

Chestnut Review

VOLUME 3 NUMBER 2 AUTUMN 2021

FOR STUBBORN ARTISTS

Chestnut Review

VOLUME 3 NUMBER 2 AUTUMN 2021

COVER ART

Jacy Zhang
“Teak”

manipulated photography, 2020

At eight years old, I thought I was done as an artist the day I walked away from my teacher’s studio and his unhealthy teaching methods. I was wrong. Over ten years later, I’m restarting. Using an iPhone camera, Photoshop, and my critical eye, I create the scenes I’m unable to draw by hand. I hope you see from “Teak” that even if you lack an art background, it’s never too late to start.

Copyright © 2021 by Chestnut Review LLC.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, write to the publisher at the email address below.

Chestnut Review LLC, Ithaca, New York
chestnutreview.com

Chestnut Review appears four times a year online, in January, April, July, and October, and once per year in print in July.

ISSN 2688-0350 (online), ISSN 2688-0342 (print)

CONTENTS

Andrew Krivak <i>Hawk Passing</i>	2
<i>Children Sleeping Out, August</i>	4
Mark Blackford <i>A Conversation with Andrew Krivak, Poetry Chapbook Winner</i>	7
Gerrie Paino <i>Portal</i>	19
Youssef Alaoui <i>To the Baths of Azahara</i>	20
Matt Moment <i>The Id of My Manhood</i>	23
Jose Hernandez Diaz <i>Broken</i>	24
Jonas Holdeman <i>Two Days Before Ash Wednesday, I Read Charles Wright in the Moonlight</i>	26
Alyssa Witbeck Alexander <i>Baptized In Ice</i>	28
Bette Ridgeway <i>Origins</i>	44
Ahmed Qaid <i>The Photograph</i>	46
Cindy Buchanan <i>A Gift of Bougainvillea Blossoms</i>	48

Sherre Vernon	
<i>Despedida</i>	50
Brandon Lewis	
<i>Reluctance of an Introvert</i>	53
Sarah Pascarella	
<i>Structures of a Heart</i>	56
Alexis Kruckeberg	
<i>In My Memory</i>	65
KJ Li	
<i>Theory of mythmaking</i>	66
Roger Camp	
<i>Pool Reflection, Rabat, Morocco</i>	69
Colby Vargas	
<i>Fun Family Anecdote</i>	70
Lucy Zhang	
<i>Qualia</i>	78
Mark Yale Harris	
<i>No Secrets</i>	81
Chelsea Stickle	
<i>AITA for falling apart at a dinner party?</i>	82
Contributors	85

FROM THE EDITOR

Introduction

Here we are at our third autumn. The magazine came into existence a few months before the pandemic began, and thus almost its entire time has paralleled our troubled real life that, despite all hopes and aspirations, continues to resemble nothing like what we knew before. And yet, we endure.

We are pleased to welcome Jordan Crook as Poetry Editor, replacing Kwan Ann Tan who had to depart this summer. We also have a large number of new readers who perform the critical task of reading the thousands of submissions we receive each month.

Though in some ways our daily work is a task, it is one that bears with it a tremendous privilege: being able to select and elevate authors, many of whom are newer writers, for their work and to grant it an audience eager to appreciate it. And always, it is our extreme pleasure to offer up to you what we have chosen.

We are also happy to present here two poems from our 2021 Poetry Chapbook winner, Andrew Krivak. His volume, *Ghosts of the Monadnock Wolves*, is available now via our webpage. Our 2022 contest will open in just a few weeks on November 1st, and we hope to see your work represented.

As we drift into fall, we hope you can take a moment with these pieces. And of course now, more than ever, keep creating, and keep being stubborn.

ANDREW KRIVAK

WINNER OF THE 2021 POETRY CHAPBOOK CONTEST

Hawk Passing

(Loosely after TH)

I sit in the leaves of the bottomland, sharp eyes
Scanning the ground. I must not breathe, not move,
Or I will miss the chance to snatch up in my beak
What blind mouse might come through this duff.

No movement from two hundred feet is lost to me,
And I can close that distance in one second to kill,
And still I could not see the thin fence meant
To keep out geese whose goslings I had eaten.

The squirrel gathering acorns for the winter
At the water's edge looked easy, oblivious, and fat.
I dropped like a stone, claws out and readying,
And that claw creation shaped to snap caught not

The rodent's head but the invisible webbing.
Squirrel flinched but felt only the soft-feathered
Underside of me and jumped back into the woods.
I lay upside down in my shit splashed on a rock.
The sun grew hot and beat down on me the first day.
The second day it rained. On the third day the man

And his wife (who know nothing of hunting and fear
Death) arrived to swim and stumbled upon me.

I was delirious with thirst. They covered my head
And cut my foot free. But when I came to and rose
Into the trees, I could not find balance. I was broken
And fluttered precariously on each wing, afraid

I would fall. Lake below. Forest within reach. I dropped
And angled for the floor I had once scorned. No more.
No more surveying from my perch. No more twist and
Dive and lift out again to live. I rot here like the rest.

ANDREW KRIVAK

WINNER OF THE 2021 POETRY CHAPBOOK CONTEST

Children Sleeping Out, August

Afternoon. The beech leaves motionless.
The morning breeze has abandoned us,
gone somewhere to wait out this play
of heat and hush.

Skies threatened an hour ago, and thunder
thumped over the mountain like a drumbeat.
Now there's only that whir in the air cicadas
and mosquitoes make.

The children too are laid low. Drained
of their desire for bicycles, banter, water.
Waiting for the first move of whatever will
in a month like this.

There are times when the counting down
of the hours and minutes in a day comes
as a relief. The longing to let go as strong
as to keep.

So, we rise, walk to the meadow. Against our
shins the touch of grasshoppers and grass stems.
And come to the place. Level and without stones.
Out in the open.

The house looks less like a refuge from the hill.
We each take a corner of the tent and raise
the poles, shake the sides, and stake it down.
It is still too hot,

and we are slow and sweating, but there is talk.
The pecking order that never seems to end.
The tarp floor smells of New Hampshire.
As old as the hills.

The son I told to bring the broom sweeps
the dried grass and insects out the front flap,
and it's as if that very act makes the air itself
move from somewhere to here.

A squirrel scampers across a branch in the woods.
A chipmunk squeaks on a stone, and birds
overhead wing flocked and fast. Evening breeze,
the day changing with us.

In time the sun goes down and stars come out.
Food comes up from the house. Sleeping bags
and blankets lay on the tent floor like overlapping
borders of nations.

There is no light to read by, so I tell them a story
about the dog I had when I was a boy.
And when I'm finished coyotes yip and howl
from the summit.

A Conversation with Andrew Krivak, Poetry Chapbook Winner

There is a lot in common between the intent of prayer and poetry. Each could be meant to be a transport to a living vessel; each a window into a world not entirely our own; each inviting those who choose to partake; to engage themselves fully, both physically and spiritually, until we find ourselves standing beside the poet, experiencing the world they chose to share with us, as they see and have seen it. Andrew Krivak is no stranger to this *Composition of Place* and, in his newest chapbook, *Ghosts of the Monadnock Wolves*, he invites you all to come along and share in the experience of the strange and mysterious wilderness he has come to call *home*.

I had the pleasure of meeting with Andrew via Zoom not very long ago. The goal, as always, was to do an interview for the Review. I figured we would have a pleasant exchange and dive into maybe thirty minutes of Q&A. What I got, instead, was a wonderful hour-plus conversation with a very down-to-Earth person. We talked candidly about life, family, the pronunciation of *Coyote*, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and what seemed like everything else but his winning chapbook.

After the internet started to slow down, and hungry children

The youngest is afraid. The oldest tells her they're far
away and won't come into the meadow. I wonder
out loud if it's coyotes, and begin the story
of the Monadnock wolves.

The shepherds who herded sheep on the slopes.
Farmers who built the walls we pass in the woods.
And the wolves who lived on the mountain
a long time ago.

Shepherds and farmers both set fire to the hills
To kill off the wolves. These children have seen
The bald eroded summit. The caves we pass.
Never a wolf though.

And I ask them. Coyotes tonight? Or the ghosts
of the Monadnock wolves, crying still, voices
moving through the night like stars,
and the way that wind will.

on both ends began to call, I walked away from our meeting feeling all the better for how it went. So often, writers will write what they know. It only seems fair we get to know them; and I feel that, in Andrew's case, I learned more about his poems by learning about Andrew, the person, than I would have if we'd merely spent a half hour trading questions and answers. The conversation I had with Andrew was—to me—a gift. It's only fair that I share it.

MB: So, let's hear some about you. You mentioned you have a MFA. Where did you study?

AK: So, I have a BA from St. John's College Annapolis. I was lucky to have parents who told me to study philosophy. As Eastern European Catholics, they believed that an education was really the best thing you could invest in. I read Philosophy and the classics at St. John's for four years, and then I worked in a boat yard for two years. After all of that philosophy, I really wanted to just use my hands. I grew up in rural Pennsylvania so it was all about the work. There's an Emerson quote I keep close: "Do your work and I shall know you. Do your work and you shall reinforce yourself."

I have always been interested in poetry, and I had won an award for my poetry in my senior year at St. John's. And so I was working in the boat yard in the day, writing poetry late at night, putting together poems so that I could apply to some graduate writing programs. I got into Columbia University and I went. That was 1988.

There were some great folks there: Dan Halpern, William Matthews, Paul Muldoon, Henri Cole, Deborah Digges, Anne Lauterbach, J.D. McClatchey.

MB: Oh, wow . . .

AK: Yeah, Henri Cole taught this class on George Herbert that still sticks with me today. He was a great teacher. He made us memorize a Herbert poem for every class. Great guy, too. I kept in touch with him for a while, but I haven't lately.

Deborah Digges and Daniel Halpern were both my thesis advisors. And Bill Matthews was Bill Matthews. Just a master.

And then, I entered the Jesuits to study to be a Roman Catholic Priest, for eight years.

MB: Really?!

AK: Yeah. I had always had this idea of living a sort of monastic and prayerful life, and when I was in New York, I found the Jesuits. I worked for a summer with these four priests, in the South Bronx. This was 1989, and crack was king. These guys just tried to give kids a leg up on studies in math and sciences so they could get into Bronx Science, and just keep them away from all the nonsense. Just keep them in school. I was amazed at how hard these guys worked all day, and still lived a contemplative life. That's what I wanted to do. So, I applied to join the Order and I got accepted. And from August of 1990 to July of 1998, I was a Jesuit. I studied Philosophy and Theology, and I taught Philosophy and English at LeMoyne College.

MB: So, what made you leave?

AK: Well, those idealistic reasons for why I entered were — I realized later — not going to keep me there. It was really a question of creativity, you know? I had vows of Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience as a Jesuit. Poverty was easy. I had nothing anyway.

Chastity was pretty tough, but not impossible, if you remained focused on your work and you had good friendships. It was really the Obedience. When you have a superior say *You're going to do this* and you feel like *No, I really want to do that*, it starts to chip away at your spirit. So I left, but I left really well. I've never regretted being in the Order or leaving the Order, and I still remain great friends with several Jesuits.

MB: Well it seemed you did leave on good terms.

AK: It is all about discernment. The men who are your superiors in the Order really just want you to be happy.

MB: Really, you left so you could continue to live your life.

AK: I did, and they respected my decision. Since then, my Jesuit friends have been some of the biggest fans of my writing because I always talk about the composition of place. As a novelist, I have a bit of a reputation for writing about nature. And the Jesuits, in their prayer, talk about what's called The Composition of Place: composing in your imagination where you would be in your prayer. So, if you're reading a passage about Jesus in a storm on the Sea of Galilee, you have to put yourself on that boat, and feel the fear, see the waves, smell the sea, and touch the sky, as the song goes. After I left, I ended up teaching high school for a year.

MB: Oh God. I feel like it's always just one year, like a trial. After that year, you're either going to do it for the rest of your life, or you're going to run like Hell.

AK: Oh yeah. My son goes to Boston College High School, and his teachers are just phenomenal, and I keep thinking how glad I am that they enjoy what they do, because I just couldn't.

Coincidentally enough, in this time, I also taught a semester at Harvard with Robert Coles, who put me in touch with Double-Take Magazine, where I ended up joining as an editor. Coles had teaching fellows writing breakout seminars for a class, so I would start my day at Harvard teaching Carver and the like, and end my day trying to deal with these 10th and 11th graders. It was really schizophrenic. That's when I started applying to Grad School for my PhD. I really only applied to two places: Harvard and Rutgers. I applied to Rutgers because a friend of mine was teaching in their English department. I didn't know how strong their program actually is. And that's where I went.

I ended up finishing my PhD in five years, and four days after I finished my dissertation, my fiancée (now wife), and I moved to London so she could pursue an MBA at Cambridge. So I never really did the whole tenure track job search. But those years in London were when I let go of poetry and started writing prose.

MB: Why so?

