

# Cycling

Harley Nguyen

it was the summer  
and it was the two of us  
the break of dawn  
and you were at my front door  
with a bike behind you  
and a helmet in each hand  
had it been months?  
i told you  
i didn't know how to ride a bike  
and you said it wasn't a problem  
pushed a helmet in my hand  
and told me to get on the back  
and hold on  
and i held on  
as we cycled through  
our little town  
by the creek we used to swim in  
and the playground we used to chase each other in  
and your mom's old house before she left  
and i held onto you and put my ear  
to your bare back  
as if i could hear  
your heartbeat  
through the curve of your spine  
we got to this hill  
and we went down  
going faster than your mom on that freeway  
and we hit the bottom with a thump  
and off the bike flew two yellow boys  
like we jumped off a roof into a pool  
below  
and we laid there  
on the grass  
and my hand  
broached  
the distance  
and touched yours  
like it hadn't been months  
since we talked  
because your mother left  
and you didn't want to say you  
loved me  
and we were still

two yellow boys  
sitting in a room  
that blossomed with jjigae and spices  
wondering  
where it all went

# Whiskey and Ice

Ivan "Blue" Perez

“Ron! I think the neighbor boys are fightin’!” I called to my husband as he sat in front of the TV, two rooms away.

“That’s nice Margie, dear,” he replied.

As usual he wasn’t paying any attention to me—and it was something important too! Two of the neighbor boys were on our lawn, wrestling and beating each other bloody. No one else was out on our dead street that rainy afternoon and, since I was the only witness, I felt I should tell Ron to do something. But he couldn’t be bothered to turn away from his show, a rerun no doubt, not even to listen to his wife of thirty-seven years. It was one thing to pretend to listen when I was telling him about my day—could I really blame him for that? It’s not like anything ever happened to me anyway.

“Today I dusted, then vacuumed, then swept the porch. Then I went to the store and picked up some groceries for dinner tonight. Then I cooked, and then you came home, and now I’m telling you about my day!”

Barring the occasional trip to the post office or luncheon with Nancy, that was how my days usually went. And since I cleaned every day, it never took more than an hour to finish. The trip to the store was another hour, and I wouldn’t have to start cooking until five. So, usually I spend most of my day in front of the TV like he is now. Sometimes I would lose myself staring in the dark reflection of the screen when it was off. I would be holding the clicker, waiting to press the power button, but my fingers never moved, and the shows never came. I would just look at myself, wrinkling and graying, lounging on the once bright green, now faded couch that Ron and I had purchased from John’s furniture store. I still remember that day, I was holding

Ron by the arm and had just picked out the couch. John came over to help us out and, after a short conversation about how the couch matched our living room just right, he had offered me a job.

“I could use someone with your eye here. Help persuade the wives when they come in, eh? Usually makes selling to the husband a lot easier!” he had said, laughing that fake, manly laugh and nudging Ron.

I was going to speak up when Ron piped in, his voice low and unenthusiastic. “She’s fine, thank you.”

“You sure?” said John. “Wouldn’t be making the same as me and the boys, but some extra cash is nothing to laugh at.”

I felt Ron’s arm begin to tense. His reply came like a hammer. “She’s fine.” John just nodded and went to ring us up.

Later that night, at home, I told Ron that I had wanted the job. I asked him why he had refused for me.

“I’m gonna make it big one day, sweetie,” he said, a glow in his eye. “The guys at the firm all say that I’m the only person they’re considering for the promotion. Think about it! A six-figure salary, all the vacation days we could want! I don’t want you spoiling yourself at some job before then. One of these days, I’ll whisk you off your feet and we’ll go to Paris!”

