

The Bridge

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Sarah Harley

The old plank bridge was unsafe to cross: wooden, worn, and wet; rickety and run-down.

I am scared to cross but my fear doesn't register with anyone. There's my father, hands inside threadbare corduroy pockets. Each night, I have to duck my head to go through a hole in a fence. Barbed wire catches my ponytail. I can feel a tantrum rising up, my voice is trapped deep inside my body. I am seven.

The river doesn't speak but pulls me all the same.

Things without names are soft and strange. My hand goes toward them against its will. The dough rests and rises in a bowl in the kitchen.

I try to understand the rules of what to touch and what to leave alone.

"It's resting" my mother snaps when I try to look at the thing in the bowl. She won't let me touch it. It stays still and warm under a tea towel in the dark. Time passes. Afternoons become night.

A flick of light then darkness.

I dream I am twirling on the merry-go-round. Around and around. I try to understand the rules of holding on.

The bridge goes from one place called nowhere to another. My father says it goes somewhere but I don't believe him. The bridge is just beyond Jetty Marsh, the place where I am jettisoned. Each

time I go there, I abandon a part of myself. I embrace forgetting instead of a truth. I am unable to cross the bridge to reach the other side.

The river beneath the bridge is filled with a sediment of clay so it doesn't flow or move with the energy of a normal river. The river is still and murky. You can't make out its exact depth because of its murkiness. The river is always high because of the days and nights of endless rain. My sister calls it the Chicken Soup River after the soup my mother puts in bowls on the table. The soup is from a tin with a red label. The tin is taken from the cupboard and opened in silence. The contents are poured into an old saucepan then watered down. A flicker of a gas flame, small blue light.

The soup once served is eaten in small, silent spoonfuls.

My mother has lost her imagination, her energy subdued after all the fighting with my father. She has been decanting drinks from brown bottles into teacups earlier and earlier each day.

My father says the river and the soup are not the same. He says there's a clay quarry nearby, a shallow pit in the ground. That's why the river runs slowly. The clay is excavated and used to make bricks and pipes. Some of the clay that is dug out gets turned into cups and saucers, even the bowls we eat the soup from.

I imagine the river turning to stone.

Growing up, I was always straight-hipped, always hiding the edges of me in baggy, oversized clothes. Cross-eyed and sullen, hair like string.

"You're difficult," my father says on account of my fear of crossing the bridge. My hair hangs half-way over my face as if it's a veil. I am seven or eight.

I wasn't difficult, I was just afraid. I was a child whose fears and terrors went by unnoticed.

I can't see properly. I'm supposed to be wearing the pale blue plastic glasses issued by the National Health Service but I keep losing them. My mother is angry because I lose everything: lunchboxes, rucksacks, my coat, pullovers, and other parts of the school uniform. I always lose the glasses which means another trip to the eye doctor in town. From the front door, there's a gently sloped step that leads into the softly carpeted reception area. Large mirrors in ornate gilded frames hang on the wall. There's a thin narrow eye chart inside a black frame. The lights are always yellowish and bright. For some reason, my mother hates it there. For most of my appointments, she drops me off and goes shopping in town.

"I'll be back soon," she says, settling me into the waiting room, as if she is dropping off a parcel instead of her youngest daughter.

"Where is your mother?" the receptionist asks.

I just sit still until the question goes away. Staring at the eye chart, I begin to time travel.

In the small dark room with the eye doctor, bright and startling lights are shone into one eye then the other. He asks which is better, this one or the last, this one or the last. The words swim around until my eyes feel blurry and I start to cry. The doctor lets out a long sigh, taking off his own glasses and rubbing the bridge of his nose. But he's kind and waits for me to collect myself.

Let's try again shall we.

Sometimes, instead of bright lights, he shows me pictures of small animals inside glass circles. He asks me to talk about the animals, to explain which rabbit is brighter and clearer than the others.

I am the girl who cannot see well.

I am the one who knows a story that cannot be told. It's a truth that has to be washed down the river that is still and turgid. It's the worst river in which to drown a secret.

I am from the house upstream, from a dirty cotton nightdress. The bed sheets have holes in them. Something unspeakable is torn apart.

I time travel back to the childhood house to rescue the girl who was once me. I find her in different rooms, still holding onto untrue beliefs about herself. She takes my hand. I wrap her in my coat. The coat is soft and warm. Sometimes I break and smash things to release my feelings that are taking up too much space inside me.

When I reach the river's edge, I drop things into it that don't belong. I try to drop in my entire childhood but the river says no, that's too heavy. I drop in sticks instead until the river says,

“Stop, you are slowing me down.”

Standing on tiptoes, I drop handfuls of leaves instead, crumpled and dried a pretty brown and copper colour. I throw them like confetti.

“Stop!” says the river.

“You're turning my water red!”

I listen to the river and sit still instead. I imagine different ways to drop things, secretly and furtively. But the river watches, eyes inside its banks.

The rivers have eyes as well as the hills.

But still I cannot reach the other side.

I'm carrying a piece of bread to feed to the wild chickens that live by the barn down by the river. They are descendents of a time when a family lived there, with cows in the hay barn and a donkey and farm cats. Now there are only rats and mice, and crows high in the rafters. My father says the crows build nests on the ledges high inside the barn. At nightfall, you can hear them caw to each other. My father says they have their own language.

I tear the bread into pieces and throw it to the chickens. My father stands there impatiently, ruining the moment with deep sighs related to the passage of time that can never be retrieved once gone. There's a smaller chicken behind the others, black feathers and soft downy plumage on its body. Like me, it's the youngest. I want to take the chicken home but my father says no because my mother will put it in the oven.

My father is lost in thought on the way home, as if he is reading private pages in his mind. He's never fully present, always somewhere else. I'm lost in thought too, disappointed in myself for not crossing the bridge.

The other side of the bridge remains a destination I cannot reach, a place of lost memories and lost parts of me that lived the things I can't remember.

At night, I return, in fitful dreams and episodes of sleepwalking. I wake suddenly, my heart racing. I am standing back against the barbed wire fence, tears are running down my face both in the memory and reliving it in real time. My coat catches on the wire fence. I want to go home but I'm stuck in an ephemeræ: an eternal present, frozen in time.

"Oh hurry up!" my father says, disappointed and angry with me.

But I cannot cross the bridge.

My sister runs across and then the dog, and then the dark looming shadow of my father. I watch them grow smaller on the other side of the bridge I cannot cross. I stand there suffocating inside my own cowardice.

There is always a truth to tell, only sometimes you can't find it. Sometimes it's easier to find the lie that needs to be released. The lies are told through time in a voice that communicates feelings of unworthiness and worthlessness. These are the lies to be untold, carried in the darkness of a river, carried to the blackness of a sea.