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OPEN RIVERS :  
RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

# WOMEN & WATER : CONFRONTATION

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An interdisciplinary online journal rethinking water, place & community  
from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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The cover image is sunset in Seoul along the Cheonggyecheon stream. Image by Stefan K on Unsplash.

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FEATURE

# WASHED UP

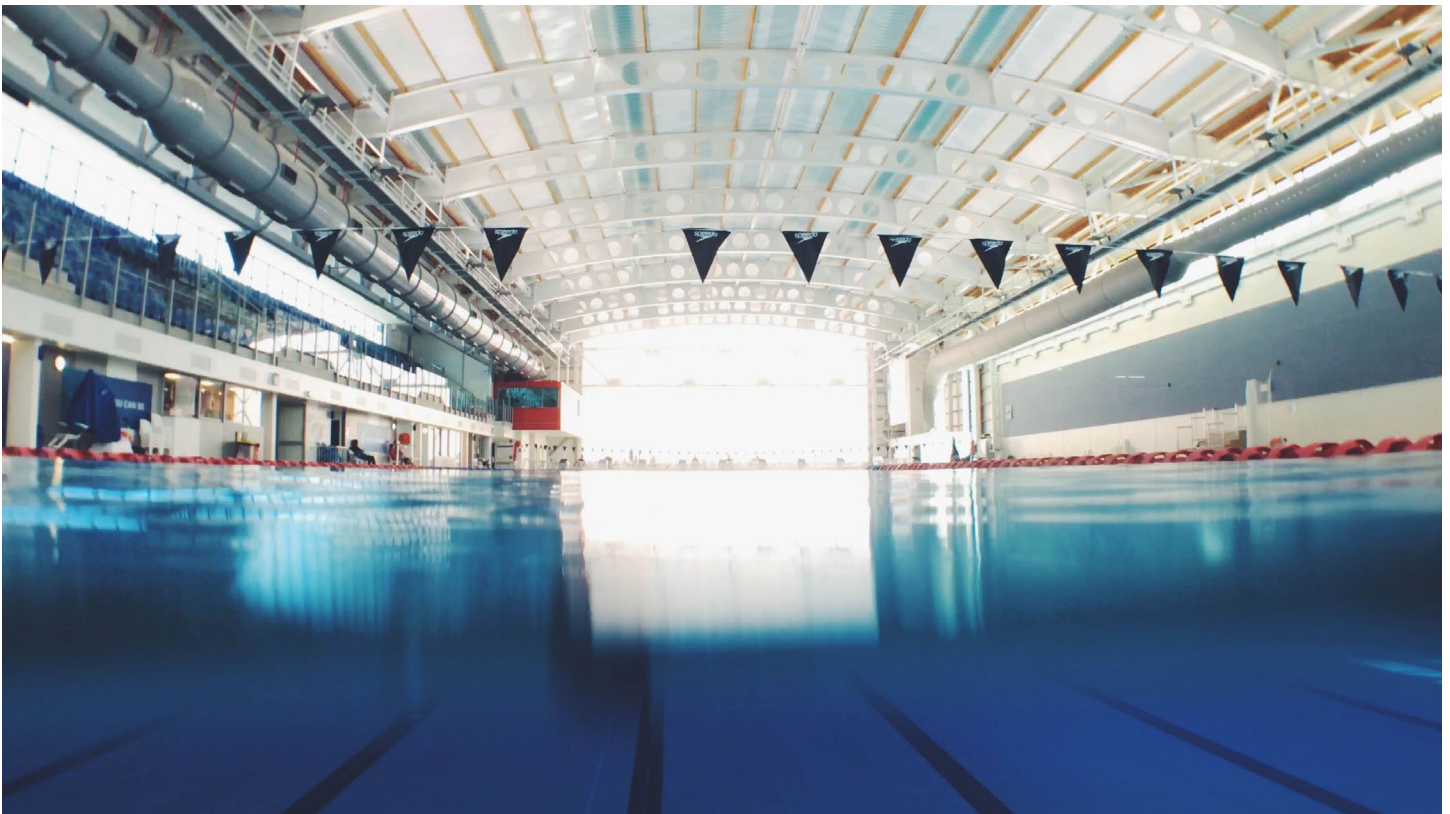
By Shannon LeBlanc

*Trigger Warning: This article involves references to an experience with sexual assault that may be difficult or even traumatizing for some readers. Please care for yourself and your well-being.*

