

# OF ASH AND ICE

SIDNEY MULLIS



# OF ASH AND ICE

SIDNEY MULLIS

WICK GALLERY



OF ASH AND ICE  
JOE BROMMEL

I.  
When small words made big worlds  
I'd murmur inversions.  
Spin: life. Watch: moon, sun. All

pendent, pending.  
String-hung sentinels pinched  
to stillness  
guarding ripples:

slinky time of the slitherers,  
slippery time of the swimmers.  
Each creature a wick selfburning.

II.  
Sluices. Runnels.  
In the time of subtle gradations  
I was made porous. All

burnt, shivered,  
and the string coiled.  
Sentinels stirring: for rounds.

Then splittings. Tides:  
moon-tugged, rock-gorged.  
Our round nouns rumbled to verb.

III.  
Return, then, happy glober, and  
attune me to these slow rhythms,  
Earth breaths.

Poke oozes pooled  
after tides. Thumb secrets  
from generous loams

and wander whirling on slopes  
long since quaked out of flatness.  
Listen: for layer tales, strata songs.

Return from your slumbering-place  
and speak again every round word you know.  
With them summon something humming.



## THE WITCHES

ARYA SAMUELSON

It is summer and I'm living with my dad and stepmother for a month in a tiny village in the Catskills. In the weeks leading up to my departure, I cried & cried & cried & cried like I was training for a marathon. And I slept in my mother's bed, our bodies curled around each other's. My only comfort in the dark. My dad and Molly would be horrified: *Does she truly have no boundaries?* A secret red shame on the inside of my mouth.

The only thing I like about this boring village is that Molly and my dad live next to a library. The spines are caked with dust and they don't have the new Harry Potter, but I spend hours crouching in the corner, poring over the only three books they have about witchcraft. I write in my diary: *I feel drawn to witches. Like more intensely than my friends. I think I must really be a witch.* Whenever I think about magic, my fingers tingle and I glow inside, thrilled by the good kind of secret.

Also, there's a musical coming to town. My dad and Molly raised money to bring a New York director to put on a show with all the kids in town. That's the kind of people they are – well, Molly really. Someone who arrives in a new town with a splash, and says, "Here, all this water is for you." It'll be my first play.

But lined across the stage for *The Wiz* auditions, I already know. When it's my turn, I conjure sound from a velvet place and I make the room explode. I don't know how I knew I could do this, but I did. The only surprise is how easy it is. As if it had been waiting for me.

†

The first week, Molly cooks my favorite food – French onion soup – and they take me to the opera, where we peer at the singers through binoculars. At night, we lay on the couch together and watch back-to-back-to-back episodes of *Law and Order*. Even though it's scary, I'd rather watch than go back to my room, where I can still hear the gunshots and *DaDaaa* of the scene changes. My dad massages Molly's feet, then she massages mine, and we feast on endless bowls of popcorn.

One morning, I am checking my email on Molly's computer and I X out of the internet browser. That's when I find it. Her diary flashes on the screen in the form of a Microsoft Word document. Left "open."

Maybe if I hadn't seen my name first thing, I wouldn't have kept reading.

Everyone's a character, the ugliest version of themselves. My dad, my mom, her friends, her brothers. But I'm the star. Every event of the last couple of days twisted inside out and displayed like meat at a butcher-shop. I discover I have done nothing but complain all week, that I've been rude & spoiled & selfish & needy & manipulative.



I coerced her into buying the binoculars. I'm getting fat. My fingers flame as I scroll down and down and down. When I think it's over, it's not. There's always the day before and the day before and the day before. I have known Molly my whole life. Her diary is hundreds of pages, infinitude of words. Her words sear into my brain like coals.

†

Old houses harbor orchestras of noises. Around midnight, I tiptoe past doors that breathe, down creaking stairs into the kitchen where the landline phone is stationed. I'm not allowed to call my mother. I call my mother. Her voice is soft with sleep, but she shakes it off like a horse shaking out its mane. "I can't sleep," I whisper. "Can you warm some milk?" she asks. "The pot is simmering," I say. *Sigh*. Hers, mine.

I've made her *promise-promise-promise* she won't tell Molly or my dad about the diary.

"Honey, I'm so sorry." She says this a lot, and also: "Do you want me to take you home?"