AK: Well, I thought I would be writing more poetry and getting stuff out there. Robert Coles kept me on as an editor at Double-Take and, really, I think, editing was bad for my poetry. But it was so cool to be in that world. I would come home and have messages on my answering machine from Adrienne Rich, Billy Collins, and Phil Levine. I published one of Ed Pavlic's first poems and, a year afterward, he started winning all sorts of awards. I just loved talking to poets.

So anyway, we moved to London, and I wrote a memoir about my time as a Jesuit. Then I wrote my first novel, *The Sojourn*,

which I published with Bellevue Literary Press. 33 publishers had turned it down before Bellevue took it, and it went on to be a National Book Award finalist and won several other awards. Because of that, I was able to just keep writing. My next novel was *The Signal Flame*, and I just recently published *The Bear*, again with Bellevue. My fourth novel is due to come out from Bellevue, but not until 2023. The folks at Bellevue are very excited about *Ghosts of the Monadnock Wolves* because it really connects with *The Bear*, where I set out to portray nature as a protagonist.

MB: What is the title of the forthcoming novel?

AK: It's called *Like the Appearance of Horses*. The other two novels of mine take place in the fictional town of Dardan, Pennsylvania, and it is the third in what I call "The Darden Series." After this novel, though, I'll be done with Pennsylvania.

MB: Very interesting, because I feel like in this collection of poems you are starting to sever that tie to Pennsylvania. Especially starting off with "Prelude." You begin the poem deep in the mines, and seem to end it on your trail home. I was curious as to how much your background in prose and as a novelist has informed your poetry.

AK: I would say completely. My love for poetry, and my early formation of poetry, keeps my prose spare and sparse, but that desire for the narrative is still there. I try to write narrative poems. I've even been accused in the past of writing poetry that is too narrative; almost too tight or too closed-off. But to me, it's always about the story, and maybe my moving to fiction helped me to open my poetry up a bit, because I could think about poetry from a distance.

MB: That's very cool. I tend these days to see so much more poetry that is statement-making instead of storytelling. I call them "Button Poems," only because they seem to have risen with the YouTube Channel. To me, they do not always transcend to the page as they should, and they tend to lose out on the importance of storytelling.

AK: William Matthews used to say to us (and, mind you, this was the eighties): "The problem is that everyone wants to write a poem where they are alone, standing in the woods, and feeling vaguely religious." Maybe we've moved on from this false epiphany poem to the "Button Poem," without having moved at all.

MB: Exactly my feeling. So, I was also kind of struck when I asked you for an acknowledgements page and you shot back that none of these poems was published anywhere, because you wrote them all to exist together. Might I ask why? Was this what you had originally planned to do?

AK: In a word, yes. And I did this because I really love my little plot of land out in Jaffrey, NH. We've owned it now for about eight years, and every time I go there I see something new and surprising; I find new things in nature that seem to me to have a kind of poetry or prosody to them. And so, I started writing poetry again, about this place, and started keeping them together in what I called my "Monadnock poems." It was the only place where I really wanted to write poetry. I didn't sit down over the course of a summer to make this, of course. The collection came together over the course of seven years and, when I saw your contest, it was almost serendipitous. I could have gone on another seven years and maybe had a book-length manuscript, but I stopped and asked myself Is this it? Are they ready to pull

together now? 30 pages is such a good solid number. So, I put it together with some revisions, and I said Let's see what happens. I love my little part of the world, and I wanted to share that.

MB: Well, it is a wonderful world to share, and we're all glad you did. I really did feel like I was living on this plot of land alongside you. Now, do you feel like these poems channeled or gleaned anything from your Jesuit experiences?

AK: No, actually. Not at all.

MB: Nothing at all? Not from any of the teachings?

AK: Well, if there is anything at all, any hint of prayer, it is coming from the composition of place that I had talked with you about earlier, and not out of reverence. I didn't lean so much on Jesuit teaching to create these poems so much poetry that I have read and loved. It's something I tell students all the time when they ask how to become a writer. I tell them to read. Read as much and as often as you can. Read things you love and things you hate. And for the things you hate, find out why you hate it, and never go back. The more you read, the more you'll find how you want to write. The more you'll see how to get it done and make it work.

MB: I couldn't agree more. Going back to your forthcoming novel, and things I have seen in this collection, do you think you will ever really be done with Pennsylvania?

AK: No, I don't think I will ever be entirely done with Pennsylvania. I did love the nature and the natural beauty of the landscape there, but it can be a place that will knock you down for being

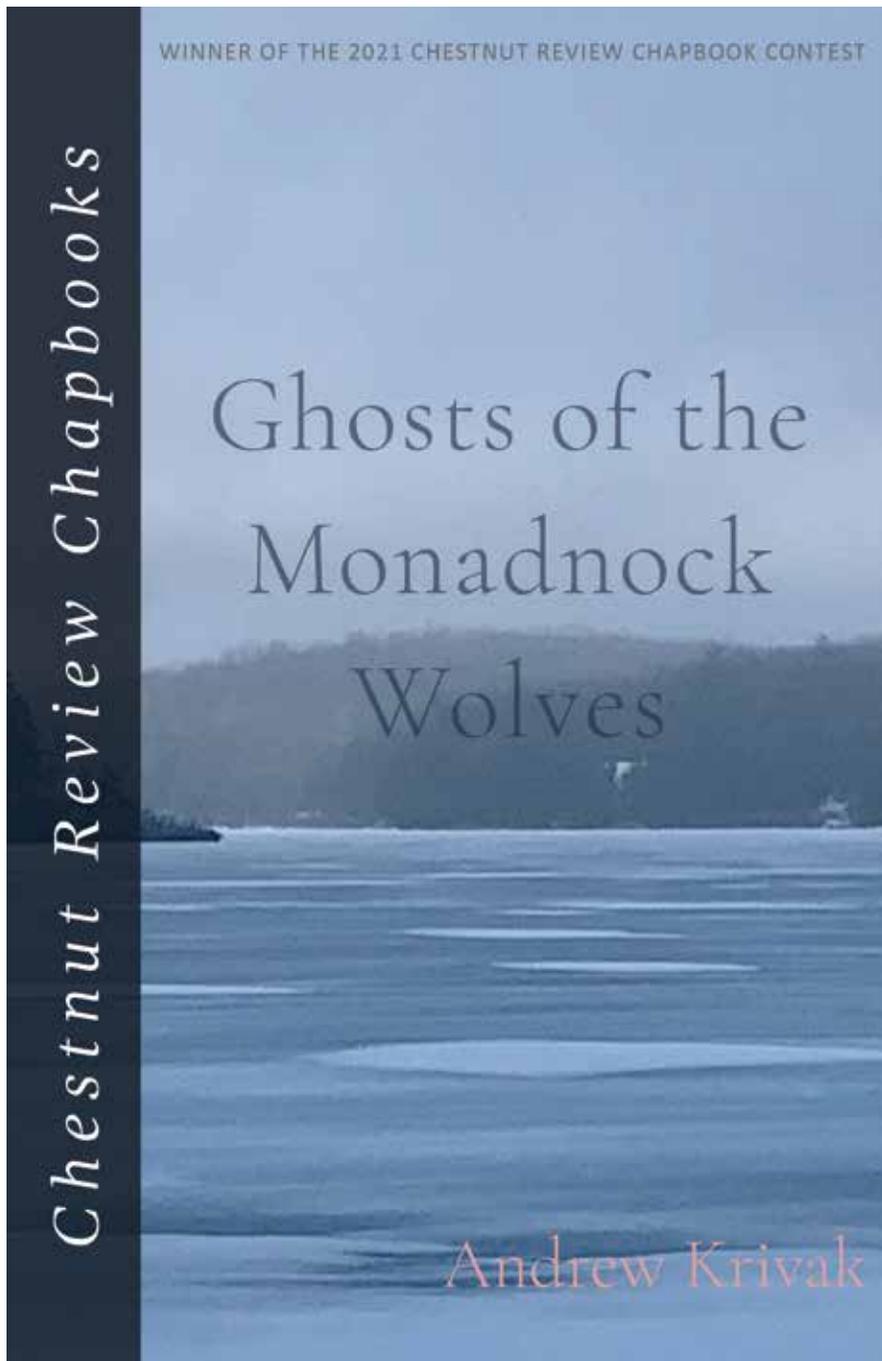
creative or even curious. At least it was then. Like any small town, it was a bit suffocating. I'll never be done with it, though, because the beauty of the nature I first found there is now like my door or window through which I get to look back and shape how I wanted it to be.

MB: And lastly, any word of advice or wisdom for newer writers; for those working on making their own imprint on the craft?

AK: Like I said earlier, and what I say to students often: Read as much as you possibly can. Writers write, but writers also need to read just as much. You will never really know what you are capable of until you know what the language is capable of. Read something every day. Write something every day. And be patient.

Andrew Krivak's *Ghosts of the Monadnock Wolves* is now available for sale on our website and at Amazon.com.

chestnutreview.com/books



Praise for *Ghosts of the Monadnock Wolves*

Here in these powerful new poems that make up *Ghosts of the Monadnock Wolves*, Andrew Krivak presents those haunting, scintillant images he gave us earlier in *The Signal Flame* and *The Bear*. A wilderness drumming in the shadows of the Monadnock range, with its unforgiving ice, its Dantesque slopes, and the howl of those ghost wolves and coyotes. In the end, it's a father's hope to somehow protect one's children against those nightmarish forces we know are beyond our control.

Paul Mariani, author of *Crossing Cocytus* and *The Great Wheel*

Andrew Krivak's collection, *Ghosts of the Monadnock Wolves*, celebrates the history of a place in the only way that matters – by giving us the people of the place. In “Lake Ice,” there's a passage that suggests his method of poetic exploration: The narrator and his children stand on a frozen lake and watch the “auger as it turns and searches, turns and searches through each frozen layer, until water so green and cold it looks oily gushes up and settles into slush around our boots.” Krivak's close eye for the sensory detail grounds all of these poems, and the work reminds me of Harry Humes and the early poems of James Dickey. Reader, get ready to be immersed, get ready to learn what the auger can find.

Charles Rafferty, author of *A Cluster of Noisy Planets*

GERRIE PAINO

“Portal”

Photograph with vintage and watercolor filters, 2021

Rocky River Park, Rocky River, Ohio

Winter and COVID conspired to leave the arches and metal spine of this children’s swing set empty, providing a perfect view from the park to Lake Erie and the broad horizon. The eye is naturally drawn through the structure while the mind is invited to ponder possibilities. I find myself captivated by portals and the manner in which they hint at what lies beyond.



To the Baths of Azahara

Your water starts to flow with the blood of a kill by lions in the High Atlas mountains.

Spanked into life from the grief of this kill, the brooding stream grows in force to invade the rocks above Ourika then cleaves its way to Marrakech, scattering the land as it goes.

Now it runs as it sprawls, wailing through the valley with the soul of a beloved, destroying the desert, sprouting trees beside it, never believing its insides will soon spill to warm your back.

Trik Jazouli, you count one misstep before falling into the fountain of Ben Slimane, daydreaming on the way to your bath, wondering if the mountain cats have survived.

Here in the ochre city, they have shrunk but are no less vicious.

Rough hewn, lithe spirits of freedom, they wander alleys and rooftops and tread the edges of walls looking for prey, anything that moves like a bird.

Trik, take care to watch the birds. They are quick and reasoned. In groups, they strafe the rooftops, tracing currents of consciousness in brush strokes.

People flow through tributaries of the souk in covered pathways, clay and wooden capillaries bearing greens, radishes, chickens, clotted with bulbous lamps.

Here is where a mule treads on your back, Trik. Warned three times but would not move, you were so entranced by the piles of meat.

You saw them as an edible bestiary, then as young tagines, a menagerie of parts. Legs that can't run, eyes that only stare, snouts pointing every which way.

The baths of Azahara can't be far off. Rivers of blood and money will guide you there. Follow the smell of black soap and rose oil.

Sunset reveals spouts of pink light above the clouds. They are stabbed by the Koutoubia, a lone sword in the back of the city, guarding the dead, pointing at God.

Evening calls to prayer fly from every angle, sung a hundred ways. The disparaging voices form a lake of song over the city.

Couscous palace high above the alleys has electric lights that will shock you if you touch them. Do not look for food there, Trik.

And keep your precious body away from strange water. This is the last of your warnings. The dark djinn are starving, unknowing of themselves, clamoring for their reflection.

A deep feud in a congress of clouds asserts the sky. You were born under such a thunderbolt, for collisions are the very source

of life. Sky versus mountain. Wind versus voice. Fire versus clay.
Water versus rock. Fang versus hide. This song versus your vi-
sion.

Your bath will soon be ready. A young boy will help. You must
wait for his call.

MATT MOMENT

The Id of My Manhood

Slam my ruffian feet in the backyard creek
where all the rainbow fish call me “God”
and my toenails are fishhooks that they hurl their suicide to.
I laugh at the stupid violence.

My feet wet now I mosh through the grass
and guillotine grubs under my wax heels
baring teeth like a boy stunted mind of a ten-year-old
while hungry for Momma’s gravy to slop up. Mmmm!

Zealot hatred of Gaia and all of her toils.
Only decades extended from my spermy origins,
having not learned a thing, and causing harm
for it is the only thing I know how to do with success.

