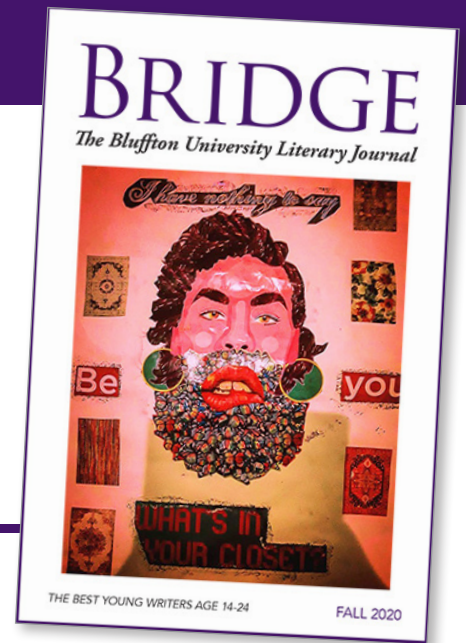


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HOPE'S FLAME

Adina Edelman

There was the hiss of a match, and a blob of flame lit up the attic room. Jen set the candle on the small table and sat, huddling into her hoodie for warmth. No electricity again. She knew by now that drunk parents doesn't excuse bills.

For a moment the hate and despair welled up, pushing out words soft as smoke. *"I wish I was dead."*

The chair across from her slid forward with a scuffing noise. She jerked her head up to see a man with pale skin and black hair smiling at her. His teeth were shark points.

"A wish," he whispered. "I love wishes."

Jen's breath caught. She choked, scooting backwards, away from the creature that now stared intently at the flame between them.

"Make a wish," he whispered, then pretended to blow out the candle. It flickered, then settled back into its steady glow. He grinned at her. "You can never be too old for wishes. Isn't that right, Jen?"

She didn't respond, fear clogging her throat. Jen was used to shouting, to fists, to slurred insults. Not smiling devils with knives for teeth.

The man leaned forward, clasping gray hands on the table. His nails glinted

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in the light. "I know what holds you back, my dear. A wisp of hope. Perhaps your parents will finally show you love and warmth. Perhaps there's a better life waiting for you . . ." He slowly shook his head. "Hope is a terrible thing."

Her thin arms shifted involuntarily, wrapping around herself. She cleared her throat, pushed aside the fear. "Can you take it away?"

He shrugged. "You are not the first to request it of me. Wish hope away, wish *life* away, and the pain ends." He gave a soft tutting noise. "Only fifteen, and so much anguish. I call *that* death. Unlike the peaceful task I'm called for. Don't you agree?"

She looked at the candle standing sentinel on the table. Tears of wax slid down its side, heading for a destination that would leave them cold and hard.

She took a shaky breath. "Once I wish it, I can't take it back, right?"

"You would not want to," he said, tilting his head. "Very few regret this wish."

"But people do regret it." She stated it as fact, looking him in the eye for the first time.

"You cannot please everyone," he said, shrugging. "Surely you know this, living with those brutes below. Fighting to convince them you're worth the scraps they spend on you." He smiled again, pointed teeth glinting. "Do you not wish to leave it behind? The mockery, the contempt, the flesh striking flesh . . ."

She shifted to sit on her trembling hands. The chair creaked beneath her.

"Wishes," he said, sitting back, "come from the deepest, most honest parts of ourselves. It is bravery, my dear, that you are able to admit your desire. Even more brave if you can carry it through. Kill hope, and you can leave this pain-ridden life behind."

"I just need to blow it out?" Her voice was hoarse.

"Correct."

They watched the candle. The rest of the room was black but for the twitching light.

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“Why does it do that?” she asked suddenly, her large eyes reflecting the flame.

“Do what?” he purred.

“Reach up. Flicker side to side, then up.”

“That’s what hope does,” he said, examining his nails. “Reaches in vain for something that does not exist.”

She frowned. “No. It has warmth. It has -”

“Pain. Is that what you seek?”

She looked at him, at the bone-white face, the black eyes. His lips were pursed in concern, but his eyes were frost.

“I don’t want to be cold anymore.” She said the words slowly, but her tone was firm.

The man frowned. “So be it. Let hope warm you. But I give you this choice only once. Leave the flame ... or blow it out.”

Jen reached slowly for the candle, the light illuminating the white scars on her hands. For a moment, she hesitated. Then she cupped them around the flame. The heat spread slowly, through her fingers and wrists, up her arms and towards her chest.

When she looked up, the chair opposite her was empty.