That was twenty years ago. Ron never did get that promotion, nor any other after. At every rejection, the glow in his eye would dim a little until it was eventually smothered. He wouldn’t look at me as much and, after years of disappointment, he stopped looking at me all together. It was only the newspaper, or the TV, or the meals he hated that seemed to occupy half my day, even when they only took an hour to make. And when it wasn’t any of those, it was his

damn glass of whiskey! How I wish I could smash that damn thing! He started drinking more ten years ago, when he came home one day, saw he was old, and realized he was going nowhere. That's also when he started talking to me less. Now, he only ever talked to complain about the rising prices of gas, or how the firm was screwing him over. Sometimes he would include my suffering in his complaints—a passing comment here or there. In these moments, where I thought he might still love me, I told him that we should just pack up and go.

“Screw all those big suits and bureaucrats,” I'd say. “I say you collect your last check and quit. We can sell the house and go live in Paris! We might not find a great place, but we'll be together and be happy.”

He would just smirk and snort. “Don't be a child,” he would tell me.

It was one thing to ignore me when it was something small like our marriage, but this was something serious. There were two boys on our lawn. The big one looked like the Carter boy, Jonny, from across the street. He had just tackled the little boy, Lucas Brimming, I think, from two doors down, and thrown him in the mud. Lucas was pinned under Jonny's weight but was beating his back with his balled fists. One of the fists looked strange, as if he was holding onto something. Jonny punched Lucas in the gut a few times, followed by some jabs at his kidneys. Soon, Lucas was hacking and sputtering out blood. Some hit Jonny in his face but he didn't seem to notice with the rain, and it soon ran a pink film down his skin.

“Oh God!” I said as I watched from our window, paralyzed with uncertainty.

Why wasn't Ron doing anything about it?

“Honey! It's getting serious!” I called, my entire body trembling.

“That's nice dear,” Ron said, followed by the clinking of ice in his whiskey glass, each ring a stabbing in my ear.

Sometimes I thought about leaving him. Maybe I could file for divorce and get half our money in the suit. I could go to Paris by myself and, maybe there I could find someone nice to settle down with and spend the rest of our lives together in love. I wanted to feel how Ron and I felt when we first met at the ice cream shop all those years ago. When he offered to buy me a chocolate soft serve and a cola. He had seemed so sweet then. When I told him of my dreams of going to Paris, his ears perked up. According to him, it had always been his dream to make it big, big enough that he could fly him and his wife to Europe and they could settle down among the old bones of the world. But he never mentioned Europe to me again. I always had to bring it up, and now I see that he never had any intention of taking me to Paris in the first place. By God, if he wouldn't do it, then I oughta find someone who would. Someone to watch the sunsets with me until I die.

Lucas had reached up and stuck his thumb in Jonny's eye and pushed it in until blood trickled out. Jonny, screaming, responded with a punch to the nose, which made Lucas's head rebound off the ground. I could see Lucas's eyes go weird as he tried to recover, but it looked like Jonny had no intention of letting him. Soon Jonny's hands were wrapped around Lucas's throat and squeezing like he was a bottle of toothpaste with the last drop stuck by the top. I watched Lucas thrash and reach out, clawing at Jonny's hands, arms, throat, and face. Lucas's face turned cherry red, and then a sick purple. He turned his head toward me, and our eyes met. I could see the whites turn blood red as Lucas extended his still balled up fist toward me. I just watched as the bruised color of his face turned to a pale blue. Jonny stayed on top of Lucas, forcing all his weight into his tightened hands. Lucas began to thrash about, his legs and arms twitching. I saw his bloodshot eyes glaze over, and the blue in his face turned to a deathly gray.

Once the twitching stopped, Jonny got up and unballed Lucas's fist. He picked out of it a lollipop, which he promptly unwrapped and put into his mouth before strolling away.

“Oh God, Ron! Ron! I think one of them is dead! Oh God, Ron! Ron!” I yelled, with tears bubbling out of my eyes.

“That's nice dear,” he said, followed by the clinking of ice in his whiskey glass.

