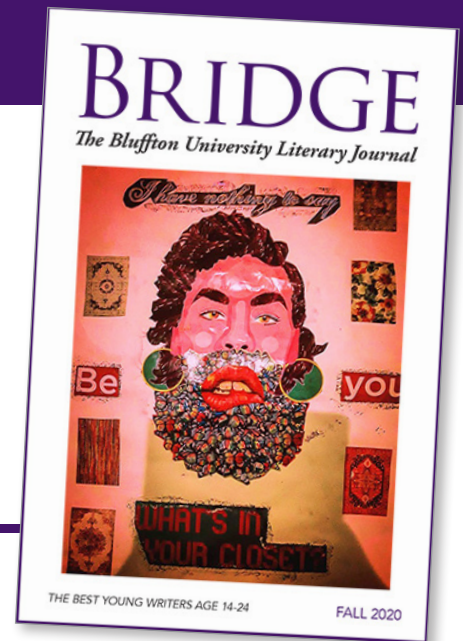


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NOCTURNAL

Grace Timko

The dreams began after her father gave her a present: a small stuffed bat. She held onto it tightly as her father showed the girl a picture of her mother. The photo was from a trip, somewhere across the ocean. Her father had tried to explain where, how there were caverns full of sleeping bats and stalactites. The girl wasn't really listening. She was looking at the photo. It was an old picture. In it, her mother was crouched down next to a statue of a man with a beard that flowed down to the floor of the dungeon cave. The girl often forgot what her mother's face looked like, now. She forgot the short, blunt cut of her mother's hair and a nose that was almost too small for her mother's face. The flashlight in her mother's hand had beamed off into some distant corner or perhaps it dissipated into emptiness, never making contact with the moist stone walls in the tunnel underneath the castle. The corner of the photo had a blurry, dark burst that could have been someone's thumb or an imperfection by the hands of a novice developer—a bit of dust or damage to the film. The girl pointed it out, careful not to touch the glossy surface. Her father took it from her and curled the corner back, gently bending it back and forth not so much that it creased, but instead reflected the light of the kitchen window as well as the lamp.

"Well, it looks little—like a bat," her father said, which the girl thought

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GRACE TIMBKO

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was silly because if some bats turn in to people, then how could they be small? Her father flipped the photo over and wrote something on the back. The girl could not read what her father wrote, but loved the way the pen slashed through the rounded orb of the letter O. She spent weeks after drawing the symbol over and over: Ø and Ø and Ø.

In the living room, the girl watched as her father slipped the photo into a box that sat on the bookshelf; it had a print of flowers in muted colors and greenish brown vines. He placed other tokens of the trip back in with the photo: pebbles from the fjords, a bunch of dried wildflower, a newspaper. She knew these well—had felt them in her hands many times. The box slid smoothly back into its empty space. Her father walked over to the couch and took the woven blanket from a wicker basket on the floor. He unfolded the heavy fabric and threw it over the girl's lap, who was already sitting on the middle cushion. Next, he knelt down on his hands and knees underneath the television, and the girl watched him jostle cables beyond where she could see. The girl tucked the fringe of the blanket underneath her legs. She scooted in closer to the plush cushions and sat and waited.

“This is a good one,” her father had said. “I promise you'll like Tippi.”

Her father had once wanted to be a director. He knew so much about the movies: the unaffected way in which characters were introduced in Coppola's films, hidden cuts on 35mm film, and small pieces of trivia about stars in the fifties, the Grace Kellys and Cary Grants. The girl was his only child, so now she knew, too.

The television flashed and they heard static. Saw snow. Then again, and all at once, they had picture. The Universal Studios logo stood stagnant and blue before succumbing to the film. Her father sighed and retreated to the smaller couch, lay down on his back, and seemed to revel in the black birds that flooded the television screen. He did not even hear

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when she asked if he had seen this movie when he was a boy. The camera remained still, and the girl couldn't tell where the birds were coming from or where they were going. She settled far into the gap between the upright cushions behind her. Without any transition, the opening credits ended, the screen dimmed, and a trolley car rolled past to reveal Tippi Hendren crossing the street. Tippi turned back, and the girl could see where the camera had been—it had been on the birds circling in the air blocks away from the pet shop, from where Tippi stood looking for a moment before moving on.

Oh, Tippi, she thought. Why would you do this?

Later, she watched as the birds attacked and claimed victims. When she saw the gouged-out eyes of Tippi's neighbor, she tucked her new bat underneath her chin and protectively spread its silky wings across her chest and shoulders. Its body was small and covered in fur that she liked to pet when the birds disappeared and she could then catch her breath. The bat was warm against her throat.

