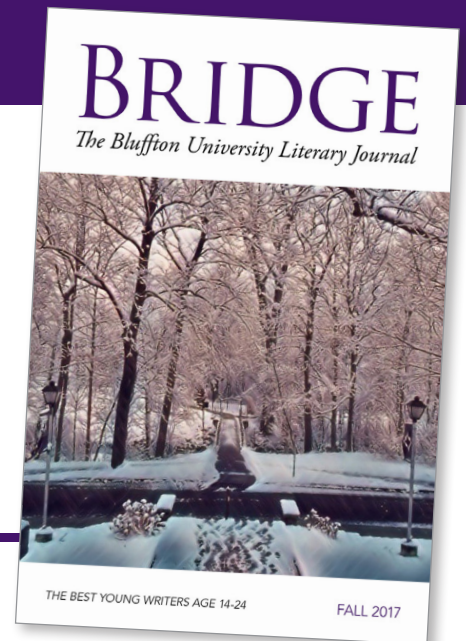


BRIDGE

The Bluffton University Literary Journal



L'APPEL DU VIDE

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We only went riding at night, until Lee, our older brother, taught me how to ride a two-wheeler. Until then, Lee would knock on the door of the bedroom I shared with Amelia, the hallway light slithering onto the carpet, and tell us to get our shoes on. I never looked at the clock, I knew it was that magical time of night when it wasn't today, but it wasn't tomorrow. I was also just excited to go anywhere with Lee, to be cool enough to go on a night bike ride with my older brother. I hung out with Amelia all the time, she slept five feet away from me; I knew too much about her, like her boyfriend (whatever relationship thirteen-year-olds can have) and that she had recently shoved her dolls into a box at the back of our closet because her friends thought they were for babies. But Lee was a mystery. He seemed to change shape every time I looked at him.

I remember being allowed to stay up late one night to wait for Lee with Mom. Dad went to bed, and Amelia claimed to— but she really snuck out of our window to ride her bike to her friend Rachel's and drink spiked lemonade. My sister learned to use my parents' concern about Lee as a cover for her own actions; she was the one my parents didn't have to worry about, and so she never let them.

Mom and I waited in the living room, simultaneously watching cartoons on TV and the front windows. Leaning against her legs on the floor, I could feel anytime she tensed, anytime she thought she heard the tumble of limbs that was Lee.

At one point, someone's car lights caused the stained glass "Stavros Household" sign to flood the living room with bits of colored light, illuminating the sad scene of a mother waiting for her son to come home. Mom rubbed my head and said, "Victor, your brother was born with a coat, like caramel popcorn. In sixteen years, I don't think I've seen underneath, seen what his real skin looks like."

As soon as she said it she pulled away, realizing she revealed too much.

I was too young for metaphors, so I remember thinking that Lee's skin felt just like mine and smelled the same too. I pulled at my arm, wondering how someone's skin



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could be fake. Lee came home, red-eyed and stumbling, before I could ask.

In those moments, I felt so far away from him. He was a different brother standing in the entryway, locking eyes with Mom. He was that sticky caramel coat Mom talked about— shoulders high, hand on the knob, one foot behind the other, ready to run. He was the complete opposite on our night bike rides – or so I thought; something scary can be so enticing when it wants your company, when it plucks you out of bed and asks you to run away with it.

On those night rides, Lee pedaled while I sat in a milk crate attached to his handlebars. Amelia would ride next to us on her bike, a small radio propped up on a towel in her basket. Lee would lift me into the crate, pull one of his sweatshirts over my head, wait for Amelia to tune the station to the top 40 or soft rock my parents listened to. Then we would rapidly pedal out of our neighborhood to the highway.

The faster Lee pedaled, the more all the houses blended together, one after the other like suburb soup. Usually all the lights in the other houses were off, people who were already in their tomorrow. Our world was quiet, and we believed that no one knew what this silence sounded like but us. The highway was our secluded playground where we could ride as fast as we wanted to, not having to worry about anyone or anything.

