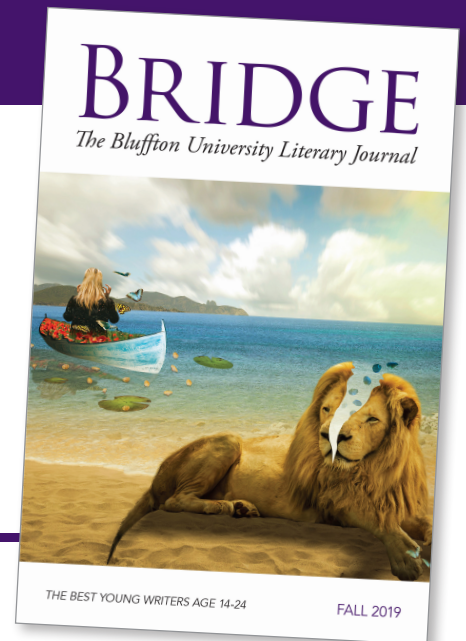


BRIDGE

The Bluffton University Literary Journal



TWO

Jessika Bouvier

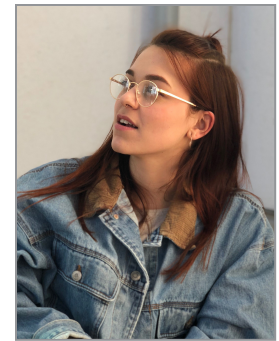
There's lights, cameras, but no action. Just you standing in the center against a nondescript wall. They tell you to look directly into the lens, don't smile like that, and the flash is blinding then gone, then hands on your cuffed wrists, guiding you. People come in forgetting the rules: head down, walk fast. They walk in forgetting but then leave with a reminder, the cell bars clanking shut, the metal cold in their grip. You'd think people would not return asking for more, but there's always those few who surprise you.

Jail is no fun, not that anyone promised it would be, but it seems entertaining when you're staring at photos of sorry suckers all day long. Darius runs the courthouse gig, carrying files back and forth. The files are huge: heavy stacks of pictures of floating heads, eyes filled with misery or dope, paper-clipped to their names, their bail, their charges. The only parts the clerk bothers to sharpie out are their social and any semblance of hope in their eyes. Once Darius brings them into the office after lunch, Pravna will spend her day scanning faces from real life to interweb, pouring the slowly hardening concrete of reputational tombstones one after another. Pravna scans while slouching

in her desk chair, appearing burdened by the weight of her iced tea. Darius will flit about the room with an already filthy duster to pass the time until she finishes uploading the mugshots, or he has another errand to run. The twins, Min and Joy, will be taking their coffee in the office as usual, with just one another.

It's a new trade, mugshot publishing. Like everything else they used to be printed, but now the trees need saving and the Internet is always ready with welcome arms. Do a quick Google search, then gawk as your neighbor or grocery clerk or yoga instructor pops up in the search engine, busted in more than one way. Peruse the details of their mistakes. A mugshot is a mugshot and doesn't necessarily indicate a charge or conviction, but the world is all about appearances, and you'll never forget the looks on their faces. If the sight of it is really so awful, the "Pay for Removal" button, green and blinking beneath each mugshot, is always ready for your merciful donation to save the poor soul you've already mentally crucified. Credit and cashier's checks only, please.

Sounds close to extortion, but they can't arrest us for making money off of public records; not that your local, upstanding



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Continued on page 2

community members won't hate you all the more for it. You can't stop your face from being captured and printed and held in some file cabinet in a clerk's office somewhere, but when the twins get their hands on it, and then the Internet, things circulate. Make the appointment so the twins can listen to your story about the collateral from your daddy's funeral and your ongoing divorce and pretend to be sympathetic. Sometimes one of them will even place a gentle hand on your shoulder. But unless you reciprocate with the removal fee, cash spilling from your wallet, they won't bat an eye as you grovel. It's just how it is. On the far wall of the consultation room hangs a framed piece of cloth that one of them embroidered a year ago. In pink, block letters, it reads:

CHECKS WITH TEAR STAINS
ACCEPTED.

JUST DON'T SMUDGE THE INK!