Exhaustion set in when Tippi was held captive in the bedroom—the scene felt like seven days. She shut her eyes when Tippi clicked on her flashlight, the beam illuminating gulls and ravens as they darted towards her face. Each time the girl would crack one eye open, there was more blood on Tippi's face and on her ankles. She discovered that the bat's nose was actually quite cold. The girl waited and waited for "The End" to proclaim itself on the screen, but felt as if it would never come. Instead, the birds once again flooded the screen. She was watching among the hoard of them—as if she was one of them—and they all faced the car driving off and turning beyond the bend. She did not think herself a bird, yet there she was. She thought herself something softer, something less threatening, something that wouldn't be drawn to a schoolhouse or be tucked away in the shadows. The screen collapsed into an unending terror of nothingness and her father rose to eject the disc. She exhaled, and the bat on her chest rose and fell with her breath.

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She named her new bat Sibella, and with that, the dreams started. In them, she is on a walk with her father around the neighborhood block. She thinks of the picture of her mother in the cave while she walks, equipped with her father's special flashlight from his toolbox. With the beam aimed skywards, she waits for it to make contact with the vast space above her. She makes out a small circle bobbing on the clouds and thinks to herself, I'm almost there. But when the beam slips off those grey shrouds, she traces it from her hand into nothingness. Meanwhile, her father tells her about films, about mastering suspense with rope and ladies' wigs, and she glances over at his silhouette against the sun setting far behind the houses and trees. The flashlight beam catches on him. She keeps staring, studying the left side of his face as he continues, but they happen upon a curb and need to cross the street. She looks both ways. She doesn't realize that her father has stopped, at least not until she turns back to ask him about things in plain sight, and her father grins at her with a crow on his shoulder.

“Surely the birds appreciate all we've done for them,” he says to no one in particular.

He reaches up to tease the crow, and it nips at his fingertip. “Ouch!” She starts toward him, but she is jerked back. There are crows tied to her arms and legs with translucent string, and they start in on the flesh around her ankles and bury their beaks in her hair. She cannot feel anything, but when she looks at her arms, they are covered in scratches. She brings her arms up to protect her face, but that only draws them in closer. No, she wants to say. Stay away. But the words won't come. In an instant, her leg jerks and the girl is awake.

For three nights, she woke up terrified to move or turn on a light to reveal a gaping hole pecked through the ceiling. She called for her father, and each time, he walked down the long hall to her room and rubbed her back until she fell back asleep or until

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he fell back asleep and the girl lay awake listening to heavy breathing. Sometimes, she imagined her mother by her side. Her father only reminded her of the birds and the way that they clung to her in the dreams. Eventually she would drift back into nothingness, although she would not remember doing so when she awoke in the mornings, alone. Once, she woke in the middle of the night and her father would be back in his own bed, but the girl couldn't bring herself to wake him, too. For whatever reason she wasn't scared, just very... awake. To bring her closer to sleep, the girl drew circles in Sibella's fur. Ø and Ø and Ø.

On the third night, she and her father danced through the routine—she was paralyzed, he successfully persuaded her back to sleep, and then he slipped away back to his own bed. Once more that night, she awoke—this time not of a nightmare, but thirst. But still she could not will herself to move. With a great breath gathered into her chest, she called out for her dad. No one came. She called out again. Perhaps she called out a third time, but it was masked by the master bedroom door opening and hitting the doorjamb. His footsteps were heavy and loud, even on the carpeted hallway. As he approached, she pleaded with him to turn on the light, to help her get back to sleep. He turned on the overhead light—there were no birds—and slammed the door behind him as he left.

“Go to sleep,” her father said through the door. She could hear the annoyance in his voice, like when her mother had run the garbage disposal for a moment too long during the six-thirty news. There was a pause.

“Think of someplace happy,” he said. She wanted to call after him, Please don't leave me. But she listened to the footsteps retreating back down the hallway, this time soft and heavy, and the lock to her parents' bedroom door turn. With the room bright and uncomfortable, she tensed her legs and forced herself out of bed, walked over to the switch, and surrendered the room back to darkness.