The thought of yes is a sweetness, like when the dentist takes away all pain with a single injection. But I know I can't come home, not yet. Molly will hate me –more than she does already. They'll never forgive me. Besides, there's the musical. I just have to keep everything a secret. My body throbs with this certainty.

†

After casting decisions are announced, I skip all the way back to the house. I will play both the Good Witch and the Bad Witch. But then I turn on the CD and realize I can't sing these songs. Belly low kind of song that lives in the grizzle of a throat. I don't know how to make my voice do those things. I will humiliate myself. My stomach a cherry pit I clench all night. I consider going back home after all.

At rehearsal the next morning, the director looks me in the eye and tells me how excited she is I'm in the play. Six-foot tall woman with lightening blonde hair she bends to my height and her eyes are so blue I can't lie. I don't want to be someone who looks right at someone and lies to them. "I'm scared I can't sing these songs," I say.

There's flash of something in her eyes and I think she might yell at me. "Of course you can," she says, her voice deep as guts. Deep as the song. Her eyes turn big and serious. "Of course you can." I stare into the sky of her. I learn to make my voice do those things.

†

It's like I have laser vision. Molly says "It's okay, you don't have to wash the dishes, just go have fun." Smiles at me, flaps me away with her wrists. What she means is *Selfish spoiled ingrate*. I don't help her with the dishes. She says "I made your favorite lasagna"; she means, *You're fat*. She says "What's wrong? I know you've been crying." She means, *You're turning into your anxious bitch mother, serves you right*. She says

"I think of you as my daughter," says "I love you." She's just performing a role. But it's like she has laser vision, too. What if when I do something I am really doing something else? I take a step to the left: it's a step towards the mixing bowl caked with cookie dough; a step away from her. What if there is something wicked inside everything I do? When I smile, laugh, or say I miss my mother, she only sees inside the black hole of my throat. What if she's right?

†

Driving in the car, my dad says, "I've noticed you listen to Les Miserables a lot."

"Yeah. So?"

"So, I'm worried about you." He sounds like Worried Dad from a TV sitcom. His voice squeaks when he says *you*. "I'm fine," I say. "Do you miss your mom?" he asks. He is not even looking at me, his eyes fixed on the road. I roll down the window and lean my head into the current of air. Wind stings my face as we descend the hill.

*Ease on down the road*, we sing. A tap dance number. The road leads Dorothy to the Good Witch, who loves her, and who is Me, and to the Wiz, who is supposed to save her, but can't. The road also leads her into the trap of the Wicked Witch who is scheming to take her down. Who is also Me. *Les Miserables* is much simpler. I know who I'm rooting for.

"One Day More," the cast of Les Miz declares through my headphones. My dad says something, then says it louder, but I don't hear him. He parks the car and I bolt. Through the door, over the dogs, up the stairs, past their bedroom, into my bed with the rosebud sheets. "On my Own" fills my ears. *Now I'm all alone again*. Plugged ears, closed eyes, just the music and me. No, just the music.

†

My dad leaves us alone for the weekend. For breakfast Molly cooks a frittata. She tells me she'll teach me how to be a great chef one day. She is also a great writer and actress and artist and dancer and interior designer. "You're good at everything," my dad always coos. "Nah," she responds, smiling. "I can't sing." But my dad insists: "Yes, you can." Even though it's true: she can't.

Now it's just the two of us. She serves the frittata hot from the skillet and asks me again what's been eating at me. "I know it's not an easy age, I remember when I was ten," and she tells me a story and I laugh in all the places I'm supposed to. It's almost like old times. "You can tell me anything," she says and passes me a steaming scone. I look at her and take a bite. "Everything's fine," I say calmly, then wash my dish and leave the room. Silence the form of lying I allow myself.

Later I will find out Molly and my dad were reading all my emails. They don't realize I've already learned all about technology and privacy. They don't realize I'm writing my stories with my body, where nobody else can find them.

†



Act I:

Like a gust of wind swiveling center stage comes me. Me with a Marilyn Monroe wig / poodle skirt down to my ankles / disco ball earrings / mirror in hand. The Munchkins come running towards me. *Adeperle, Adeperle!* Audience is laughing. Feel all their eyes following everything I do, like I'm a magician. Little/ big girl pulling a rabbit out of the hat. Pulling my voice from inside to outside, except there's no pulling. I'm no longer playing tricks. *He's the Wiz, he's the only one who can bring your wish right to ya. We ooh and ahhh* at every mention of the Wiz, but it's all just a game. The audience knows the Wiz is powerless. It's Me they care about: the witch who holds all the power. My body my wand; my voice the cascade of sparks turned fireworks. Lights hot on skin, a hundred eyes watching, this must be what love feels like.