The "i's" are dotted with tiny flowers.

I should clarify that none of these people are heroes. Not to imply that this information leaves you with any notion of that, or anything that even suggests it, or anything admirable at all. But it's best not to make empty promises. People get caught up in things around here. Heads in the clouds, always giving the benefit of the doubt, that sort of thing. They forget the rules, too: head down, walk fast. There are no metal bars or barren hallways, but people still come in forgetting, and never come back asking for more.

Save for those surprises.

#

It is afternoon. A spring rain slides over the edges of the building and fogs the windows. Darius is out retrieving mugshots from the clerk's office. He dusted earlier today, but only the surfaces that were already uncovered, so the magazines still hold little heaps of grime. Pravna slouches beside the microwave.

Last night's stir fry perfumes the small lobby.

"He's late," Min, the slightly taller twin, calls out from within the office. "Why does it kill people to act with a sense of urgency? You'd think he'd treat the situation with some respect."

Pravna blinks as the tupperware twirls. Joy, her eyelashes clumpy and thick over her small eyes, jostles the lamp on her desk. It threatens to fall, but she steadies it with her hand, then mumbles to no one in particular.

"Tell me I'm wrong," Min says, peering out of the office.

"I won't," Pravna replies.

"Of course you won't. I know every appointment in the book."

"You do."

"Of course I do."

A pause.

"Why do you think they're so late?"

Joy asks, voice soft. She has always been the meeker twin. Pravna sits and busies herself on the computer. Min has the urge to insult her, but turns back into the office to brood. Joy pivots from her sister's gaze as she paces.

Car lights pool onto the front window, glinting orbs smeared against the cloudy glass. Think spotlights whirling, searching for a volunteer in a crowded tent. The twins emerge and halt for a moment under the little archway that separates their office from the lobby. Joy rests her hand on the collar of her blouse and tugs. Pravna rises eventually, joining their small huddle, and curls into the wall. They wait like this, the welcome mat a stage and they the audience. A man scuffles through the parking lot in the pouring rain. Briefly, before entering, he looks up at the sign plastered on the door.

The ticket is punched and the man steps into the circus. Dirt scrambles and clings to his ankles as he walks. He lets the

lights of the funhouse wash over him as he stands at the entrance, staring up at the mounted clown as if it were his reflection, the world blurry where the neon lights and vacuous sky separate. The difference between a nightmare and a pipedream is that in the latter, there is hope. When the man walks into the office, there are no neon lights, no waiting clowns, no music, but there's still trap doors and mind games and mazes to isolate him, strip him down, until he stumbles through the curtain and the audience holds its breath, waiting for his final act.

The man enters. The spotlight settles, but there is no applause. The audience does not wait to laugh, but they still wait, clinging together.

The man stands there, observing them as they him, before peeling back his soaked jacket and draping it on a coat rack. He takes an experimental step forward.

"Sorry about that. I don't have a great sense of punctuality," he says. He seems bent on saying more, but then just laughs.

The three women ogle from within their huddle. Pravna leans to open the door to the consultation room, ushering the twins and the customer inside. Min and Joy wait for his measured approach.

"It's nice to—"

"Inside, please," says Pravna. The man drops his lotioned hand. Min and Joy follow once he enters.

Sitting heavily, the man remarks, "You've done a lot with this place." His sunken eyes rest on the framed cloth. "I like the personal touches."

"Thank you," Joy says, but Min places a hand on top of her sister's twisted fists.

"There's no need for pleasantries. But we appreciate it."

"Oh."

"What can we do for you?"

Make your choice. Go ahead. You've

already got your preferred narrative all lined up in your mind. Spin the rolodex, shuffle the cards. A family man with a longstanding public nudity charge from that one time in college, doesn't want his growing kids seeing him frozen in time, coked out with a black eye. Or a small-town good-for-nothing, pushed into his older brother's gang, forced to deal with his brother's drunk girlfriends and roll his joints. He bends to the will of local police at the promise of a payout for information, but then they book him, too. Little brother sleeps with sister's husband and trashes the house. Pastor steals the already meager tithe. Local track star caught on roids. It's all semantics, all funhouse mirrors. Watch your body warp into something else, someone else. Pick your silhouette. Pick your player.