Lee would occasionally slow down for Amelia; sometimes they let themselves wander away from each other, bookending the road. But they always drifted back, always made sure the three of us weren't too far apart.

As Lee pedaled, I tipped my head back to feel the wind on my face like a wave, a rush of cold air that froze my cheeks and hit my lungs like a drum. Sometimes, Lee closed his eyes too—I think I remember learning this from him. My hair didn't blow in the wind, it was too short, but Lee's did, it was curly and just long enough to become animated, like an octopus grabbing prey.

Amelia, on her most daring nights, would peddle hard enough so the current took her bike for a few minutes: she'd stand up, stick her hands out, eyes wide at the sky, caressing the air like she was catching honey. After closing my eyes for that first breath of rushing air, I liked to stare down the never-ending stretch of blackness in front of us, at my siblings, at the houses we glimpsed through the trees, at anything I could commit to memory, because I knew the feeling of being so content, so safe in a milk crate tied to a cheap bike, could not be replicated.

I still wonder whether my parents knew, or if they were totally blind to our night rides. Part of me thinks it would have to be a miracle for them not to notice. Another part suspects that maybe our parents did know; but that the sight of all their three children riding in tandem, smiling and laughing, convinced them to let us go. That maybe, without us in the house, their bedroom became their highway, and they let everything else but themselves drop away.

That's what we were doing, ignoring all the things outside our focused vision for one hour. We let the feeling of desolation cradle us and drove so far into it that we stopped being scared of the dark, of the cars, of how fast we were going, of everyone else, of not being where we were supposed to be, and just let ourselves float through the night air. We would only turn back when the plots of land got larger, the houses farther apart, the lawns with no yellow patches like ours, until the need to ride so far out into the night to find emptiness was not present. I usually fell asleep on the way back.

I never really thought to question our night rides, I didn't want to be disinvented. I recognized that they always happened after Lee had a fight— with my parents, or with anyone. Lee was bigger than most of his friends— kids who most people left alone, but who some couldn't help but be revolted by—so Lee took on the role of protector. When he was fighting, Lee pushed past depression and thrived, because people were relying on him, just like Amelia and me relied on him when we were riding.

When Lee came home with a bruise blossoming on his face or blood on his shirt, Dad would rush to him, ask what "they" had done to him and take inventory of his son's body: Lee's skinny legs, the flat contours of his abdomen, the muscles on his arms, his face – pale, blue tinted – to make sure nothing was out of place, to make sure "they" hadn't broke him.

“They,” I later learned, were the people who taunted Lee for being able to listen to himself, for being an amphitheater of bones and muscles, instead of being afraid like them. “They” were a conglomeration of prejudice and fear and that suffocated boyhood. During these times, with the soft, angelic, hallway light hitting them, Dad seemed to never even consider that Lee might be guilty. These were the only times I saw Lee let himself fold into Dad’s arms, the only time he rested his burden onto us. I liked doing things alone with Lee, riding felt empty without Amelia, though we had done it once or twice.

On those nights, I would wear my warmest pajamas and wait up for Lee’s soft knock. If Amelia was at Rachel’s, drunk off two shots, then I would be who Lee needed. I liked doing things alone with Lee, riding felt empty without Amelia, though we had done it once or twice. I didn’t know how to make Lee laugh, couldn’t make a zigzag pattern for him to follow or race him home. It felt like a task too big for me to orchestrate. If one element was off, it wasn’t release or magic, it was just riding your bike at midnight.

When she was home, Amelia would slide into my bed and we would keep each other awake until Lee came for us. Even at seven, I recognized fear on my sister’s face. She always tried to get to the front door before our parents did, sneaking Lee in and waking me up to get band aids and towels, or a trash can and pajamas.

If my parents found Lee first, Amelia and I would stay in our room. I would ask her to explain the constellation map thumbtacked to our ceiling. Lee found the map at a garage sale when Mom was pregnant with me. Amelia would describe the clusters and what they were named for, sometimes making up names and places, until Lee knocked on the door. When he did, we were all relieved. We depended on the release of riding bikes down the highway in the middle of the night: Lee to baptize himself of whatever anger he was hoarding, Amelia to guide us home in one piece, and me to make sure that when we got home the air would be back in our house.