Every summer in my childhood my parents took me and my sister to beaches in Maine, mountain lakes in our home state of New Hampshire, and our uncle's pool in Massachusetts just over the New Hampshire-Massachusetts border. Once the last towel was unloaded from the car, we'd rip off the clothing covering our bathing suits and race to water as if it was simply a mirage, wavering and threatening to disappear. It didn't matter that the Atlantic Ocean or lake or pool wasn't warm or that the

sand or concrete scorched the soles of our feet. Our mother's calls for sunscreen echoed unheeded somewhere behind us. What mattered was the flying right before the plunge.

As a child, I was restless and constantly propelling myself from one activity to the next. I lived for the moment where I was suspended in the sky, above the surface of the water and a surge of coolness. I yearned for times of slowness that felt, to my active body and mind, fleeting and rare.



*Swimming pool at AUT Millenium training center, Auckland, New Zealand. Image by Artem Verbo on Unsplash.*



But from the moment I hit the water, wrapped in its cool liquid blanket, my body obeyed: a jet of bubbles from the nose, quick snaps of ankles, the turning of palms. As Bonnie Tsui writes in her book *Why We Swim*, “Swimming is something that requires us to make our bodies a part of another body unlike ours, that of water” (228). In water, my muscles had the movement they craved and, once I was older and began swimming on a team, my racing thoughts were eased by the repetition of laps. In water, I felt safe and understood. In water, I was home.

My mother is petrified of deep water, which is a fear I’ve suspected developed after witnessing a near drowning when she was a child. As the story goes, a cousin almost drowned when my mother, her siblings, and a few cousins jumped into the Merrimack River—not known for its cleanliness or its calm waters—by the old Lowell,

Massachusetts mill buildings. I’ve imagined this cousin sensing the moment she had lost control, fighting and eventually escaping the current, crawling onto the muddy bank, wet and shivering and exhausted, coughing and sucking in air, happy for land and its solid foundation. My mother later told me that on that day near the Merrimack River she was young, and she didn’t know that the water was too deep, the current too strong, and her cousin too weak a swimmer. Tsui writes, “In America, the pool is a privilege” (123). What Tsui really means, though, is learning to swim is a privilege—one that my mother and six siblings didn’t have in their inner-city, working-class family. It’s a privilege I plan on giving my future children. It’s a privilege my mother made sure my sister and I had because she had not.

When she swims, my mother’s arms barely skim the surface instead of finding an angle that would



*Training at the pool. Image by Leah Hetteberg on Unsplash.*

enable her to glide forward. Her kicks are fast, but she doesn't have the endurance to sustain the momentum. She strains to keep her head above the water instead of placing her face onto the surface and turning her head to the side each time she needs to breathe. When I worked as a lifeguard and swim instructor during my teenage years, I learned to spot swimmers like my mother—the ones who are afraid of water's ability to support them. As an instructor, I learned that there's a lot of fear behind learning to swim, particularly among older individuals. At first, I didn't understand because I have never been afraid of water, of the buoyancy it creates, and back then, I didn't know its ability to pull you down. A bathing suit, to me, felt like a second skin. When I started teaching adult swimming lessons, the gap between my love and their anxieties became clear; "swimming stripped people down to their bare elements" (Tsui 146). These older, new swimmers were afraid because they did not know how not to be.

My mother's fear led to early swimming lessons for my sister and me. Once a week in the perpetual dark of New England winter, my sister and I jumped into a YMCA pool. In the humid air of the natatorium with its overwhelming smell of chlorine and harsh overhead lights, we treaded water and paddled and splashed from one end of the pool to the other. I loved these lessons. I behaved better for those instructors than I did any other adult or teacher in my life and I thought and talked about them all week. Eventually, I excelled through the levels until, by the end of eighth grade, there were none left. From there, it was either join the high school swim team or settle with my water-stained lesson completion certificate.