Act II:

Playing the bad witch I cackle & growl & send my voice right through the roof. *Don't nobody bring me no bad news.* Pink boa feathers twisting around my neck, I think of every bad thing in the world and become all of them. Become who Molly thinks I am, but worse. I torture people, eat humans, enslave monkeys. Evil women bend their knees and get low, so I do — whipping my boa like a lasso. It's fun being bad. I die a few scenes later and scramble downstairs while everyone else performs the final song-and-dance number. *Can't you feel a brand new day?* Just me and stage moms in the basement. It's over, but my body doesn't know, legs still trembling like the floorboards from the music upstairs.

†

After the play, so many bodies pull me in close. Hold and release. Church overflows with parents, neighbors, and grandparents, all with smiling teeth like glitter. I see Molly across the room, glowing in a way that does not belong to her, as if she's the one being celebrated. My dad walks towards me, holding a huge bouquet of roses. "My daughter, the singer!" Proud Sitcom Dad. He opens both his arms like I'm a dog and he wants me to jump. He buries me in his stomach and the world goes dark. When I finally look up at him, I see up close what his face looks like happy. For maybe the first time.

Then somebody is spinning me around and suddenly I am pressing against Molly. She bends over my head, lips hovering by my ear. She whispers: *You're a star, honey.* Something in me tightens, then softens. When we face each other, I look and look but I don't see any meanness. Only two bright orbs of light. "Thank you," I say to Molly making myself speak into her eyes.

Then I run to my mother. She is all softness and I want to forget where my skin stops being my own, but for the first time, I feel my body against her body, the boundaries between mine and hers. I feel my other parents close, watching, and I pull away. I make my rotations until finally the church lights turn off.

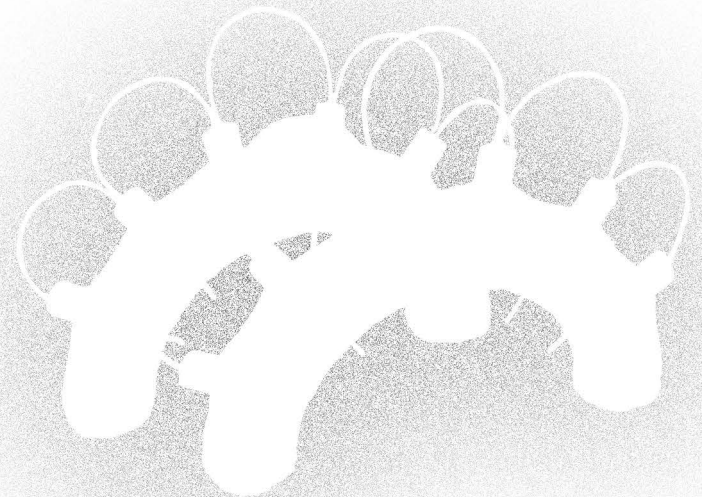
†

Nearly twenty years later, I watch a videotape of the performance. In the video, there is a girl who smiles when she is good and also when she is evil. Her smile is so big it swallows her words sometimes. She doesn't mean to smile, but she is just so happy. She speaks fast, impatient for the music to start, for the audience to start laughing, then clapping. I see a girl who didn't know how to move onstage, only to put a hand on her hip. But her rigid body controlled her bomb of a voice. You'd never know how many secrets she guarded.

Something gaped opened after that performance. And something else was lost. It was the beginning of a new world inside myself and the beginning of its unraveling.

Onstage, the girl is transformed into a witch who is joyful, electric, powerful. Commanding of all the good & all the shadows. The kind of witch she won't know how to be again. Not for a long, long time.

I want that smile back.



