

## **Lost Footing**

by Katje Lattik

Back when I was new to Chicago and still finding my footing, I was faced with living in a physical world that had been severely limited by a global virus and a personal choice to be miles away from the people I knew. I retreated to the virtual world. Everyday across my TikTok feed I was served video after video of cool, beautiful, rollerblading girls gliding down southern California streets in the bright sunshine while they filmed themselves from above. I would watch them sideways on my phone while I rotted in bed and marvel as the muscles in their long, tanned legs pumped, pushing them effortlessly in circles and zigzags and spins. The videos were set to 70s songs I thought I was the only millennial cool enough to know, and the girls wore dolphin shorts, tube tops, striped tall socks, and all the other accessories necessary for a pastiche of that decade.

The idea of becoming the roller rink queen of my dreams would not leave my head. I convinced myself the biggest hurdle would be getting over the financial pain of buying new skates in my size. I had moved to Chicago without a job, so desperate to get away from my past and feel like I was making progress in life that a matter like securing employment seemed a trivial thing to wait on. Several months later, I found myself employed at the first place that would have me, an office job at a small, new company in an ethically ambiguous industry. What at first seemed like an unforeseen perk—mostly female coworkers born in the same year as me who had also recently transplanted to Chicago—I eventually came to understand was actually a symptom of our below market pay.

Still, I was determined to turn my meager paycheck into the cosmopolitan life I had always dreamed of—and now that dream included a brand-new pair of size 5, lace-up, sparkly navy roller skates. I hit “confirm” on the \$150 online purchase, then spent the next week eating Uncrustables straight from the freezer for dinner. When the skates finally

arrived at my door, I was mysteriously frozen. I didn't know what to do from there. Everything I had consumed online had led me to focus on obtaining the items and looking the part. I had pictured myself skating, sure, in the same self-assured and fluid way my friends in the phone had, smiling and laughing for an unseen audience. But I hadn't thought about children at the park staring at me in my dorky helmet and elbow pads while my hands spun in circles trying to find balance.

It took me two weeks to take the skates out of the box and down to the lakeside park. Another hour to find a spot where I couldn't possibly be an inconvenience to anyone. And then two minutes for me to decide I felt too off kilter, too out of place, and too much an observer than a doer.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, that is not where my skating story ends. A month later, when all my roommates had plans, and I was feeling especially lonely and sorry for myself, I decided to hop back on the metaphorical horse and just do it, dammit. I closed out of the TikTok session that I had been hypnotized by for hours and purposefully left my phone on my bed in an act of defiance against its hold on me. I suited up in all my protective gear and took the skates out to the parking lot behind our apartment. I looked across the pavement and determined it would only take about three steps to get to the first car that I could brace myself on if needed. I stepped out with the first skate, immediately hit a small piece of gravel, and fell backward, my arms instinctively reaching out behind me.

By the time I hit the ground I was keenly aware of what had happened. Even though the pain was still being blocked by adrenaline that I could feel as a dull buzz in my body, the loud snap that I had heard on the way down was unmistakable. I lay there on the asphalt without a phone, waiting for the inevitable excruciating sensation that I knew was seconds away. No one to come and save me, no parent to come kiss it better. I had moved to Chicago thinking it would heal the self-hatred that told me I was wasting my 20s, and I had bought roller skates thinking a hobby would cure my loneliness. And now here I was, alone in a parking lot with a broken arm. I screwed up all my strength to get over my lifelong anxiety of remotely inconveniencing strangers and called out to a neighbor two buildings down who I could hear taking a Facetime call.

Later, after the stranger retrieved my roommates and I spent the night being ignored in the hospital, I finally went for my xray and was put in a cast. As the doctor looked at the images on the screen, I asked if he could tell that I had broken that same arm before, back in the 2nd grade when doing some ill-advised at home gymnastics moves.

“Oh, no,” he said, “honestly if it happens before the human body is ten, a few years later and it’s like it never happened at all.” Before I could even register a little bit of happiness about that fact, he proceeded, “But you’re over twenty-five now. This is never going to fully heal, not really. You’re always going to be able to tell where this break was.” He was right. I can still feel it in my arm sometimes when I carry heavy groceries or it’s about to rain. The same way I can still feel pangs of regret when I think back to how long it took me to leave my hometown, or to be paid a fair wage, or get over my social anxiety. But the body fills in the cracks, and new memories settle over the old painful ones, even if you can still tell where the break was.



Raised in Baltimore and now living in Chicago, **Katje Lattik** comes from an anthropology background with a longstanding interest in language, culture, and the stories people tell about themselves and the world around them. Her published work includes a book for the Library of Congress exploring the institution’s Mayan jade collection through a blend of creative nonfiction, research, and visual analysis, as well as articles for medical association publications covering industry trends and legal developments. Recently returning to a lifelong passion for creative writing, she has begun sharing personal essays that explore identity and the subtle ways language shapes human experience.