When I joined the high school swim team as a freshman, I knew the four strokes and how to do a flip turn because of my YMCA lessons, but I knew virtually nothing else about competitive swimming: practices were often held before sunrise or after sunset; there was an understood lane order of fast to slow or freestylers to

breastrokers; and pace clocks kept time during practice by ticking by the seconds, not minutes. I couldn't name a single famous swimmer, but I still loved water because it allowed me to compete with myself, which I enjoyed more than competing with others. I loved how in control I felt when I pushed myself to finish a set of laps under time, or when I made it through an entire practice without skipping sets. What really attracted me to competitive swimming was how it used sets and meets and times to make me more disciplined. Within this structure, I learned to control speed and times with my body through a series of minuscule movements—a slight internal rotation of my shoulder, a catch of the wrist to scoop water, an extension of an arm—that hardened my muscles. I told my body what to do, and it complied. I have longed for that control since quitting the sport.

Although my parents gave me an early start with swim lessons and summer outings, beginning competitive swimming at fourteen is unusual in a sport where serious, successful athletes peak at that very same age. My high school team performed abysmally because most of us were new to the sport, and instead we laughed, joked, and formed lasting bonds. Even my United States Swimming (USS) Team—a team I joined to improve my times at the recommendation of my high school coach after my freshmen year of high school and a team which was year round and won meets far more than my high school team ever did—still enjoyed close friendships and jokes. The community was enough for me back then: "Join a [swim] team, and you begin to appreciate the company you keep" (Tsui 181). Because of the fun I had, the friends I'd made, my love of the sport and its demands, and the desire to improve my times, I decided to swim in college.

Every swimmer that left my USS team after graduating high school and moving on to college swimming returned to practice during college breaks with more defined muscles and stories about training trips held in warm locations, about bonding with teammates, and about wild parties



once the season was finally over. Each story made college swimming—and college—sound like an adventure. “It’s so much fun. It’s like having a built-in family,” they’d all said as they jumped into their old lanes. All the current USS teammates who had taken over these spots in the graduates’ absences moved aside, some even dunking under lane lines to return to their old, slower lanes. “You should swim in college if you can,” these returning swimmers told me as I neared the end of my high school days. “You’ll regret it if you don’t.” I then watched as they pushed off the wall and disappeared underwater, arms eventually breaking through the smooth surface. When it came time for me to apply to colleges, I chose schools hours away from New Hampshire in states where I knew no one. If I was going to continue to swim competitively in college, I figured I might as well do it in a new place with new teammates. While I wanted a similar positive experience with college swimming as my USS teammates had, I desired my own experience.

When I packed my bags for a Division II college nestled in Pennsylvania’s Pocono Mountains, I felt lucky to have been granted a few academic scholarships and to have been accepted onto a team with mediocre times—times most college coaches said would have been unsuitable for competition. The itching in my muscles told me I couldn’t simply practice without the thrill of a personal best time and the knowledge that I’d worked for that accomplishment for months, sometimes even years. Swimming in college, I hoped, would extend the control I found as a child and adolescent. At eighteen, I was head over heels for swimming. I was convinced it loved me too.

But I didn’t anticipate how my love for the sport could change. My college teammates were loud, competitive, and more experienced with swimming in high stakes meets than I was; our opposition was intimidating, driven, and physically larger. I woke before sunrise each morning, stumbling to the pool with bleary

eyes and burning muscles. I realize now that I was unprepared for the physical and mental demands of competitive college swimming: “It is a punishing regime to sustain. The clock ticks. Lap after lap, the unchanging scenery” (Tsui 176). In the weight room, I lifted half-rusted dumbbells sized for men, and at night I returned to the pool, helping to stir the water into violent waves and currents. During sets I tried to focus, but my mind wandered away, thinking of the stacks of homework I had to complete or the studying I needed to accomplish. Often the doubts crept in too: *You’re never going to be as fast as the others. You started too late. Why is this set so hard? It’s because you don’t try hard enough.* “Back and forth, back and forth, staring down at the black line at the bottom of the pool. It’s a lot of time to think, and if you aren’t careful, fear can take over” (Tsui 172). I often felt like I was drowning.

Each day, I swam more than I slept, more than I attended class, more than I studied. I swam and ate and swam and studied and ate. My muscles stretched and pulled over bones, I lost weight, my hair thinned, and I had wild daydreams about filling a bathtub with lotion and sinking all my flaking flesh inside. My college teammates and I sought out free back rubs that would temporarily ease our knotted muscles. We rubbed against doorframes, chair backs, and tennis balls nestled between our shoulder blades and the floor. We begged each other for elbows against tender spots, clenching our teeth when the bone found the point of pain. I swam so much I dreamt of swimming, of the lap of water against pool sides, of a coach’s commands to push harder, of the scream of lungs during a race’s final moments. I was prepared for sore muscles and dry skin, but I was unprepared for college swimming and its focus on winning above all, above everything. Part of the reason for this shock was I had heard only positives about college swimming from my old USS teammates.