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The next morning, she thought she heard the sharp thud of a newspaper roll hitting the vinyl siding of her house as she walked down the stairs. She hit the bottom of the landing and pulled open the front door to retrieve the paper as usual. The neighborhood's delivery boy had gotten lazy over the last couple of years, not caring to take aim anymore. Sometimes the paper fell short on the dewy lawn, making the ink bleed onto her father's hands. There would be long stretches where they felt like he was trying to hit all four corners of the driveway or connect the dots from the previous day's landing location, creating his own constellations.

Then she remembered one particular morning. A morning when it had seemed as though the boy hadn't come at all, and her mother had three cups of green tea to pass the time before her daughter was ready to leave for school. In fact, the newspaper had come, but had not made it past the sidewalk. It lay in the middle of the street for days, until a nor'easter broke it down piece by piece and swept chunks of it down a storm drain. That had been the last normal morning between the girl and her mother. And the girl wondered if it was even meant to be theirs at all.

This morning, the girl couldn't find the newspaper again. She figured it was caught in the space between their house and the holly bushes that lined their walk. She pushed through the low branches of the hollies and winced as she stepped barefoot on fallen prickly leaves, some with their bright red berries still intact, but fading. At the same time, the leaves on the branches caught on her skin and left puffy, raised scratches on her arms. For some reason, the hollies were more drawn to her skin than the baggy pajama shirt that acted as her nightgown. When she was safely through, she was next to one of the windows that peeked into the one-car garage. The blinds were pulled. There was no paper that she could see.

The girl tore back through the bushes, adding to the crisscrossed pattern on her

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arms. A gust from the east tunneled down the walk and lifted the hem of her shirt-dress for a moment before she turned. She closed the door behind her and made sure to twist the lock; they used this door just once a day while the side door remained perpetually unlocked.

She walked back into the kitchen and sat in her mother's usual seat. On the stove, the tea kettle rested on a burner where a mass of orange flames licked blue at the base. She almost called out for her mother, wondering where she was, before stopping herself. Her mother was gone. But her mother's kettle was on the stove, and the stove lit. The box from the night before was in the middle of the kitchen table, the one with the mementos from her mother's trip. Its lid was on the chair beside her and its contents exposed. The girl picked out the photo of her mother in the cave and set it down in the middle of the placemat. She felt around for the stones, some of which had gotten caught in the center of a rolled newspaper. Careful of the dried flowers, the girl overturned the contents of the box. She knew every keepsake, but she still wondered: what had she missed? What more could she learn? She kept her father out of her mind.

Then: she heard the caw of some crow beyond the window over the sink. She shuddered and a nervous chill ran through the core of her body—perhaps she even felt a phantom weight on her shoulder. In her mother's absence, the girl felt an uneasy sense of control. The newspaper had begun to unfurl, so she smoothed it out like she had watched her mother do again and again. Her palm flattened down on the bent creases, and the girl began to read. Today's paper. The words looked strange in front of her, the letters were jumbled and didn't make sense. But she could understand what she was reading in front of her.

Today's paper. "Woman's House Overrun by Bats."

The girl thought the hum of wings flapping might be nice to fall asleep to in their

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oceanside home. She did not think about where her mother was right that second because she was so enraptured. She licked her thumb and was ready to turn the page. But she saw something dark and blurry from the corner of the room. The rapid movement quickened something in her, and she looked down to see a papercut opening between her thumb and forefinger. Bats began tumbling through the window and skittering across the polished kitchen table in their attempts to land. Some flew upwards and hung on the curtain rod over the sink, wrapping their torsos tightly, and closing themselves off from those still flying or scaling the cabinets. Some ate grapes from the fruit bowl like apples—she liked watching them the most. But for some reason, she felt like she must pull away and look back at her hand, which she saw was now being tended to by much smaller bats. Their tongues were tiny, pink triangles that lapped at the pinpricks of blood budding from her skin.

She didn't feel like Tippi. Her father had been wrong. The girl did not like Tippi. No—but she felt like something akin to Tippi, like a distant sister who accepted her fate and did not hide from it in the corners of dark rooms. She let herself be still as the bats flooded her vision. She even closed her eyes and let out a sigh. When she opened them, her mother's photo on the table was gone.

The newspaper still lay flat on the table, and some words had the letter ø. The tea kettle whistled. She looked on as the bleeding began to slow and a sheen that reminded her of liquid band aid solution coated the site. All the while, the bats continued. Some moved on to her arms, the places where one scratch intersected with another to form a cross or an X. Another washed behind her ears. Its nose was wet, and the girl couldn't feel much else as the bat clung to her hair. Through the thin veil of their wings, she watched their fingers twitch and curl up against their bodies—it was cold and outside, the sky was red.