The man stops and places his face in his hands. He begins to cry.

#

I've been a little dishonest with you.

The person staring back at you from the funhouse mirror is me. Disproportionate. Hard to look at – a warped reflection. Not a pastor or a gang member, but a father, a decent one, maybe the only thing I've ever been willing or able to fight for. We called her Cassie. It was the name she came with, and the foster agencies tell you not to change it, even if the prospects for eventual adoption seem plausible. I always hated her name because it captures her appearance exactly the way you'd imagine: blonde ringlets, dark eyes, freckles, exploding and effervescent and bubbly. I should've pushed a nickname, but hindsight is twenty-twenty and the sob story doesn't work when there's people gawking in the grocery store, complimenting her hair only so they can lean down and whisper to ask if she's safe, if she knows this man, if he took her from her mommy. It

especially doesn't work when the foster agency calls and says the grandparents have bailed out her junkie parents and she's headed back to a more "permanent" residence. And then you say goodbye once her biological family shows up and swarms her, all of them amalgamating into a giant mass of light hair and light skin and light everything, including responsibilities, consequences.

I'm getting a little beside myself.

I came in on this particular morning, at this particular time, because I know Darius will have skipped the few blocks to the clerk's office to gather the papers and he can't face me even now, probably, although I don't know if that's true or if I'm just projecting. I was vague on the phone with Pravna; she's always been such a stingy bitch. You could admire her intolerance for nonsense, but considering that is the majority of my composition, it's a little inconvenient. She could've at least thanked me for getting fired so she had one less person to deal with. Min and Joy don't bat an eye, unreceptive to strangeness. The only thing that puts me off is the utter lack of a replacement hire. Four months after they officially canned me and my desk is a carcass shoved to the side, still well-dusted.

"What can we do for you?" Min asks again, and I raise my face from my hands. There's no real tears and they know that and I don't know why I pretend, but I tell myself it's all part of the fun, even though I don't know what that means any more than you do. I'll admit, I'm a little stoned at the moment. It's been a rough couple of days. Alright, more like months. I don't know. I tend to exaggerate.

"Is that you asking me to cut to the chase, Min?"

"You made an appointment."

"Yeah."

"So, what can we do for you?"

"What if I just wanted to come and converse?"

"I think it's 'converse,'" Joy mumbles. She leans a little closer to Min, her chin almost brushing her twin's shoulder. "Just say 'talk.'"

"Okay. So what if I just want to talk?"

"We can talk," Min says and shrugs. "But talking still has a service fee and I still am uncertain as to what you want to talk about."

"I want my job back," I say.

"You know we can't do that," she says.

"People make mistakes. You work with those very people every day," I say.

"Work with them, yes. But we don't hire them." Joy whispers something in Min's ears and they both raise their hands to shuffle Pravna out of the room. As the door cracks open, some vaguely Italian opera lilt in, draping us momentarily, before dissipating. I place my hands flat on the table and try to remember my grade school lessons about posture.

"Listen. You know me. You know how I work."

They do not respond.

"Citing one issue, citing the past isn't good enough. We all know that you can make that file disappear."

"This isn't a charity, James. We don't just wipe things away for free. You're not a special circumstance," she says.

"Special circumstance?" I repeat.

"I don't want to beat around the bush with you. We can't take you back."

"We don't cross those kinds of lines," Joy adds weakly. The words are foreign copies as they fall from her mouth. Min grips her shoulder and nods.

"Cross it now. For me," I say.

Min levels her eyes and props her chin on her fingers. "Oh, James," she sighs.

For a moment I am too baffled, but then I am not, then I am stagnant in every sense of the word. You could easily

accuse me of being self-absorbed, but this feels like a low blow. I used to file their paperwork. I used to make the coffee and microwave the leftovers and book the appointments and herd the rowdy. You'd think they would honor a relationship like that, pay homage to the good times or something. After everything that has happened. After everything that Darius and I have been through. You'd think. But then again, I guess part of the hardship that required enduring was me.

"You're really telling me you can't throw me a bone? You're really telling me that?"

