CHARLOTTE PENCE
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Ducks and Drakes

Ducking Stool: A chair at the end of a plank, in which a culprit was tied and then ducked into water; a form of punishment, formerly used, as in New England, esp. for quarrelsome women.
—Webster’s New World Dictionary, second edition

Mid-July hovers like honey
with nothing moving too fast
toward resolution.
A game of ducks and drakes
is his suggestion,
and he skims the thinnest rock
the mountain can shed
across the creek.
One, two, three...
four, five—Five rings!
Another diminution, she thinks.
She worries she said too much
at last night’s party, and now
her rocks just plunk in the water
like a woman tied to a ducking stool.
She replays: November’s vote
won’t be democratic; I don’t care
for the baby stage; and had she said
tapanâde for tapanäde?
Why this fear of saying too much
or not saying enough,
why this clench in her stomach?
The creek water sprinkles her leg,
their talking starts and stops.
In the overheated afternoon,
her life skips back
to junior high, the drone
of history lectures and a toilet flush
down a distant hall, the rat-atap-rat
of the neighboring teacher
chalking up her thoughts.
As a girl she understood well:
speak only with undebatable facts,
obedience preferred to opinions.
She twists her elbow, flings another rock;
it, too, plops and his skips seven times.
He asks, Why do you always worry?
And she wishes she didn’t
fester, fester. Put me
on the stool, she thinks,
dunk me in with this rock in my throat.
He interrupts to say try again.
And hold the stone as if it wants to fly,
as if you’re holding it back.
But again, plop; a single,
circular bubble rises after it and pops,
the way she imagines her breath underwater
would rise to the surface and break open.
Lying in Bed

When I slide my index finger, its tip, down the center of your chest, your sternum, that short, narrow channel
on a man’s body, on you bony and harsh, crooked like a dry creek bed, what exactly do I trace? The way bone
bulges then dips in quarter-inch curved steps, striations of calcium deposits, coat after coat
until hard,
until thickened into a center that could support you, the ribs, the myth of Genesis and Adam forming Eve.
A bone to withstand the steady strum of heart, of blood that can’t decide if it’s coming or going, and I think now
of your mother’s heart attack last week, and I want to do something to ease your worries: her death, us.
We can, of course, only accept which means relearning how to live this life as each person leaves us.
From small acts like opening the *Times*, reading the bold print while you eat your ham-on-rye instead of calling her,
to learning how to close your eyes, inhale, recall the smell of my hair when the sun warmed it that afternoon
we sat by the pond. We each become what others must get over, if we’re lucky,
and that’s why
when I press my fingertip up and down your sternum, noting each switchback and elevation as if mapping
a trail through woods, and say, “I love this part,” and you give the kid-like nose scrunch and ask, “But why?”
I shrug as if I’ve never thought about it, as if I don’t know how this touch will also turn toward memory.
About the Author

Charlotte Pence’s poetry is forthcoming in *Prairie Schooner, Spoon River Poetry Review, South Carolina Review*, and other journals. She has received the New Millennium Writing Award for Poetry, a poetry fellowship from the Tennessee Arts Commission, and most recently the Libba Moore Gray poetry award. Currently, she is a doctoral candidate concentrating in creative writing at the University of Tennessee and poetry editor for *Grist: The Journal for Writers*.

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