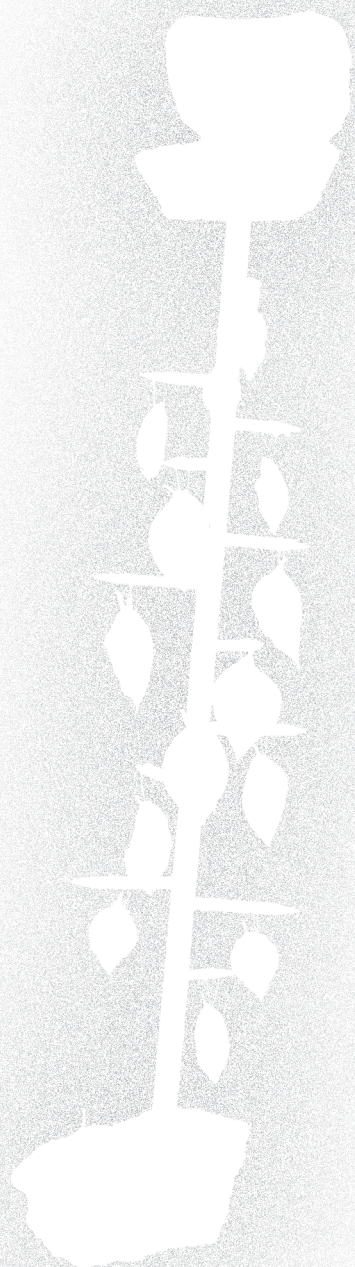


















## EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

### *Altar*

2017-19

handmade paper pulp, gravestone dust collected from a gravestone carver, wax, sand, dry rigatoni and manicotti pasta, pleather, black streamers, teddies that people did not want, olive pits, paint, wire, shells, coins from my childhood collections

96 × 48 × 96 inches

(243.8 × 121.9 × 243.8 cm)

### *Muffin Tree*

2019

preserved sliced almonds, crushed walnuts, and muffin liner, gravestone dust, wax, raw pasta, sand, rock, wood, paint, plastic, resin, mosaic tile, cotton string

8 × 10 × 38 inches

(20.3 × 25.4 × 96.5 cm)

### *Hot Dog Tree*

2019

preserved onion, banana pepper, and potato stix, gravestone dust, paint, plastic, mosaic tile, resin, wood, rock, sand, teddy bear preserved in wax

20 × 16 × 46 inches

(50.8 × 40.6 × 116.8 cm)

### *The Town Between My Toes*

2019

sand, wax, raw rigatoni and shell pasta, pleather, black food coloring, olives, carrots, olive pits, cotton string, resin, wire, wood, paint, rocks, teddy bears

dimensions variable





# LIVING IN THE CAVE

ADRIENNE RICH

Reading the Parable of the Cave  
while living in the cave,

black moss,  
deadening my footsteps  
candles stuck on rock-ledges  
weakening my eyes

These things around me, with their  
daily requirements:

fill me, empty me,  
talk to me, warm me, let me  
suck on you.

Every one of them has a plan that depends on me

stalactites want to become  
stalagmites  
veins of ore  
imagine their preciousness

candles see themselves disembodied  
into gas  
and taking flight

the bat hangs dreaming  
of an airy world

None of them, not one  
sees me  
as I see them





Sidney Mullis is a sculptor who lives and works in State College, PA. Her work has been exhibited both nationally and internationally, including shows in Berlin, Tokyo, England, and Croatia. Solo shows include the Leslie-Lohman Museum (NYC), Neon Heater Gallery (OH), Bucknell University (PA), Rowan University (NJ), Galleri Urbane (TX), University of Mary Washington (VA), and more. She has been an artist-in-residence at The Wassaic Project, Women's Studio Workshop, MASS MoCA, and Ox-Bow, among others. Her work has been featured in publications such as Hyperallergic, Young Space, and Sculpture Magazine. Mullis currently teaches 3D Foundations, Sculpture, and Critical Studies at Penn State University. She is the program coordinator of the Penn State's John M. Anderson Endowed Lecture Series and was awarded a Creative Achievement Award by the University in 2016.



Published on the occasion of

# OF ASH AND ICE

SIDNEY MULLIS

February 15–March 14, 2020

WICK GALLERY  
1283 Bushwick Avenue  
Brooklyn, NY 11207  
[wickgallery.com](http://wickgallery.com)

Directors: Sam Branden, Sol Avi Erez,  
Logan Myers, and Christine Rebhuhn

Exhibition Curated by:  
Sam Branden and Christine Rebhuhn

*Of Ash and Ice* © 2020 Joe Brommel  
*The Witches* © 2020 Arya Samuelson  
*Living In The Cave* © 1972 Adrienne Rich

Design: Logan Myers



Catalogue © 2020 Wick Gallery



