

KALEIDOSCOPE

EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCE OF DISABILITY THROUGH LITERATURE AND THE FINE ARTS

Number 91
Summer/Fall 2025



FALL OR FLOAT

"Iron Girl" by Cassandra Brandt

"Untethered" by Poppy Reeves

"The Do-si-do Girl" by David Bachmann



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Erika Marie York, *Fall or Float*, 2022, acrylic on canvas, 30" x 30"

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This award-winning publication expresses the experience of disability from a variety of perspectives including: individuals, families, friends, caregivers, healthcare professionals, and educators, among others. The material chosen for Kaleidoscope challenges stereotypical, patronizing, and sentimental attitudes about disabilities.



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IRON GIRL

CASSANDRA BRANDT

Before

Maybe the foreman was testing me, but I didn't flinch when he sent me to bolt up on the top of steel, several floors and probably close to eighty feet up. My heart leapt a little with adrenaline, gazing up at the tiny hard hats shining up there under the sun. I could hear their voices jeering, the steel clanging as they beat it into place. The crane loomed nearby, already lifting its load up to the connectors. A rigger ran ground for the crane mere feet from where we stood by the gang boxes.

I had lugged my tools onto the site with much difficulty since the closest parking was two blocks away. I had thrown all the essentials into my big canvas Klein bag, the kind you filled with bolts and sent up on the crane to the connectors so it was called a nose bag. I had wrapped my arms around it and clutched it to my stomach and worn my harness on my back without fastening the leg straps and they slapped up around my legs all the way. I had dropped the big bag alongside my harness near where all the ironworkers had their tool boxes staged and now I pulled the harness on, buckled it about my legs, waist, and chest. I loaded it with the stuff I would need to bolt up.

I grabbed my eight-pound beater and clipped it onto my belt with a carabineer via the nut I had welded to the hammer's head. I slid my spud wrenches into the slots on my leather frogger and put a couple bull pins into the sides of the canvas

bags at my hips. This was going to be a lot of weight. Hoping I wouldn't need them, I left my cowboy and Bessey clamps behind in my nose bag. My new foreman looked mildly impressed upon viewing my weathered tools and how easily I slung on my gear. He smirked at my manicure though, upon handing me a pair of small Tillman gloves, and wondered out loud how I could keep my pretty nails from being ruined.

"Very carefully," I said lightly, grabbing my faded pink sleaver bar.

I nodded up at the iron. "The bolts up there? What size am I looking for?" He pointed out the metal cans way up on the roof on a bundle of decking.

I felt eyes crawling on me as I took the ladder to the beam on the first floor.

I was used to the scrutiny of the ironworkers and men from other trades staring at me like I was an aberration. On every jobsite I was approached with the same old comments about how cool my presence on the jobsite and knowledge of the trade was, and the same old questions too. How long had I been in construction? WHY was I in construction? Was my dad a foreman for the company? I tired of telling the same story but I didn't mind the attention. I certainly didn't mind being the only woman. I didn't get along much with most girls.

I was sometimes a little amazed that so few women were in the industry. Didn't they know this was the life? Did they honestly prefer being housewives and trapped in office jobs?

Sometimes I got the old, "Hey! Rosie the Riveter!" Was an eighty-five-year-old icon the only cultural reference point they could find for a woman doing skilled manual labor? I saw myself as the long overdue and contemporary icon, pink hardhat, blond ponytail, hanging off the iron, wielding a torch with a flame, a spud wrench on my hip.

I took the next ladder to the second floor, my legs quivering a little with anticipation as I climbed further toward the sky. Several ladders later I tied off to a beam at the top of steel. I was more familiar with Beamers that ratcheted onto the beam, but I had been given a cable tie-off with a carabineer at one end and D-rings at the other. I wrapped the cable around the beam and fastened it. I paused to glance way down at the foreman's tiny hardhat as he looked up at me. I hadn't been so many feet in the air in awhile and I felt my palms sweat and a familiar moment of panic I had grown accustomed to rushed over me. I breathed deeply.

I looked up and saw nothing but the cloudless, bright, blue sky. I allowed it to bring me peace for a moment, then headed away from the scary perimeter to the deck bundles where I found sure footing. I filled my canvas bolt bags with the required TC bolts from the big cans. Another ironworker was filling his Klein bolt bags too. Before he could start staring and asking the customary questions, I addressed him with ease as if it were totally normal that I was there; to me it was.

"So how long have you worked for these guys? Is Arizona Iron a pretty good company, you think? So I guess the two-and-a-quarter bolts are for the filler beams? Where should I start? Fuck, it's gonna be hot today!"

"You like doing iron?" He asked at last.

"All girls can't sit behind desks or on the couch," I retorted rebelliously and he laughed. We discussed which beams we were going to bolt up.

I glanced around and saw that some ironworkers welded handrails on a danger-taped staircase. Over on the opposite

end of the structure the crane was sending beams up to the level where I stood. The connectors waiting on the steel looked over at me. I tied off to my first beam and crossed it with my feet on the bottom flange, gripping the steel with my thighs. I never actually walked on the steel when I was up this high. I craved a good adrenaline rush but that might be too much.

I pulled a couple of bolts from my bag and twisted off their nuts and washers and set them on the beam between my knees at the first connection point. The first bolt went in easily but I didn't tighten it down until I had lined up the other holes. Another took just a twist with my spud wrench but a third was too far off. I tightened the first two and shoved a bull pin in the next hole and beat it halfway through, forcing the alignment of the beams. I easily bolted the lowest hole and then removed the bull pin to slip the last bolt through the neatly aligned holes. I tightened them all up.

I moved on across the next beam. The scariest beams were on the perimeter of the building. If I fell from there, I would fall all the way down, rather than to the partially decked floor just one level below. A tall tree loomed close enough for me to pull off a leaf. A couple of guests stood in the windows of the big Marriott hotel next door and watched us. I waved at a child who waved back enthusiastically.

Week 1

She hugs me, awkwardly because of the neck brace and the fact that I am lying in bed and unable to hug back. She looks pale and vulnerable and acts so unlike her typical talkative self.

I tell her that I love her so much, words I had asked my dad to relay to her, as I was hunched in that car, terrified I would never see her precious face again. Now she smiles at me, her big blue eyes full of tears that she swipes quickly away. Her long, brown hair brushes across my face and I *reach my arm up, touch it softly, feeling its light weight between my fingers*. But I don't, not really.

My hand doesn't leave its frozen position on the bed. My body doesn't respond to what my mind tells it to do. It is like a nightmare. I look into her sweet face. It could never be a nightmare if she is in it.

"I love you, too, Mom," she tells me softly.

Her words are like a gift I almost didn't get, and hearing them makes me feel as if I have just opened the shiny paper from a present.

My gratitude that I will be here for her after all, after such a brush with death, makes me thankful for every breath I continue breathing. But breathing isn't easy.

I don't want to see the pity in their eyes or the motor functioning of their bodies.

My diaphragm isn't working and my lungs are weak, their capacity reduced. My breath comes in short, desperate, little gasps. Then it doesn't come at all.

My life is still in danger unless I get another surgery, an emergency tracheostomy. A hole referred to as a *stoma* is made in my neck at the throat, opening a direct airway through an incision in the windpipe so I can breathe without the use of my nose or mouth.

I can't speak at all now. I have to get stronger first, before the stoma can be plugged, making speech possible again.

My lungs and throat are filled with mucous. Often respiratory nurses come and use a deep-suction machine to pull it out. The quick procedure is more anxiety-inducing than painful.

The ventilator breathes loyally for me and my urge for water dominates my days.

My mom, weak, tired, and dealing with her own pain, is rock solid then. She gets up and down again and again giving me sips from the sponge on a stick, then bringing the suction hose to my lips so I can spit the forbidden liquid back out, lest it go down the wrong pipe. My dad finds the greatest way to soothe me, dripping cold, soaked washcloths over my face, and gently sliding ice across my cheeks, pulling the heat and pain away, if but for a moment.

The aura of the wing is palpable, every family trying to grasp and accept the magnitude of the tragedy they are living. Ours are lives that have come to a screeching halt without actually killing us, and I, for one, am not so sure that sparing my life was merciful.

I just lay here and live. *What else can I do?*

I'm still in shock, just want to be drugged up. I imagine that if I fully experience the horror of this reality I will have some kind of psychotic break that I might never come back from.

My days spent in ICU are a blur. I wake sometimes at night alone, unable to either cry out for help or push a call button.

It's terrifying, the helplessness. My mind doesn't want to accept it.

*Really? There's absolutely nothing I can do to help myself?
Nothing?*

There is something. I discover that blowing raspberries, using the farting noise that I make with my lips, is loud enough to be heard outside my room and at the nurse's station. The noise becomes my call for help.

The thick brace on my neck prevents moving it much and the rest of my body lies completely limp, dead weight. It shakes and jolts suddenly: a leg, an arm, all four limbs at times. It doesn't really hurt badly but it is by no means comfortable. What does hurt is that burning and tingling sensation that runs through my body.

The medications I am being pumped full of loosen my bowels and diarrhea is constant. I cry in embarrassment regarding the need to be cleaned again and again. I groan in discomfort as the nurses and aides roll me back and forth.

I want to tell my brother and daughter a million things, but with the tracheostomy, my voice is so quiet and unintelligible. I listen to my family talk, instead. There is talk of the great possibility of my body regaining function, but it doesn't sound great to me, hearing my dad's overly confident tone, as if there is no need to address what the family will do if I don't start moving again. My mom's nod looks too exaggerated, and my brother is too quiet. I look at my daughter, who is listening too, rocking her body back and forth, a nervous habit she's had since she was a little girl.

The television is never turned on; I don't want to see able-bodied people doing things with their arms and legs, living full lives mine would forever pale in comparison to now. Several times friends come to see me but I am in too much of a state of panic to visit and I ask for them to be sent away until a better day. I don't want to see the pity in their eyes or the motor functioning of their bodies.

In the early morning hours I close my eyes and remember how in my childhood I would sometimes feel as if I were floating outside of my body as I drifted to sleep. My spirit would linger in the upper corners of my bedroom near the ceiling and look down on my sleeping body. This ethereal sensation hits me again now; it is intensified by my inability

to feel my body. I leave my broken body behind on the bed, close my eyes and float.

A concerned nurse named Teresa pulls my brother aside and tells him, he relays to me later, that if I don't start to calm down, I am not going to make it.

Calm down? I am trapped inside my body! All I know is terror and it grows by the day, by the hour; sometimes I think, by the minute.

My brother reminds me of who my heroes are. Are they football players, models? No, they are beloved and venerated for their words: thinkers, writers, activists, people who have gone through hell and dedicated their lives to others anyway. My heroes are strong of heart and mind, and fortitude of that nature is infinitely more impressive and important than physical strength.

The loss of my limbs didn't eliminate my real sources of strength. I can still demonstrate incredible strength without lifting a finger, still ignite within others the fires of passion for social change. My voice is not lost; my mind is present; my heart still bleeds.

I can still *do* important things in this world, perhaps even take advantage of the platform this tragedy and disability may give me, upon which I can elevate my voice, my brother goes on, in response to the mumbled, heartsick lamentations of diminished self worth which he alone understands.

"I don't want to hear it," I sob. "I don't want a life without my body! I want to be *ironworker strong*."

In the empty hours alone I wait for sleep to take me away from this horrifying world where the worst has happened. Sometimes I must remind myself to be grateful to be alive at all.

Month 2

My eyes sweep across the long rec room and with sorrow I realize that mine is the least able body present, a fact that sinks hard to the bottom of my stomach. There are several people sitting around a table with puzzles and crafts, working on fine motor skills, I assume. A therapist walks backward slowly, holding a walker ready for the patient walking toward her. A therapist is doing range of motion exercises with a patient on a raised mat. Another man and his therapist seem to be playing some type of virtual reality game.

I would give anything to be any one of them, I think. If only I were here to practice walking again, instead of learning to use a power chair! I would be any of them, absolutely any one of them no matter what they or their life was like, if only not to be totally paralyzed, I think in agony.

In the manual wheelchair it is hard to hold up my upper body. I try to pay attention to the physical therapist and the power chair sales rep. There are three common types of high-quality power chairs which can be used by individuals with a high level injury, he explains. *People that can't use their hands*. I try to calm my racing brain and listen, if only to focus on not crying.

One power chair is equipped with a head array, another a chin toggle, and a third employs a sip-and-puff device controlled by breathing into a straw. I stare at the crazy, expensive looking, heavy power chairs with all their cords and buttons. I swallow my tears. I feel a perplexing wave of shame; I will be ashamed to roll around in a chair like this. My pride cringes and it is hard to pay attention to talk about front wheel drive, shock absorbers, and the benefits of pneumatic or polyurethane tires.

I shed a few tears during the first Hoyer lift transfer into a chair equipped with a chin toggle.

It is my second day in rehab. I am thrilled to be accepted to Banner University Medical Center formerly known as The Good Samaritan. I recognize the white twelve-story buildings by the porthole windows. The hospital's four towers are connected with bridges.