But college swimming was lonely. For the longer invitational meets, my teammates and I traveled

to neighboring states, bunked in hotel rooms, and ate energy bars the consistency of cardboard. We spent days wrapped in towels that never dried with headphones shoved over ears, waiting for our few minutes in a lane. Intensity hung in the air during these moments, saturating every sodden towel. Intensity was the shrill of an alarm set in another cold hotel room, and the weight of it filled bleachers, hotels, restaurants, and buses with a heaviness that made it hard for me to breathe, speak, or laugh. This tension weighed on me; I still liked competing with myself, but I never liked competition with others: “I couldn’t figure out how to control all the other stuff that went along with getting your body into the revved-up state required to slay your rivals” (Tsui 161). Uncomfortableness aside, I didn’t want to quit the team because doing so would mean I had fallen out of love with the only thing that had consistently calmed my mind and body. I wasn’t sure who I’d be without it.

At the end of that first season, college life—what I had missed for all those early morning practices and weekend meets—beckoned. “Party. Drink. Smoke,” college told me. For a while, I succeeded in hiding the naiveté that swimming and my upbringing had created; the parties of my high school years consisted of movie marathons in a friend’s basement and bowls of popcorn or candy placed on a scratched coffee table. Against the sound of the television, a parent’s steps creaked on the floorboards overhead. Occasionally, someone snuck swigs of beer or pulls on a joint, but, for the most part, we joked and laughed on old couches, sagging into worn cushions that smelled like cheap cologne and stagnant basement.

College frats, however, were loud. There were beats booming from towering stereo systems, and the air was damp with sweat created by the lack of ventilation and the friction of skin against skin and bodies connecting together on too-small dance floors. It was hard to see and breathe through the dense clouds of cigarette and pot smoke. I was eighteen and cocky, relieved to have a swim season behind me. I thought I could

handle college frat parties because I had handled the physical and mental demands of one season of a Division II swim program. On a frigid night at the very end of February in my freshmen year, I giggled and stumbled to the bathroom with a friend—my beer left behind in the hand of a stranger—and didn’t anticipate how my life would change.

The next morning in my empty dorm room (my roommate was away visiting friends for the weekend), I hunched over a trashcan and vomited the four beers I’d ingested the night before. For a few hours, I wondered how four drinks had made me so sick until I remembered the blue eyes, the offer to hold my drink at the party, the taxi ride back to campus where I rested my head against a broad shoulder, the cold linoleum of my dorm room floor, and hands that covered my mouth and silenced my attempts at the word “no.” I realized that something had probably been slipped into my drink and I had been raped.

If the swimming season hadn’t ended the previous weekend, I wouldn’t have been out the night before. Instead, my Saturday night would have been filled with homework or a quick movie break with other swimmers. There wouldn’t have been blurred memories of uneven fingernails tearing at my flesh, fingerprints bruised into my upper arms and inner thighs. In the following weeks and months and even years, when large parties and crowds made my chest constrict with a budding anxiety attack, or when I cut off flirtations before they became something more serious, or when I attended weekly therapy sessions that left me feeling emotionally empty, or even when I slept with someone in a drunken haze because it was easier that way than when I was sober, I couldn’t help but think: *if only it had been swim season.*

The mantra stuck for the remaining three swim seasons as I fought and waited for the fun to return, hoping to regain control over my body and mind, to regain the love of order and routine as I struggled against waves, nightmares, flashbacks, and loss—a loss so large it took me a decade to



