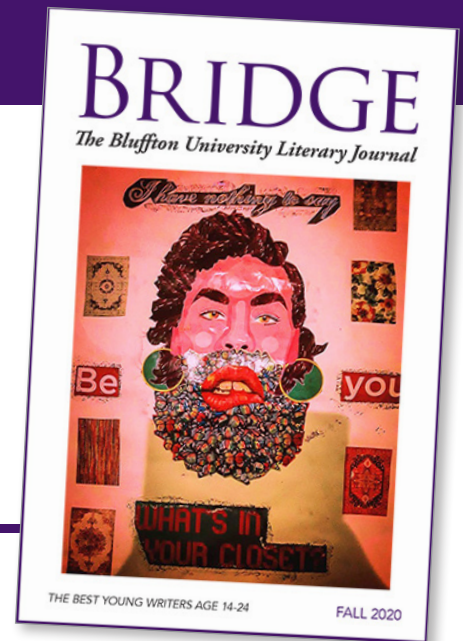


# BRIDGE

*The Bluffton University Literary Journal*



Erik Porter

## SHE TEACHES ME PALM READING

She plays a movie—the best, she says,  
the first Batman—with the dark knight  
as that rugged heartthrob. I’ve never seen  
it, I say, but I’m ready. And that’s what first  
dates are for, she says—new things, fun things.  
We sit on her basement couch and watch, and  
our arms touch near the elbow, just a graze—

but she can tell, I’m sure—it must be obvious—  
that I’m uncomfortable, tense—that I’m treading  
new ground. It has to be funny to her—a little  
bit cute, endearing I hope—that all she did  
was lean close enough for our arms to touch.  
But I’ve got to move, I think. I can’t stay like  
this—and so I move in tiny shuffles, and I try

to be discreet; I move far enough to end our touch,  
and I stay close enough to hope it happens again.  
I rest my hands on the quilt that covers us—a gift,  
she said, from a friend. The squares, cotton and  
linen, green and brown, are connected by little knots  
of yarn I roll through my fingers. A small Christmas  
tree stands on the end table; red, yellow, blue lights

wrap the green—it’s November though, not even  
Thanksgiving, and so I nudge her with my arm to get  
her attention, and I point at it—cool-like, and with  
my thumb—I love Christmas, she whispers, and so I  
always keep the tree up. A wall calendar—“unlikely animal

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### ERIK PORTER

graduated from Concordia  
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in May of 2020. He enjoys  
playing tennis, reading,  
writing, and making music.

friends”—hangs on the wall. It’s a donkey and goat this month, and they’re smiling like people, front legs touching.

A mannequin head, transparent, its features rounded and soft, reflects the light of the TV like a prism. It looks like a watch guard, the head, protecting *The Lion King*, *NCIS*, *Gilmore Girls*. She readjusts and moves closer so we touch again, our arms now pressed at the shoulder. I let it happen this time, and I stay relaxed, calm. Maybe that head modeled hats at a department store, or she

*stanza break*

bought it to practice drawing its contours, or it was a thrift store jewel she found years ago. She rotates and our knees touch. I turn a little too, trying to return the favor—but this is as much as I’ll do—it will be enough—we can watch like this for a while. Erik, she says, hear me out, and she places her hand on my wrist, turns my palm up, and clasps her hand onto mine, knitting our

fingers together. I feel the pressure between our conjoined hands; I feel her move her fingers across the backs of mine. And I wish I was a fortune teller—give me your hand, I’d say—I’d hold her hand in both of mine, and I’d run my thumbs across her palm. I’d feel her lifeline and every crease—I’d take my time, noting each line, its path, how it connects to the others—and I’d see her future, ours.

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Erik Porter

## SHAKESPEARE'S BIRDS

*Nay, I'll have a starling shall be taught to speak  
nothing but 'Mortimer,' and give it him  
To keep his anger still in motion.  
—Harry Percy, King Henry IV, Part I (1.3.223-224)*

A flock of starlings bursts from its roost  
in a lone, leafless tree; gentle hills roll  
through the prairie around it. The birds  
curve and jab, swirl and pulse, tumble  
and soar across the yellows and blues

of the evening sky. They loop and twirl  
like the smooth spirals of a gymnast's  
ribbon. I long to be closer—close enough  
to see the fading sun shimmer on their  
feathers and see their green and purple

shine—and close enough to listen for  
the music that spurs their motion. But I  
want to be farther away too, so I can see  
their shapes, the ones they make together,  
with curves and waves and lines that

roll and shift like the air they fly through.  
Murmuration, they call their display, a way these  
birds find a place to stay for the night. Scientists  
have words for their shapes—Calculus terms  
—hyperboloids, paraboloids, doesn't matteroids

that the birds shift into as they fly. And maybe it  
does start as a murmur, their movement, just a  
whisper, a subtle change in direction from one  
that drifts through the flock like a current until  
the entire group has changed shape and direction.

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Erik Porter

## IT WON'T BE LONG UNTIL THE SUN SETS

We lean into the wicker backs of our patio chairs, my mother and I—my socked feet skim the pavers beneath me, keeping time as we watch dusk turn to evening. We eat while we sit—our summer evening meal: breaded chicken, Perdue, because she says they're less artificial; tater tots, Schwan's, so we have something to buy from the salesman in his truck; raspberries and blueberries, Driscoll's, because she's sure they taste better. And they do

—the berries, the freezer food—when we're outside, and we listen to Kupper's dog bark at cars, and we see the Storsved kids across the street, playing whiffle ball in their empty lot—and the Nibbes are out too—Rod and Maxine—and they wave as they walk. They look good, too—our plates—with reds and blues and oranges and yellows—like our yard, and the sky—like the bright blue of Mom's Hyacinth—in the bee corner, as she calls it, where the skinny blooms of these flowers extend into the air. And the pink of young apples on our tree—we'll be picking soon, she says, with fall around

the corner, and frost. And the yellow tips of zucchini buds in her garden, with the cucumbers and grape tomatoes—and marigolds—the rabbits don't like them, she says, and they brighten the garden up. The sun glows in the west before it sets. It's gorgeous, Mom says, and so calm tonight—it is—the color, the air, the evening breeze that moves the grass, the leaves, the hairs on my arms—and the temperature—it's comfortable—a neighborhood comfort—a sun's-going-down comfort of a summer prairie dusk. We sit, and we watch, and we feel as the navy of evening begins to hide our backyard colors.