**All I know is terror and it grows
by the day, by the hour; sometimes
I think, by the minute.**

I began my stay at Banner with high hopes exactly two months after the car accident. "I am going to work hard, even if it hurts," I tell my brother. I have no idea what to expect. When the nursing assistant settles me into my room she fills out information on a dry-erase board.

"And what are your goals for your time here in rehab?" The young CNA asks. My answer slips out before I can catch it.

"To get movement."

Seeing it there in blue dry-erase marker I feel stupid. No amount of therapy is going to fix this, fix me. It might as well read: "Do cartwheels." I can't wiggle a toe. I always did expect a bit much out of life.

When I start controlling the power chair I feel so much better instantly. I am shocked at the relief I feel and tears spring to my eyes again. I am moving on my own.

Getting movement.

For the first time since the accident I can go where I want to go, turn where I want to turn, without any help. The power chair is a part of me instantly. The chin toggle reminds me of using forklift toggles at work, although of course, not with my chin. I catch on quickly, maneuvering the power chair through a short maze of bright orange cones Penny sets up. I can feel myself calming a little as I embrace the autonomy that the power chair offers.

I think back to Nurse Diana's words about pushing through rehab. I had imagined therapists helping me learn to walk again. But my rehab is pushing through on a power chair. It's learning another piece of heavy machinery.

Year 3

The sun is warm on my face and I close my eyes and turn toward it for a long moment, soaking it in. When I open my eyes it is too bright to see, the lake reflecting the sun, shining like a sea of glowing glass. A lifetime ago I used to come out here to Seneca Lake with Vince, he fishing and drinking beer, me reading, toking, tanning.

Now those tanned and toned legs that launched me off those rocks sit pale, undefined, and immobile in my power chair. I swallow away the pain nostalgia always brings and wheel my chair into the shade.

My retriever Lovely trots up from out of the trees and finds her water bowl, then flops in the dirt beside me panting happily. Her yellow fur is smeared brown with dirt, wavy and curly from swimming. I talk to her in the sweet voice I reserve for her and she thumps her tail loudly, stirring up clouds of dirt.

I can't enjoy the water like before, but my spirit does reach peace after a time of running through my memories. I have long felt romantically drawn to the water and to the trees. They are magnetic as the iron to me.

I remember running my fingers across the tree's trunks, my fingers exploring the rough edges of the bark like reading braille, twisting leaves between my fingers, feeling the delicate green veins, reading the energy. Now only my eyes can absorb the serenity of nature, drinking in the details my fingers once filled in, and my nose inhales the crisp, raw scents of the forest. The denial of a physical connection doesn't take from the intimacy I feel toward the world around me, but I long to push my toes in the mud, to wrap my bare arms around a tree and lightly scrape the delicate skin of my inner arms on its bark. My world is not tangible anymore. But the connection I still feel toward it is nothing short of touching, in the way that my heart is still moved.

Had I noticed before the way the sunlight slid over the trees, glaring bright and bouncing off, giving the leaves the

illusion of wetness, they shone so? Had I noticed how they swayed together in the slightest breeze, how they leaned on one another in their quest to reach up toward that light, that life? Had I noticed the way that standing water could look so still and untouchable, but how it came alive with ripples and bubbles when touched? Had I missed the way the sun sank slowly, spreading reds and oranges across the sky, expert brush strokes of color rippling across the horizon? I drink the nature in.

I'm grateful to be out in this world rather than stuck in a room on a bed. I wasn't meant to be cooped up indoors. How I had loved working under nothing but the cloudless blue sky! I had called the jobsite my office, content to contend with the natural elements like the Portland rain, Phoenix sun, San Francisco wind, rather than be trapped between four constricting walls!

I roll back into the sun and turn my face to it again, let its warmth soothe me. My brother and I share a joint.

Year 4

Every morning I wait for help while life rushes on outside of my dark bedroom.

The power chair is a part of me instantly.

Sometimes I imagine exactly what I would do if my legs worked.

I imagine throwing off my blanket, which has been too uncomfortably warm for hours. I imagine scrubbing the crusty sleep from my eyes because they itch. I imagine swinging my legs over the side of the bed. From there the possibilities are endless.

Do I take a long, hot shower; let that water rake through my hair and cascade down my back? Do I go watch the sunrise with a cup of freshly brewed coffee? Maybe I will peek in at my sleeping daughter; leave a kiss on her forehead. A morning drive? Wake and bake?

Instead I wait through the process of other people fixing the body up for the day. Oh, to take care of my damn self! I would never take such a luxury for granted again. Hindsight for a tetraplegic is a slap in the face. Why didn't I appreciate how easy life was? How fast that fast lane was? Why was appreciation so hard for me? Now gratitude flows through my heart every time I am able to sit in a chair instead of lie in

bed, and patience has come through endurance like the Bible said.

Still I watch their hands moving to complete tasks, wishing I could just take over, because I would do it faster, more efficiently. I would open the mail when it came, organize my home, change the oil in the van, wash my daughter's dishes and laundry and let her feel like a kid.

**I must acknowledge my pain
and move on before I begin to
wallow in self pity; how thin the line
really is between sucking it up
and falling apart.**

The only tasks I can complete on my own are on my phone; it's the only thing I have control over, the only way I can go somewhere else, research and read, fulfill that ache and longing to learn and to create. It is where I go to communicate and advocate and even to fulfill basic needs like texting for help from across the house. I lament at times the technology that has taken over my part of the world in the last decade, but being a person who doesn't have the option to get up and do something active, my phone and the mouth stick I use to operate it are my lifeline, my most essential tools.

I use popsicle sticks now, glued in a U-shape to the end of the stylus pen. My front teeth have started to separate from gripping the pen through pursed lips. It's popsicle sticks or another expensive mouth stick.

I rarely use talk-to-text, my mouth stick flying across the screen like my fingers had flown across the keys. Typing is the most comfortable and natural way to write, the words coming right out of my head onto the screen. Already my tendency to anticipate impending doom has me mourning the day my jaw and neck give out on me, too, and how will I write then? Considering there's already technology that tracks your eye movements and this mind-reading software being developed, I have hope that there will always be a way to write, even if I have to learn a new way.

And so I begin to write again, feeding the hungry wolf inside that delights in creative production.

Year 5

Years ago now I remember crying to my quadriplegic friend Gina: *Would I ever* feel like myself again?

"No," she had told me honestly. "But you'll love the person you'll become."

There is still hope.

I think of what Nurse Diana said about never giving up the fight, how she said to remember these stubborn arms rocking that baby rolled up like a burrito. I remember Janessa telling me the bad days would always still roll around, but it didn't have to be a bad life. I hear Trista telling me to speak up: *This is still your world too! You got this!* On doubtful days when I reach out my friends reach back, and I know I can do this, that I am still positively affecting people's lives and that a good life is not out of my reach either.

I will never take my life. I know my present circumstance isn't all there will ever be for me. And even if such was the case, the glimpses of love and light still in it will be enough to sustain me.

Still, when I feel that black cloud looming, I can't change things up, move away, or utilize any of the myriad methods I had used in my walking days to ease my boredom, loneliness and depression, from challenging my body with acute exercise to distracting the mind with instant gratification to avoid dwelling in my suffering.

I find myself going back to the Buddhist teachings that remind me that life *is* suffering, but also that the state of change is like a universal law: This state of mind, this level of suffering, it is not my forever. The despair or anxiety I feel one day is unlikely to be the way I will feel tomorrow or even in an hour. *And what a comfort that is.*

Dealing with the human condition means suffering, and this knowledge is what prompted the creation of the Buddhist religion.

According to Buddhism, *life is suffering*. It is full of pain, and quite generally dissatisfying. For a person with so many physical limitations, I experience extreme loss and pain and suffering. But a fundamental notion in Buddhism is that pain and suffering are two quite different things. Suffering is our mental response to pain, and it can be consuming when we are dwelling on the "Oh, I don't *want* to hurt so badly. *Why me?*"

The Buddha would say, "*Why not?*" He said the assumption that life should be fair is the cause of suffering, and the first step to ending suffering is separating the pain you feel from the notion that you are entitled to *not* feel pain. Buddha said pain is inevitable but suffering, suffering is a choice.

I must acknowledge my pain and move on before I begin to wallow in self pity; how thin the line really is between sucking it up and falling apart.

Buddha said our suffering could be caused by our attachments. It is hard to let go of the life I led and pour all my spirit and love into what is left, but if I don't learn to love only that which cannot be taken from me, I will be truly left with nothing.

Buddha had said you can only lose what you cling to, and I remind myself of this a lot.

Let go!

My desire to have my arms and legs back is an insatiable, obsessive craving, and I am clinging at the wind because so much is already lost.

I focus on letting go. It is a daily battle to let go of that life and this body. I am learning to react and respond to my negative emotions in a way that lets me validate them and yet move on, and it is no easy feat.

I practice *metta*, loving-kindness meditation in which I extend first self-love, then love to those that are the easiest to love, down to the more difficult. For me sometimes that is self-love, too.

A meditating mind lets go, and mine is and holds on tight, intent on me torturing myself. Still I practice.

I believe meditation is a real science, so to me that means real hope. Imagine, my mind becoming healthier just by the way I think! If every moment throughout one's life offers an opportunity to be relaxed and responsive or to suffer unnecessarily, I choose peace. ♦

Excerpted from the author's self-published memoir Iron Girl: Tomboy, Tradeswoman, Tetraplegic (2020).

ISOLDE KEILHOFER

MAGNIFIER

convex lens frame handle form
magnifier 放大鏡 lente lupa
 held in a spectrum of languages
 small window huge page makes
 large tiny bites vastness beyond
 scope broad life in narrow focus
 cage of dwindling sight, sun rays
 drawn into glass-oh-kindling fire
 raging at the dying light — handle

loss
 with
 care
 grip
 hold
 firm
 eyes
 fade
 fast

Note:

Traditional Chinese:

放大鏡

Fàngdàjìng

JACOB THE LISTMAKER

DEVON WELLS

To Jacob's mind, the war with disorder had always persisted, waging across time and space long before he had taken his first breath. He was born into it, wailing to guard himself from the harness of reality, even as nurses clamped his umbilical and wiped him clean.

The conflict only worsened as he grew. He flared at stones in his yard, paper clips in the junk drawer, spent feathers on the playground, mushrooms stirred by the rain. The horrors mounted until, intuitively, his mother unearthed a shoebox from her closet. "To keep track of things," she said as she placed a ruthless hickory nut inside and slid it forward for his mimicry.

Jacob glared, distrustful, but soon warmed to the order his shoebox imparted. Before long, though, his mother felt otherwise. Within the year, their house teemed with ephemera gleaned from the world, miring them deep amidst sticks and leaves and bits of string.

"What if we kept a list of things," his mother said, toeing aside a pine cone.

"Perhaps we don't need to keep the items themselves, to bring the refuse of the world inside. We just need a list."

She presented him a notebook and a pen, red and bright, to occasion the change. Again suspicion rose, but Jacob slid one tentative foot forward to accept the stationery. He eased off the cap and brandished the ballpoint at the furniture before his mother, gently, directed it toward paper. Under her guidance, a chain of circles coaxed the ink to flow. Jacob bloomed. Together, they scrolled the pen across the page; the word "Pen" filled the topmost line. "Pen cap" appeared on the second. Then "Notebook." At the top of the page, in block capitals, they wrote "THE WORLD."

In coming weeks, Jacob's skill for writing improved as he surveyed the kitchen to list the objects found—a table, chairs, the faux-marble counter, plates and bowls, mugs and tumblers, the special cup he reserved solely for milk. On his own, he wrote "Fridge," then "Magnets," then "Takeout menu from Ding Ho's." He opened the refrigerator and wrote "Milk, 2%,"

and "Blotchy apples," and "Eggs," and "French dressing," and "Dressing bottle."

His mother asked about his new occupation.

"I'm keeping track of things," he replied. "Like you said." He then wrote "Mama" in the notebook. Then, "Jacob."

His scouting advanced. Jacob listed the items in his boxes and drawers (delighting his mother, who hurried them curbside for pickup). He listed his clothes, books, and toys. He entered their yard and listed the grass, the tulips, the dandelions, a robin, a gray squirrel, and a bug with a lustrous blue thorax.

When school began, Jacob encountered an untapped well for listing:

- Teachers
- Students
- Jackets
- Shoes
- Backpacks
- Lunch tins
- Pencils

- Textbooks
- Chalk
- Blackboards
- Blackboard erasers
- The class bunny
- A soccer ball
- The field
- The sky
- Clouds
- The school
- The front entrance
- The rear entrance
- The emergency exits
- The kindergarten classroom front window
- The kindergarten classroom side window

and so on—an interminable resource for his register.

One day in second grade, as the recess bell rang, Jacob contemplated the school building itself. He saw the bricks that formed the structure, and had recorded “Bricks” in order, but found his entry meager. There were many bricks and they each maintained an essence, while together they formed a whole. He determined that each brick required an entry of its own. He wrote “Red brick, top left, front of school,” then “Brown brick, next to the red brick, top left, front of school,” then “Tan brick, next to the brown brick, top left, front of school.” He began a fourth entry, but Ms. Marillac appeared to speed the children indoors.