Meantime my Pop threatens to lick his new wife
like a stamp and send her to Madagascar!
Wanting to be just like him,
I address an envelope to hell bearing my own name.

Broken

My father tells me we need to stop speaking Spanish.
He says my Spanish is trash and we should focus on English.

He says a doctor told him the problem with my Bi-Polar
Is due to the fact that English-only was not enforced in our
home.

I know my dad. No doctor told him that. He uses imaginary
Conversations with doctors to legitimize his points.

I tell my dad his English isn't perfect, either. Better than your
Spanish,
He says. I laugh and laugh, but inside I am angry and hurt,

Yet, I know my dad has a point and at the same time doesn't.
He wants stability, not broken languages which lead to broken
homes.

I feel like telling him, we come from broken people who build
Themselves up. I feel like telling him the brokenness in my Span-
ish,

Like the brokenness in his English, is part of who we are,
Like it or not. Sure, we can try to improve it, but we have

Nothing to prove. I feel like telling my father all of this,
But, instead, I put the Laker game on louder: what's the score,
anyway?

Two Days Before Ash Wednesday, I Read Charles Wright in the Moonlight

March 29. Tonight, like last night,
the new waning moon, like a blood-shot eye,
hangs in the limbs of the red oak,
keeps its moody vigil, keeps,
as my grandmother Anna would say,
its counsel.

The night before my grandmother died, I spelled my mother
at the hospital, sat bedside, held her mother's hand, pale
and dry, traced with a fingertip the veins
some eighty-five years had raised,
spoke without speaking,
heard without hearing, her first ragged breaths
of shallow sleep.

Mark would have us believe that on this day,
Jesus cursed the fig tree, its barren branches,
fruitless limbs, that it did as it was bid, withered
and died. Speak to me, Micah, that I may, one day

sit beneath my fig tree, fruit or no fruit,
without fear.

Heaven's eel, Charles, heaven's eel with its sharp
teeth, long and slick,
gliding along beneath the surface
of the sky's bottomless pool, unseen, unmistakably
there, oh yes, there beneath the surface,
where all our ragged breaths
descend and settle.

Baptized In Ice

At eight years old, I gathered the soft folds of the white dress in my fingers, pulling the fabric close to my body. Twirling in the floor-length gown, I spun and danced in the church building's women's locker room. The brightness of my dress stood out against the light pink walls and matching backsplash tiles of the tiny bathroom. I already felt pure. As Mormons, my church baptizes its newest members when they're eight years old, the "age of accountability" when they can choose baptism, choose Jesus Christ. To them, eight is old enough to make mistakes and "sin."

My mother squeezed my shoulder. We hugged each other, and she flashed a quick thumbs up before jogging back to her front row seat for my baptism. I poked my head through the door of the locker room that led straight to the font, waiting for my moment to enter the water. The font, essentially a large bathtub, rested beneath ground level so that all those baptized descended a few steps to reach the water—as Jesus had for His own baptism. In place of a wall, a large glass window rose above one side of the font. My family and friends huddled in a tight room behind the window in folding chairs to watch my cleansing. Following tradition, a small cluster of children not yet old enough for baptism crowded on the floor near the window to peer at me, their example.

"It's time," my father, a tall man with broad shoulders and dark hair mouthed to me from the opposite side of the font. He

held the priesthood—God's power given to worthy men—so his authority allowed him to baptize me. I walked to meet my father in the center of the font, the cool water lifting the hem of my dress so that it rippled near my ankles. Forgetting about the chill after the first step, I felt like a goddess as I moved through the water, the hem becoming a train. When I reached him, my father grasped my right wrist, and I clutched his left one. He raised his right hand, closed his eyes, and voiced the baptismal prayer. "Alyssa," he said, "having been commissioned of Jesus Christ, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen." He then lowered the rest of my body into the water. I plugged my nose and felt my ponytailed hair wave under the surface, like a mermaid whose flowing locks let sins shake from the strands and land on the floor of the pool. A quick moment later—too quick, as I wanted more time to relish my sins washing away—my father pulled me up out of the water. I exhaled, water dripping out the end of my stiff, wet ponytail while I wiped my eyes with my soaked (but not yet pruny) palms.

I was clean.

Following the baptism, everyone caravanned in their Sunday best to my childhood house in Logan, Utah. We lived less than a mile from the church; Mormon church buildings pepper the northern Utah landscape every few blocks. In our family room, my mother had set up long tables dressed in red plastic tablecloths for a luncheon that honored me and my baptism. While scooping potato salad and plopping pork into bread rolls on paper plates, family and friends congratulated me on my decision to formally join the church and admired me for my perfection. Of course, I never actually considered not choosing baptism. I also never considered the Mormon church as anything other than True. In my highly religious town, baptism acted as a rite-of-passage, a symbol of purity. Even my non-Mormon cousins traveled

five hours to congratulate me, and I wanted my new cleanliness and example to inspire them to choose Mormonism for themselves. In an attempt to act mature, I mingled and moved between groups of people, sure to give everyone a chance to give me a gift and share their testimony of Mormonism. I reveled in my pureness and wanted that feeling to last forever.

In church, I learned about the similarities between thoughts and actions. If a person thinks a bad thought, they need to repent as if they actually committed the bad deed. Walking between tableclothed tables, I wondered how long I could go without sinning. Maybe years! Maybe longer! I smiled a little wider, silently rededicating myself to a lifetime of happiness and pure thoughts. At eight, nobody ever told me what exactly constituted a dirty or a bad thought. Thinking something mean? Thinking a swear word? I knew very few naughty words. I only knew one swear word: “damn.” As long as I lasted the rest of my life without thinking the word “damn,” I saw myself remaining righteous and perfect.

Damn.

In that moment, that one bad word I knew burst through my mind—a lit sign, neon colors flashing the abominable word.

Damn.

Damn.

Damn.

Immediately, my purity left me. Jesus suffered for my dirty thought. He bled and cried in the Garden of Gethsemane, left alone by His apostles and in deep, hopeless pain to redeem my soul from that swear word. Damn. I imagined dark strands of sin tightening around my unrepentant ankles and wrists and darkening my new dress. “Heavenly Father,” I immediately prayed and repented in my head, trying to unshackle myself. “Please forgive me! It was an accident! I didn’t mean to think the dirty word!

I am so sorry!” Yet, I kept thinking it. The swear word pulled me down, and I imagined Satan himself throwing that word at me over and over again, mocking me. How embarrassing that I thought myself able to stay pure forever. I sinned before the end of my baptismal luncheon!

“I am so proud of you!” my mother said, walking over to me and wrapping her arms around me. Our dresses brushed against each other while we embraced. I smiled, but inside I collapsed. In my mind, a dirty girl dressed in ruffles and bright white shoes crumpled to the floor.

....

I started figure skating lessons the year of my baptism. I loved the ice. Even when my body wobbled, skating filled me. I loved the smell of the ice—damp water mixed with sweat from the hockey players who left the ice the hour before. I loved the sound of the lights that constantly buzzed overhead, the scrape of blades on flat edges and the rip of blades on deep edges, spotting tiny flecks of fleece stuck to the ice where a student wearing cheap cotton gloves pushed themselves back up. I enjoyed the first year of skating lessons, learning basic turns, a two-foot spin, gliding with one leg extended behind me. But the simple joy intensified when I learned to jump.

It exhilarated me to leap off the ground, to land on ice. As a child, I loved performing single rotation jumps, but as a teenager, when I performed double rotation jumps, I knew I had discovered a true passion. To me, jumping was divine. Nothing brought me more joy than jumping off of the ice, entire body rotating twice as I pulled my crossed body tighter, my ponytail sliding down my hair from the force, then landing on my left blade, hearing the subtle rip of the outside edge against the ice, my right leg raised higher upon execution than required because I loved the feeling of extension. Moments like this made me feel

strong. Moments like this made me feel powerful.

....

I met Levi in September, just weeks into the start of my second year of college. We attended the same church congregation, and I overheard other girls whisper about how they considered him the most handsome boy in church. I agreed. Blond haired and blue-eyed, Levi recognized his own attractiveness. He wore skinny jeans and sweaters, and he often casually leaned against walls and door frames, a stance that made all the girls blush when he walked past. He approached me after church one day, asking about my recently broken ankle as an easy conversation starter. Flattered and surprised that he noticed me, I fiddled with the hem of my dress while we talked.

“I’ll walk you home,” he said. After a five-minute walk from our church building, Levi and I sat on the front porch of my apartment and continued talking. “What music inspires you the most?” he asked. He then pulled a pair of headphones out of his front jean pocket and handed me an earbud. “This song makes me think about God.” While we listened, he moved his head along with the beat, occasionally brushing his knee against mine. Unsure if he intended the touch, I hoped he brushed against me on purpose. I liked how Levi found God in rock music. He seemed to care about church as much as me. We talked on that porch for two hours and he asked me to be his girlfriend a few weeks later.

Levi often surprised me with flowers. I loved walking into my apartment’s kitchen and seeing a dozen daisies blooming in a vase on the old wooden table.

“Levi left you flowers again,” one of my roommates muttered. I blushed, picking up the index card with “I love you!” written in his cursive handwriting. I’d never seen handwriting as clear and even as Levi’s before. Next to the note, he’d drawn a cartoon

of the two of us holding hands, hearts bursting near our heads. Beaming, I brought the flowers up to my room and laid the note among the pile of other doodles from Levi.

“I have a surprise for you,” Levi texted me one morning. Later that day, I met him outside and he smiled at me, tandem bike in tow. I rushed to hug him. Levi knew how much I missed skating and being active since my ankle injury. Leaving my crutches in my room, I sat on the back of the bicycle built for two.

“Okay, you have to promise me you won’t try to pedal,” Levi said. “Let me do all of the pedaling. You just enjoy being on a bike again. I don’t want any doctors mad at me,” he winked. I hugged him around his waist, and off we went. I cheered while we rode around town, my booted foot sitting still against the pedal. I believed God gave Levi to me. Rolling down a hill, I raised my arms above my head while Levi pedaled.

“I am so happy!” I shouted against the wind, and Levi laughed. I leaned my head back and closed my eyes, arms raised and feeling the breeze on my cheeks in ways I hadn’t felt since I last skated. “I love Levi!” I yelled out, and I meant it.

....

A lake sits at the center of the town Levi grew up in. The winter before our wedding, we visited his parents and skated on his frozen backyard. Levi preferred not to skate with me at the local ice rink, but he tried the sport out at his home. While we skated, I avoided practicing too many jumps or spins. I didn’t want Levi to feel insecure because I was better than him, so I skated laps on the frozen lake and stared at the dark ice, so different from the milky white substance I competed on. Still, I tried a spin or two on the lake ice—my body longed to feel my edges under me. Levi took pictures of me spinning with the lake and the sunset in the background, and he smiled out of pride and not jealousy when neighbors sat on their back porches to watch me skate. I

liked creating my art in his backyard.

Levi loved to ballroom dance. He took my hand and tried to dance with me on the ice. He led our dance, and I refrained from jumping or spinning. I skated slowly, scraping my blade against the ice to lose any extra momentum so that my movements matched his pace.

“Do you love me more than you love skating?” he asked me, our bodies silhouettes against the sun.

“Yes, of course!” I responded.

“If it ever comes down to it, will you sacrifice skating for me?” he asked. I didn’t understand what he meant—what circumstance would require me to give up such a large piece of myself to save him? But I promised to sacrifice skating if he needed me to.

“I just want to know you love me more,” he said.

“I love you more.” I kissed him and scraped my blade to a stop.

....

My eyelashes felt sticky. Not ten minutes into our return flight from our honeymoon, Levi and I had already started arguing. I’d turned my face away from him and pressed against the plane’s window, sobbing.

The first few days of our honeymoon, I’d tried to slow Levi down. He’d wanted sex five or six times a day, and my vagina constantly ached with no time to recover before Levi’s hormones raged again. When I asked him to wait, he ignored me, saying he “needed it,” and that he wouldn’t be able to concentrate on anything until he got off. Clenching my teeth until he finished was an easier and faster way to get through the inevitable than crying and saying “no.” No matter what I said, I knew every conversation resulted in him unbuttoning his jeans. During those first few days, I hid my face a lot. I looked away whenever I walked

past the bed, hoping he wouldn’t push me onto it. I looked away during sex, grimacing when he pressed into my dry vagina. I looked away to hide that I cried when he slammed doors. As per Mormon standards, we had both been virgins before our wedding. Since my baptism, I’d frequently rededicated myself to a life void of sin, including avoiding any element of physical intimacy before marriage. But now, I was married.

“Come on, let’s go do it in the airport bathroom!” Levi said when we stepped off the plane and into Salt Lake City International Airport. He winked at me. He winked a lot. I used to like it. I tried to smile, but I sniffled instead. During the last week, I had learned that Levi loved having sex in public places—gyms, bathrooms, arcades. Once, when Levi “felt it,” he snuck me into a men’s restroom with multiple stalls and urinals. Locked in a stall with my pants down, I crouched next to the toilet while Levi hovered above me. Not wanting the man urinating next to me to know I was there, I had covered my mouth with my hands. I hated sex in public. Pain sprang through my body every time and I disliked the mess.