"We are," Min says. Her black eyes sparkle. They're not quite vindictive or anything I hope they would be, nothing that could justify me throwing a genuine tantrum. Joy cowers into her shoulder and blinks slowly. Like clockwork Pravna is at the door, propping it open, expression reminding me that she probably never really left.

"I can't work anywhere else. It's not the same," I say.

"There's nothing we can do for you, James. I'm sorry."

"Please. I just want things to go back to normal."

Cassie arrived in early May. The weather was so hot you could barely call it spring, and on the first day she was so shy, she spent all day in the yard, napping beneath the trees to hide from the sun. She was filthy. Only later, when we suggested a bubble bath, did she let us look into her eyes.

"I've been going to therapy, figuring stuff out. Come on."

Her hair was tangled up in green leaves and maple tree seeds. Her cheeks were flushed and red where they pressed against the ground and her shoulders looked collapsed in on themselves. She was still so pale, but not in a sick way. Just light.

"I just want to make things right."

I let her rest in my arms as she dipped her head back in the bathwater. Her head lolled amongst the froth and bubbles, hair splayed out in the pink water. Knees knobby and small. Darius kept whispering to her even as she was floating, ears half-filled with water, trying to will a little smile out of her. He plucked the leaves from her hair and sang lullabies. When she climbed out and we towed her off, I could still hear him singing as he lead her to bed and watched her doze off from the crack in the door, even though he was only whispering. I came to watch with him and he hugged me, but never took his eyes off of her. "She's so beautiful," he said, over and over.

"Darius won't talk to me. He won't talk to me and I need at least something back that belongs to me."

We only got to keep her for two years. They never could get in touch with the real parents, and the agency told us not to keep hopes high, but adoption seemed more like a possibility every day. It seemed like a miracle. A real miracle.

"You can't just look at everything that's happened and throw it all away. You didn't help me last time. Where were you? Where were you both when I was up shit's creek? Where were you when I needed you?" The twins blink, separately then in unison. Min pats my hand and I can see it: the little quota of artificial sympathy flooding into her eyes.

Cassie was clinging to my back in the pasta aisle when I got the call. She was saying something about Ragu, lasagna for dinner, Spaghettio's, something. I should've been listening closer. After that it was only the voice of the agent, sympathetic but not fully saturated. Cassie clutched at my hand, asking if it was Daddy on the phone, but I don't remember the way it sounds anymore, only the shape of her lips as they sculpted

the syllables.

"Darius got to stay. What about me? Why can't it be me, too?"

The foster agency tried to put us with another kid a few months later, but by then our bridges had been burned. Darius was distraught. We both were. The real miracle wasn't Cassie, but that the world seemed to keep spinning afterwards, no matter how slowly. We were expected to forget. No visitation rights. Not even a thank you. Just pity, catch and release.

"Please."

After she left, Darius couldn't sleep at night. He would just sit there, gazing at me in the dark. I had to migrate to the couch eventually. Something like that – losing a child only to realize she never really belonged to you – it doesn't inspire an us-against-the-world mentality. Mostly it just made me aloof, made him cry. I won't say I took to the bottles, but having an excuse would make it easier to say.

"I have nowhere else to go."

One night I told Darius we should get our foster status revoked altogether. I couldn't stand the mail every month from the agency, the newsletters on good parenting and creating a space for love to crawl and flourish, consume. I thought it would be good for us. He slumped over the simmering asparagus on the stove. His "no" was quiet. Do people remember how arguments begin? Does anyone remember the exact moment when it all became too much?

"Please."

I've never been able to remember those moments. All I can remember is how dense his head felt beneath my fist. The little spots of blood where he dropped to the ground, clutching his face. The peak of my anger is a little blurry in my head, but I remember the way it dropped through me, seventy miles an hour, racing and racing until it collapsed, into dust,

into regret and screams and tears.

I remember how he cowered in the corner when the cops took me away. A few days later, bail paid for by “anonymous,” charges dropped. After months of calling, he only ever answered once. There was no talking, just the sound of us exhaling into the receiver, back and forth.