The brick subsection commanded three weeks of lunch and recess to complete. While he was occupied, Jacob’s classmate Colin asked him to play catch twice, then tag, then four square before tiring of inquiry. The other students and teachers conspired rumors. Ms. Marillac checked on him.

“What are you doing, Jacob?” She dipped low, situating her face to match his position.

“I’m making a list,” he said.

She nodded. “Did one of the other boys make you do this?” she asked.

“Oh no,” he replied. “I’m just trying to keep track of things.” He set the exchange on the next line of his notebook: “Conversation with Ms. Marillac.”

Through garbled sobs, he explained to her his trouble with the scales of the universe . . .

When spring arrived, Jacob’s mother took him to the beach. As they descended the boardwalk, Jacob continued to list entries that spanned fields both deep and near. He wrote “Beach,” then “Stretch of beach from the big rock, running left” and “Stretch of beach from the big rock, running right.” Then, “Rocky cliff” and “Part of the rocky cliff that sticks out” and “Part of the rocky cliff that broke off” and “Part of the rocky cliff that looks like the class bunny (a bit).”

“Why don’t you play in the water, Jacob?” his mother said. “It’s warm and encouraging.”

“Maybe later, Mama,” he said. “I have to keep track of things.”

Jacob stood above a tidepool on the left stretch of the beach and recorded “Tidepool.” He added its crevices, its baubles of seaweed, its fragments of fiddler crab, then, conclusively, the flecks of feldspar and schist themselves that had merged to allow the ocean’s ingress.

By this point, Jacob had filled many notebooks and run out many pen cartridges. Upon their arrival home, he started a new notebook to index his work: “Notebook about pens and kitchen stuff and Mama’s makeup,” “Notebook about bricks in the school,” and so on.

Someday, I’ll need a notebook about the notebooks that just keep track of notebooks! he thought.

Near semester’s end, Ms. Marillac guided Jacob’s class through the levels of the biosphere. A textbook showed the Earth on one page, a forest on the next, then a tree, then its branches, then the structure of its cells, its molecules of lignin, of cellulose, and, ultimately, the composition of atoms, chiefly carbon, its sextet of electrons reeling.

These images exposed Jacob, for the first time, to the long, concealed truth of his mission. To record things in full—at a subatomic or, indeed, an atomic level—was unworkable: Any one tree would require many human lifespans, and many, many notebooks. Dejected, as the bell rang and his classmates fled to the playground, Jacob’s terror returned with the realization of his bounded efforts—and, truer, the boundaries of his capacity itself.

His screaming drove the school to call his mother. She soon arrived to see her son pounding the classroom rug in agony. As in years previous, she longed to embrace her child, but his size and strength now portended injury. Instead, across the room, she directed him in quiet breathing, but the boy could not hear her above the clamor of the reality he confronted.

Eventually his crying stilled. His mother took him home. Through garbled sobs, he explained to her his trouble with the scales of the universe—how the limits of existence were dooming his effort.

She listened with patience. “Does your list require this information? This specificity?” she asked. “Each word is a container, you see. Those atoms and molecules that cause your distress are still present, built into the entries for ‘twig’ and ‘branch’ and ‘tree.’ The subcomponents and their meaning remain.”

He considered her position. “But . . . I have to keep track of things,” he sniffled. Together on their davenport, they turned the pages of his latest notebook and identified the tiers of nature the entries held within them. The exercise calmed the boy. Although bruised and brokenhearted, Jacob found he could do nothing but accede to constraining all new listings to the visible.

Life flowed through the summer as Jacob filled more notebooks in descending frames of detail. “My stuffed tiger Joony” gave rise to “Blue stain on Joony from my marker set” to “Marker ink” to “Cobalt aluminum oxide” (the pigment confirmed by the customer support line of Initial Markers Ltd. of Cortland, Illinois).

He continued until, one fall evening, the television raised the prospect of spacetime.

“Scientists now treat time as a dimension,” said his program’s narrator. “Objects not only have height and width and depth, but they also span positions in time.”

Jacob listened in horror. If this were true, even his limited list would guard against only slivers of existence. Atoms may have punctured his defenses, but spacetime broke down the concept of defense at its core. Time splintered the force of reality into guerrilla units of shakes and jiffies. To list it all, as though a directory, was to embrace a failure as vast and vacant as the universe itself.

Tears welled in Jacob’s eyes and his breath quickened, priming an explosion. But then, the narrator continued.

“At the opposite end of our understanding, the world becomes stranger still. As the universe expands beyond the planets, incredible things are happening at the smallest levels. Particles blip in and out of existence. Objects affect one another across

enormous distance. Things become real only as we observe them.”

The tears dried. Jacob settled.

“Ahh,” he cooed. “I don’t need to track everything I can imagine—all the dirt beneath our lawn, every ant in America. If the world is only what I can see, I only need to keep track of those things in front of me.”

He opened his notebook and wrote “*Origins* episode on quantum mechanics, Saturday, September 25, 1981.” He checked his watch and added, “8:57:22 p.m.” He finished the line as his mother spirited him to bed.

Despite the new conditions, Jacob’s ambitions struggled. Listing moved slower than reality—even the flakes he could access. “Yellow warbler in oak tree at east corner of house, 5:56:07 p.m.” and “Yellow warbler 5:56:08 p.m.” demanded several seconds each to set down in his brisk scribble. His hand ached from the frenzy of writing. His rate slowed. The grains of the tangible, as they hardened into history, still overwhelmed him.

School brought a blitzkrieg of untraceable moments. When he arrived home that Monday, Jacob retreated to his bedroom. In there, he hoped, he could filter what he observed—he could keep his backlog of entries at bay. But even in his sanctuary, the light pouring through the window reflected his possessions and flooded his senses.

“It’s still too much!” he moaned. Jacob hauled shut the curtains, set his notebook on his desk, and gathered the things he could hide. He clutched his clothes and his shoes, his books and toys, and shoved them to the back of his closet. He retrieved the pictures from his wall and unplugged his bedside lamp, adding them to the pile. He dismantled his chair and placed the meaningless limbs with the rest, then turned cross-legged away from the bed that was too capacious to transport

alone. With eyes shut in bliss on his carpet, for minutes he resisted the advance of the world around him.

* * *

His jeans infiltrated first. A slight tickle, then an itch, then the threads of denim cracked open his fortress of barrenness and clawed their way into his world. A tumult of sensation followed—the scratch of the tag on his T-shirt, the churn of a lawnmower in the distance, the pressure of his ankles beneath his knees, the temperature of the room on his lips.

“It’s coming too fast!” His awareness devoured his surroundings like a black hole. Rushing, he tore his clothes from his body and launched them into the hall, then stood in the center of his room, upright and bare, fighting to block any phenomena. He held his notebook in one hand and his pen in the other.

There, hours later, the ambient chill quaking his bones, his mother found him writing:

“A boy making a list.”

“A boy making a list.”

“A boy making a list.”

“A boy making a list.”

“A boy making a list.” . . .

And she marveled in anguish at what becomes of us when we try to reckon such grandeur. ♦

ALLEGRA M. MARCELL

ADVOCACY Is

Advocacy is shouting daily
 About the worth of the person
 Who society should include,
 Because no one realizes
 Or believes you,
 But doing so figuratively, mindfully, demurely,
 So as not
 To offend anyone
 Even if it is your loved one
 Who has been offended.
 Advocacy is sometimes screaming into the void
 Alone.
 Advocacy is a Sisyphean,
 Herculean
 Act of love,
 A daily exercise in existentialism,
 About someone so magical,
 That everyone they could touch
 Would glow,
 If only everyone would stop
 And listen.
 Advocacy is asking people to hear you
 When very few know how.
 And sometimes it is paying for the right person,
 With the right degree,
 And the right job title,
 Simply to repeat your words,
 To make them audible.
 Advocacy is frustration,
 Banging your head repeatedly against a
 Brick wall
 But somehow willing it not
 To hurt.
 It is wanting to go scorched-earth
 But reining the impulse in.
 Advocacy is intuition
 And saying the quiet part
 Out loud,
 Pointing out that the emperor,
 In fact,
 Does not have any clothes.

But all of this is not for naught.
 Advocacy is no nonsense.
 It is gaining knowledge
 And using it as power.
 Advocacy can be ripe with fear,
 But it is also fearless.
 Advocacy is learning
 From amazing advocates
 Who knew these things
 Before you even started.
 Advocacy is being gaslit
 But still showing up again,
 And again to speak your
 Truth.
 Advocacy is sometimes having friends and partners
 To scream into the void with you.
 Advocacy is weightlifting
 With the muscles of
 Your patience.
 Advocacy is teaching.
 And learning,
 And teaching some more.
 These are the experiences of
 the Changemakers,
 Who have visions of what life could be
 Of what we all could be,
 Together.
 Of what is possible if we just believe in someone
 And give them the supports,
 And opportunities,
 And space,
 And autonomy,
 That they need,
 Of seeing a person as an individual,
 And making decisions unique to them.
 It is honoring personhood,
 A celebration of someone's potential,
 And believing that they are capable,
 And have value
 And so much to give.
 Advocacy is cutting through the excuses
 And letting others know the expectations.
 Advocacy is saying "we're here,
 We belong,
 Show up,
 Be ready,
 Try again."

UNTETHERED

POPPY REEVES

Today's a good day.

Of course, that term is relative. To me, a good day means I wake up exhausted, but not too exhausted. It means I complete my minimal tasks without stumbling, or needing to lean against walls or counters, only pausing to rest in the chair that's never far.

Instead of malaise-blanketed skin covering a collection of muscles both shaky and leaden, I contend with a level of discomfort I can tolerate and ignore.

That's an interesting part of chronic illness. Ignoring. You'll never do anything if you can't ignore what refuses to leave you alone. But if you fly too close to the sun, dare to push your luck too hard, it will dig in its claws and drag you back—kicking and screaming optional.

It's a tightrope, a circus act minus the costumes. Toeing the line between indulging and refraining. A trapeze perpetually swinging from too weak to move and too strong to give up.

The gift of a good day is finite and not something to spend frivolously. It is a blessing to simply sit with my face turned to the window in less pain than usual.

Of course, to be human is to want more. And I am guilty of being profoundly human. Ben suggests a drive to the beach—my happy place, my sanctuary. I haven't been in a year.

My limbs feel more stable than usual. Capable. So I agree.

City lights flash by as Ben drives, long blurs in technicolor. My eager eyes drink in the activity we pass as my hair whips in the wind. Bars filled with dancing patrons. Restaurants and their tantalizing aromas. Groups strolling and laughing. I am privy to their private bubbles for only a moment, but my parched mind stores them away for later.

Proof that life still happens outside my four walls.

The only parking spot is roughly 350 feet away from the large stone steps marking the beach's entrance. To most, nothing. To me, something to size up, consider. These days, a walk of that length is an investment—something that will cost me.

My limbs feel steady. Ben and I link our fingers, picking our way over the grass as the crow flies. The breeze is soft on my bare legs, a temperature so perfect it's as if the air's an extension of my skin. Dusk dies as the sun slips below the horizon, giving way to that subtly magical atmosphere inherent to summer nights. It speaks of potential—something that, even after a decade of illness, I still believe in.

That magic, woven from the warm air and palpable joy of humanity, spurs me on.

As we reach the rocky stairs, a wobble reverberates through me. My head clouds, and my body demands rest. We sit on the stone so I can catch my breath, let my glitched-out cage

settle. But my soul ignores and flies off—there's too much to see to bother with trivial things like the expansion of lungs or trembling of legs.

In the sand below, a large group plays volleyball. I admire the way they move—quick, agile, and without limit. No one pauses to keel over, or collapses to the ground. It transports me back ten years, when I was healthy and strong, careening down bike paths, not a care in the world. Before my body betrayed me. Before I learned to distrust it.

They have no idea how lucky they are.

But I am lucky, too, to witness this display of vitality. It's nice to know others are moving. A concept springs to the forefront of my thoughts, one I cling to often: *mudita*. The act of finding joy in the joy of others.

I observe the volleyball players and I practice *mudita*. I smile when they do, cheer when they score, and press my palm to my chest, grimacing, when they fall. Joy, subtle and warm, curls in my center.

Beside me, Ben observes as my eyes rove, taking in everything I can. Planes fly above, ferrying people to their destinations. A bonfire flickers, surrounded by laughter. A boombox, muffled by distance, plays songs that were popular eleven years ago. I am simultaneously here and there, infused with nostalgia and haunted by past and present.

My gaze flits to the water's edge, longing. It calls me, a siren song of hushed roars and lapping waves.

And another 350 feet.

Looking at Ben, I jerk my head, a silent question. He nods. I remove my sandals, letting them dangle from my fingers as I clamber down the steep steps.

I hover at the edge of indecision, caught between stagnation (self-preservation), and risk (a taste of normalcy). One foot in front of the other, I tell myself. Just one more step. Then another. Just to get to the shore.

