acceptance of playground mud as love.

Even sometimes, I excuse your behavior. I explain to myself your innocence and naivety of the world at that time. What did you know about racism? About me or my history with the color of my skin?

I remind myself that you never knew my own battle with my race. You were unaware of the years I licked the entirety of my palms wet with saliva and patted it on my knees. Embarrassed for my ash stricken joints and overcome with melancholy as I watched the last bit of eggshell white disappear from my body—aching for its return or even an extension of its stay on my skin.

You would never know of the one car ride home I had with my father at age five. I sat in my car seat, curling my two feet over themselves as I meekly whispered to him, *I wish I was white*. My voice splintered through the air-conditioned breeze, *It seems like they're better than us and prettier than me and I wish I was them*. You would never hear the impenetrable shudder created over those few words. Or the growing racks of shame rolling over me like jaded waves reeling into an ocean's shore. You'd never hear my father attempt to convince myself away from my own internalized oppression and then, defeated, voice back, *Then, I wish I was white, too*. I wish you could feel the way the cement highway

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widened underneath me as I crawled into its depths.

During these moments of deep recollection, I aim to drive out the hopeless fantasies of us together as adults, both older and vastly matured from our preschool states. I envision what it would be like to look at you through a new perspective and vice versa. I question if the passing of years between us would draw us nearer to one another like magnetic forces or shift us apart as if we were tectonic plates swimming on a sea of awkward silence.

On one late night Google search, as my mind drifted into the ebony, starless sky and my fingers searched aimlessly across my keyboard for its next endeavor, I found you online. Just one click on your social media profile and I would see you in your present state. I skimmed across your profile page until I was content with a picture of you in your football gear. There you were—a broad shouldered, white boy with that same sly grin and brown mud patterned across your uniform. I envisioned your body gliding you about the earth under the Friday night lights. I saw you riddled in that same dirt from our childhood, taking a part of me each time you left the ground a little bit browner. In my desk chair, my body pulsed in its hopeless long for the blissful ignorance of my youth, hurt by the undying love I cradled for you in the cavity of my chest after all these years.

When I think of you now, I still hold close to the memories we wove together over the beginnings of our adolescence. I still dream in heart-shaped chocolates and glasslike bubbles and patterned race car sheets. Yes, I do occasionally want to be a sugar cookie like you, too. And I always find myself asking if you remember me as I do you.