I didn’t know what my parents and Lee fought about. My parents were of the too-young-and-impressionable camp, so I was kept away from all the sticky familial secrets. Amelia knew, but only repeated my parents’ clichés. Lee and I never really talked until we were both older, when he had been on proper medication and treatment for a while, when we were far enough away from the tumult to see the mountain top.

I took my conclusions from sitcoms where the good kid met the wrong crowd: partying, bad grades, lackluster attitude. This storyline always felt inadequate, though. I never heard my parents worry about Lee throwing his life away, not like the parents on TV. They didn’t sound angry, they sounded scared for him, scared for how numb and absent he was some days, scared of the anger that ensnared the air around him, scared of losing him to whatever void he was falling into.

When I was young, I knew next to nothing about Lee’s childhood, of my parents’ attempts to get him to therapy or on medicine. I knew that on the days he was happy he went on runs with Mom, helped Dad with dinner, swung Amelia around the kitchen in a mock waltz, played superheroes with me, and took naps in the backyard or crowded us all into the living room to play a card game or watch a movie. Then, Lee was the daring boy on the bike, someone we stuck to like bees to honey. Mom’s chest rose and dropped fully, Dad whistled, Amelia would float around the house, light as cotton candy, and I felt better just watching them. The only other thing I knew was that on nights Lee left, we would ride bikes until the Lee I did not recognize disappeared.

On our last ride, Lee and I hit a pothole and I flew out of my basket. Lee’s close-held secrets spilled all over us that day. An older boy, named Teddy, hit the basketball out of my hand and sneered, “My brother Glenn says that your brother is an ass-licking f**got.”

I was only in first grade, so none of these words really made sense to me, but by the way Teddy spat out the last word, like he ate the tag on an apple, I knew it was bad. I yelled back that of course my brother wasn’t that and then bawled my little eyes out until it was time to go inside.

When Lee, Amelia, and I got off our buses that afternoon, I asked Lee what a “fatgot” was, and if he really was one. He looked as if he had been caught in a wave, the kind that leaves you heaving salt water, a handful of chips halfway to his mouth. I barely got out the name Glenn before Lee was running the few blocks towards their house, leaving a pile of chips in his wake. Lee dragged Glenn, clad in a wrestling onesie, out of the house and beat the crap out of him. Amelia and I caught the tail end of this as we ran up the block. Teddy stood in the doorway watching, slack-jawed. Amelia ran into their backyard, grabbed a hose, and turned it loose on Glenn and Lee. We all stood for a moment, Lee and Glenn in a face off, purposefully not wiping the blood away from their noses and mouths. Teddy hovered behind the screen door. Amelia held the hose, and shifted nervously, one foot on the lawn and one on the concrete sidewalk. Then Lee grabbed me, shouted for Amelia, and we all ran home.

Later, Glenn’s parents called Mom and Dad over to talk about the fight. Lee told us later that they all sat in Glenn and Teddy’s living room “explaining themselves.” Our dads had gone to high school together, and had seen a couple of fights themselves, so they didn’t want to press charges. Mom and Dad were still pissed, though. As soon as they got home, we had a very tense dinner, followed by an early bedtime for Amelia and me while Lee, Mom and Dad talked some more.

Like any other night Lee got into a fight, we waited up for him to knock on the door, but something was different. I knew that we rode after fights like these, but seeing Lee enraged, laying punch after punch into Glenn’s face, like he was a different Lee altogether, I was kind of scared of getting on the bike with him. In my mind, Lee was like Hercules: the underdog fighting obvious evils. The fight with Glenn didn’t feel like that.

“Move over,” Amelia said, sliding into bed next to me. I was still thinking about what Glenn and Teddy meant, about the fight. After a few minutes, Amelia spoke. “He’ll be Lee again soon,” she said. “We’ll get ice cream, see movies on premiere night and get the jumbo popcorn, and go for bike rides in the daytime, and... other stuff.”