As I walk, my heart protests, indignant thumps inside my chest. My limbs weaken, but my spirit marvels. Around me, the world is so alive and beautiful, and I am blessed to be a part of it.

The sky is vast and wondrous, a black canvas tinted by the orange and white lights of the city. It's a cathartic, radiant contrast to the white bedroom walls that construct my everyday life.

We inch closer. My heart beats faster, my chest aches and my head swims, but the sand is so soft beneath my feet, baked warm by today's sun. A little further.

I collapse at the shore and relish the gentle wind floating off Lake Michigan, how the waves lap at my toes, icy cold. Around us, people swim, light fireworks, and play.

How very human, I think. There's something about the beach that brings out our inner children, pushes them gently to the forefront, allowing them to take over and do what we are meant to do—play and enjoy.

Even if I cannot physically play among them, I am there in spirit. I revel in the sparkle of moonlight on water, the unbridled laughter, and the few others who, like me, sit and watch as the world flows around us.

The sand is so soft and warm, and so is my soul. In my head, I am bathed in the collective joy of humanity, content to close my eyes and savor.

But my body disagrees, sending me distress signals of faintness and tachycardia. Reluctantly, Ben and I journey back to the car, pausing a few times to rest.

Fatigue shadows my previously eager eyes. I slump into the stiff leather seat, head resting on the window. Though my time away was short, I resolve to immortalize it.

I am home now, in my bed. But my mind, untethered, is at the shore, watching the waves and playing in the breeze. ♦

NAME

JOSEPH TRANCE

The marking pencil slipped from his hand, his eyes snapped open, and he whirled to face me. His wide-eyed look could only mean one thing. I reached for the PA mic in front of me. His 190 pounds rocked from left to right, his white fishing cap slid across his head, forming waves in his soft brown hair. A slight smile graced his lips. He looked so peaceful. I stood behind the desk that separated us and could have watched him for hours, but I coughed, and the peace was broken.

“Easy, Ben,” I said trying to keep my voice steady as I eyed his six-foot-four-inch frame. Too late. His massive right hand became a fist and before I could blink, he started to pummel his face like a punching bag.

I flipped the switch on the mic and yelled, “Graph Room! Code Blue!”

They came running and almost knocked me down as they bolted into the room—four strapping therapy aides along with Barbara, Lynn, and Tim. They pushed past me and surrounded Ben.

We stood in silence for a minute and waited. Ben scanned us.

Barbara, another Level III, came up behind me and said, “Yes or no?”

I hesitated, looking at him. Then, “Yes. Now!”

Like choreographed dancers, we moved in to take him to the floor. Ben backed up as he stared at us. But then he did something completely out of character. He laughed. It started out as a “heh-heh,” grew into a “ha-ha-ha,” and then into a belly roar. He laughed so hard his face turned bright red and he doubled over.

“What the—?” We stood and watched him.

“Now, that’s interesting.” Tim said. “Write it up, Samuels.”

Without facing him, I answered, “Yes. I will. For sure.”

I kept my eyes on Benny. I knew Tim wouldn’t be insulted, like some other suits would be if you didn’t look at

them. He had been the center’s senior psychologist for five years; he didn’t get insulted. Big feet shuffled away from me as he left.

To my left, behind me I heard, “You, OK, Rick?”

“Fine Lynn, but . . . wow,” I half whispered.

I felt the director move up behind me. And then with childlike innocence, she said, “It keeps the job interesting, doesn’t it?”

“Mmmm . . . yeah. It does.” I said, smiling.

“Later,” she said, and then she was gone.

Benny had stopped laughing and he was back to rocking mode. It was over . . . for now.

I turned to the staff that remained. “That’s it, people. No takedowns today. But . . . thanks for coming.”

The four therapy aides backed out of the room slowly, keeping their eyes on Ben.

“Rick?”

I turned to face Barbara. “I don’t know, Barb,” I shook my head. “It’s definitely new, damn if I can figure it out.” I shook my head slowly. “You don’t have to stay. I’ll be fine. I can walk him back—”

“Puzzle,” Ben cut in.

I turned to face him. He stared at me, a look I’d never seen before.

“What, Ben?”

“Puzzle,” he said again.

I glanced at Barb, who shrugged her shoulders.

“I don’t have any puzzles here, guy.”

He smiled and still looking at me, bent down, stretched his body like in a game of Twister. His eyes never left mine as his big hand zeroed in and rested on the marking pencil.

“Puzzle,” he said again. He picked up the red pencil and rolled it between his fingers.

“I’ll take that,” I said, eyeing the sharp point.

He started to hand it to me, but pulled back, turned away, and began to run toward the behavior graph wall.

“Hey!” I snapped. I reached out and caught him by his big belt buckle, before he reached the wall.

“You don’t grab things from people, Benny.” I snatched it out of his hand.

“Puzzle,” he said again. He snatched the pencil back, but then immediately shoved it into my hand. Then it clicked.

“Oh, a trade in.”

He smiled and began flapping his hands. I turned back to Barbara.

“He’s been earning puzzles for tracing his name. He trades in the pencil for the puzzle when he’s done.”

Barb wasn’t listening. She had that look. She was staring at the wall where I posted my clients’ behavior graphs. I was so distracted watching her, I didn’t see Ben come up behind me. He grabbed the pencil from my hand and ran to the graphs.

“Benny!” I yelled.

But it was too late. He ran to the graphs and began to mark one up with the pencil. I was just about to shove him away when I realized he was marking his graph. *His* graph.

To ensure consumer confidentiality, the graphs weren’t labeled by name. And even if they had been, Ben couldn’t read. To an outside observer, my graph wall was an abstract painting. Each individual behavior was color coded. Self-stimulatory behaviors such as rocking, hand-flapping, and finger-flicking were indicated by orange, yellow, and blue lines. Red was reserved for self-injurious biting, scratching, or head-banging. I had a caseload of fifteen consumers, and collectively they had the range of stereotypical behaviors associated with autism. All those behaviors were color coded on my wall. It took a sophisticated data-based program to find patterns. There was no way to distinguish one graph from another. But Benny had zeroed in on his. Silently I watched as he retraced the red lines of his graph. He would trace, stop, close his eyes, and rub the pencil between his fingers. That was . . . familiar.

“Rick?”

Her voice made me jump. I’d forgotten she was there. I slowly turned to face her.

“Yeah, Barb? What?”

But she couldn’t answer me. Her eyes had gone glassy wide, her face had lost some color, and there were beads of sweat on her forehead. I moved quickly, got a chair, and gently helped her sit.

“You, OK?”

There was no way to distinguish one graph from another. But Benny had zeroed in on his.

She was still looking past me, staring at Ben as he traced the graph lines. I knew that look. She was there in body, but her mind was occupied with a problem concerning one of “her people,” as she liked to call the consumers. It was a look I’d grown to respect. She slowly moved her gaze from Benny to me. Her eyes locked onto mine.

“I’ve got a tape. You should see it. Please.”

Barb never said please. She was always about business. Direct and curt, but she was one of the most caring people I’d ever met.

“Sure.” I nodded toward Ben. “Just let me get him back to where he belongs. I’ll meet you in multi-media.” I studied her face for a moment. “Need help?”

“No . . . thanks . . . I’ll be . . . fine.” She rose slowly from the chair, took a breath, and steadied herself. She looked past me and stared at Benny once more before she left.

Whatever it was, it wouldn’t let go. I accessed my iPhone and took a look at Benny’s schedule: functional academics. Sheila.

She was polishing her nails again; purple this time. She didn’t even look up when I entered the room.

"It's 'bout time, Benny. Where the hell were you? Did you fall in the bowl?"

I cleared my throat and she looked up and blushed, a deep red.

"Oh, hi, Ricky." She quickly added, "He said, 'bat room' and I let him go. I was just going to look for him when you . . ."

I studied the screen as Benny picked up a puzzle piece and rubbed it between his fingers.

I put my hand up. "Stop talking, Sheila. Give him his name sheets and make sure he gets his puzzle when he is done."

She rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Why do you even bother, Rick? It's not like he's ever going to sign paychecks or anything."

Sheila was pushing forty, a tenured trainer, burnt to a nice fat crisp. She had been with the center for ten years, never finished her BA, and had been passed up for promotions because of it. She had a rep for hassling supervisors, especially younger ones like me with graduate degrees. At another time I would have tried to coax her, plead with her even, to do her job. But I wasn't in the mood for her bull at the moment.

"Just do it, Sheila!" I snapped.

Her eyes got wide and she put down the nail polish. She studied me for a moment, blew on her nails and said, "Sure, Ricky." She pulled out the folder of copied sheets that had Benny's name outlined in broken lines.

"Sit, Ben-gi. OK . . . let's write your name, again. And then you can play

with your puzzles, won't that be fun?" She flashed me an ingratiating smile and I wanted to bust her in the mouth. The door rattled as I left.

Barbara was studying the screen when I walked into the media room. She looked up as I came in.

"Here, have a seat," she said as she patted the chair next to her. "Take a look," she said as she turned her attention back to the screen.

I looked, but not at the screen. Her face had regained its color, and her eyes had lost the glassy look. She was back to confident and strong, business as usual. But there was also an aura of excitement around her. I felt it as I plopped into the seat. I looked at the screen and there was Benny working on his beach scene. I looked at her again.

"So, what's the big deal? I've seen him do puzzles before."

"Just watch. Watch."

The edge in her voice and the look in her eye prompted me to look again. The beach scene puzzle was one of Ben's favorites. Sweeping blue ocean waves, large white sandcastles, and kids in multi-colored swimsuits comprised most of it. The top of the puzzle was a sky; swirling red, orange, and purple shades surrounding a bright orange sun. It was very pretty, but it didn't explain Barb's excitement; she wasn't the nature type.

"There! That! He just did it again!"

"What? What did he do?"

"Damn, Rick, shut up and watch!" she snapped.

I shut up and regarded the screen. I watched him for a while as he placed a few more pieces into the puzzle.

"I don't get it . . . so he does puzzles . . . What?"

Barb smiled and shook her head. Still looking at the screen she said, "One more time, look. Task-analyze what you see."

I studied the screen as Benny picked up a puzzle piece and rubbed it between his fingers. He picked up the puzzle box and looked at the picture of the completed scene. He closed his eyes and began to rock as he rubbed the piece between his fingers. He opened his eyes and immediately placed the piece that he had been rubbing into the right spot of the puzzle. I watched him do five more pieces the same way . . . weird. But I still didn't understand. I looked back at Barbara, the glassy look was back.

She pulled her eyes away from the screen and asked, "Well? What do you think?"

"About what?" I asked.

"Oh, Rick, you are so dense! Benny has been using the picture on the cover as a guide. He looks at it and knows exactly where each piece goes. Look at those pieces."

I picked up the remote, paused the tape, and zoomed in on the puzzle pieces spread out before him.

"They have no discernible differences," Barbara said. "But not once did he try to fit them in. He picks up a piece, looks at the cover, closes his eyes, 'sees' where each piece goes, and places it. He can tell where each piece goes by looking at the whole picture."

I thought about what I'd seen. "I think you're only partially right. I think he is also using the shape of the piece. Look at him rubbing."

I pressed "Play" and the tape continued. We watched as Ben picked up a piece and closed his eyes. He began to rub and I slowed down the tape and zeroed in on his fingers. A frame-by-frame examination revealed how his fingers

slowly moved over the entire piece: top and bottom surfaces, and then each edge, slowly . . . deliberately.

Barbara shook her head and looked at me. “He’s just stimming, like hand flapping or rocking . . . he’s just giving himself some sensory input,” she said.

A few days later I noticed Ben's behavior began to change.

“That’s what I thought too at first.” I searched her eyes. “But now I’m thinking he has a hypersensitive touch. So maybe he’s also feeling where the piece goes. Input from two modalities—seeing and feeling.”

Barbara didn’t answer me and looked back at the screen. In the silence, a scene from the movie *Rain Man* flashed in my head. Raymond, an autistic savant, looks at a scattered pile of toothpicks that have been dropped by a waitress. “Two hundred and forty-six,” he says to his brother. He’s right. Without touching them, just by looking, he “sees” how many toothpicks there are.

But Benny was no “rain man,” he was just a man with autism who had a weird way of doing puzzles . . . not exactly movie material. He was just Benny and that’s all he would ever be. I turned off the tape and looked at Barbara.

“It’s interesting, but where is it going to get him? How’s it going to help him in life? Where’s the functional value?”

She shook her head slowly. “I don’t know, Rick. Why does it have to get him anywhere? Maybe it’s just him doing what he does best. Is everything in your life functional?”

“Well . . . we do everything for a reason and—”

She cut in, “We work so hard to try to make our consumers fit into our world. Sometimes I think we forget they are people just like us. They really aren’t ours. We don’t own them. But we act like we do. We program every minute of their lives, looking to better them but—”

“But what? Without us, they couldn’t survive.” I said.

“Really, Rick? We work so hard to change them; cut down their self-stimulatory behaviors, teach them how to communicate and socialize, all to survive. But at what cost?”

“What do you mean . . . cost, Barbara?”

“What is the point of teaching them to survive, if it changes who they are?”

I thought about that as she continued.