I followed Levi into the airport’s handicapped restroom stall. The large stall had plenty of room to move around.

“You never know when you’re gonna need one of these!” Levi grinned and pulled a condom out of his pocket. He’d kept it there during the flight, hoping to sneak us into the tiny airplane bathroom. Our fight lasted longer than the flight did, so his condom went unused on the plane. Now in the stall, he glanced at me and ripped open the package. The tear seemed louder than usual. I hated that sound. I heard it a lot.

“Whew!” Levi said, a few minutes later, zipping up his pants. He laughed—a proud laugh, one that revealed most of his teeth. I pulled my leggings and underwear up over my thighs in one long tug, grateful that he let me keep my pants partially on in the

dirty bathroom. I wore new, white underwear, specific underwear that symbolized I was now a married Mormon. The underwear was sacred. I wanted to keep the garments from touching the ground. Still, when I pulled the white underwear over my legs, it felt soiled. The underwear touched the body of someone who didn't want to be touched but was touched, someone who didn't want to be touched but, this time, didn't say "no." It was only day four of being married to Levi, and I'd already said "no" dozens of times. I said nothing an equal number of times—out of fear of seeming like a prude, an ungrateful wife, a "regular girl" who, according to Levi, avoided sex.

"I'm so glad you're not like one of *them*," Levi told me, referring to the "regular girls." "I'm so glad you like sex." He reasoned that it was normal for girls to not experience pleasure during sex—men can't control their hormones, and young girls just go along with the ride. Still, did he truly believe I wanted sex every time he did? Did I even have a right to say no in marriage? I wasn't sure. I only knew that my vagina hurt, I hated how Levi ignored me when he orgasmed, and I worried about disappointing my husband or God.

We left the bathroom one at a time, so that nobody found it suspicious for a couple to walk out of a public restroom together. He left first, and I waited an extra minute before I followed. When I found Levi a few yards outside the restroom, he grinned. But his smile looked different than the proud smile I had seen a moment before. He beamed like a teenage boy who had seen his favorite celebrity in person. I guess, in a way, Levi had.

"Elder Bednar is over there!" he said. "He changed my life! Let's go say hi!" Elder Bednar was one of twelve apostles of the Mormon church. Apostles have the highest authority in the global church, apart from the three men in the first presidency. Levi and I often watched the apostles speak at a semi-annual tele-

vised conference, and we'd both read plenty of articles by them in the church's magazines. We both looked up to the apostles but had never actually met any in real life. To meet one in person was, according to Levi, divine intervention.

We stopped Elder Bednar and his wife—I had no idea what her name was since she rarely spoke on TV—in the airport and shook their hands. Elder Bednar seemed shorter than he appeared from the televised pulpit, and his hair, grayer. Levi walked a few steps ahead of me, so I missed what he first said to the apostle.

"And this," Levi said, turning to me, "is my new wife, Alyssa. We're on our honeymoon!"

"Congratulations!" Elder Bednar said, shaking my hand and smiling at us. His wife nodded her head and smiled, too.

"We were married in the Salt Lake Temple!" Levi explained. Elder Bednar and his wife looked at us with pride.

I glanced at Elder Bednar's eyes, eyes that I had always been told held the Light of God, "the power of discernment." Elder Bednar should be able to tell if people spoke the truth and what they needed the Lord's help with. Shaking his hand, I wondered if he knew what had transpired in the bathroom less than a minute before.

Elder Bednar said nothing about our deed. Smiling next to my ecstatic husband and an apostle of God who smiled right back at him, I saw two options: either Elder Bednar was an apostle of God and didn't think there was anything wrong, or Elder Bednar didn't know what had happened, because he didn't have the God-given power of discernment.

I wanted the apostle to save me. I wanted him to tell Levi that sex needed to be consensual. I believed Levi would listen to Elder Bednar. Then, Levi grabbed my hand, and we waved goodbye. A dirty girl and her dirty husband who wore matching sacred underwear.

....

I was asleep when Levi's hands woke me up. At first, I pleaded for him to stop.

"Please," I whispered. "Not now. I want to sleep."

But he moved closer.

"Cut it out," I murmured, pulling away from him, pulling my clothes back over my skin. "That hurts."

"You're my wife," he said. I didn't see his point. He explained how the scriptures talk about a wife's duty. I bit my lip, not interpreting the scriptures the same way. Still, I felt guilty arguing about scripture with a priesthood holder. I had realized that protesting only made it last longer or postponed the inevitable. Sometimes I felt my eyes and cheeks warm, which happens when I cry. Then again, he rarely noticed the times I cried when we were in bed. Or at least, he acted like he didn't notice. I waited for it to end. I held my breath to avoid gasping in pain—when Levi felt angry and unloved, it always led to more arguments.

The next day I made dinner for us while he watched *Phineas and Ferb* in the living room on the ugly green plaid couch we got for free. My phone sat on the counter next to me; it was on silent, of course. A notification brightened the black screen with a text from my mother that said, "You doing okay today?"

My mother had recently begun texting me a lot; she said something seemed "off" with me. I sat down the knife on the linoleum and responded to the text, sure to include a couple exclamation points and smiley faces to curb her worry (and Levi's if he looked through my phone). While I held the phone in my hand, I glanced at the couch again to check on Levi. He'd fallen asleep. His work shoes lined up against the couch, and his pseudo leather planner sat on the desk above his shoes. I almost smiled at how his obsessive-compulsive tendencies manifested.

Before my marriage, I skated when I needed a reprieve of

my most stressful moments. Being on the ice healed me. Now, I ducked back into the kitchen and googled "What is spousal rape?" and "How to know if you're being abused." I'd already searched these many times, always answering "yes" to almost every scenario the websites offered, such as one spouse trying to sleep or "no" not being a respected answer. But I still checked—trying to reach a site that told me not to worry. But none of them did. Maybe the websites lied. Maybe I was overly sensitive. Maybe I had made the whole thing up.

....

After a couple of months, Levi and I knew that our marriage needed help, so we decided to talk with our bishop. As Mormons, meeting with an untrained bishop who held the priesthood and the power of discernment to discuss personal challenges was better than meeting with a trained therapist or counselor. Levi met with the bishop first, and I made an appointment for a few days later. During the meeting, the bishop sat behind his large desk, and I sat on the other side, feeling small and nervous. The door was closed.

"I just don't feel safe at home," I said, putting my head in my hands.

"Well, are you reading your scriptures and praying with Levi daily?" he asked, leaning back in his seat.

"Yes, every day."

"Good. Because that's the best way to help a marriage," he responded.

I frowned. "Yes, we're both active and we're reading our scriptures. But that's not what the problems are. I feel like there's a hierarchy in our marriage, and that scares me. Sometimes Levi acts like he's the head of our relationship, and I want us to be equal."

"You know," the bishop said, "we learn in the temple that the man is the head of the household. That's how God wants it

to be. That doesn't mean wives don't have a say—they have to keep their husbands on track.” I looked down. The bishop tried to continue the conversation, but I wanted to leave. In church I learned to trust the bishop—that God directs him so that he can guide us. Yet sitting in his office, I hated his advice. I gave brief answers to a few of his questions, then left.

I sat in my car, waiting for my heart rate to decrease. I felt betrayed by the bishop and betrayed by Levi. I was taught to trust the priesthood and the men who held it. God communicated directly to those with the priesthood. Yet I knew that these two God-loving, priesthood holding men had failed me. What they said about marriage felt ungodly to me.

In that moment, I decided to divorce Levi.

“I'm not coming home tonight,” I texted him.

....

“Are you saying you want to go against God?” Levi shrieked in our living room a couple days later when I told him that I planned to leave. Permanently. An index card with the words “What Would Jesus Do?” in his crisp cursive handwriting was taped to the wall behind the couch we sat on. He'd taped the sign there a week earlier as an apology attempt, a promise of change.

“I don't think God wants me to be treated this way,” I said. Out of instinct I reached for Levi's hand to comfort him. I caught myself and pulled my hand away.

“If you leave me, I will tell every guy in five cities what you do to people. I will make sure you never find someone else.” He glared at me; lately his blue eyes hardened when he looked at me. He started to say something else, but I stopped him.

“Levi,” I said. “I don't care what you do to me. You can hurt me, and you have. For a long time, I believed you that it was normal. But it's not. Okay?” I sat forward. He looked like he wanted to respond, but I cut him off. “I thought I could be okay with it,

and I have tried so hard to convince myself that I can be. But it's abuse, Levi. And if I have a child, I know you would treat them the same way you treat me. And I *never* want you to be the father to my kids.” Levi's eyes widened—I had never said anything that aggressive before.

“So, you're just giving up? Is that what you're saying? You just came here to tell me you quit, and then you're just gonna go? You're the one being abusive.” He shook his head.

I let out a short sob that almost sounded like a laugh. I stood up. I never sat on that plaid couch again. My entire body shook, and I grabbed onto my skirt to steady my hands. We both sniffed.

“Can I have one last kiss?” Levi asked.

I leaned in and pecked his lips, but the kiss felt loveless. Pulling back, I recognized that we both regretted the touch. He followed me to the step by the door, crying. He sat down and I walked away. I didn't look back. Perhaps he cried on the step for hours, staring at the imprint my shoe marked on the mat, frozen where I'd left him.

All my life I had believed sacrificing for a Mormon marriage was a form of the ultimate success—a path to eternal happiness. The church I loved told me to avoid divorce at all costs. Part of me wailed that stepping away from an eternal marriage showed my fallibility—that I no longer appeared perfect to the outside world or to God. I had stepped off the path. Although my heart ached, I exhaled when I thought about sleeping away from Levi. I exhaled when I thought about a life without him there. I stared at my empty ring finger for a while, and eventually, I smiled.

....

The summer we divorced, I returned to the ice. I rarely skated during the marriage—I knew Levi had seen skating as something that kept me from him. After I left him, I skated almost

daily, finding empty sessions and using the entire ice for myself. I skated fast, and I skated strong. During the hours I owned the ice, I wanted every inch marked from my blade, every segment of ice proof that my body was there. I refused to hide.

Sometimes rink employees watched me skate from the front desk and commented to me about what a “powerhouse” I was on the ice. Although my skills were less refined than my years of competitive skating, I developed a new energy when I skated—a rich passion and anger and strength—that had never existed before. Skating, the center of what I truly loved, my divinity outside of religion, held a space for me to heal. To allow my body to do things that I wanted it to do. On the ice, I rebirthed myself.

Shortly after the divorce, I performed in a show and mentally dedicated the performance to my decision to leave Levi. Performing on the same ice I grew up on, I could pick out scratches on the walls and tell a story about their origin. I could point to places I had landed jumps for the first time. As a little girl, skating taught me to be tough. As an adult, I returned to the space that first gave me strength and claimed the connection between my body and the ice, refusing to give it up again.

Stepping onto the ice to perform, a spotlight flooded me, and the light bounced off the black sequins on my dress. I closed my eyes. I felt no nerves. I ignored the audience and the lights and just allowed myself to skate. I sang along with the music while I skated. Moving with power, I didn’t think about the upcoming jumps or spins, nor worried about falling or impressing anyone. Instead of hoping to prove myself to Levi, or even devote myself to Mormonism, I moved my body because I wanted to, in ways I chose. Unlike all the years a coach choreographed my programs, for that performance, I coached myself. I decided when to turn, when to extend, when to jump.

I just skated. I just existed. And it was enough.

