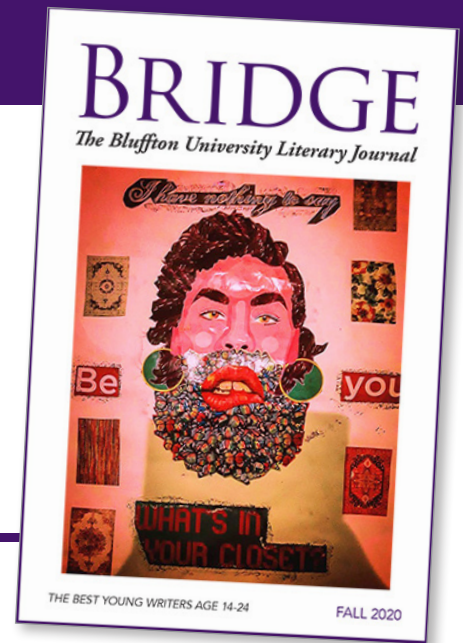


BRIDGE

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DECORATING THE DEARLY DEPARTED

Elizabeth Barrett

When the grass is pale, soil drying, I track dirt and shreds of dead leaves onto the carpet, scattered by eroding boots. I'm holding a rabbit in one arm, where it hangs loosely, limp, graying in my grip. There are flowers in its teeth and hair, carefully placed by my small, clumsy fingers, right after I found it under a tired tree. I'm grieving

a life I didn't know—clutching the vessel still silky, but somehow lifeless. I picture it before death: leaping, tumbling through grass and snow, spinning over spring's sprung thistles, daisies caught between its toes, its white fur softer than dandelion seeds blown to the wind. I wish for the effervescence it must have had, but I do not wish for this fate.

Fingertips trailing down its back, I wonder if it has ever been afraid to die, or if it has ever leaned over a casket to give a last kiss on the cheek, or if its mother ever hugs it a little too tightly before school. Maybe it never has shaky hands or a racing heart. I wrap my hand around its paw. We all end up here someday, surrounded by flowers.

I set the spiritless plush on the kitchen counter and I'm met with my mother's scream—something like terror or disgust, an eerie deviation from her typical thoughtful tone. My head is already lowered with shame when she stuffs her hand in a plastic bag and holds the animal by a foot. I almost expect to hear the rabbit yelp, but it swings feebly

as she carries it outside. I am quickly warned about the diseases and dangers that settle on the dead. I take a long shower, and she washes the scent of decay off of my clothes. When the sun goes down I lie and wonder if one day, if my body goes still, she will put flowers in my teeth and hair, or if she will recoil in fear, shrieking at the sight of

the end.

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