reach its depths. I disregarded my body in ways similar to the rapist. He had used my flesh, resisted my swipes of nails and shove of palms, and I'd have to punish my body for its weakness, for being unable to stop him. At practice, I tore through sets until I was vomiting into a garbage can placed at the end of my lane. I barely ate or slept, yearning for a few minutes every day when I was in the pool and, therefore, in physical control. When the instinctive, mesmerizing catch of body in water eased the chaos in my mind, I pushed harder. I told myself that I deserved this continued tear of muscles, the stinging shock of cold liquid at 5:00 a.m., the memories I thought I could push away with every lap, sprint, and flip turn: "[Swimming] is an exercise in thresholds. How much can I take, how much distance I need, how far can I get from shore...at what point I desire to return" (Tsui 230). I told myself that swimming was still fun even though I knew that was a lie, yet I clung desperately to the sport,

hoping it would return me to who I was once before the rape. I swam even though my times suffered and my moods became erratic: one minute I was laughing and the next I was angry and yelling at innocent friends and the next I was crying. After these moments when I lost self-control, I isolated myself in the library, a college coffeehouse, or my dorm room, headphones in ears to block out the world. My teammates avoided me outside of practice and meets, and I spent a lot of time alone. I felt like I was drowning, and Tsui's words had never seemed more true: "Drowning is quiet and quick. Someone might notice—or no one might" (249). Although I'd told the head coach, Lisa, what had happened, I only sporadically accepted her offers of help or invitations to talk in her office. Still, I kept swimming for the brief flickers when a swing of hip, a glide forward, and a sharp inhalation took me away, took me back, took me past the pressure slowly building and begging for release. Swimming gave



*Bondi Icebergs Pool at in Sydney, Australia. Image by Jeremy Bishop on Unsplash.*

me an outlet, a façade of control over my body and mental state, and it would take years for me to realize that rape destroyed the remaining joy I held for swimming. Seventeen years after I was raped, I still regard swimming through a lens of nostalgia and regret.

After a series of races when I succumbed to fatigue and negativity, Adam, the team's distance coach, marched me over to the cool-down pool at a three-day invitational meet. Unlike Lisa, who preferred private chats in her office, Adam publically challenged me and my teammates with honest truths that often felt both inspiring and embarrassing. Instead of the usual "you need to get out of your head and pay attention" speech, he pointed at the diving well, told me to jump in, and demanded I play in the water and remember how to "have fun." I obeyed his orders, but a command to have fun wasn't fun; swimming wasn't fun.

I remember that the diving well was colder than the racing pool, and I swam downward until my ears pulsated in pain. Above, swimmers kicked and pulled, moving back and forth like obedient soldiers. I watched them before surfacing, inhaling the thick, chlorinated air. I continued to dive and surface until my toes were numb and my lungs ached. On my last attempt, I reached the bottom only for a moment before I kicked off, eager for air. I tried swimming a few laps from one wall to another, but my movements were uncoordinated and slow. I'd hoped for a moment of serenity, where my mind blocked outside distractions and anxieties, and I'd feel as excited to swim as I had during my USS and high school days. In the diving well, I joined the other swimmers, but I no longer became lost in the rhythm, in the art, of propelling myself through a world where, even for a moment, the outside environment was silent. It was no longer just me, the water, and my lane.

Even though I wanted to stop swimming, even though I daydreamed about turning in my bag and warm-ups embroidered with a Nike swoosh

and an American flag, I didn't quit the college team. Swimming doesn't allow you to quit mid-race, and this post-rape challenge, I told myself, was my mid-race. I didn't know how to leave and, in a way, I felt as though I couldn't because I was obliged to finish my four years as a college swimmer: I had made a commitment to myself, to a team and friends who expected me to return and fill a spot in races and on relays, and to my USS teammates who always said college swimming was "so much fun." So each winter morning I rose before the sun kissed the sky with pink. I hoisted my aching muscles out of the pool. I pushed off the blocks with pointed toes. I yanked off crushing latex caps, releasing waves of wet curls. I followed the outlined sets and the relentless tick of the pacing clock's second hand. I swam and swam because I did not know how to cope any other way. I swam until the last race in the last meet of my senior year of college, and then I shoved all my old gear in a backpack that I tossed into the darkest, farthest corner of my closet.

Two summers after my college swimming career ended, I went on an early morning coffee run in my hometown. I steered the car in a familiar direction: right at the light, up a potholed hill, and onto a side street where one of the town's swimming pools glistened in the weak sunlight. The baseball field adjacent to the pool was empty except for an abandoned glove hanging off a fence pole. On the edge of an evergreen tree line that separated the park and pool from a residential neighborhood, a man walked his dog, stopping when it paused to inspect and smell leaves and roots. I hadn't meant to drive there. All I wanted was a takeout coffee from my favorite local café, but my body remembered. I idled before twisting the key, silencing the engine, and exiting the car. The USS team I used to swim for was practicing. Behind the chain-link fence, I felt like an intruder.