Amelia looked at me, expecting something. I nodded, not sure of what else to do. We were just kids, grasping at memories, not sure how to cope with Lee’s depression and the other things we didn’t know. We were quiet after that, but when Lee knocked on the door, a little more hesitant than usual, I sprang up, ready to take my place in his basket.

By then, summer air was turning into fall air, and the wind on the highway bit more than usual. Lee was riding faster than he ever had before. Occasionally, I could feel him squeeze my shoulder, like a seatbelt. We were far enough down the highway that the lawns were professionally kept. I distracted myself looking at the combinations of colors, sizes, and textures, the gnomes or porcelain frogs, everything that made the garden look full. I couldn’t look at Amelia or Lee. I had too many of other people’s words in my head. Lee cleared his throat and put one hand on Amelia’s bike to pull her closer.

“Vic and Ams....Uhm, what that kid said—”

“Fatgot?” I pulled my attention away from the house with the sunflowers growing tall against the back of the house.

“No, you say...never mind...I know you’re probably confused. Honestly, so am I.”

I turned around. Lee’s voice cut through the sound of the turning spokes, the sprinklers, everything— and I had a sudden urge to remember his face. I don’t think I had ever heard him talk so much on our rides. He was looking directly at me, his eyes a little wet in the corners, strain pulling out the lines in his forehead.

“I don’t know how to tell you, how to explain—”

Then we hit a pothole. The bike jerked and everything went foundationless. I remember closing my eyes like I was doing a cannonball into a pool, but instead of sinking I hit concrete.

I cried, bawling for the second time that day. I felt Lee cradle my head in the crook of his neck. Amelia dropped her bike on the ground, quickly sitting on the pavement next to me. Lee pulled her to us, so we were both squished under his arms, his tears mixing into our hair. He kept saying how sorry he was, he couldn't stop: I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry. Eventually, as we sat in the middle of the highway, Lee rocking us back and forth, he started whispering I'm gay, I'm gay, I'm gay, I'm gay, I'm gay I'm gay I'm gay. This was more comforting than the I'm sorries, though I have a feeling Lee didn't realize he had substituted one for the other, that for him, then, they meant the same thing.

We sat there long after I came to a hiccup, and little a longer after Lee stopped his mantra. Amelia had been quiet the whole time, but when I opened my eyes, I could see her fingers turning Lee's skin white. We got up when a car pulled off to the side of the road and a middle-aged man got out. He was very suspicious of Lee, putting himself almost in between us, pointedly asking Amelia and I if we were okay or if we needed a ride. Lee and Amelia declined at the same time.

We stood in a line facing the rest of the highway, trying to memorize the thick trees on each side, the metal dividers reflecting the streetlamps, the sign with the picture of an accident causality and flowers to frame it, the fast-food littering the grass, the long expanse of darkness in front of us, the orange sign warning that the highway ended here, ordering drivers to exit. The road was the same, but for once, it wasn't bearable.

For one last time, I climbed in the milk crate, and we rode home.

I fell asleep in the crate, even though it had just betrayed me. Amelia rode with Lee's hand on her handlebars. When we got home, Lee carried me into the house. I woke up when Mom poured peroxide on my bloody knee. She carried me back to my room to lay down. Amelia was sitting on her bed, Lee a shadow in the doorway. They both followed Mom out after she tucked me in.

When they left, I fell asleep immediately. The next morning Mom was up early making pancakes, Amelia next to her. Dad and Lee had gone out. When they got home, Dad popped his head through the front door and told us to go outside. Lee held his hands over my eyes while Amelia led me to the edge of the driveway.

Shuffling me in front of him, Lee said, "This is for you little man."

When he pulled his hand away, there was a shiny new two-wheeler in front of me. Mom, Dad, and Amelia were lined up behind me, smiling. Lee squeezed my shoulder, walked to the bike, and rang the bell on the handlebars. Then said, "It's for you to ride by yourself. Ready?"