“Look, you’re a musician. Like blues piano, right?”

It surprised me she knew about that, although I did have a rep for making noise on the keys in the staff lounge. I smiled.

“Grapevine runs thick here, Samuels, and I hear you’re not too bad,” she said. “Now suppose you were told you could only play classical. That you couldn’t play anything else, and that someone was going to shape your playing so that you could only play classical. Not a pleasant thought, eh?”

“But my playing isn’t hurting me. Benny pummels his face to a bloody mess, I have to stop him.”

“I’m not talking about the injurious stuff, Rick. Of course we have to stop those things. I’m talking about his puzzle bent. Why does it have to be functional? Why can’t we just accept abilities like that without looking for a function? It’s recreational. It’s a part of who Benny is.”

I was too concerned about Benny’s punching the stuffing out of his face to be able to appreciate his puzzle ability. I moved my chair back and started to get up to leave.

“It’s interesting, Barb. But it won’t get him a job. His review is coming up soon and I have to figure this thing out.”

“Just thought you would be interested, that’s all. After all he is yours.”

“No . . . he’s not, like you said, ‘We don’t own them.’”

I dragged my feet as I walked to the door; they felt like they were sinking in beach sand.

Barbara turned the tape back on and was staring at it when I left.

* * *

A few days later I noticed Ben’s behavior began to change. His self-abuse became erratic across all areas of the program. I had always prided myself on being able to find reasons for changes in my clients’ behaviors. Changes in activities, environment, medications, and staffing were some of the more common reasons but not this time. He started to pummel his face in the gym, which he usually loved. And in areas where we normally would have a problem, he was calm . . . sometimes. One thing that seemed to be consistent across all areas of programming was his *rubbing thing*. Reports of him closing his eyes and rubbing anything he was using were increasing. Coins, pens, even the buttons on the clothes he was sorting were being rubbed. Sometimes he would pummel himself and sometimes not. But another thing that everyone noticed was his smiling and laughing was increasing. He was having a good time with all of it.

I went through five years of past records, trying to find anything in his history that could give me a clue. But I only read what I had read before;

autistic from birth, Mom was a word processor, Dad a graphics software designer. His strongest rewards were puzzles and drawing. His drawings were more like scribbles, multi-colored and all over the paper. They didn't really say anything about him.

* * *

"All behavior is communication, Rick."

"But what is he trying to say, Wendy?"

His speech teacher shook her head in silence. "I don't know but if you stick with the premise that all behavior communicates something, then he's telling us something."

I left her office wondering what Benny was trying to say to say.

* * *

Every three months all consumers went through a quarterly review. A multi-disciplinary team reviewed the progress of each consumer across all skill areas; behavior, socialization, and communication were also discussed. On the day before his review, I had a stack of Benny's behavior sheets to go through. In the old days, I would have attempted to graph the data myself. But I just couldn't, not this time. So, I took the stack of papers that pinpointed the frequencies, dates, and times of his self-abuse down to the computer room. There were graduate students who would do the data entry into our computers. They would organize it all by date, time, and type. The computers would graph it all in about an hour. Maybe I'd be able to see a pattern if I had a visual of what it looked like.

Two days before his quarterly and I did something I hadn't done in years; I stopped in the Catholic church I attended as a kid. It had been at least three years since I'd been there. Religion just hadn't done anything for me in such a long time. I was an educated professional now. I had a master's degree, was a supervisor, and

had extensive training in my field. The rituals of the mass, confession, and the sacraments had lost their value to me. Still, I was feeling lost not knowing what to do about Benny. I had no idea why he was doing the things he did, and I needed help.

I sat there in the front pew looking at the representation of Jesus on the cross. I held Benny's file in my hands, contemplating. "I don't know what to do," I whispered. "Help me, Jesus. I know it's been a while, and I have no right to be here. But . . . I need help. Show me what to do . . . please."

In the silence, I felt a peace I had not felt in a long time. I was tired and sitting there I just let it all go. Somehow I knew He heard me and it was going to be alright.

I spent the better part of the day before his review trying to update Ben's goals and decide what life skills I could plan out for this giant of a client. He had no special math or music abilities like some other clients with autism. He wasn't especially good looking, and even his spontaneous social interactions were in question because of his recent unpredictable behaviors; many people were afraid of him. So, what could I possibly write that would improve the quality of his life? What could I write that would be of any value? I ended up writing, "Continue Goal" across all his skill areas. I made a recommendation for a "functional analysis" of his behavior, where an in-depth look at his behaviors would be done by a clinical team. It wasn't great but it was realistic. I looked at my watch as I shoved the paperwork into a file. I realized I was two hours overdue for lunch. I rushed down to the computer room, picked up the sealed envelope with his behavior graph, and went to the cafeteria. There I was sitting at a table, my mouth full of tuna salad when I took the graphs out and spread them before me. Ever choke on tuna salad? Messy.

The next day it was Lynn who finally broke the long silence at Ben's review.

I had spent about an hour going through his history, his behaviors, and all his goals. At Barb's suggestion I played the video of him doing his puzzles. I looked around at the team. I studied their faces trying to impress the moment in my memory. Along with Lynn, Tim, Barbara, Wendy, and myself, there were also a two "techies" from the computer room, and three graduate students representing the departments of psychology, special education, and communication sciences.

Lynn stretched, rubbed her eyes, and glanced at the graphs one more time before she spoke. She out a slow breath and then said, "Samuels, if this is some kind of sick joke, I swear I'll . . ." Lynn shot a look at the techs.

"It's no joke, Lynn," Barbara assured her.

"All behavior is communication, Rick."

"But what does it mean?" asked the grad from communication sciences.

"I have no clue," Tim said. "But, it's amazing."

"It is saying something," said Wendy. "Something . . . awesome."

"But what function does it have? How can we use this?" I asked.

"Function, meaning? We don't even know what this is," Lynn said, as she glanced at the graph again.

"He's communicating," said Wendy.

"The best way he can," added Barbara.

"He's telling us something very basic here."

"But . . . what, Wendy?" I asked.

"Who he is," she answered.

"But it's impossible. It can't be real," said Lynn. Her voice quivered with uncertainty.

I whispered, "Look at the data, Lynn. Look at the graph."

In one movement we all turned our heads and looked again.

I continued, "I don't know what's impossible anymore. But I do know that this is real," I said, gently touching the graph. "It exists. It's here, right in front of us."

"Wendy is right," Tim agreed. "He is telling us, who he is . . . through his behavior."

"His mind, his language, his behavior, all rolled into one." As soon as I said it, the swirling colors of the beach scene sky flashed through my mind.

"The way he does puzzles," Barbara said. "Just knowing where all the pieces fit."

"But, but doing puzzles and manipulating his behavior over

dimensions of time, frequencies, graph lines, and to get it all to spell—*spell*—by connecting lines, that's a whole different level. Do you realize what kind of mind it would take to do that?"

The scene from *Rain Man* flashed in my mind again.

"A savant mind," I said. "He's a savant, but instead of remembering cards or counting toothpicks, he calculates spaces, behaviors, frequencies, and graph lines."

"Write it up, Samuels. Do a search of all autistic savants. Go all the way back to the beginning, Kanner in the '40s, and see if anything comes up."

"I'll check all the communication journals and publications," said Wendy.

"I'll research other special populations in the journals," added Barbara, "but I doubt it."

"I agree," said Tim. "Nothing will even come close."

"Think they'll make a movie about him?" I asked.

"I don't know, Samuels, but there is a place for him in the journals. The research will find it," Lynn said with certainty.

Barbara shook her head and said, "Why can't we just appreciate him? He's Benny just being Benny. He's just being himself, like all of us. We should just realize that and appreciate him for who he is. He's unique."

"For sure," I said, as I reached for the graph. I picked it up and placed it down again. I could feel all eyes on me as I slowly and gently . . . oh, so gently traced the graph lines with my finger—the lines that so clearly spelled out his name: B-E-N-N-Y.

I still didn't know what goals to write. But I did know he had a place. Like a piece in a giant puzzle, he fit. I knew that. For sure. ♦

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DEB ROBERT

THE UNEXPECTED DIAGNOSIS

Keys jingled, heels tapped in rapid pace—a body full of energy.
Accolades, advanced degrees, a woman with self-made energy.

Lead with love, repair the harm, in forgotten public schools—
Boost the rigor, build a culture of good grade energy.

Change the world, it was my mission, until mine changed first.
Young-and-healthy flashed a grin, then died with a grenade energy.

Numbing pain spread through me; my legs no longer functioned.
A world that I had always known—my body—had betrayed energy.

There's no cure, the doctors said, *and unknown chance to worsen*.
Soon cognition turned to fog . . . my neuron wires with frayed energy.

“When *are* you back?” the School Board asked, “We’d like you to return . . .”
So I battled through the motions and I masked with a charade energy.

Behind the scenes I tiptoed on the border of my death.
My nerves burned fiercely, I had to leave—my future an unplayed energy.

So I managed fear, and loss, and pain, while normalcy receded:
Such a challenge not to wallow in *I-wish-I-could-have-stayed* energy.

But with tragedy and grief come silver linings often hidden:
I learned to water my own roots, letting healing thoughts cascade energy.

Loving breathing in when b r e a t h i n g was all that I could do,
Breathing out and letting go of the uncertain and afraid energy.

Get well soon, Ms. Robert, their words and cards sang to me.
Dear healthy past, I miss you—now we rise with a remade energy.

DON'S BODY SHOP

MIMI EAGAR

“**M**ommy, that guy Steve is on the phone again,” Beth called out to me from the family room as I prepared lunch in the kitchen.

“How ya doing?” The voice at the other end sounded relaxed and unrushed, the opposite of how I was feeling. It was the seventh time he had called that day.

He had called to ask me out soon after we’d met at the Parents Without Partners (PWP) barbecue, which thrilled me at first. But now, his obsessive calling was making me think twice about getting involved.

“Hi Steve, I’m doing the same thing I was doing a few hours ago when you last called. I appreciate all your attention but I’m a mother of two young children and I don’t have time to talk on the phone all day. You’ve got to stop calling so much.”

“I just wanted to make sure we’re all set for Saturday,” he said, referring to our weekend dinner plans. It was to be my first date since filing for divorce in January 1988, over a year ago. More than that, it affirmed my desirability as a woman, declared my sexuality, and was the first thing that made me feel good since my near fatal stroke in 1985.

He owned a condo in Princeton, a charming university town with tree-lined streets and quaint shops surrounding a beautiful ivy league campus. It was one of my favorite places to visit and walk around on a Sunday afternoon with

the children. I suggested going to a restaurant there which was far enough away from my home, avoiding the possibility of running into someone I knew. Dating had to be discreet even though my divorce had dragged on for more than a year, stuck in a nightmare of negotiations.

I decided to have him pick me up down the block so as not to risk the girls or babysitter telling my soon-to-be ex-husband I was out on a date. I awoke Saturday morning with an unfamiliar burst of energy and excitement pulsing through my body. I felt a sense of hope, something I’d thought was lost forever since becoming disabled with a weakened left side and paralyzed left arm and hand.

The day seemed to drag until it was time to get ready.

As I searched my closet for something to wear, I felt relief having traded elastic waistbands for more stylish belted pants. I had improved my one-handed dressing and its many challenges. I swapped my red orthopedic shoes and Velcro sneakers for more acceptable ones with elastic laces that I could just slip on. They were far from the boots or heels of my pre-stroke days for which I longed, but at least passed as more “normal” wardrobe choices.

After my sitter arrived, I waited for the call alerting me that Steve was down the block. I took one more glance in the mirror, checking for any last-minute adjustments, and tried to calm my queasy stomach and my shaking left hand. Neurological damage resulted in involuntary movements that

caused me endless embarrassment and were worsened by stress.

“You look great,” Steve said as he opened the car door for me. I slipped in beside him and was surprised when he leaned over to kiss me hello. I felt a familiar stirring below my waist, which I thought had died months ago. It was as if a part of me had been asleep waiting for some handsome PWP prince to wake me with his magical kiss.

“Thanks, you look nice too,” I said hoping to mask the nervousness in my voice. We ate at a charming restaurant, but my eyes never stopped searching the room for any familiar faces.

When Steve dropped me off, we shared a passionate kiss that left me wanting more. I remembered my first kiss in eighth grade and the sensation of floating through air. Only now my hormones were a lot more experienced than they were that night on the beach at age thirteen and still in braces. But the dream to continue the romance hadn’t changed at all.

“I’ll call you,” Steve said.

“I had a really good time. I hope we get to do it again,” I said and walked the half block back to my house in the dark. That night I found it almost impossible to fall asleep as my mind and body replayed the entire evening.

True to his word, Steve did call, and we went out the following week. I put my arm through his as we walked from the car to the restaurant and realized how good it felt to be able to lean on someone else. I’d relied only on myself for months. After dinner I slid over in the car until our bodies touched. This time my stomach felt a lot calmer, and the shaking hand had disappeared. I shivered as he caressed my thigh with his hand.

“Well, we can’t go back to your place, and my place is too far away to drive back again,” Steve said. “Where can we go to be alone?”

