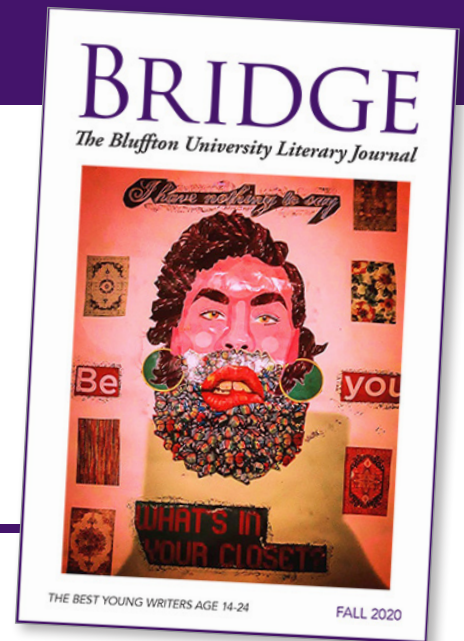


# BRIDGE

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## THE GIRL IN THE PLASTIC

Zoe Thomas

Movies tell me that flying should be associated with freedom. But in my case, flying requires me to show the one thing I can never be free from: my first driver's license. For the past five years, TSA agents have loved mocking it. There have been multiple occasions when an agent has had to try to stifle their laughter when I hand the plastic card over to them. Sometimes an agent spends what feels like hours looking back and forth between the plastic and I, probably doubting if the girl on the license is me. Once an agent took one look at the license and tells me that I must be glad that I got a haircut. I want to yell at him for snickering and scream how his actions decimate my self-esteem. But then I glance down at the license, and I bite my tongue.

To be blunt, I believe it is the most disgusting image of me in existence. 16-year-old me was sporting her classic hair style: straight blond hair with a hint of frizz and oversized bangs. It resembles a hybrid of a bowl cut and a mullet, neither of which look attractive on a young woman. Her braces have an alternating pattern between lime green and salmon pink rubber bands. It's a nice summer and watermelon-inspired look—perfect for the middle of February. In short, I would rather show strangers a picture of me as a wrinkled baby with an oversized head and

*Continued on page 2*

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fresh from the womb than this official state ID.

Ever since its creation I've fantasized about destroying this piece of plastic. Throwing it out a window. Running it over with my car. Shoving it through a paper shredder and burning the scraps. Unlike most unflattering pictures that can be quickly deleted, this horrid image has to stay with me until I reach the prime age of 21. I could never tell my mom I wanted to pay to have a new license so prematurely. She would ask me what was wrong with the license. I would tell her I hate the picture. She would tell me that's what I look like and ask why I hated it. I would stay silent, as I couldn't tell her why I didn't recognize myself. Or maybe I'm just frugal. Either way, I am fortunate that becoming 21 is no longer years away, but a matter of weeks. It's been written in purple pen in my planner, just to make it official. With this milestone birthday slowly impending, feelings of nostalgia swell into me and the urge to rid the world of this cursed license isn't as overwhelming as it used to be.

At times I can't understand this old version of myself. Why does she let her bangs grow all the way to her eyebrows? Why does she claim it hides her acne when her bangs fill her pores with oil? Why does she want to use that greasy curtain to hide her forehead from the world? Maybe this shaggy shield can be a red herring to distract the audience from her smile. Is that why she chooses to model her braces after her favorite fruit? Does she believe that the metal glued to her teeth, not the rubber bands, cause her daily embarrassment so she might as well make them remind her of something positive? If so, it would be a futile thing to do. There is nothing she could do to dilute the shame that came with having deformed and crooked teeth.

The address on the license is outdated and represents my childhood home in Galloway. I never expected to say goodbye to it before I earned my college degree, but Dad can no longer go up the stairs to reach his bedroom and, more importantly, his shower.

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*Continued on page 3*

because, to me, it lacks the qualities of a home. I have a room there, but the space feels like a personal motel filled with sentimental junk. I painted the walls mauve, or millennial pink as Mom calls it. Everyone asks why I wanted such a bright and stereotypical feminine color that contrasted greatly with my grunge-inspired personality. I lie and tell them that I don't know.

For better or worse, this license has trapped my 16-year-old self in between layers of plastic. Sometimes the plastic seems like a cage, forcing her to remain with the friends who encouraged her to be self-deprecating until she could no longer see the line between humor and hatred towards herself. At other times, the plastic is a protective bubble that hides her from the pain that suffocates her future. This girl hasn't watched her Mom say the last goodbye to her own cancer-infested mother and then cry silently on the drive back to Ohio. This girl hasn't been woken up at 4 am by a phone call from a sobbing sister, who tells her that Dad was taken away in an ambulance. This girl hasn't watched her Dad lay unconscious in the ICU with an opaque tube shoved in his throat to let him breathe. Maybe all of this resentment towards this girl in plastic stems from when my bubble popped.