From the other side, I watched the team begin a drill. The swimmers rose from the pool and beads rolled off their skin, staining the concrete with oval patterns. They were animated, lively, lining





*Swimming pool. Image by Thom Milovic on Unsplash.*



up behind high white starting blocks with an unspoken order: sprinters first, distance swimmers next, backstrokers, butterflyers, and breaststrokers last. Their muscles were defined, etched from countless training sessions. I looked at my rubber flip flops, cutoff jean shorts, and baggy red tank top. My shoulders were once broad, my abdomen was rigid, my hips were narrow, and my joints always ached. Now, my body felt deflated.

The summer sun rose higher in the sky, and I leaned against the hood of the car. No one saw or recognized me, and I felt simultaneously alone and accepted. Something in me responded to the short, shrill whistles; the barked commands; the familiar sound of water breaking, swallowing incoming bodies. The swimmers soared off the starting blocks with strained muscles; arms pointed with clasped, interwoven hands and bodies arced like ballerinas as they extended limbs toward the sky. I once knew how to fly this way. I once felt the wind against my wet body and prickles rippling over my saturated skin.

Tsui, a former competitive swimmer, says, “As an adult, I want to remember what it was all for” (184). I have tried to remember and to train again since I quit competing, but, when I have, my past swirls around me—all my regrets and shame rising with each head rotation and intake of air. In public pool lanes, I have searched for my eighteen-year-old self before the assault, as if by reinstating my old swimming routine, I can reenter her body and mend my past. Memories of rape no longer haunt my dreams or interrupt my waking thoughts, and I’ve learned through individual and group therapies how to cope and talk about rape and the sleeplessness, anxiety, and depression it caused and created. It’s only when I swim that I’m overwhelmed by the realization that rape ruined the physical release swimming once gave me as a child and beginning competitive swimmer; I’ve longed to return to what I know about water and swimming and how both “can be a portal to somewhere else” (Tsui 251). I imagine that I’ll keep trying to find a way

to regain this control, one of the last missing pieces, so I can make myself whole once more

Three summers after college, my arms protested when I tried to place them into correct positions, my leg muscles tensed into painful knots, and my lungs ached because of the humid air. After a few yards, I stopped at the shallow end to fix my cap that kept tugging upward and exposing the base of my hairline. An elderly man in the lane next to me watched, and I pretended not to know why he stared.

“You a swimmer?” he finally asked.

“I used to be.”

He studied my old competition suit, fitted cap, and racing goggles perched on my forehead. He wore a scratched pair around his neck and a faded race suit clung to his thin legs. He smiled, fumbling with his goggles.

“You still are,” he said.

He ducked under the water, pushed off the wall, and began to swim to the other end with well-tuned strokes. I watched the arc of his arms, the bubbles trailing his feet, the rhythm of his head from side to side when he rotated to breathe. At the other end of the pool, he curled into a turn with surprising agility.

As I have many mornings throughout my life, I found myself in the pool, in water as familiar to me as my skin, but the older man wasn’t right—I didn’t feel like a swimmer; I didn’t feel at home. I submerged, pulled off my cap, released my trapped hair, and surfaced. The tiled wall scraped my knee when I clambered out of the pool. My battle with the pool wasn’t over and I doubt it ever will be. I’d return in a few weeks, perhaps a few months, and try to start over and to swim again, inhaling, exhaling, pushing backward to move forward.

## Works Cited

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## About the Author

Shannon LeBlanc holds an MFA in creative nonfiction from Emerson College. Her essays have appeared in *Catch & Release: Columbia Journal Online*; *What I Didn't Know: True Stories of Becoming a Teacher*, an anthology published by *Creative Nonfiction* and edited by Lee Gutkind; an "Albums of Our Lives" column on *The Rumpus*; as a Reader's Choice finalist in *Memoir Magazine's* #MeToo edition; and on *The Bangalore Review*. She lives in Louisville, Kentucky. You can follow her on Twitter [@ShaNini86](https://twitter.com/ShaNini86).