

2013

## River Talk

Mia Juratovac  
*Denison University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Juratovac, Mia (2013) "River Talk," *Exile*: Vol. 59 : No. 1 , Article 26.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol59/iss1/26>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Exile by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.

## River Talk

By Mia Juratovac

You watch the water rush under your feet, brown with silt and boiling around the stilted legs of the bridge like it wants to climb up and devour you both, you and this stranger next to you, both balanced on a ledge, both watching the water. Well, he might be watching you. It isn't important, so you don't look up to check when he asks, "What happened to you?"

You tell him that you failed two courses at university this semester, that they dropped your funding and now, because your parents are not rich, nor are they willing to pay for your schooling, you are being forced to drop out of college and are not invited to Christmas at your parents' house and they won't email you back. You mention your little brother, about how smart he is and how proud you are of him and everything he's done, how much you want to hear from him.

You don't tell him that your little brother is smarter than you, better than you at the things that matter, math and science and sports, instead of flowery writing. This stranger doesn't need to know that his school costs thousands of dollars a year and that your parents don't even blink as they write his checks, and that they buy him new hockey equipment every year. You also don't tell him about the first time your mother yelled at you for bringing home a B on a test, nor about the many, many times the situation repeated itself. These are things the stranger does not need to be told, that you are insecure and conditioned to be terrified of failure. You think probably he can see it in the anxious twisting of your hands on your scarf, in the lines on your face that you are too young to have, but are too tense to avoid.

"That ain't so bad," the stranger says, and when he sees you scowl, he adds, "about the grades, I mean. College just ain't for some people. It wasn't for me." He attempts to say the words earnestly, but your ears are conditioned to hear the unsaid "because they're stupid. Because I'm stupid."

You look at him. You tell him, "I don't think you seem stupid." He seems surprised you picked up on it, but quickly realizes all it means is you are both broken in the same ways. He gives you a tired smile, and in that moment he looks very, very old.

“You didn’t plan to come here.” It is said with that same smile, now knowing and wise but still tired, and you are compelled to ask him how he knows. “You’re dressed for the weather.”

You look at him again, and realize how out of place his jeans and light shirt are in the biting chill. He is many years older than you, maybe with a family back wherever he is from, maybe not. You hope not, strongly and suddenly, as you watch him gaze at the water like he is coming home, an exhausted relief in his eyes. You wonder, as you look him over, slightly stooped but not yet weak with age, why he is here, what he cannot fix. You can’t bring yourself to ask.

After a few minutes, he looks back to you. “How old are you?”

“Twenty,” you tell him. You can give him this truth.

“Too young to be up here, then. You got time to fix the shit you’re in.” His eyes turn back to the water, still dancing and biting at the bridge like it is trying to tear it down, something in his face a little darker. “Old man like me, I got nothing else. Sick, tired, lonely, why the hell not.”

You’re not old, you want to tell him, fifty isn’t old, you have years to go, and I bet your parents still talk to you, if they’re alive. The words stick in your throat, tacky with insincere reflexes and blind assurances. The wind pushes at your back and you have to pull your hands from your pockets and flail just a little to keep your balance, not ready to fall, not yet. Maybe he’s older than he looks; maybe his parents never liked him. There’s no way you could know, so instead you hear “No family, then?” sliding out of your mouth like some timid animal, barely audible over the rumble of the water.

He hears, and shakes his head, without words. You wonder what happened to them, if he had a wife and children, or if it was just him and his parents and siblings and they’re gone now, if he sees their faces in the eddies of the water. What’s worse, you muse, having no family because they won’t talk to you, or having no family because they’re dead? After a minute of thought, you decide it has to be the latter. At least when your family won’t talk to you, it’s because they’re alive and well and angry.

A silver car zips by, and the air it displaces shoves at your backs. This time, it isn’t hard to adjust your balance, to avoid falling until you decide if you want to. You hum, a silvery pool of transparent mist dripping from your mouth. “... It’s quiet around here.” Your eyes drag over the gray buildings, far away on either side of the bridge, only slightly darker than the cloudy sky they’re silhouetted against.

“Two people standing on the bridge, ready to drop, and nobody’s called the cops.” It’s the closest you’ve gotten to sarcasm in at least a week.

“I’ve been comin’ out here for the past few days or so. Standing up here thinking about just.” He shuffles uncomfortably under your sudden gaze. “... Takin’ that one step off. Just one little step, and it’s done, you’re fucking done.” You can hear the realization as he speaks, can see it in his tired, tired eyes when he lifts them to meet yours. “... Everybody said this was the easy way.”

“It’s very hard,” you agree, and suddenly you are fifteen years old again, standing on the 16-foot platform over a rippling diving well, toes gripping over the edge of the chipping cement, looking down into deep blue and wondering how badly it would hurt to just give up down there, sixteen feet down where the lifeguards can’t get to you. You are fifteen, you are the fat friend, you are the disobedient, lazy daughter, and the bad best friend, and the one who can’t draw, and the bitch who doesn’t earn her A’s, and, and, and. And then you are breaking through the surface of the water, cold crystal clear blue swallowing you down, until your feet hit rough concrete and old, dead leaves. You are looking up at the rippling sky, eardrums sending screeching pain through your head, chest wanting to collapse and release all the air and take water in, in, in.

That was when you made that realization, at the bottom of the pool: it is not easy to do this, and maybe it would be easier to try and live even when it hurts so much you can’t draw breath. Which, now, you can’t anyway, and your lungs are beginning to spasm, so you push off the bottom of the pool in a swirl of dead vegetation. Your head shatters the surface of the water, and you take in a huge, gasping whoop of air, and you are back on the bridge, with your family not speaking to you, and this stranger watching you like he’s afraid for you.

You steady your breathing, trying hard to get all the shaking out of your throat, the anxious flutters out of your stomach. Carefully, so carefully, you shift sideways toward this stranger, shoes scraping against the barrier, grains of cement tumbling down to the hungry, eager water. When you’re close but still far enough that he will not feel crowded, you catch his eyes, and extend your hand to him.

His weary, dark eyes flick from your hand to your face to your hand to the water, and then back to your eyes, and slowly, after a long, tense hesitation, he lifts his hand and takes yours, gently at first, and

then gripping hard enough that it hurts a little. The pain is good though, you think as you squeeze back; you can only hurt when you're living.

"It isn't easy." The tremor is back in your voice, hoarse and wet as you choke on the words.

He looks again, stunned, from your hand to your face, one last time. The river roars and laps at the bridge as his leathery face falls into the smile his wrinkles hinted he had. His own eyes are exhausted but now moist. His calluses dig into yours as he squeezes just that little bit harder, grease-stained hand strange but comfortable in your ink-marked palm.