

The Prairie Light Review

Volume 42 | Number 2

Article 15

Spring 5-1-2020

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College of DuPage

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Recommended Citation

Troncoso, Lucas (2020) "The Bridge," *The Prairie Light Review*. Vol. 42 : No. 2 , Article 15.
Available at: <https://dc.cod.edu/plr/vol42/iss2/15>

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The Bridge

Lucas Troncoso

*Content Warning: Suicide

I walked one day through this old, narrow path that I used to run on with my mother. I was six at the time. She always told me that I never tired of running, always skipping ahead with my little feet in that pale pink dress my grandmother made for me before I was born. But the last day I ever saw my mom, I was running down this same path in fear, running, running, running as if that was all there was in life. I sort of remember that night, but there really isn't much to remember anyhow. I woke up freezing under a bridge and hitched a ride with some truck driver the next morning. I'm eighteen now.

I decided to go on a trip for a few days with just my bike, my old backpack, some food and water, and came to that path that has stayed in my mind ever since; so, locking my bike to a tree by the roadside, I started down this memory lane. The path is, frankly, only a path now because it has less underbrush and more gravel than the rest of the green growth around it, and it goes on for miles, a true masterpiece you think would come from some artist's metric, yet free imagination; it narrows down the farther it goes, perfectly, but naturally. All I hear is the faint chime of birds in the light, misty trees that line either side of the path, and the sound of my own feet crunching gently on the rugged earth below. A chilly grey sky seems to elaborate on that silence, like white noise. It is the most peaceful walk I've made since I first set foot on the gravel.

A grasshopper jumps up from a patch of damp pebbles, skipping along through blades of grass toward the shallow puddles to my side, still steaming with morning dew. When I witness this microscopic event, it is like the whole world

has grown seven sizes larger, that all the childhood magic that surrounded this place has returned from the ashes of my present life, that this once narrow path now opened to reveal again its secret beauty, if only you look on the small things. And the sun, for a brief moment, shines through the clouds upon this haven, so that all the brush and gravel come to life, and the puddles glimmer with yellow, leaving only the shadows of a concrete bridge that runs over the path just ahead of me. The bridge beckons to me from some trench of the past, though it puzzles me still, like a friend you see for the first time in years and need a minute to recognize. I continue down to greet this warmingly chilly place, laden with mud at the floor, with cracked concrete slopes that reach up to rusty beams that used to vibrate with the flow of traffic. Yet across the mud, in the corner of my eye, I catch a strange sort of ghost, for its wrinkled plastic, resting against the concrete slope, achieves some unearthly presence amid the litter that otherwise accompanies the bridge. It is a large oven bag tied with the elastic string of a sweatshirt; a strand of tape runs across its folded edge with a hole cut in the fold.

I had only heard of suicide bags in my life up until now, and this first-hand encounter sent me spinning inside so that I had to grab a pillar to steady myself. Whether it was curiosity, conviction, or both which finally compelled me to cross the mud and look closer, I will never know.

Inside the bag is a yellow note that reads, in an artfully crude font, "I'm sorry." But there is no gas tank, no body, no sign of use otherwise. I look around for some clue in this derelict place, to the brush around the bridge, and up

and down the path, yet nothing seems to explain this lonely sight. Eventually, though burning with questions, I cross underneath and move on.

The one time I ever saw my grandmother, who was dying of cancer, I was seven, and I asked her to explain why she had to have this cancer. She replied, "Sometimes, the things we can't seem to explain aren't meant to be explained." So, instead of trying to explain things, I've learned always to ask questions, even if I don't get an answer. And even as I may never know the story of the person who said goodbye on that bridge, I ask myself what it would have been for me if I were in their place, for many times I have faced my own reflection in the coaxing steel of a knife, or in the hollow barrel of a gun. I often think to myself how choice of a place this person had found to leave the earth, if they ever did - or, should I say, to return to it. But I need not explain it to myself.

We are all accountable to the same air we breathe, to the same dust from which we come, and to the same earth which embraces us when our time comes. Knowing this, no question left unanswered now causes me pain, for all questions are accountable to time, as are we. Moreover, I think I have become this very unanswered question, which answers only to the soil that spoke it. I am soil, I am air, I am life, I am renewal to the questions which must follow me.

I am a single leaf sprouted on a grand, eternal tree.