**Night Ride**

Jeri Griffith

From the railroad trestle, I see the house where I live with my parents. Though it is by no means a grand house, it sits atop a terraced hillside above the small, muddy Rock River. Trains from the countryside whistle and hoot their way across this structure several times a day. With narrow gravel margins, it’s not really a pedestrian bridge, but still I use it to cross the river to the other side of town. Its creosote beams are spattered with droppings from the resident flock of pigeons. The birds soar and flap beneath me. Their pink feet emerge from iridescent feathers to grasp their perches. Where the pilings enter the water below, whirlpools suck twigs and leaves that have floated downstream.

If a train comes, I’ll run hard to the other side and dive into the weeds. In the worst-case scenario, I would have to jump—a thirty-foot drop. The whirlpools scare me. I can swim, but it wouldn’t be any use. I’d fight the force of their downward pull, then finally give up, drown, and die.

*You never have a choice.* Even though I’m only ten years old, that’s exactly what I think. *The vortex is always there. The whirlpool draws everything toward itself and nothing can escape. If you stare at it too long, you’ll fall into that center and then there’s no use in putting up a fight. You’ll be sucked under. You won’t even understand what happened to you.*

This has something to do with how I feel about my life here. Perhaps I can never leave. I’ll always live in that house with my parents. I’ll stand on this railroad trestle forever, gazing down at the eddying water. I’ll think of drowning, and in that thought there will be some kind of relief.

How can I tell the truth? It was and somehow still is exactly like this:

My father takes us fishing. Today, we are fishing on the ice. The ice is thick—thick enough to hold up our car and all the fishing shacks that have been towed out onto the lake. My father works the lines and the tip-ups that signal when a fish has taken the bait. He pulls off his mittens to squash meal worms onto the hooks. I don’t know how he can possibly get his numb fingers to move. But he is single-minded. We are there to catch fish.

He lights a cigarette, his only concession to the cold. Me? I’m so frigid I want to cry. When I complain, he starts up the car, and I sit inside with the heater blasting warm air. From there, I gaze out over an expanse of white. I think we might as well be at the North Pole.

Everyone knows my father. They all like him, or so it seems. I’m not supposed to question either my father or my mother. Still, I feel uneasy, sometimes afraid or sad. When I wake up in the night, I hear the furnace kick on in that house. I think of the fish waiting motionless in the cold water beneath the ice and feel that I, too, am breathing through gills. I survive as if I’m underwater.

The whole world is internal to me. I experience it all inside myself. One of my classmates calls me a human sponge. I absorb everything. I see other people’s emotions like colors. I understand that many people in the world aren’t happy, and I really don’t know how to help them. Are my parents happy? I don’t know. Sometimes it seems as though we are all happy. But my father drinks too much. My mother is volatile. Her emotions explode. She can’t explain or contain them.

Seven more years pass, then this:

At the crossroads—four corners where two-lane highways meet at right angles—there was a pizza place. There, the boy and I began our night ride on his motorcycle. He was driving fast—very fast. For hours, we rode. I straddled the bike and held his body tightly. We plunged through the darkness of that summer night. Sometimes, we skidded on gravel as we passed beneath the shadows of tall trees. The fields were outlined with a faint, ambient light. Mist gathered in sunken, hollow places. Several farm dogs charged us and barked to spread an alarm, but we just kept going. Those yapping dogs couldn’t touch us. Nothing could.

And it was good. I felt everything and nothing. Once, we almost lost our bid for life. We skidded on a rough patch. The bike was about to go out from under us, but somehow, we raised ourselves up. We righted our mutual weight and continued. And we didn’t die. That night, we didn’t die.

We ended up back at the crossroads. I got off the bike and took off my helmet. My hair was matted and tangled. The boy looked depressed. His girlfriend had left him, and he was uncertain what to do. He wanted to marry her, but at eighteen, with no job and no real prospects, how could he provide for the things they would need? He knew her family didn’t think he was good enough for her. He felt her going away from him for good.

I was having a completely different experience. I looked up at the neon beer sign from the parking lot and wondered if I’d live my whole life under signs like that. And then I thought maybe there was a reason I was alive. Maybe there was a reason to question my father and my mother. Maybe I could see a way out and beyond that house on the riverbank. I saw the sadness in the boy’s eyes. We decided to go inside and order a pizza. The waiter was a guy from our senior class named Don. His family owned the place. Probably, they still do.

“Whaddya want on it?” he asked me.

“Everything,” I replied. “I want it all.”