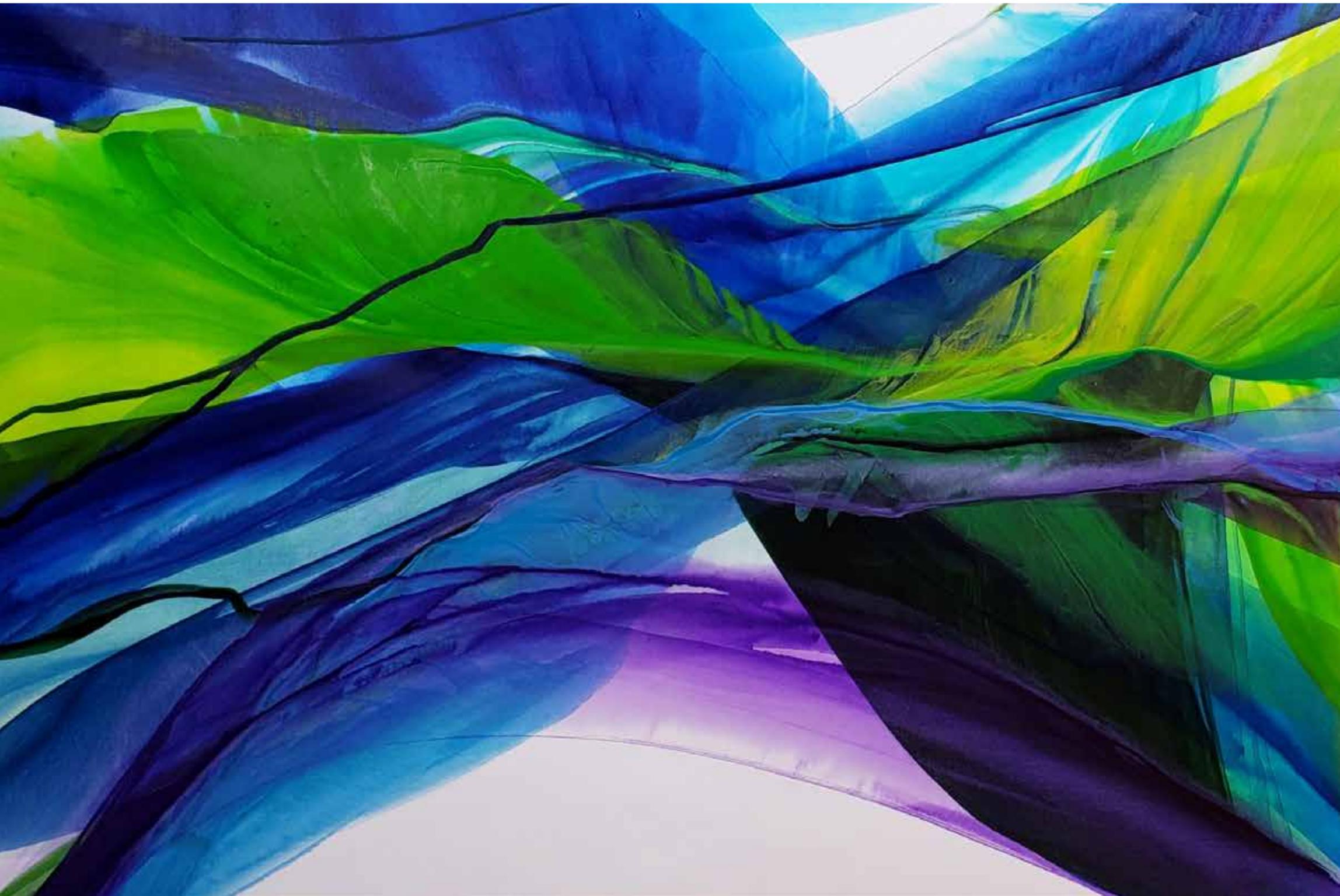
BETTE RIDGEWAY

“Origins”

Acrylic on canvas, 48x84 inches, 2019

(Next Page)

All tones of blue evoke a feeling of serenity and wellness in me. Into the sweeping swaths of blues, we poured greens into the mix; suffusing the image with a dollop of nature. The overall goal in all my paintings is to bring lightness and transparency, thus engaging the viewer to dive a little deeper into the colors beyond. The magenta was the last color added which gave it a special tenderness. I realize that each viewer interprets my work differently. I create the canvas on which they can project, dream, remember, realize and feel enriched or uplifted.



The Photograph

Arms stiff at her sides, my mother stands next to her younger sister,
Staring into the camera with a blank face
No trace of emotion—not a hint of a smile or a frown, nor the
slightest curve of her mouth in
either
 direction, her face expressionless, like a mannequin
Her sister, my oldest aunt, smiles widely—I’ve never seen her smile
like that before—
 a dark hijab wrapped around her head
My mother wears a loose, white hijab patterned with embroideries of
leaves, opposite of her
sister’s,
 a long tuft of black hair hanging out of the front of it, falling
across her face.
A homemade dress,
several golden bracelets, she and her sister wearing matching sets,
just as they do now.
The only photograph of my mother from her youth—the only one
we know of, at least

My mother, whose thin black hair is greying now,
goes on walks with me during evenings, eight thousand miles away
from where that photo was taken,
 to clear her head

“Don’t smile,” they’d say before photographs.
She never did.

CINDY BUCHANAN

A Gift of Bougainvillea Blossoms

This latest gift weighs dark,
heavy as a low cloud drooping with rain.
The leafy bracts are creased sharp.
The colors run wound-red to bruise-purple.

I hold the blossoms in my outstretched hand,
searching for words tattooed upon the petals,
assaying for flattery, criticism, blame—
measuring this gift against others of its kind.

I refuse to bring the flowers close or find
their scent. Acceptance might unbalance me,
dispel the bitter taste of iron upon my tongue.
I have spent years perfecting my response

but I am tired. Death is taking form,
drumming her fingers upon my chest.
My hand trembles. I let go and am
astonished when the bougainvillea float

softly to the ground, light as hummingbird wings.
They are flowers, nothing more, exquisite
and fragile for a second. I pick one up,
and cradle the blossom in the palms of my hands.

Despedida

for all the aunties who raise us

I am the daughter
you wanted—
It's all I wanted—to be
anywhere but here:
meningitis—overdose—
a broken heart—a stroke—

My lonely. You have orphaned me—

Please come back to bowling
alley bathrooms; I'll scream
you aren't the boss of me
& you can pull my hair
with lies & threats
& after—scoop me up
carry me outside, dream
me into stars & hold me
into sleep—My fierce
& demanding—

I will live with you all those times
again—furniture rearranged

from wall to window—your hunger
for color: everything highlighter
yellow, neon pink—My bright
& burning—I'll give up
black & grey for orange & red
& all shades of blue—here—

My careful—My hands
can braid, can put on
a face, can open a drink
an avocado, my hips
to music—I will ask you still
about the lyrics—you
so skeptical of words
& distrustful of time—I know
now we don't have to
live a year twice
the same way—

& when you left for Georgia
& why you came back—me

My older me—What your body said
as it wasted down past
muscle to bone, as the trash
piled up & the animals wrapping
their warmth around you parted
to let me in—There were drugs,
of course—My unseen—

I should hold you guilty
for so much neglect: of your own children—

for disdain: of the brother I loved—
for the men in my whole life—
I should call you to account—for never
casting back at our mothers—I believed
in your power—My fragile—My ashamed—

But I cannot hate you—for all
you broke—My broken—I
still hear you sneak
past the whole house seething—
silent into the dark room
where I cry—I feel you
lift my head onto your lap
the accidental tangle
of your hand caught
in my hair, your tears
covering my face—

BRANDON LEWIS

Reluctance of an Introvert

Like back when I still went to meetings
and other drunks urged me to take a seat
somewhere in the middle of the room,
saying folks on the edge could be
jumped by wolves, happens all the time.
Or like how, if they called on me, I'd always
say I prefer to listen tonight, thank you,

guessing nobody wanted to hear
another relapse story. Those mornings
I'd get wasted after praying in the shower,
and after sitting outside a liquor store
for twenty minutes, staring at the brown
bags the customers were holding. All
I'd really have to talk about now is

how it killed me this summer watching
groups of students eating together in
the PLU cafeteria, smiling over their trays,
or when I'd catch them sharing blankets
on the lawn like they've known each
other for years. And yet I roam the fifth
floor of Harstad—all the dorm rooms

empty but mine—feeling perfectly
at home. No porn or Taylor Swift blaring
through walls, nobody stomping back
from the bars at one a.m. Lately what
I've craved more than booze is to be
someone's friend and not wonder if I'm
going to fuck it up, if me not drinking will

be a problem, how long before I stop
answering texts. Last night at a reading
Casey Fuller talked to me about when
he was a kid breaking into neighbors' houses,
dueling bottle rockets with his buddies
on the fourth of July. I wanted to blurt
out, Hey, why don't you and me run down

the street and get some coffee. I kept
looking at his tattoos, the ones of Morrissey
and zombie Shakespeare. He brought up
the time he was shot by a friend in Oly,
pointing to his calf. He was just fuckin' around
and it went off. I couldn't help myself,
jumping in with my own story: eight years

old and playing in a vacant lot, my neighbor
hitting me with a throwing star inches
from my eye. Casey laughed, Nothing like
a head wound. I laughed too, stressing
all the blood I lost, how many stitches. Then
I almost told him about another wound,
a friend of mine killing himself years ago.
But of course, you don't spring that shit

on someone. Even if the mood's like the rooms
in AA, or you're feeling desperate enough
to say that you think about this friend
every few days, wondering what type of gun
he used. Did he stick it in his mouth, under the chin
or against the temple. Was it easy to do.

Structures of a Heart

In Jonah's class, when his sixth graders dissected fish, they followed the curriculum-directed, district-approved order of operations: Start with the scales and eyes, then slice the belly to access the stomach, intestines, liver, and heart. As the teacher, Jonah always dissected his fish first, so the kids knew what to do. Today was no exception.

"Fish have only two chambers in their hearts, but humans have four. If you're careful, you can cut into it and see," he said, holding the dark, slick organ up for inspection, no larger than a pebble against his gloved fingers, before returning it to the tray, unopened, a mystery to entice the reluctant.

There were a few squirms and squeals as he distributed the fish and tools, but the lab partners soon became quiet and focused. Jonah made the rounds and observed. Cory and Beth extracted the interior gills with skill, then fanned them out like palm fronds on their tray. Sam and Taylor each tweezed an eye, mini-Sauron towers, and examined them closely. He passed Steve and Clarissa, heads bowed over their fish.

"Why do we even call this an experiment? We know exactly what we're going to see," Steve muttered, loud enough for Jonah to hear.

Clarissa peeled off the dorsal fin in a clean strip. "Technically it's a *dissection*. And speak for yourself—I've never seen fish guts up close before."

At the end of class, Jonah had everyone walk around and compare their specimens, the slight variations that made each unique. He hoped the lesson was memorable, that the partner work was informative, but kids were kids. He never knew what would stick and what would slip away.

When he got home from work, garlic and basil greeted him first, fragrant through the screen door. Inside, Timothy, his husband, had three pots going on the stove, stray julienned vegetables and farro grains littered the counter.

"What are we having?" Jonah said.

Timothy wiped his hands across his apron and kissed him hello. "An experiment!" he said, uncorking a bottle of wine and pouring two glasses.

One of the pot lids danced and spat. Jonah lifted it and got a whiff of soy and pepper, maybe vegetable broth.

Tall and effortless, Timothy reached up to the cupboard's top shelf for a platter, then artfully assembled the meal across it. It seemed to Jonah the opposite of his day's work.

They ate at the kitchen island, the main course between them.

"Did you pick up our suits from the dry cleaners?" Timothy asked, after a few bites.

"Crap," Jonah said.

"I mean, *I* don't mind if we go to the wedding like this." Timothy gestured to his jeans and sneakers.

Jonah scooped an extra helping off the platter. "This is delicious," he said.

The next day, he administered several pop quizzes, ran an assembly, and monitored an after-school science club meeting. He was home, shoes off, tie loosened, by the time he remembered.

Timothy sighed. "Give me your wallet. I'll get the suits myself tomorrow."

Jonah handed it over. Timothy found the pickup receipt exactly

where Jonah had folded it.

“Thanks,” Jonah said. He couldn’t read Timothy’s expression. “What?”

“You still want to go, right?”

“Of course,” Jonah said, a little too fast.

Timothy tucked the paper into his own billfold. “I’m just saying – these are *your* friends. It’s no big loss to me if you want to cancel.”

Jonah smiled, closed-lipped.

That weekend, when the wait staff placed a plate of fish before Jonah at Peter and Erin’s wedding reception, he couldn’t help but think of the mauled versions he usually handled.

“Remind me why I ordered this?” he asked Timothy.

Timothy considered Jonah’s wan filet against his homely chicken breast, dressed up in a magenta sauce. “Want to trade?”

Jonah knew Timothy didn’t actually want to, that he was being considerate—and also that he absolutely would if asked. “No,” Jonah said. He watched Peter, fancy in a tux, lead Erin to their seats for the toasts.

Peter, Jonah’s oldest friend, was an astrophysicist. Erin, a rocket engineer. The speeches, from Byron, Erin’s mentor, and Elise, Peter’s frequent collaborator and co-author, zeroed in on this meeting of the minds—there were jokes about physics principles and obscure scientific concepts. Genuine laughs erupted from half the guests, those in the know, with bewildered twitters from the rest. Jonah, part of the latter category, felt self-conscious.

Timothy saw his baffled expression. “Why would you need to know about that for your sixth graders, anyway?” He meant well, but it still smarted.

Going to weddings always made Jonah revisit his own nup-

tials and the decisions made for that day. As an attendee, Jonah was acutely aware of the event’s importance for the bride and groom/groom and groom/bride and bride, but how for many others it was just a party, an interchangeable plate of fancy proteins, a mix of whatever was in the Top 40 that week, crosscut with the old standbys: “At Last,” “Butterfly Kisses,” “Still the One.” Originally, he and Timothy had planned a big wedding; they even asked Peter to be a best man. But one afternoon, during a boozy backyard barbecue, they made a spontaneous decision. They were married in T-shirts and flip-flops. Carmen, their Internet-ordained friend, served as the impromptu officiant. The friends who were there were surprised, in a good way. Informed after the fact, their families and other friends were also surprised, in a hurt way.