I look up into the twins’ eyes. I try to capture both of them at once and fold them inside of my head. Neatly folded handkerchiefs. In the center, a cushioned pearl. I’m staring so intently that I’m not even sure if I’m really looking at them or past them, into some place beyond.

“I’ll do anything.”

Losing Cassie tore our world apart, but I burned the scraps.

“I think you should go,” Min said. I close my eyes, open them again, and everyone is watching me. Even Pravna has emerged from behind the blinds to gawk at me openly. The music outside has stopped. Only my breathing fills the room. I hadn’t noticed how short of breath I was.

I rise from the chair and they watch me. Everything is calm, not unlike a funeral procession, except I’m the only one carrying the casket and no one is crying. Pravna waddles to the door and holds out my coat. Her sparse mustache brushes the edge of her lips.

“Thanks,” I mutter. Her fingers graze mine as we make the transfer. She says nothing and slinks back to her desk.

From behind, I hear shuffling feet approaching. I smell her before I register the contact, her arms gentle as they wrap around me, tight and comforting. Her hair, so oddly floral, and mint chapstick.

“Joy?” I ask.

“Just wait,” she croaks.

“I don’t understand,” I say. She pulls back, but her hands linger on my elbow.

“Let’s go outside, James.”

Rain is pouring off of the overhang. I light a cigarette and listen hard to hear the paper burn. The sound of water pounding the cement washes everything out. I focus on the horizon to avoid looking Joy in the eyes.

“It’s even uglier in the rain,” I say.

“I think it’s beautiful. We never get enough rain,” she mutters.

“Everyone says that, unless you live in the Pacific Northwest.”

“Even then,” she says.

“Even then what?”

“Even then they probably still say it.”

She reaches up and gingerly takes the cigarette from my hand. She takes a pull, but there’s no visible smoke when she exhales. “I just wanted to apologize,” she says. She places the cigarette between my lips again.

I don’t say anything, just stand there smoking.

“For what happened,” she adds.

“I know.”

“We should’ve helped you somehow. We should’ve been there for you, after they took her back.”

“It’s fine.”

“She was so sweet. You two really made her so happy.”

“Joy, we don’t need to do this.”

She starts to cry. “I’ve been working on a way to find a loophole. I’ve been sneaking to the courthouse at night, talking to people. Min says it’s worthless, but I haven’t given up yet. There’s got to be a way to get her back. And the second out I found out how, I’m going to call you and tell you and Darius and then you’ll have her back. Forever. And things will be normal again, just how you want it.”

“Joy.”

She touches her bottom lip as if to stop the wavering. “They never should’ve gotten custody.”

“It’s the law.”

Her crying gets louder. I close my eyes and try to feel the smoke swirl through me. I wish her sobbing harmonized with the rain, but the sounds leaving her throat are harsh and sharp. I rub the back of her neck.

“I’m just so sorry,” she blubbers.

“Me too,” I say. There is nothing else for a few, long minutes. Just us, the grey rain, the grey smoke, and our empty thoughts. She moves closer to me and we hold each other loosely under the overhang, wading through the stagnation.

I walk to the car and shiver as the rain slides into the crevices between coat and shirt, shirt and skin. I go to pull out my keys when I see Darius one car over, just staring at the steering wheel before turning to look at me. He gestures to the passenger-side door and I climb in, although I’ll probably hate myself for it later. The leather seat squeaks against my drenched clothes.

He pulls a towel from the back seat and props it between us on the center console. I grab it and sink my face into the cloth, breathing in the smell.

“I saw your car,” he says.

“Yeah.”

“Why’d you come here?”

I move to squeeze the water from the ends of my hair. “I tried to come when you weren’t here, to be fair.”

I try to hand the towel back to him, but he just looks forward. I toss it in the back.

“I got into some trouble. More trouble. I was just trying to see if Min and Joy could help me out.”

“I know. I put your file up myself.” He pauses. “Min caught me crying in the copy room about it. She lectured me about professionalism, but then she hugged me, kind of.”

“Weird,” I laugh a little bit, but it turns

into a cough. “But that is nice of her, I guess.”

“You know she cares. You know they all cared about her, about our family.”

“I know. You don’t have to be so cryptic.”