# The Bridge

Clair Volkening

I can't get home without going over a one lane bridge They're cute little things. Most are straight spans of concrete. Those are easily navigable, functional. The last one crosses the creek in a gently cresting curve. It was built in 1824 and rehabilitated in 2002. The curved buttresses underneath loop gracefully over the water. Stone walls topped with concrete border on either side act as foot wide rails that keep cars from sliding off into the creek far below. Not too far, but far enough that falling off would probably not be good for your wellbeing.

When I was younger, my dad and I would ride bikes from my house to the bridge. I'd sit on the edge, feeling the concrete irritate my skin in the summer. When I was even younger, my sister and I would walk, or she would carry me, down to the bridge so we could toss things off and watch them hit the water then float downstream. I liked the leaves best, they'd flutter down slowly, softly, gently. Green leaves were better than autumnal leaves, maybe because of the bright green against the brown waters below. The hedge apples, walnuts, and rocks made giant splashes and satisfying thunking noises. Sometimes I was more in the mood for the thunking than the floating. Sometimes it's nice to watch something smash into the water.

When I got older my friends and I started going to the bridge by ourselves. We were four dangling legs hanging off the side of the bridge as we talked about boys, friends, laughed, and cried. In ninth grade when I felt so alone, I thought about ways to end it, wondering if leaping off the edge would work. It most likely would. There is a certain peace to imagining your body floating in the water. Nothing to worry about anymore. No pain. No sadness. Just you and the water as your body thunks like all those hedge apples, walnuts, and rocks.

When I was seventeen I tried to get a guy to kiss me on the bridge. He didn't. Maybe that



was for the best. I didn't really want to kiss him specifically anyways, just wanted the experience. Sometimes you want things simply because the wind feels perfect on your skin, the sky is in that tenuous grey stage right before it starts downpouring, and the thunder is rumbling in the distance. There's something alive about being outside in weather like that. He kissed me later, in my car outside his house. My first kiss. Maybe it would have been better on the bridge with the wind tousling our hair and the itchy irritant of the concrete rubbing the backs of my thighs.

I did kiss a guy on the bridge later. A different guy, not nearly as sweet, but definitely more willing to kiss me. I should have been thinking about his mouth on mine, but I wasn't. I was thinking about all the leaves, rocks, sticks, and hedge apples that my sister and I had tossed off this bridge. I was thinking about all the times my dad and I rode down here, about how he used to tell me to not get too close to the edge. I was thinking of twelve-year-old me lying on the edge with my best friend as she cried about her dead cat. I was thinking about staring down at the water as I wondered whether the fall was worth it. I broke away and started walking back. He got up and followed me, confusedly asking what was wrong.

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If you've ever done a handstand, or hung upside down from harsh playground monkey bars, you know how easily the world can be flipped on its head. There's a picture of my sister on the side of the bridge. She's upside down, legs staggered out to balance. It takes strength to do that. Strength and fearlessness. I tried to do a handstand on the side of the bridge too once. I got scared. Seeing the water and the rocks far below made me too nervous to kick my legs up above my head. It's frightening to look at the world when you're upside down. Everything you think you know is flipped on its head and suddenly feels strange and unreal.

A week after I came home from college because of the pandemic I walked to the bridge. There's a chunk of rock and concrete that has been dislodged from the side where someone smashed into the wall with their car. The pieces lie on the road before the bridge, crumbled. I stopped and stared at this hole in the wall. The county was going to rehabilitate the bridge again a few years back. They said it wasn't very structurally sound anymore. Nothing ever happened though, no work has been done since 2002. But now, now, there is a hole in the side of the bridge. It's an aesthetic issue really, in the part of the wall that borders the road before the bridge. It still shook me though.

There are certain things I know about the bridge. You have to be careful to stay close to the side when a car comes. It's a one lane bridge after all and cars go fast on these twisty turny roads. When you press into the concrete you can feel the rough edge through your shirt, on your hands. When I got my driver's permit I learned another thing about the bridge. It's dangerous. There's only a narrow window when you can see if another car is coming. After that, the curve of the bridge hides the other side and hides you from the oncoming cars. My mom told me that you have to check, and then you just have to go.