“You mean and not get bothered by the cops,” I said, shocked the words had escaped from my mouth.

We searched both sides of the street for a private place away from lights, traffic, or the prying eyes of onlookers or worse.

“Look over there down the street, Steve, there’s a body shop. It’s off the road and I’m sure no one is around.”

“Making out in a body shop, now that’s a first for me,” Steve said.

“I imagine a first for anyone,” I said, not quite believing what I had proposed. He pulled his car into the entrance of Don’s Body Shop driving past the lineup of dented, scratched, and sandblasted cars.

“I feel like we’re in a battlefield of wounded warriors, brave souls who survived their injuries, and now await their chance to be restored. I’m relieved not to hear the growl of guard dogs or sirens ringing as we’re trespassing on this private property. I can only imagine the embarrassment of having to explain why two middle-aged adults are parked here at ten o’clock on a Saturday night.” I said, laughing.

But my anticipation outweighed any fear I had of being caught. It was as if every hormone that had laid dormant for so many months from anxiety, anger, and depression exploded into one of the most exciting, passionate make out sessions I’d ever experienced in my life.

Maybe it was the paint fumes or the stars that shone down on the dented fenders, but whatever it was, Steve and I revved up at Don’s place for over two hours. Our engines overheated more than any of the run-down heaps that witnessed our marathon kissing session ever had.

I will never forget the body shop where we made out with unbridled abandon. It was where I realized that even beat up, damaged models, like me could get a second chance at life.♦

MARY ELLEN TALLEY

ADRENALINE CROSSWALK

I had to follow
as the teen bolted out the classroom
then pushed the high school double doors
to race down the sidewalk
fast as flight
and the hummingbird
within his locked
and seldom-speaking spirit.

How did he manage
to hit a hand of God
green light
busy street
to arrive just before me
at the burger joint
in time to order
a chocolate milkshake
with his few words?

The confused cashier
listened to his word shape shadow impulses
asking me whether to grant
the teen's request
as school nurse and security
burst in, relieved, sat at a booth
inviting him to join them.
I wanted to cheer, reinforce, proclaim
his cacophony of clarity.

But as our darting bird
settled
into sitting,
we all staring at the door
fearful he not try this rapid exit again,
I knew that my response to the cashier
had to be headshake,
my *sorry*,
no.

NAOMI STENBERG

THE BELLS

I have heard it is essential
to remember you are not your illness.

I have found that hardest to remember
when I am not doing well,
when my illness has devastated my life,
when I am living in the middle of devastation.

But when I really think about it,
sometimes while meditating
or taking a deep breath on a quiet street,
this is what I know:

No matter how overwhelming my illness can be,
there is a chapel inside the forest of my symptoms
where my true self, my well self lives.

And the bells ring on the hour.

DOUGLAS G. CAMPBELL

BLACK HOLE

brain to pen
the connection gets
lost sometimes
pardon my
unhappy consonants
and disappearing vowels
sentences falling off the page
into a crevasse so deep
they are often unretrievable
rescue attempts are
sometimes successful
jumbled or whole
they make their way
back to the light

You

SUSAN LEVI WALLACH

You wriggle to the edge of your bed, sit up, and put your right foot on the floor, then your left, making sure your heels align exactly with the edge of the rug. Then, right foot first, you pace eight even steps to the window, flip open the blinds, scan the street. Then you breathe. Your father's white Tahoe, which he always parks midway up the drive, is gone. You can't see your mother's white BMW, but you can hear her in the dining room, putting away the dishes from last night. Yesterday was your birthday. You locked yourself in your room minutes after "The Big Reveal," as your father had called it, and had been there ever since.

* * *

You had expected the cake. White frosting, with white piping circling the top, crushed raspberries between the two layers, the raspberries always still a little tart. Red and white. The same cake, the same bakery two towns over.

"I know what you'll like," the baker said to you the first time your mother

brought you in, and, even though you were sure she couldn't possibly and you'd have to show her how wrong she was, you did want a cake that day, it being your third birthday and three being a number you especially liked. You never went into that bakery again, but every year your mother ordered the cake and your father picked it up on his way home.

You always felt a swell of pleasure when your mother cut the first slice and you saw the raspberries, because that meant you were about to get your present: a laptop last year, a cell phone the year before, an iPad the year before that.

This year your father put a small box in the middle of the table.

"You'll never guess what's in the driveway," your father said, and you felt panic grip your throat as your mother said, "Just show him, show him."

"Every boy should get one of these for his nineteenth birthday," your father

said, opening the box and shoving it toward you. "Your sister helped me pick it out." Your father leaned close, a man-to-man smirk on his face. "Wait till the girls get a glimpse of you in this." The key fob had a red ribbon looped through the ring.

You were pretty sure you knew what was in the driveway. And you were right. It was just like the ones you'd admired in the television ads, all sleek lines and bright chrome wheel covers against metallic white or gray or black. But this one was red—still is, though it's parked at the curb now, the red of it hardly muted by the shadow of a weeping elm.

When your father tried to hand you the fob, you let it drop to the floor.

"C'mon, buddy," your father said. "Time to put that driver's license to use."

You ran upstairs taking two steps at a time, which meant you were really angry and ought to be left alone.

You didn't want the red one. Just because you like red in general—just because you swung your bedroom door for a whole morning, listening to it bang against the wall and catching the knob as rebounded so you could swing it over and over without getting fingerprint smudges on the white paint, until your father offered to call a painter that afternoon and have your room painted carnelian blush by tomorrow or do it himself—doesn't mean that *everything should be red*. Certainly not a car. Not some deep red the color of oxygenated blood so that if you crash the thing you wouldn't be able to find your own blood-soaked body up against all that red. You're sure that if you check, its finish will be perfectly smooth, no sign of coagulation. Coag-u-la-tion, a word that you think sounds as lumpy as it looks, not one of those roll-off-the-tongue words you like to whisper to yourself—pseudo, cerulean, obsequious. Never mind their meaning.

You look at the ceiling. White, perfectly smooth. Your father had drilled the painter on the importance of straight lines, absolute demarcation between walls and trim. The painter spent a week in your room, a disruption you hadn't anticipated. You went up to the attic each morning, pacing out the exact outline of your room below, listening for the sound of brush strokes.

* * *

The car was a different matter. It's not as if you asked for a car. Your birthday was disruption enough, with your mother at breakfast insisting that you make a wish before you blow out the candle that she'd stuck in the special birthday pancake she made for you. All that filled your mind was static, a noisy soot-colored jumble that made wishing impossible. So you said carbon, because that's what it reminded you of. You could have said atomic number six, and maybe she would have thought chemistry set and bought you one. But you said carbon, and she heard car, or maybe car *bonne*, as if you were telling her in an amalgam of English and

French that a car would be good. What you wanted was a dog.

"Oh, good," your mother had said. "You'll enjoy college more if you have a car. I bet all your friends have one."

**All that filled your mind
was static, a noisy
soot-colored jumble
that made wishing
impossible.**

You concentrated on cutting away the candleholder, a precise circle. You hadn't enjoyed your freshman year at all and you hadn't made any friends, unless your mother was thinking of the buddy assigned to you by Student Behavioral Health Services. He was a psychology major who kept asking you questions so he could tap your observations into his tablet. You would pretend not to hear him. Just as yesterday morning you pretended not to hear your mother.

* * *

That evening, your father came home with the cake and the small box.

* * *

For days you'd had the feeling that something good was about to happen. The air around you seemed to tingle against your skin. You found yourself looking out the front window a lot, asking your mother over and over to check the mailbox, till she finally pulled on her bathrobe and shuffled down the driveway to put up the red metal flag.

"There," she said. "When the mail is delivered, the mailman will drop the flag." Her voice was louder than you'd like. You couldn't really make out the words. It was just noise, like she was just one more person pitching

shovelfuls of gravel into your ears, so that once again you had to clamp your hands against your head to protect them.

Your sister once taped a poster of Munch's *The Scream* on your bedroom door. She'd stuck a white label to the figure's cheek and written his name in capital letters—HELLO, MY NAME IS JACK!—as if it were a name tag.

"That's you," she said. The next time you had to put your hands against your ears you screamed, too, till your sister skidded into her Jeep and your parents went to sit with their drinks on the back deck, even though it was January and they had to brush the snow from the glider.

* * *

Your sister has your mother's old Jeep, with a fat chrome grill that reminds you of the death head's you saw on a family trip to Miguel Allende, hanging in a stall in the marketplace. A mask made of leather and paint, silver teeth and holes for eyes—which your sister held above your head so that the sun shot through right into yours. Which your sister tried to force over your face till your howling brought your parents at a run and also a *policía* who knocked the vendor to the ground and held him there with a boot on his neck while your father tried to explain.

You didn't want that to happen to the car dealer, a woman who looked not that much older than your sister, except with sharp pink lips.

While your father went inside the showroom to "take care of things," you stayed in his Tahoe with the air conditioner running, the fan on high at seventy-two degrees, seventy-two being divisible by three, the third number in a Fibonacci sequence and also a divisor of eighteen, your favorite number of all time. All your pants are 36 x 36 off the rack. Your mother has to have the waists taken in—your waist really measures thirty—and you have to roll

each leg three times, each roll a precise inch. But when you look at the label, you know—36 x 36. One thousand two hundred ninety-six when you think of it as a multiplication problem. Or 72 x 18.

Your father had parked next to a red car. A violent red, the color and sheen your mother had painted on her toes once and then had to cover with socks till she found the polish remover and wiped off every bit of it. Your father smiled at you and then at the car. You didn't realize he was sending you a signal. You didn't realize that he intended it to be *your red car*.

If you had, you might have swung the passenger door of your father's car against it over and over until it wasn't quite red, until it had the pulpy cast of skin before it bruised. When your father suggests that you "take it for a spin" and "maybe drive home right behind me," and tosses the key into your lap, you pretend you don't hear him, don't feel the weight of the key. Instead you keep counting the buttons on the car dealer's blouse—you squint in amazement. There are nine: seven up the placket and two decorating the collar. Again and again you count, just to be certain, your lips shaping themselves over each number until the dealer's cheeks begin to flush and she turns sideways to face your father.

"Wow, that's one intense young man you have there," she says. She hunches her shoulder so you duck your head to try to see around them, to tally up the buttons one more time. But she crosses her arms over her chest as if hiding them from you.

Meanwhile, your father is talking on his cell phone, waving his free hand in front of his face. He says the word "color" over and over: color? color! color!!

"I know," your father says.

"But it is a great deal," your father says.

"Jeez, a gift like this," your father says. "Who would even think of asking?"

You rock in your seat, the echo of the sighs having become rhythmic and compelling.

Your father puts his phone in his pocket. "OK," he says, looking at the car dealer. "I should have left him home. Another time."

The car dealer sighs. "Most boys would be thrilled to get a present like this," she says.

Your father sighs back and taps on the windshield right in front of your head. "That all right, buddy? Three lanes of traffic would be a bit much to cross on your first outing, anyway."

You have to correct him: his first outing. He looks at you as if he is waiting for an explanation. As if he doesn't realize you don't have one. Ow ting.

Both your parents drive white cars. Your sister's car is silver. A spectrum of neutrals. You had deliberated for months, white or black, each one your favorite for a day or two, neither maintaining a clear lead. To tell the truth, you went for white most of the time, black gaining favor only briefly, and only after the ten cognitive therapy sessions your parents insisted you attend.

* * *

You rock in your seat, the echo of the sighs having become rhythmic and compelling. You rocked when you were a child. The floor was your preferred surface. Sitting in the middle of the

rug (you knew you were in the middle because of the medallion, because the rug was square, because your mother bought square rugs with medallions for your room and the living room and the master bedroom, the rooms you liked best, and you'd agreed that if the medallion lined up exactly with the ceiling fan it was OK that the room itself wasn't exactly square) and tipping back and forth—not for the repetitive motion (your therapist would talk to you about repetition being a form of stasis) but, as you explained to your therapist, for the motion itself, the knowledge that each time you swung your body through its arc at one point you reached perfect alignment with the very center of the medallion beneath you.

* * *

"He's a teenager," your father says to the car dealer. "You know how they can be."

* * *

You think your parents should get you a dog. A dog would be better than a car. You could walk the dog. You've seen people walking dogs from your window. The woman who lives across the street has a dog, which she walks every morning, still in her pajamas. A dog would be better than the pills you're sure your mother grinds into your morning cereal: you can see the blue and yellow bits floating among the raisins, the chunks of apple. Sometimes you go into the kitchen and the air itself is blue and yellow, the whole house is blue and yellow, and no matter how hard you try not to breathe eventually you have to take a breath, take gulps of air that turn your lungs blue and yellow as well. You will suggest a dog instead of a car. You will.

* * *

The Jeep your sister drives used to belong to your mother, before the white

Infinity, which was before the white BMW. Your sister describes its color as snot. To you it's dull gray. You've never seen your sister wash her car, though her boyfriend washes it occasionally, pulling his own car alongside and playing the hose over both and, occasionally over your sister as well, after which she charges at him and they run out of sight behind the garage. Your father's car, the one you're sitting in, has gray upholstery, which is all you see because you're slumped down in the seat, tired of this saleswoman and her buttons and her comments. You're trying to figure this out: how the math of gray and white allows for something red. All the way home you rock back and forth, making the seat belt rub into your neck until you feel your skin might break.