Peter had been gracious with the news, Jonah remembered, although here he was now at their wedding, relegated to the general guest list, no groomsman duties, no speech to give. Was that a slight or did Peter just know him best? It was nice to be just a guest, no duties beyond attendance and a gift. And what was a best man, anyway? It was a place in line, a few extra booked dates in a calendar, a bigger price tag. As Elise finished her toast and the band’s lead singer warbled the first lines of “All I Ask of You,” Jonah had no regrets.

He pushed his plate away. “Drink?” he asked Timothy.

They left their seats and went to the bar, where Byron nursed a Manhattan. The three had met the previous evening at the rehearsal dinner, but Jonah reintroduced himself for good measure and ordered two whiskeys.

“Ah, yes, the teacher!” Byron looked wistful. “Teaching... just so important. If I ever leave this rat race, that’s just what I’d love to do.” Jonah knew Byron had been instrumental in developing satellite mapping technology, devices that now steered millions

of users to their destinations. He couldn't tell if Byron was being honest or just polite.

"Last week, we dissected perch," Jonah said.

"And what do you do?" Byron asked, turning to Timothy.

Timothy, a personal trainer and personal chef, was considering personal stylist next to complete the trifecta. "The problem is I don't have great style," Timothy said. He favored cargo shorts and fisherman sandals in summer, sweatshirts and denim in winter.

"Cheers to that," Byron said, but his lips curled up in a smirk. He offered his cocktail glass for a clink, then moved along.

"Snob," Timothy said, just under his breath.

Peter and Erin's band launched into a slow ballad that Jonah didn't recognize. Timothy's eyes lit up. He took the snifter from Jonah's hand and tugged him toward the dance floor.

"You know I love this one," Timothy said.

Jonah and Peter met in junior high as lab partners. Peter had luscious, heavy eyelids that gave him the appearance of just being roused from a restorative nap, and the constant bedhead to match. Jonah was pale and bookish, and prior to Peter, didn't know any other science nerds. The first day they were paired up, he watched Peter set up the microscope, prepare the drops of pond water on the slides, and adjust the lens and light, as efficient and professional as the instructor.

"Check it out!" Peter stepped away and Jonah had pressed his eye to the ocular lens. Under the spotlight, the protozoa oozed in and out of the frame.

"What are you doing?" Peter asked, and Jonah realized he was waving, as though the creatures could see him.

"Nothing." He braced himself, anticipating laughter at his expense.

Peter dropped his voice and leaned closer, a co-conspirator. "It does look like they're saying hello sometimes, doesn't it?"

At this unexpected response, Jonah felt a tumble of emotions – gratitude, recognition, fellowship – and something entirely new. His heart shook itself awake and climbed up to his throat. Dumbstruck, he nodded.

"May I?" Peter asked, and Jonah stepped aside to give him another turn.

As teenagers, Jonah and Peter would fish with night crawlers purchased at the local hardware shop or road stand. The worms would protest all the way to the hook, and even a few moments after, too. The pond teemed with perch, bass, walleye, ready to be plucked. Jonah and Peter, spoiled for plenty, would throw most of their catches back, but sometimes they'd land a big one. In those cases, they'd bring it home and sauté it in a pan with lemon and dill.

The first time they cooked their catch, Peter removed the filets, one side for each of them to eat, then extracted the heart. He bisected it, held it unfolded in his palm, and pointed out the two chambers.

"One direction for the blood—in here, out there." He hovered over the path with his index finger. "Ours, though, can go two ways—spent blood comes in, gets sent to the lungs, then comes back fully fueled before moving along to the organs. And on it goes."

The pan sizzled. Before he cooked, Peter went to the windowsill and tucked the heart into the soil of a potted plant. "Compost," he said, then washed his hands.

Once, Jonah asked Peter: "What would your last-request meal be?" They sat with tin plates of minutes-pulled bluegill dredged in cornmeal, fried in melted butter, the adjacent camp stove still hot, ready for the next catch. The afternoon breeze ruffled

the pond and pines. A lock of hair dipped across Peter's brow. Graduation loomed, and there were few excursions left: Peter would soon depart for MIT, Jonah for SUNY-Buffalo.

"This," Peter said. "You?"

"Same," Jonah said.

Midway through the reception, Erin asked Jonah to dance. She felt like a starched collared shirt, stiff at his torso and shoulders. Jonah shifted his stance to adjust, but their embrace was still awkward. The song was slow enough that they could simply sway, which suited Jonah just fine.

"How ya doing?" Erin said, after a few minutes.

"Never better," Jonah said and hoped he sounded sincere. "It was a beautiful ceremony—and you're drop-dead gorgeous. Peter's a lucky guy."

Erin beamed. She tilted her chin toward Timothy, who'd returned to their seats. "So are you," she said.

"Timothy? Yeah, I did all right."

"Better than all right." Erin leaned a little closer, so they were nearly cheek to cheek. "Look, I know today might not be the easiest for you, and I'm really happy you're here. I just wanted you to know that."

"What?" Jonah said.

"My husband might not have good eyes, but I do."

Jonah felt his face flush. "And here I thought I'd been a good actor all these years."

"Mainly to the audience that counts." Erin smiled.

Jonah was thankful she was still close, so he didn't have to look her in the eye.

Across the room, Timothy met his gaze. He abandoned his conversation and came over, just as the song wrapped up.

"May I cut in?" he asked.

"Of course." Erin stepped aside.

After Erin, Timothy felt like a favorite T-shirt, snug and cozy. The next song was more up-tempo, but Jonah still drew him near and rested his chin on Timothy's shoulder.

Three years earlier, Jonah and Timothy had met at the gym. Among a flurry of January newbies, Jonah had resolved he would be different, a new regular, and even paid in full for the year. He was mid-crunch when Timothy approached him.

"Hey," Timothy said. He had sandy hair and perfect teeth, and smelled like antiseptic soap, clean and healthy. "I hope you don't mind – I'm one of the trainers here — and with your current form you're in for a world of hurt."

"Oh?" Jonah stopped, halfway up, out of breath.

"May I touch you?" Timothy asked.

Jonah nodded. Timothy placed his hand between Jonah's shoulder blades, the other at his side, just below his rib cage. His hands moved slightly, in sync, and Jonah felt something click.

"Try now," Timothy said, and watched him press upward. "Beautiful."

On the dance floor, Timothy pulled away a little. "You OK?" His arms were sturdy and sure.

"I am now," Jonah said.

At the end of the reception, Jonah found himself outside and alone. Wispy clouds ribboned white-gray tulle across the dark sky. There had been a good blaze in the nearby fire pit earlier, but now the embers smoldered. Jonah thought he felt some residual warmth, although it could also have been the drinks.

Eventually Peter joined him, two beers in hand. They clinked the necks. As Jonah tipped his head back to drink, he saw a streaking flare across the sky.

"Look, look!" he said, pointing up. "A shooting star!"

Peter chuckled softly.

“What?”

“That’s not a shooting star, bud, that’s a satellite. See?”

Peter traced his finger along the trajectory in the air, and Jonah could now see it—a blinking orb, paused. “Give it a minute,” Peter said, and they both stood and waited.

The dot raced to a new point in the sky, its movement rapid and smooth, its pathway sure. What had looked spontaneous and celestial in Jonah’s peripheral vision was in fact earthly plotted. A controlled experiment.

“Don’t make a wish on it,” Peter cracked.

“Why not?” Jonah asked. “It’s a guide, after all.”

Peter took a sip of his beer, his voice suddenly serious. “All joking aside, what would you wish for?”

Jonah stood for a moment, his gaze going from the fire pit to the sky and back. In the nearly empty ballroom, Timothy was still on the dance floor. Erin appeared in the doorway; the sequins of her gown shimmered in the light, silvery like scales. Jonah saw Peter’s face soften. It was the way Timothy looked at him, he realized.

His own multi-chambered heart beat in his chest, his spent blood refreshed.

This, Jonah thought.

He located the satellite again, wondered if anyone could see him from its lens. He put both arms above his head and waved. Next to him, Peter did the same.

ALEXIS KRUCKEBERG

RUNNER-UP IN THE 2021 POETRY CHAPBOOK CONTEST

In My Memory

our child-selves are hungry. It is only two, but no lunch at noon is no lunch at noon. Our mother kneels and heats baked beans in a brown-gold floral pot over a small fire, scraping the bottom with an orphaned serving spoon in time with “Have You Ever Seen the Rain.” Dad and I make sandwiches at a picnic table. He slices summer sausage with a pocket knife, snacks on mixed nuts, and tells me to put more mayo on his bread. You sit with a bag of Doritos in the dirt near my hanging toes. A chipmunk rides the wave of its own back to a fallen branch and watches you drop chips only to pick them up and eat them. We have all noticed him, but you keep eating. Our mother stops stirring, and I hold my plastic knife still. Silent, like a deer, our father kneels and lays prone in front of you both. He clicks his tongue, tender noises, and holds out a peanut. You knew to watch and keep quiet. The chipmunk takes the offering – waits for another. On the fourth, you trill like the bird you had tattooed on your hip at seventeen and Dad, our step-father, slaps you for the first time, our mother stirs, and I spread mayo on bread.

Theory of mythmaking

I don't want the way the fish
looks at me as I hook my finger

through its jaw, pry the surfaced bone
from flesh. Its eyes moon-white with fear

or judgement – as though its fate
was still undetermined, as though I

could put down the knife. I scrape harshest
around place the tongue should be, remembering

what my mother taught me: like blood,
the softest meat is kept where we need it

most. I don't want to believe anything
can be too small for mercy. Under the right

blade, any mouth becomes a wound – some
are always hungry, nosing through the dark

for the vanishing heat of some soft dead
thing. What could be more honest than this? Before

I was hungry I was witness, which is to say
the bleeding never stems, only displaces

some deeper history. The only fate I want
is one that can't be taken back. In this temporary

light, watching my mother scalp the fish eyes
from our kitchen counter, I could be any god

or animal. I don't need to be good, I need
to be perfect and terrible: a hole in the air

in the shape of a body. Who among us can say
we have not called this home? Watch me

step out from the light, gild my eyes
with dead scales, let the bare night

break me into the kind of wonder
that strikes only once.

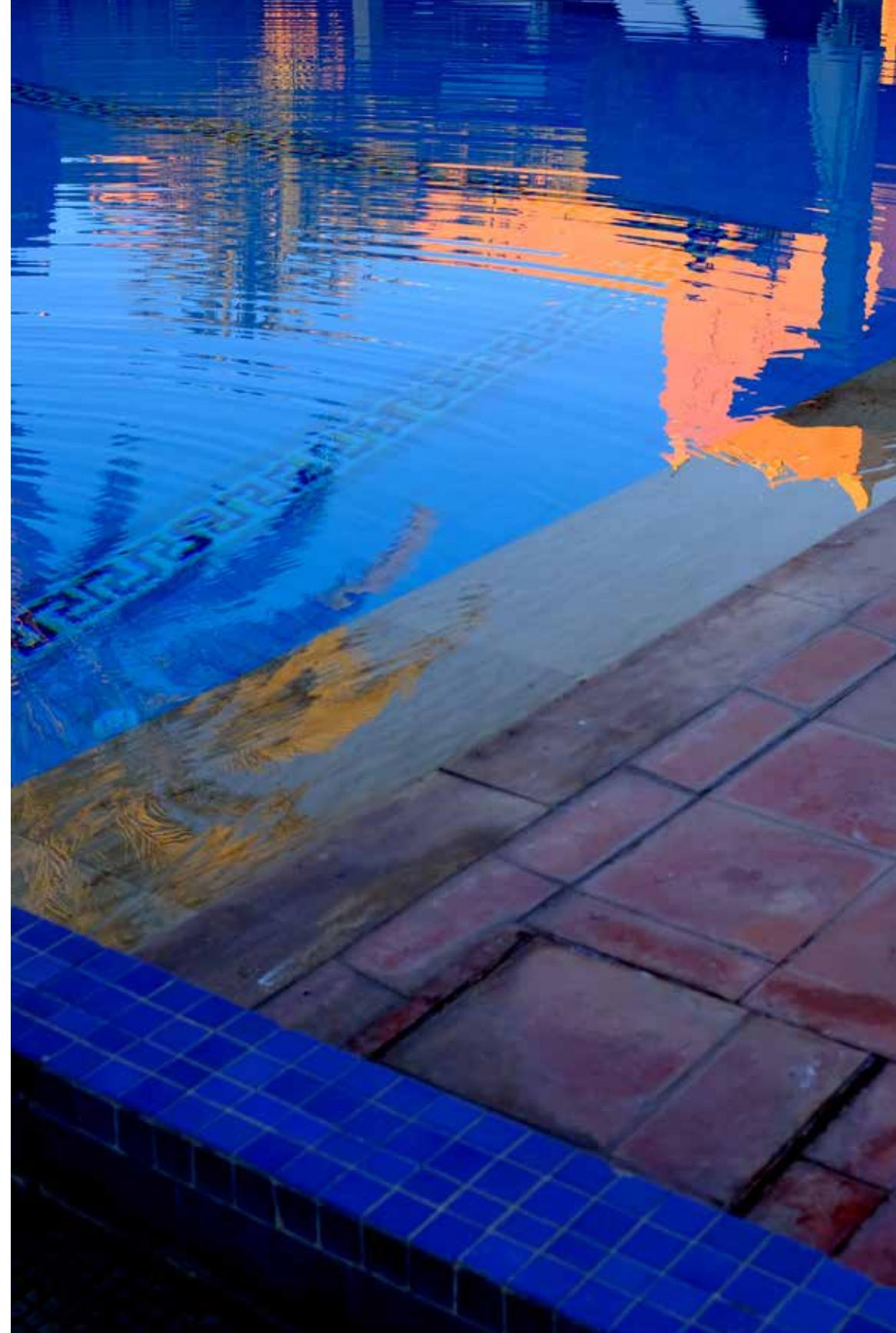
*Note: The phrase "some are always hungry" is borrowed from Jihyun Yun's
published collection of the same name.*

ROGER CAMP

“Pool Reflection, Rabat, Morocco”

Photograph, 2015

Very early on I developed the habit of photographing early in the morning (just at sunrise) both for the quality of the light and the absence of people. The hotel I was staying in was modeled on traditional Moroccan architecture so it had this wonderful glow when the sun struck it. The reflections in the blue swimming pool captured both the warmth and coolness of the two subjects.