I know that the sound in the car changes when you go over the bridge. The atmosphere of the whole world changes when you go over the bridge. Maybe it's the suspension, lifted high above the water, encased on both sides by the concrete walls. Maybe it's my mom's voice telling me to go in the back of my head. A lot of people get in accidents. You can tell if someone lives around here by how they go over it, they don't know how dangerous it truly is. When I saw the smash in the side of the bridge, the way it had been bruised and broken, I wondered how well I really could have known it if I wasn't even there when it was hurt. Just goes to show that we can't always know when other people are in pain, no matter how long we've loved them.

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I fell in love recently. I think I did at least. He visited during quarantine and we walked down to the bridge, sat on the edge, and let our feet swing like children. We tossed leaves into the creek, watching them spin gracefully down. Sometimes when I look at him, I can see who I've become. I can see the person he loves.

I can see who I am. But I don't know myself. I could say I'm a nineteen-year-old who uses she/her pronouns, likes reading, plays violin, is occasionally funny, secretly has a sugar addiction, and all the other things that supposedly make me, *me*. But, when it really comes down to it, I have no idea who I am. Sometimes I feel like I've been flipped upside down and I'm staring at the idea of who I am, but that idea is a mix up of old me's and new me's. What in the person I am now reflects the little girl who tossed leaves into the creek with her sister? Am I still her? She wouldn't recognize the person I am now. I've grown up, left behind old dreams, reached others, and done things she never thought were possible. The ten-year-old who tried doing a handstand on the side of the bridge would be shocked at the things I have done. Sometimes I think I can feel her tiny hand slipping out of mine as I try to hold onto her. Maybe that's the norm, trying to reconcile who you used to be with who you are now. Trying to reconcile your upside-down view with the right side up view you had before.

Then comes the question though: how do we know what is upside down and right side up? Gravity is the literal answer to that. If I jumped off the bridge it would become very clear what is down and what is up, especially when I hit the cold, silty water and my bones cracked on the unfeeling rocks below. But perspective wise, there really is no upside down or right side up, there are just sides. The only reason we think we are looking at something right side up is because we've been looking at it that way for too long. Sometimes, like when you repeat a word

so many times that it begins to feel foreign in your mouth and you can't help but wonder if it's really a word at all, your perspective becomes alien simply because you are too used to it. The bridge feels alien. I feel alien. All because the bridge is too familiar to me and I am too close to myself. I am too close to me to truly know myself.

I took a walk to the bridge the other day, feeling the cool September breeze gently push my hair back from my face. There's something in the early autumn air that carries the promise of winter. It's like I can taste the cold air that's going to descend and wrap us all in its frigid embrace. I've always felt this way, always loved the fall because it means that soon I'll be listening to the sound of bare branches rattling against each other as I fall asleep and waking up to a cold room and the smell of coffee downstairs. It means that it will be Halloween soon and sticky face paint, uncomfortable costumes, cold hands, and the thrill of being outside in the magically mysterious night is coming. I don't believe in real magic. At least, not the witches and monsters that we think of when we think about Halloween. I believe in the magic of memory. Places, people, days, books, music, all of these things are magical because we build our memories around them. Memories are what make us.

When I walk to the bridge for the third time since quarantine started, I am once again struck by all the times I've been down here. I may not be the little girl who tossed leaves over the edge and watched them swirl downwards towards the water, felt her legs burn as she rode her bike up the hill coming home from the bridge, or sobbed into her pillow every night as she tried to fight the emptiness. I may be different than I was before, I may even be an entirely new person. But, the memories of all those days, all those experiences, all those feelings, are what combine to make who I am. We are nothing without our memories, nothing without the little girl who smiles at me from her perch on the side of the bridge. My world might be flipped upside

down again and again, but the memories are what help to steady me. They are the bridges that link the unfamiliar to the familiar and, like I said, I can't get home without going over a bridge.