"Come on, Jack. It's an Audi. Trade you," your sister had said at dinner, just as your mother passed the asparagus. You were about to say OK when she started to laugh, and so you couldn't. You couldn't take a helping of asparagus, either.

* * *

You realize that the gray Jeep makes you nervous, blending in as it does with the gray of the cement drive and the gray of the lamb's ears growing in the garden and the gray of the winter sky. You think you will lose it against all that gray, and what good is a car you can't take anywhere and park and be sure to find again? A car you always have to keep in sight, that might become a mirage?

"Jerk," your sister mutters, but you're not sure if she's referring to you or your

father. You shrug and pretend to take your dog for a walk, even though it is thirty degrees outside and you're still in your pajamas. At the mailbox you turn around, pretending that the dog is pulling at the leash in a way you find unpleasant and distracting. You decide it is your sister's job to walk the dog, just as it is your mother's job to open the mailbox and reach in.

* * *

Your father keeps saying you should have a car in the same tone he uses to say you should take your meds. As if the car will make you well, which the meds haven't. As if the car is a new medication, one that will swallow you in its redness. A red like scalded skin. You see the car as a giant tongue lapping at the roadway, devouring everything, growing. This is what you explain to your father. "Sure, buddy," he says. "Probably could eat up the road if you let it all the way out. But you won't do that, will you, buddy?" He tells you to mind the speed limit. You're sure what he means is drive carefully, make sure that the number on your speedometer matches the number on the road sign.

You're sure he shouldn't be calling you buddy, which isn't your name. You're also sure he shouldn't be prefacing that *name that isn't yours* with "But you won't do that, will you" or "Sure" or "That all right"—all things he started saying after your mother started talking about the future, as in "his future" and "our future" and "what kind of future." You and your father are not buddies. His buddies do not live in this house. They stand around the grill in the backyard with him while their wives sit

on the kitchen chairs and sip gin with your mother. They reach out their hands to shake yours, though you keep your hands behind your back, clenched into fists that make your arms ache. "Bet you're loving college," they say. "What are you studying?" they ask. "Bet you can't wait to get back."

But you are not going back to college, even though your father said that this time he'll pack up your whole room—"Every stick!"—and rent the U-Haul again, arrange your curtains in precisely even pleats on your dorm windows. Even your rug, with its medallion in the exact center. But the carpet made a strange sound when you walked on it, like clay over gravel. So you didn't walk unless you hummed with your hands pressing your ears. Which made it impossible to carry anything. Your books. Your pens. Your laptop. College was useless. You will stay home. You will walk the dog when no one is looking. You will get a white car that you will drive from the carport to the street and back again.

Your father's voice is too loud. Even with your hands pressing into your ears, you can hear him saying that the dealer is willing to take the Audi back and will you just nod to show that you agree? Because there won't be another car, no sir, not after all this trouble. So hands over your ears you nod, because there always won't be another whatever-it-is. But there always is, and then another and another after that. Each thing just another thing, until your father gives up and moves on to the next thing. The thing that will change everything. ♦

EMILY YATES

RIP MY ADRENAL GLANDS

To my mom who drove me from LAX to St. Joseph's Hospital, hazards flashing, speeding through the carpool lane

My fingers went numb first,
Then my right hand,
The rest of my arm,
My toes on my right foot,
My right leg.
The right side of my face
Tingling as well.
I panicked, thinking back
To my high school health class,

“My—My—My—”

Fear clung on the word,
Not letting go.
I tried to connect my brain
To my mouth.
I just spoke a minute ago.
I needed to speak,

“My—my name
—my name is Emily Yates”

To let myself know I wouldn't die
In the passenger seat with my mom
Speeding down the 405.

“My name is Emily Yates”

I tried to smile,
To raise the numb
Right corner of my mouth,

“My name is Emily Yates”

But the smile wouldn't come
With the proclamation
Of my name.

“My name is Emily Yates”

And while I failed
To still the fear of death,
I thought of the life I'd yet to live.

“My name is Emily Yates”

And as my mother pulled
Into the drop-off zone of the ER,
The numbness faded like it came, slowly.

Feeling fled first to the right side of my face,
My leg,
My foot,
My arm,
My hand,
My fingers.
And I didn't die.

“My name is Emily Yates.”

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Author's Note:

In the winter of 2019, my adrenal glands failed and I was diagnosed with Addison's disease.



Erika Marie York, Blonde, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 30" x 30"

BOLD VISION

SANDY PALMER

"I am inspired by literally everything. Life is so beautiful and such a gift, I want to use all of it in my work."
- Erika Marie York

With canvases propped up against the furniture and some pieces on the floor in her living area, Erika Marie York opens the blinds to let the natural light flood the room. Freda Payne can be heard singing "Band of Gold," dollops of color are on the pallet, a brush is in her hand, and she begins to create. "I play music, zone out, and just paint. I don't normally have a plan, I just like to see what happens." The result is bold and vibrant. She uses thick lines, contrasting hues, and large shapes that grab your attention. Despite the absence of facial features on most figures, she captures the emotion of the subject with a head tilt, posture, positioning, and layers of dynamic color. "As long as there is paint on the palette, I have to keep painting."

Growing up in Maryland, she was surrounded by the work of her parents, both artists. Her father's focus was on drawing, woodwork, and sculpting while her mother was always

crafting, painting figurines, quilting, and creating mosaics. As a toddler she began coloring, like most kids, but she never stopped.

Also, like many children, she wished she had glasses because her entire family wore them. Then, when she was around eleven years old, she was diagnosed with Stargardt disease, a genetic eye disorder that causes progressive vision loss. "I was really sad and angry because it happened so suddenly. I just wanted everything to go back to the way it was when I had 20/20 vision. I just wanted to be like everyone else. All of a sudden, I had to sit in the front of the class and use large print worksheets and textbooks, and I was different from everybody else."

When life became more of a challenge as an adolescent, her parents were always supportive. In high school she found



Erika Marie York, *Still Life*, 2004, acrylic on paper, 26" x 28"

another advocate in her art teacher, Ms. Acree. It was in her class that York first worked on a large-scale piece. The subject matter was a still life. Having trouble seeing the objects, Ms. Acree encouraged her to take liberties with what she could see. The result was *Still Life*, shown above. "In the end, the painting was very abstract and I really loved it. I think it was the first piece I exhibited."

Outlining shapes in bold, black lines and choosing high contrast colors are signatures of her work even now, nearly twenty years later, partly because it makes it easier for her to see the image, partly because that's her style. When Ms. Acree told her she possessed talent and could exhibit her work, something within her changed. "Up until that point art was something I always did but after that, I understood there were so many opportunities out there that I could be a part of."

Fascinated by sociology while attending Smith College in Massachusetts, she ended up earning a bachelor's degree in the subject. During her time there she took a drawing class but found it very difficult because the expectation was for figure and still life drawings to look realistic. "We also had to do 'big crit' where we would criticize each other's work and I hated it. I spent a lot of time trying to get things perfect. Everything was supposed to look super realistic and I just couldn't manage it. By the time I finished the class, I was so relieved it was over. I didn't draw or paint for years after."

With Stargardt's, the artist's central vision is impacted. There's a blurry blind spot in the center that makes it difficult



Erika Marie York, *The Prayer*, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 30" x 40"



Erika Marie York, *Graffiti Me*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 22" x 28"

for her to see things directly in front of her. As a result, she subconsciously turns her head to the right or left to look around the blind spot and see things with peripheral vision. "I've adapted well since my initial diagnosis and most people can't tell that I'm legally blind. Recently, my vision has gotten a little worse, but I can still see a lot. I just continue to adapt to the changes."

No longer able to see pencil sketches on paper without considerable effort (needing to get so close to the drawing to see it that she began having neck pain), she now draws with marker. Her work has become larger as well, and when sketching out a preliminary idea on canvas she uses paint so she can see the lines easier. While most of her work is acrylic on canvas, she has begun creating some digital work too. "I like using the Procreate app because I can try out different techniques and textures and I can zoom in so I can work smaller but not struggle to see it."

York is a firm believer that everyone has something to offer. "It's easy to get caught up in the things that you can't do, especially with regard to having a disability. I could sit and mope about not being able to do something or I could figure out a way to do it my way. Creating art allows me to see all kinds of possibilities. I want everyone to take advantage of that. It's very easy to get caught up in comparing yourself



Erika Marie York, *Lonely Girls*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 24" x 36"

to someone else, and that is the worst thing you can do. If anything, you should be motivated by seeing someone else's work and let it inspire you to create your own, and share your unique vision."

Some of her works are reminiscent of pop artist Keith Haring, especially pieces like *Graffiti Me* and *Dog Eat Dog*, which happens to be her favorite piece. "It's my largest painting. I love working with a lot of space. The title comes from the shapes I can see in the painting. It looks like a chaotic map, a chaotic world. It was so much fun to paint because I paint really close to the canvas and when I finished, I was able to back up and see the piece as a whole, instead of one section at a time."

Her work was exhibited at the Pepco Edison Place Gallery in Washington, D.C., in connection with The Columbia Lighthouse for the Blind in 2014. It was her first professional show and was a memorable experience. That was followed a few years later by a feature in *The Washington Post* and she admits seeing her face in the esteemed publication was a surreal experience.



Erika Marie York, *Dog Eat Dog*, 2013, acrylic on canvas, 60" x 40"



Erika Marie York, *Keeping You Closer*, 2015, acrylic on canvas, 24" x 24"

"I try to use things in my daily life as a source of inspiration—colors, shapes, movies, and books. The mundane can be so inspiring." Something as simple as noticing the delightful shade of a blue dumpster can spark her imagination and cause her to wonder what she can paint on top of that color. The artist's zeal for life is reflected in her broad, beaming smile. As for her passion to create she says, "Art is so important to me. It's an outlet. I can create something that wasn't there before. I can create what I want to see in the world. It's incredibly freeing." To see more of her striking images visit erikamarieyork.com. ♦



Artist Erika Marie York at home working on a painting

FROM SCIENTIST TO STROKE SURVIVOR

ELLY KATZ

Author's Note:

*The spatial layout of this essay has been modified in compliance with Kaleidoscope's two-column format. You can read it here or go to www.udsakron.org/kaleidoscope-magazine-archives/ to read it with the intentional layout that poetically charts my zigzagging pilgrimage as I wrote through calamity to emergence. In the linked version, the left, right, and center margin shifts are intentional features of the artistry of this excerpt from my work of creative nonfiction, *From Scientist to Stroke Survivor: Life Redacted*, an account of survival and transformation in the wake of a stroke at age twenty-seven.*

Excerpt from Part I: Overture

Her first experience was a penetrating itch. This sensation was layered on top of blistering pain shooting from the right side of her head into her eye. It was not the kind of feeling diminished by vigorous scratching, as is the case following a bug bite. Hers was a jaw-clenching urgency to dig her nails deeply into the right side of her scalp and face. She felt ignited, as if a vial of lightning was injected intravenously. It was all-consuming and unshakable, despite her clawing. Agony raged through her. The one to ten subjective scale that doctors instructed her to rate pain stemming from her connective tissue disease recalibrated itself. Nothing could compete with this uproar.

That is, until the girl reckoned with her totalizing unanchoring. Suddenly, she failed to locate her entire right side. The once watertight GPS system between her brain and her body was breached. "Mom, is my right side on the bed? Where is my right side? Can you see it? Is it there?" Her interrogatories gushed forth, the questions colliding into each other breathlessly as her terror mounted. Her throat constricted around syllables. Her body plan felt remapped to an uncharted terrain relative to before. This was the after—the other side of wherever she had been, an elsewhere perpendicular to everything that framed her frameworks of

time, space, herself, and truth—she would not, could not, ever forget. It jolted her like a harrowing nightmare, a plot twist crafted in a science fiction workshop.

* * *

That is how traumatic cataclysms strike—in a slice of a second. The world you assumed was a fixture turns out to be a balloon puncturable by a sharp blade. Paradoxically, the nervous system absorbs loss almost as gradually as it heals from an onslaught—gruelingly and ploddingly.

* * *

The sliver of a blessing inherent in this type of tragedy is the utter uncertainty, the absence of medical prognosis as to what may unfold in subsequent months and years. Sometimes, the unknown is what rescues. She is disoriented in her body. Everything the girl learned in Harvard's evolutionary biology lecture halls capsized internally. She felt herself in a state of decay, as if she was a radioactive isotope leaking out of the lattice that held her universe up. Just as quickly as we enter the womb of the world, we can be pushed out, evaporated out of our current mentality and woken to hollow shells of ourselves.