Fun Family Anecdote

Late at night, our gaps filled in by liquor, we are transformed into kind and patient spouses. Chairs scrape on uneven bricks. Bug torches glow and lights shaped like hot peppers swing above, imparting a halo of light that blurs Gwen's edges. I often wonder, but have never asked, if she sees me through the same forgiving filter.

"We can disappear." These three words, spoken out loud—finally!—wedged between second and third cocktails, open the floodgates. "Get away from all this."

I circle my hands expansively, hoping this maneuver encompasses everything relevant: yard, weedy patio, vinyl-sided house, objects inside said house.

"Really?" Gwen's response is not so much contentious as indignant. "You're gonna make all of us disappear? How do you plan on getting the five of us out of here, hotshot?"

We are employing our secret marital voices. The exact vocabulary of our scheming mustn't leak through the windows—especially Youngest Child's, drafty and showing the first signs of rot. Better they assume the parents are murmuring about mutual love, planning the next family vacation, rehashing Middle Child's chances of making Varsity in the fall.

"Besides, we got rid of the minivan!"

Practical Gwen! Predictable Loveable Gwen!

"How would we . . . with five of us?"

A song comes on that was popular in our volatile, sexy courtship days. We have danced to it many times—herky-jerky, disconnected, barely touching—as was the style.

"Not five of us." Gulping back my words now, possibly to the point of being inaudible. "Not really."

"OK, four then!" Short, snapping syllables. "He'll be off at school. On his own. I have a feeling it's going to stick this time!"

"Just two. Only two. Only Us."

We're reaching the point of No Return; the embryo of my plan, under wraps so long, has been revealed.

"Oh, shut up."

This is jockeyed between us all the time, playfully, never really meant. Gwen straightens in her chair, already sensing the possible genius of it all.

Weeks later, we find ourselves in the same spot. I lean forward on my elbows, in my most earnest Marriage Pose, coaxing participation out of Gwen.

"Think about it. What do we need? I mean, really need? What is in this house that we really need to live?"

She tilts her head back and sucks in night air.

"I wouldn't bring many clothes at all." She gazes straight up, as if the stars will help catalog her wardrobe. "I hate my clothes. I could get new ones, maybe."

"For sure, babe. This will be good for us. Stripped down to the essentials."

The continued use of subjunctive, these could and would and maybes, does not escape my attention. I stick to simple future tense. "You will finally be able to paint."

I clasp her hands and sway them in short arcs, as if I can remind her how it feels to hold brushes, to create so quickly, so definitively. In college, she painted in oils: craggy landscapes with

solitary, barely discernible human figures.

Packing will be the easy part. We'll leave so much behind: detritus, flotsam, jetsam of childrearing years. This being the point. One of the points. One point of many.

The leaving becomes an exhilarating new project for our marriage, even when major logistical gaps become apparent. Disappearing, even in the heart of night, will not be easy. Sleep in this home has been tenuous, a hit-or-miss proposition, for years. Middle's medication is known to cause night terrors. Top Child falls asleep with a laptop on his stomach, dark splattercore movies running one after the other. Gwen wakes up sweating at odd hours, wrestling off covers, spreading like a starfish, emphasizing the exhale of every breath. Dissipating unfamiliar and vexing heat. "Fucking hot flashes. One more woman thing."

We often work on jigsaw puzzles on vacation. This is possibly our most-agreed-upon family tradition—open on the first night, spread pieces on a picnic bench or table, connect more bits every night. In our most successful year, all five of us contributed to the Doors of New Orleans collage. Gwen and I working together, constructing this vanishing, is beginning to feel like a complicated and satisfying puzzle.

We must leave by the end of month. Top Child is theoretically heading back to school, though he hasn't expressed any enthusiasm at the prospect, obtained housing, registered for a single class. Definitely not a done deal. He speaks of college in sweeping, sometimes grandiose statements: how great it will be to have a career, to be On His Way. He may be operating under the assumption that job offers are handed out alongside diplomas.

"I suppose he will have to grow up fast." I sense Gwen coming around to the idea. "He is getting better at controlling himself

lately."

Top Child is tall and strong—in the right circumstances, capable, and very protective of his sisters.

The plan is solidifying our marriage. Sex is happening—the extended sort of screwing, elusive since those first studio apartment days, unconcerned with tempo or angle or getting to the finish line.

We cash out our savings. Half to cover emergencies on the road; the other half will be left behind. At least two months for them to work out details: paying mortgage, utilities, making a go of it.

"They'll have to adult, that's for sure," Gwen offers during another patio conference, so close to the proverbial finish line. I feel we have been over this concept, adulting, before. Ad nauseum. In spite of parenting books, advice columns, and brief stints in family counselling, neither we, nor circumstances, have insisted anyone grow up.

"We have provided for them," I remind her. "So much. So long." This comes across as more plea than assertion, which is not my intention. "They have not wanted for anything."

Here is an identified portion of the problem. One I have assumed we agree on. Entitlement.

Our children have not occurred as expected. They are not what anyone would have predicted. Gwen and I brought a wide array of traits to the table—good and bad, fully acknowledging certain personal flaws—but it is unclear how they added up to these three human beings. Each combination seems mathematically impossible. None of them is bad in a bad seed sense; they have simply proven themselves incapable of living lives uninter-

rupted by crisis.

“I wasn’t like that,” has become a common phrase when debriefing our progeny’s misadventures. Also, “We wouldn’t ever have done that,” and “What the hell did we do wrong?” Have reviewed every choice we can remember: when to start allowance, how hard to push at the church thing, whether to hold Top Child back, so big and young for his grade.

They can sell all unnecessary items—so many!—for an additional month of paying bills. Middle, maybe even Youngest, knows how to sell and buy things online.

We tuck a new Will and Testament in Gwen’s underwear drawer, where children have always known to look for clandestine and important things. Will look past unopened boxes of cereal for days at a time, wailing at lack of breakfast food, but can sniff out bags of weed and bottles of massage oil soon after they enter the home.

A fallback option, a contingency: leaving behind contact information for Child Services. At least two governmental agencies are responsible, legally, for neglected minors.

Neglect is probably not the right word, I feel the need to clarify, not in a strict moral sense. This is a fresh start for everybody.

I arrange a taxi the night before. Will pay cash, bringing cash for the bus. A bus can take a human being halfway across the country in two days, anonymously.

The taxi is ready to back out of the driveway—sensing, even smelling, Freedom!—but Gwen is suddenly not in the adjacent seat. I may have been watching the house too carefully. My plan, all along, has been to hold home in field of vision for as long as possible.

Trying hard, and failing, to remember the first time I regarded its siding. We were impossibly young, a second baby on the way. No memory of the visiting, the touring, the inspecting, or the making of the decision: Buy This Thing. I absolutely do not recall the original color. Forgetting this old life already, if such a thing is possible. Feeling empty and light.

Gwen’s absence is confirmed when I see her face next to the kids in our picture window. The warp of the glass and the shine of the streetlights make their faces, four white ovals, quiver as if the window is shaking, as if they are encased in water. The impression is one of visiting the aquarium, ogling them like a happy narwhal family.

I am having difficulty reading Gwen’s expression. Resignation? Relief? Both are possibilities. Satisfaction more likely; her own plan so well-executed. Impossible to feel anger, displeasure, even disappointment. Admiration only.

Youngest is under Gwen’s left arm, rubbing at the crust that gets into her eyes every night; even with the distortion and pulling away of the taxi, confusion is plain to see on her face. She bites at her lower lip—has been known to do this to the point of bleeding. Middle is curled into Gwen’s other arm, craning her head up towards Mother, checking whether she is supposed to be angry or sad. Top Child’s face is twisted with what I believe is pure unfiltered hate. He looms over his mother’s shoulder, glaring at his deadbeat father or the taxi or whatever is discernible to him in the early morning dark. Intense feelings tighten his features, strengthen his soft face. He is handsome like this. Experiencing an ill-timed swell of pride.

The driver floats a questioning look via the rearview mirror. He is tapping at the brake, eager for his own escape from this horrible scene.

The four of them are breathtaking like this, perfectly still,

perfectly spaced in the window.

There's plenty of time to formulate, trudging up the driveway, the creation of a humorous family memory out of this—a story to recite on our next long-awaited, long-deserved, vacation. Remember the time Dad suffered prolonged delirium, the cause of which is still unclear? How he almost left? Possibly, considering his confused state, never to return?

The driveway is longer than expected, dominated by spider-web patterns of cracks. Few uncracked surfaces remain. The driveway could be disintegrating under my feet.

Qualia

Red

Is the rose stuffed in an Oi Ocha bottle.

Is the first blood, but not those after, oxidized and darkened. Her body moves slower than it should, faster than she'd like, trying to clasp time in cuffs.

Is the color of the qipao she wore to her wedding banquet, after peeling off the white organza dress, after strangling her waist with an elastic band. The strapless bodice skirts her bare shoulders, a reminder of what she lacks.

Is the lobster after it has been steamed, crustacyanin unveiled, astaxanthin released. *Not everything dies pretty*, she tells her daughter who thinks Sleeping Beauty is dead. She dreams about scratching at a board, her body wrapped in twenty layers of silk, sealed in four coffins, one enclosing the other, her stomach full of melon seeds that sprout and slip through the cracks in her body so they can grow.

Is the parasol she holds over her head to block the sun. She pulls her daughter tight to her body, under the refuge of shade, but her daughter wrenches herself free and skips into the UV.

Your skin will grow spots, she warns. Like tapioca pearls floating in milk. Like frog eggs abandoned in pools of water, cradled by the bromeliad plant. *Why do you have to carry that thing out*, her daughter says.

Is the bracelet her daughter wears when it's the Year of the Ox, her zodiac year. The bracelet is from grandmother, but the only reason it gets worn is because it's too difficult to take off. At the end of the year, her daughter cuts it off with a Swiss Army knife. Says it gets stuck in zippers and hair.

Is the last blood and all those before. Her limbs combust at night and she pulls herself out of bed, opens a computer, looks up pink bibs and pink stuffed toys for her daughter's baby shower, decides on a crimson set that might be more gender-neutral. She scavenges the cabinets for dried ginseng root and honey dates. Packages them in a box. Tapes on a mailing address label. Wonders if her daughter's body has begun to burn, when she'll realize it was always burning.

MARK YALE HARRIS

“No Secrets”

bronze

22x11x14 inches, 2004

We all feel the need at times to retreat and engage in self-reflection. But allowing ourselves to be emotionally vulnerable requires us to break through the defenses that we all rely on for emotional security—our defenses that put a buffer between us and feelings that provoke anxiety or are too demanding. The pose of No Secrets is a visual representation of a private moment of introspection, of honesty with one’s self and the reflexive defense mechanisms that arise to protect ourselves from unpleasant feelings.



AITA for falling apart at a dinner party?

My newly vaxxed friends and I (28 F) gathered for the first dinner party since the pandemic started. My friend (29 F) was hosting with her new husband (29 M), who she tied the knot with during the pandemic in a small ceremony in their living room. It was great to see them so in love. It seemed like everyone had taken the time to improve themselves. Someone (28 M) was now fluent in Mandarin. Someone else (30 F) mastered the art of French cooking, said she could spank Julia Child in the kitchen. Another person (32 F) had gotten in shape during quarantine and had to buy new, smaller pants. None of my pants fit for the opposite reason. Sweats are all I had left. I knew my friend would object to me wearing that to her dinner party with tapered candles in gold candlesticks (wedding presents from her aunt and uncle), so I had to wear an old elastic-waist skirt hiked higher, which made it shorter than I would've preferred. I felt kind of exposed. I'd been holding myself together with paperclips and a prayer for the last eight months. I was becoming strange.

"What about you?" the Mandarin master asked me. "What did you do?"