If I stare closely, I can see the glare of the blinding flash in her eyes. Or maybe it's a joyful spark leaping out from her soul as she could not remain still when she passed her driver's test on the fourth attempt. She finally receives this badge of teenage honor. All of the times she is forced to cry in front of her Dad because she fails again and again could be forgotten the second that the plastic touches her hand. This is the day that the world becomes much larger and her independent spirit can finally speed off into the distance in the hand-me-down silver Mazda with no commitments. Her image may be stuck in plastic,

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*Continued on page 4*

with the exception that it says I weigh only 150 pounds. I hope that lie makes it onto my 21-year-old license.

Only the sharp eye can notice the shadow that gently outlines 16-year-old me. But I know it's not a trick from the lighting. The same shadow still lingers with me now and will appear behind 21-year-old me in her new license photo. It's my own emotional parasite, feeding off my most unsavory experiences. This shadow indulges itself on the inconveniences of being a teenager—from the pressure of being perfect to every time the friends of 16-year-old me called her Doughy Hoey Zoe to the overwhelming angst caused by nothing. But this darkness feasted off of me when Dad had a massive stroke, and it has continued taking an extra nibble every day since. Maybe the shadow could have been removed before, but it feels like the pain from the stroke made our bond permanent. What will 21-year-old me serve up on a platter to the shadow? Is she destined for another trauma in order to sustain the shadow's ever-growing appetite? Or will she put the shadow on a diet and force it to portion out past gloomy memories like leftover pasta?

The first person that 16-year-old me shows her license to is her Dad, the plastic still warm from the printer. It feels like one of the only memories she shares with him. Her Dad had missed most of her band concerts but made it to most of her sister's soccer games. It makes her feel set aside and forgotten. Supposedly his favorite daughter, 16-year-old me doubts her title when she pursues music rather than athletics. Her Dad takes her to the movies where they sat in silence and he takes her sister to races where she wins medals.

Now, my Dad uses a cane to walk and only wears weighted sneakers to make sure his feet don't drag. I feel closer to my post-stroke Dad than the one who held the warm license five years ago. Maybe it is because of the new fears and knowing how finite life can be. When I'm away at college and he's at my parents' house, I assume we still breathe the same air, but I can never know for certain. It's like I am waiting for another phone call

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*Continued on page 5*

that tells me to forget this life and prepare for immediate change. Maybe it's because of the things that stayed the same. Our favorite activity is still watching movies. He sits at home and watches the same movies on HBO until he can identify the film by the first note of the soundtrack. Sometimes I watch with him, or sometimes I ask him to watch an indie flick so I can hear his review of it. He always agrees and tells me to change the channel. He never let me choose before the stroke.

Movies tell me that when I go off to college, I will need a fake ID. While most of my peers follow this tradition, I never can. Besides my overwhelming fear of authority, something feels wrong about buying a new license and replacing my hideous one too early. Maybe I thought it would be redundant. I would flash around the fake ID with a picture of 18-year-old me. She lacks the bangs, the braces, the 1998 birth year. Maybe I would consider it a decent picture of 18-year-old me. But she would have a shadow that finds nourishment in the loneliness radiating from her. With the shadow still across the girl on the license, I decide to wait for 21. Sometimes I feel hints of regret from not buying the fake ID. I wonder if the ever-present shadow would have shrunk between the ages of 16 and 18, even just by a sliver. Instead, the shadow haunting me has grown. I've known this from the moment my sister called me at 4 am. When I imagine the license for 21-year-old me, I hope that the shadow is only a faint outline and does not encompass the entire background.

But I wonder what other differences I'll notice when I set the new license next to the expired one. Will her smile be the fake one I use daily, or will it be genuine like the one on 16-year-old me? Will she squint her eyes so tightly that her soul can't speak? When I evolve into a 21-year-old, will I feel the last bits of childhood break off so that the new phase of adulthood can take root?

There are moments when this wishful thinking is overshadowed as I wonder if I

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*Continued on page 6*

will resent the license of 21-year-old me. What if the second the freshly printed plastic card touches my hand, I look at the picture and become flooded with dissatisfaction? What if this new snapshot displays nothing but the pain that encompassed everything between the first license and this new one? What if one day I think there is a bubble around 21-year-old me and long for it? Is there an impending trauma waiting to strike the moment I am blinded by the flash of the camera? What if I can't recognize that girl with no bangs, no braces, no home?

When the sun rises on my birthday and the light nudges me awake, I can banish the ugly driver's license from my wallet and replace it with the new one featuring 21-year-old me. On that morning, I'm pretty sure I'll get rid of the old one. But maybe not. I could put it somewhere in my mauve room at my parents' house. It can wait in the bottom of my desk drawer to be rediscovered on a day when I'm visiting and want to reminisce. Maybe the dust that this license collects will hide her faults and I will only notice that spark in her eyes.