“I know,” he says. No words seem justified or casual enough. I glance at the side of his face, relieved to see no scarring. He squirms in his seat and turns the keys in the ignition. We pull out of the lot, the windshield wipers struggling to keep up with the downpour. “I want to show you something.”

“We might drown,” I say, still looking at the edge of his eye socket. I squint and pretend I can see the marks from the stitches.

“Shut up,” he says. There is a bite to it, but nothing serious. I lean back and try to relax. Every bump in the road makes my clothes squelch against the seat.

After a half-hour drive, we parallel park in front of some townhouses, the bushes out front emerald green in the rain. Across the street, an ornate church towers over us, pristine and squeaky clean in the storm. Kids are huddled under a swarm of umbrellas, being herded around by nuns and kicking up waves of puddles as they stomp across the concrete. The buses pull up one at a time on the corner, and the nuns escort them in tidy lines, their small heads and umbrellas bobbing as they are counted and filed away into the hulking yellow buses. Some of them sport raincoats with little hoods that obscure their faces, while others duck out from under their umbrella when the nuns aren’t looking, opening their mouths to the sky and giggling when the rain pours over their faces.

I feel myself looking for her before I’m even sure that’s what I’m looking for.

“Why are we—”

“Sssh,” he says.

“Darius, we can’t be—”

“Hush. She’ll be in the huddle by the stairs, with the other first graders. Yellow umbrella.”

I search for a few minutes, sorting through the throngs of children jumping, children swaying, singing, dancing, laughing. Something glitters in my periphery; little white-blond curls tumbling out from the hood of her raincoat. It’s teal with little butterflies. And her tiny hands twist around the handle, the breadth of the umbrella only just overwhelming her frame. The rain tumbles down, coating the car windows, and her expression is warped because of the water and the distance but I feel her smile more than see it, something deeply and snugly fit, a hole long empty but permanently dug out.

“Wow,” I breathe.

“I know,” Darius says. “I try not to come too often, but I can’t really help myself.”

She turns to a friend nearby and splashes a handful of rainwater on his coat. They giggle and spin in circles.

“She’s gotten so big,” I say. She’s so much taller than the frozen images I have strung up in my head. Little polaroid portraits of her gap-toothed smile, her red, red face when she cries or gets shy, her surprise, her delight. None of them stretch to accommodate this new, bigger face. Wider and more full of emotion than I’m ready for. I wonder briefly if I would’ve ever been ready for it.

We sit there for a while and just breathe. I don’t tear my eyes away, but a little bubble rises up inside of me, a flare telling me to reach over, touch his hand, press his face into my chest. It floats there, a bouquet of embers in my throat, but it turns to ash, smoke swirling out from my nose and ears and curling against the dashboard.

The nuns start to gather Cassie and the kids surrounding her. They shuffle them into a neat line, and she ends up somewhere in the middle, talking animatedly with a redheaded boy behind her. Darius revs the engine and I shift to face him.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Leaving. I can never watch this part.”

“What part?” I ask. But he says nothing, just merges into traffic and kicks the wipers back on.

I rip off my seatbelt and clamber into the backseat, trying to get a last glimpse as we drive away. The kids start hobbling onto the bus, struggling to close their umbrellas and shake the rain from the folds, growing more restless the closer they get to the entrance. One of the nuns props her own umbrella over Cassie’s, closing her smaller one, and a gust of wind knocks the hood of her raincoat back from Cassie’s head. Her curls are unruly and a little damp. The nun ruffles them, grinning at her, then shifts her body, her black robes covering Cassie as she moves to enter the bus. Cassie never looks towards the car, doesn’t even come close, and I feel a temporary betrayal pass over then through me. We turn the corner and all I can see are houses stacked against the dark clouds.

I climb into the front seat. I turn on the A/C, full blast, and the air is freezing as it gushes over my still soaked clothes. I glance at Darius’ hands where they grip the wheel, and he can feel me staring, he has to, but he clams up and his shoulders harden and if he could lean farther away from me without driving us off the road, he would. I say nothing and turn on the radio. The heavy beat of a Spanish bolero rings through the car, and I close my eyes, willing myself to hear and feel nothing outside of the soaring voice of the trumpet.