It was like being back in high school with the teacher calling on me because he knew I hadn't done the homework and was hoping he could embarrass me into feeling better about himself. And not only had I not learned anything during quarantine, but it turned out I hadn't learned anything from high school either. I just stared at the Mandarin master until someone cleared their throat and changed the subject.

I was doing my best to smile and cheer everyone's successes when my right eyebrow fluttered off my face and into my neighbor's gazpacho. No one noticed. My neighbor kept slurping soup. My left eyebrow soon followed to the floor. Okay, eyebrows I can live without. That's what Sephora is for. But then my nose dropped onto my lap. My hand covered my face like I was trying to cover my full mouth while speaking. There were no holes where my nose was. It was like I'd never had one.

My friend kept talking about her wedding, all the things that couldn't be captured in the numerous Facebook photo albums, when my left ear slipped off. I heard everyone's muffled voices from the floor where the "c" curve of my ear cheekily peeked up at me. Fortunately, my pandemic locks covered for me. My mouth went next. My bright red lips in my lap, puckering as if for a kiss that would never come now.

The newly fit person noticed me pushing food around my plate and said, "You didn't develop an eating disorder, did you? There are better ways to lose that weight." Everyone chuckled. I shook my head slightly, afraid to disturb more body parts. But I lost my second ear.

CONTRIBUTORS

My DD breasts, one by one, plopped onto my legs before toppling onto the floor in two loud slaps. “What was that?” my friend mouthed. Everyone looked around. My eyes chose this moment to pop out like ping pong balls and bounce across the table. Through my detached eyes, I saw the horror on my friends’ faces as they understood.

Chairs ground against the wood floor as they all worked to flee me. My floor ears could distantly hear the screaming and dithering. My friends were so out of practice with tragedy that they didn’t know what to do. My hair dropped to the floor like a game of Pick-Up Sticks, inciting a fresh round of screams. Thankfully they sounded more hurt than I felt, although I was running out of body parts. I kept thinking I would break apart like a Barbie. But then thinking wasn’t a problem anymore. My head lolled off and rolled away smooth like a honeydew.

As someone dialed 911, my friend said, “You ruined my dinner party!”

Am I The Asshole?

Youssef Alaoui is a Moroccan Colombian American. His family and heritage are an endless source of inspiration for his varied, dark, spiritual, and carnal writings. He has an MFA in Poetics from New College of California. His work has appeared in *Exquisite Corpse*, *Big Bridge*, *580 Split*, *Dusie Press*, *RIVET Journal*, *Paris Lit Up*, *The Opiate*, *Bioptic Review*, *Dryland*, and was nominated for a Pushcart at *Full of Crow*. His short story collection *Fiercer Monsters* was published by Nomadic Press of Oakland, CA. His poetry collection *Critics of Mystery Marvel* was published by 2Leaf Press of NYC. Based in SLO CA. www.youssefalaoui.info; tw@iuoala; [insta@iuoala777](https://www.instagram.com/iuoala777).

Alyssa Witbeck Alexander is a creative nonfiction MFA candidate at the University of Montana and holds an MS and BS in writing from Utah State University. She currently teaches composition at the University of Montana and Utah State University. Her writing is published in *Sink Hollow Literary Magazine* and *Outrageous Fortune*, among others. Her piece in this issue just won first place in the Utah Original Writing Competition. Find her on Twitter and Instagram (@lyswalexander).

Cindy Buchanan received a BA in English and a teaching degree from Gonzaga University. She attends poetry classes at Hugo House in Seattle, WA and is a member of a monthly poetry writing group. Her work has been published in *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *Mobius: The Journal of Social Change*, *Straight Forward Poetry*, *Whistling Shade*, and is upcoming in *Evening Street Review*, *The MacGuffin*, and *Rabid Oak*. She grew up in Alaska, lives in Seattle, and is a runner and avid hiker with a deep interest in Buddhist philosophy and Zen meditation practice. Cindy has completed the Camino de Santiago in Spain, the Coast to Coast Walk in England, and the Milford Walking Track in New Zealand.

Roger Camp is the author of three photography books including the award winning *Butterflies in Flight* (Thames & Hudson, 2002) and *Heat* (Charta, Milano, 2008). His work has appeared on the covers of

numerous journals including *The New England Review* and *Southwest Review*. His photographs are represented by the Robin Rice Gallery, NYC. More of his work may be viewed on Luminous-Lint.com.

Mark Yale Harris realized his true passion—stone carving—in the 1990s. In Santa Fe, he was mentored by Bill Prokopiou and Doug Hyde. Harris' alabaster, marble, limestone and bronze works express the inherent duality in man's essence. Prior to this shift, Harris spent many successful years in the real estate/hotel business. Harris' 250+ (90+ solo) gallery, museum and international exhibitions include Marin MOCA, Booth Western Art Museum, National Sculpture Society, National Museum of Wildlife Art, Fredric Remington Art Museum, Museum of the Southwest, Royal Academy of Arts and The Royal Scottish Academy. 110+ publications have featured his sculpture in the past 10 years, including *American Art Collector*, *Fine Art Connoisseur*, *Sculpture News*, *Southwest Art*, *LandEscape Contemporary Art Review* and *Art Daily News*. Harris is represented by 18 galleries (US/UK) and has works in permanent collections in museums, various states' public art venues, upscale hotels and hospitals.

Jose Hernandez Diaz is a 2017 NEA Fellow. He is the author of *The Fire Eater* (Texas Review Press, 2020). His work appears in *The American Poetry Review*, *Georgia Review*, *Iowa Review*, *The Nation*, *Poetry*, and *The Best American Nonrequired Reading*. He has been a finalist at the Andrés Montoya Prize, Colorado Prize, and The National Poetry Series. Currently, he is an Associate Editor at *Frontier Poetry* and a Guest Editor at *Palette Poetry*.

Jonas Holdeman is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in English at Middle Tennessee State University. His poem, "Stern Sonnet," which was published in *Great River Review*, was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2010. He received his MFA degree in Poetry and Poetry in Translation from Drew University.

Andrew Krivak is the author of three novels, a previous chapbook of poems, and two works of nonfiction. His debut novel, *The Sojourn*, was a 2011 National Book Award finalist and winner of both the Dayton Literary Peace Prize for fiction and the Chautauqua Prize. His sec-

ond novel, *The Signal Flame*, was a finalist for the Chautauqua Prize. His most recent novel, *The Bear*, received the Banff Mountain Book prize for fiction and was also a finalist for the Chautauqua Prize. His chapbook *Islands: Poems* was published by The Slapering Hol press in 1999. As a scholar and a writer of nonfiction, Krivak is the editor of *The Letters of William Carlos Williams to Edgar Irving Williams, 1902-1912*, which won the Louis Martz prize for scholarly research on William Carlos Williams, and the author of the memoir *A Long Retreat: In Search of a Religious Life*. *Ghosts of the Monadnock Wolves* will be his second short volume of poems. His new novel *Like the Appearance of Horses* is forthcoming in 2023. Krivak lives with his wife and three children in Somerville, Massachusetts, and Jaffrey, New Hampshire. Please visit his website at www.AndrewKrivak.com.

Alexis Kruckeberg received her M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Minnesota State University, Mankato. She tends to cook more food than is necessary and daydreams about traveling to Mexico. Her poetry has appeared in *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, *Barely South Review*, and others. She has work forthcoming in *Sequestrum*.

KJ Li is an LGBTQ+ Chinese-American raised in central Texas. She currently lives in Washington, D.C., where she takes walks to podcasts and misses the family cat. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Lumiere Review*, *perhappened mag*, *Cobra Milk*, and others. More works can be found at <https://kjli.carrd.co/>.

Brandon Lewis received his MFA from the Rainier Writing Workshop at Pacific Lutheran University in Washington State, having studied under the poets Kevin Clark, Rick Barot, Greg Glazner, and Kevin Goodan. His poems have recently appeared in *Superstition Review*, *Nashville Review*, *Naugatuck River Review*, *The Tusculum Review*, and *Portland Review*. Brandon has taught high school English for the past twelve years and lives near Olympia, Washington.

Matt Moment (he/they) is a writer, photographer, and performer from New York. He is a recent graduate of SUNY New Paltz, where he was awarded the Vincent Tomaselli Award for Creative Writing in poetry and playwriting. His work has been featured in *Hole in the Head*

Review, BreakBread Magazine, Mistake House, Escutcheon Review, Stonesthrow Review, and more. Presently, he is traveling during his gap year before graduate school.

Gerrie Paino's creative spirit has led her to various forms of artistic expression throughout her life. Most recently, this drive has blossomed into a passion for photography. In keeping with her minimalist nature and desire to move lightly through life, she eschews the typical array of cameras and lenses, choosing instead to shoot exclusively with her iPhone. Free to travel unencumbered, she relishes exploring the world around her and sharing what captivates her spirit with others. Photography has heightened Paino's senses, teaching her to look more closely and engage deeply with her subjects. She delights in allowing others to see the world through her eyes.

Sarah Pascarella is a Boston-based writer and editor. Her recent fiction has appeared in *MudRoom Magazine, Levee*, and *Fiction Southeast*, among other publications. She has a Master's in Writing, Literature, and Publishing from Emerson College.

Ahmed Qaid is a Yemeni American writer, filmmaker, and photographer. He has a passion for creating complex, authentic, and compassionate works that explore the experiences of the Arab diaspora within contemporary America. His works often center on themes of memory, belonging, and the loss of cultural identity. You can find him on Twitter and Instagram @moonchildcinema.

Bette Ridgeway has exhibited her work globally with over 80 museums, universities and galleries in her four decade career, including Palais Royale, Paris, Embassy of Madagascar, Kobiashi Gallery, Tokyo and London Art Biennale. Prestigious awards include Top 60 Contemporary Masters, Leonardo DaVinci Prize, Rome, Sandro Botticelli Prize, Museum of Florence, Italy and the Oxford University Alumni Prize at the Chianciano Art Museum, Tuscany, Italy. In addition to countless important private collections, Mayo Clinic, University of Northwestern and Federal Reserve Bank are amongst Ridgeway's permanent public placements. Her work has been highlighted in many books and publications, among them *International Contempo-*

rary Masters 2010, 100 Artists of the Southwest, Masters of Today and 100 Famous Contemporary Artists. Ridgeway has penned several publications about art and process including *Talent is Just the Beginning—An Artist's Guide to Marketing in the 21st Century, Layering Light* and *Layering Light on Metal*.

Chelsea Stickle lives in Annapolis, MD with her black rabbit George and a forest of houseplants. Her flash fiction appears in *CRAFT, Gone Lawn, Tiny Molecules, McSweeney's Internet Tendency* and others. *Breaking Points*, her debut chapbook, is available for pre-order from Black Lawrence Press (October 2021). Read more at chelseastickle.com and find her on Twitter @Chelsea_Stickle.

Colby Vargas is a full-time educator and part-time writer in the Chicagoland area. His work has appeared in *Annalemma, The Louisville Review*, and most recently, *Storm Cellar*.

Sherre Vernon (she/her/hers) is the author of two award-winning chapbooks: *Green Ink Wings* (fiction) and *The Name is Perilous* (poetry). Her work has been nominated for Best of the Net and anthologized in several collections, including *Bending Genres* and *Best Small Fictions*. In 2019, Sherre was a Parent-Writer Fellow at MVICW. Readers describe her work as heartbreaking, richly layered, lyrical, and intelligent. To read more of her work visit www.sherrevernon.com/publications and tag her into conversation @sherrevernon.

Jacy Zhang studies English at the University of Maryland. Her photography has been published in *Riggwelter, The Lumiere Review, the winnow magazine*, and elsewhere. You can find her on Twitter @JacyLZhang.

Lucy Zhang writes, codes and watches anime. Her work has appeared in *Midway Journal, Hobart, The Cortland Review, Invisible City* and elsewhere and is included in *Best Microfiction 2021* and *Best Small Fictions 2021*. She edits for *Barren Magazine, Heavy Feather Review* and *Pithead Chapel*. Find her at <https://kowaretasekai.wordpress.com/> or on Twitter @Dango_Ramen.

Chestnut Review

for stubborn artists

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

James Rawlings

PROSE EDITORS

D. E. Hardy, Maria S. Picone

POETRY EDITORS

Marisabel Rodriguez, Kwan Ann Tan

ART/LAYOUT EDITOR

Teresa Snow

SOCIAL MEDIA EDITOR

Jordan Crook

READERS

Fox Auslander, Caitlin Bauxbaum, Mark Blackford,
Deirdre Danklin, Christina Dorudian, Julia Eldred,
Jacob Ginsberg, Linsey Krolik, Shella Parcarey,
Dynamic Rahma Jimoh, Ranna Kiswani, Shon Mapp, Natalie Marino,
Ron Morgan, Idowu Odeyemi, Praise Osawaru, Mayowa Oyewale,
Pragati Sharma, Brooke Randel, Anthony Salandy,
Annie Schoonover, Lindsay Schubert, Harry Smith,
Nadia Staikos, Stephanie Tobia

INTERNS

Pierre Azou, AJ Comsti, Autumn Fulgenzi, Nicolette Visciano,
Julia Walton, Erin Weller