She could not determine where her right side ended, and the world began. Her sense of boundary dissolved. Her spine morphed from midline into a period, a hard stop, followed by a landslide of empty space. Her sense of center was catapulted to off-kilter. It still is. She lived out of context, at a remove from reference, inside the splitscreen of her body. Her now overwrought and confused nervous system articulated a frightening fact. She forgot the geography of her right side, the drifting continents of ribs and limbs that were once paradoxically, disconcertingly, and lullingly welded to her torso. She could see it out of the periphery of her left eye. But feeling and seeing were so detached in her now. She longed to feel her right limbs against the gurney. She missed her once impervious right outline and felt like a vessel spilling out of herself, drop by drop, to the right.

Fear overtook her, gripping her in a chokehold, its sour taste festering on her tongue. Her mother stood beside her bearing witness, a mirror of dense horror. Despair pooling in both of their eyes. Silence enveloped them inside an igloo of trauma. Their mutual passion for language gave way to a stale quiet, an unfamiliar medium for both. They stared into the black abyss of immobilized space endeavoring to divine something ineffable in air.

Medical mishaps were part and parcel of what it meant to live in the girl's "before" body. Since age eight, hypermobility endowed her joints with too many degrees of freedom. She was always a step away from a kneecap or an arm dislocating. But the incidents she overcame with physical therapy were transitory. They did not etch themselves onto the pedestal of who she was and never jeopardized her potential. Now, for the first time, future and hope forsook her. An exotic vernacular of subtext—the semiotics of grimaces, wincing, gasps, and glazed eyes—replaced vocabulary, too frictionless and blunt to express her baleful umbrage, her immanence in silence that left her mute. She felt unexpectedly atomized, cleared out of herself, by a tsunami.

She firmly shut and opened her eyelids while whispering prayers to a Judaic God she abandoned decades ago when her genetic connective tissue disorder, Ehlers-Danlos syndrome (EDS), set in. In vain, she hoped that she was still in a daze from a cocktail of ketamine and propofol, that reality would kick in and the bilateral symmetry of the body she possessed

prior to the doctor's near-fatal blunder would be restored. But there was no exit. There was no backpedaling into the person she was only three hours before. The physician who performed the procedure swiftly emerged by her bedside. He looked too debonair in his bespoke suit and necktie, as though he were ready for a party or a date in the direct aftermath of what would be his greatest medical malfeasance. Did he know? Did she?

As he neared her, her inflection entered the highest register it does when her panic surges. "I can't feel anything on my right side. I can't move my right side. What's going on?" The words tumbled out of her. She did not have time for niceties.

"Some of the local anesthetic probably tracked down your right side," he answered curtly. His tone was implacable. "You are fine and can go home," he advised as he ducked his head to look at an incoming text message. Much like his advent, he hurriedly departed the building, leaving the baffled girl and her mother in nurses' hands.

* * *

If you are wondering why she refers to herself in the third person, why this girl remains anonymous, it is because *she* no longer is—that person forever arrested in the ember, of Elly's, of my before. She glares at old photos of herself with accosting disgust. She simultaneously recognizes herself and does not. Her past could have been lifted off novel pages. My past.

* * *

I muddle and contuse pronouns over and again throughout this narrative, as I grapple with the lack of distance between me and myself. I write through and into an experience so massive that I require techniques to capture it. Poetry, in its permutations and repetition, is the one steadfast technology I leverage for this undertaking. I am not concerned with making meaning but with coming as close as possible to it. Therefore, the source of this artwork is a hovering presence; trauma's scale is a forest, while my ritual consists of drawing a single tree, a branch even, in lines of words that have proven to be essential lifelines. I glue myself together by taking a step back from the "I," not to bypass it but to earn my right ultimately to occupy it again.

* * *

She turned her back on her *before*, removing the Harvard degree that feels like a mockery from her wall. She fumes with ire at the brutal contrast between these two renditions of herself and wants to yell, to punch something, anything. She feels the sediment of this ghostly afterlife aggregating over her fossilizing self. Where did that girl participating in impassioned class discussions go? Recollections flood her. She feels like she is being waterboarded as trauma uncurls itself, its weeping wound reopening anew. But she will soon realize that forgetting is a more devastating anguish, a clamping down around the nebulous clouds of what peters out of awareness.

How does one sit up with half a body? For that matter, how does one do anything with half a body?

No one warns you of the swift clip of tragedy, how you can blink and the tectonic plates of your universe rupture, swallowing you, dust particles discreetly falling out of the known world. She feels discombobulated and claustrophobic in the body she now shares with trauma. It feels too cramped for both of them. Her thoughts amass a surreal heft, a crushing gravity that threatens to break something in the brain that once made sense of everything. She has to set them down. Regenerative medicine was previously a wonder cure for her body, miraculously healing torn tendons and unstable joints from head to toe. Her succession of past successes with these interventions with the same doctor mollified any qualms about what should have been routine cervical injections, lending them the ease of stitches, or even of Band-Aid, removal.

* * *

We naturally “other” the infirmity we see in the world. We glance over and around individuals using wheelchairs, ailments of the elderly, the blind reliant on walking sticks, limbs casted and dependent on crutches, and stroke survivors wearing distorted masks. A multitude of mental and physical disabilities are not even appraised by eyes curtly scanning, by minds concretizing a single thought into a myopic impression, because—like my connective tissue disease minus my stroke—these invisible impairments bluster below skin and, therefore, are undermined, undervalued, and misapprehended. They are plagues, we convince ourselves, that cannot intercede in the zip code of our being, certainly outside the paved paradise of age twenty-seven. But no one

is immune to inevitability; it can besiege anyone at any moment, irrespective of age. We are all closer than we can countenance losing our ways and our bodies.

That version of her before October 24, 2022—the day on which the threshold was erected between her and everything she thought iron-clad—will always be twenty-seven, preserved in the trap of recollection. Her former existence does not bear any resemblance to her now, a blip in the standard space-time continuum that runs at a remarkable delay, in which minutes feel like hours. The narrow gates of disability are located elsewhere, an underground shadowland that only appears once you slip out of the socket of your ordinary, when you become a collage of machines and wires, your legs obsolete in the setting of your wheelchair, when your inner world stops spinning but the world outside continues to careen about its axis, when logic smacks against a monolith in the throes of unconscionable suffering. How blithely and all too casually it occurs, this machination of hurtling chance that sears you wide open.

The disabled do not have the luxury of swiveling their necks to face a diverting vista. If we could, we would hold ourselves at arm’s length, create distance where there is only proximity. We want to bolt, to outmaneuver, to outsmart our circumstances, but where can we run when our feet can no longer carry us, when we aspire to outpace the heart thrumming within our very skin? We have nowhere to turn to but within—a secret door opening that was never tried. We are shoved off the conveyer belt of mundanity and become refugees out of place, incarcerated in bodies that no longer know our names.

* * *

She noticed she had to use the restroom. How does one sit up with half a body? For that matter, how does one do anything with half a body? The girl is still coming to terms with all of this. She is, almost two years later, asking the same question. She continues to receive silence in return. She is learning to dwell inside these questions. She no longer feels compelled to meet questions with prompt answers, as she did in Harvard math and genetics classrooms just a few months prior to her surgery.

She is astonished by her disappearance, a seeming feat of legerdemain—that girl who unabashedly flung her hand in the air in math lecture halls, galivanted through science laboratories bursting at her seams with passion for the experiment she was about to conduct and assiduously drafted papers in complex genetics classes. She was aloft on her own becoming and never felt the evanescence of being human, even in the face of her fragile connective tissue.

Her hobbies, plans, and blueprint were so immaculately laid out—the Ph.D. program in genetics at Harvard Medical

School she was asymptotically close to beginning and her ultimate dream of a career in biotechnology. But that was derailed when the girl was curtailed-off from her known self and obsolescence set in before her life even reached its midpoint. She witnessed ordinary sloth off its meaning, becoming a senseless string of sound. The disabled are scorched in the crossfire of a nuclear code set off in their very bodies. It's only now, two years since trauma took her hostage, that she is starting to adapt to her body's adaptation, it is only now that she is determined to endure. She is the victim. She is the evidence. She is the survivor. It is in her blood, her personhood, the caldron out of which she is gradually growing a new human she has yet to know.

She has been so mangled, externally and internally, that the doctor who violated her almost stole her name, which she nearly legally altered to Grace.

* * *

But her name, my name, holds my story. I am not willing to discard my past, even if it now feels like an item on recall.

* * *

All of this reeks of fantasy to her. *He* took it all. *He* keeps taking more from her with each passing day.

How he could, with the aid of imaging guidance that offered him direct eyesight into his target ligaments in her neck, pierce the girl's cervical cord and medulla remains an unanswerable question. He superimposed a spinal cord stroke and a brain hemorrhage on top of her already unstable neck and connective tissue.

Four nurses hoisted her up by her extremities and carried her to the adjacent bathroom. They did the same to bring her to her father's car. Her parents deduced that if they could safely drive home, as per the doctor's orders, then they could certainly bring their daughter to a trustworthy hospital adjacent to their apartment. Trepidation blotted out her rattling pain, whiting out the world, a shoreline from which she was washed away as she lay in the backseat.

Her body was an object now, but that did not, could not, concern her. She observed agitation stoke her parents, as though by osmosis they assimilated her own. Fraught wordlessness flossed through the car. None of the usual music played. Even the talking navigation system trailed off into silence. After all, what could language do in moments like these? Were there words for moments like these? She is learning that oftentimes an absence of language is a word, that chasms can often cobweb more than meets the eye. She glances out of the window as nightfall skids across the horizon and her interior night begins to settle, a scar that may never fully heal.

Then, without warning, her present began to rip and tear at the seams of her once indomitable fortress of childhood recollections, gnawing at the paneling of her naïveté. Her breaths grew shallow. She panted, as though she were suffocating under the vortex of a riptide, the water spinning her into a dizzying tailspin beneath its bottomless depths. The wrenching, stabbing in her right scalp drowned out all else, even the lack of sensation from the right side of her neck down that half of her body. Who knew that numbness itself was a feeling, a hostile intensity?

She capitulated to it all—to the body that was no longer hers, to the soul that may be in partial flight to another habitat, to the presence and absence of everything she felt and could not feel. She let herself melt into the car's to-and-fro as traffic hissed and wheezed them to the emergency room at a Manhattan hospital. She could sense herself unspooling. The edges of the world were pressing in on her on all sides as her body was manhandled onto a gurney and into the scanner that would bracket and barb the rest of her life.

She is the victim. She is the evidence. She is the survivor.

An urgent question bounced off the walls of the CT scanning room, a refrain dripping with untamed concern. "Is my right side on the table?" Her voice did not sound like hers. It had an infantile and a near-tearful quality. It sounded so foreign to her that she shifted her gaze about the room for its owner. At age twenty-seven, she was accustomed to her maturing, almost raspy, voice. She adored her deliberate pace of speech as she selected words as though they were books at a store, testing out vocabulary as she tried initial paragraphs on for size inside her brain before committing to a given set of syllables or to a novel. But she did not have that aptitude now. Ironically, she was held captive and still within her body, but her brain was on overdrive, running at a fast clip to make sense of her biological collapse. The words poured through her lips in a torrent, one bleeding into the next as though a paucity in the space-time spectrum was setting in, as though the laws of quantum mechanics could be subverted.

Her memories feel blurry since that instant. She recalls the traces of her parents' tears as her gurney exited the exam room, the worry stitching into and smudging their expressions into hodgepodes of wrinkled skin and coiled muscles, the cool wisps of air entering her nostrils as a nasal cannula was inserted and hands wheeled her into intensive care.

But there is one moment, or rather, a string of moments, that shine through the cracks in her mind, a light radiating the nightmarish black clouding that time. Her mother is in a chair beside her and cradles her daughter's left hand, the sole hand she can feel. The girl knows she is a planet and a half from alright. She does not need to hear it to know it. While the girl comes unglued, her unity with her mother is unbreakable, firmly tethered to something that surpasses her downtrodden body, that supersedes anything and everything on Earth. The girl will soon concede that no knowledge nor education will pull her through this bleak quicksand, that her one true constant in this world is the woman looking back at her and smiling through tears.

* * *

Now, in the after of this insult to my brainstem, I am dependent on external oxygen delivered via nasal cannula. I am humiliated before my mother, who only greets my divested body with an abundance of fierce love. Her forbearance with me catches fire somewhere deep within, inducing me to begin to find nuanced enchantment in this vulnerability, to whisper to myself a less horrific healing story, to acclimate to hope's new configuration, to pinpoint it and to begin to quest what can be hoped for when the woman you invested twenty-seven years in becoming no longer is. My mother renegotiates the terms of my destruction in her quiet position beside me, her tender palm between my shoulder blades, a poem of touch sheathed in a benediction. This is our downsized, revised version of a hug, a caress that talks me out of my own emptiness. This gesture feels like Earth is sighing after holding its breath, awaiting an end to this *after* that does not arrive.

I am still on that same sensory treasure hunt for the half of me that resides in some subterranean basement of my nervous system.

During my eight-week inpatient stay, time developed an elasticity I would grow into, its intervals stretching into expandable wads of chewing gum. My anguish and loss seemed to dismantle everything, distending time, rendering it too taxing for minutes to carry on at their typical clip.

However, I was not alone. My parents became abiding pillars of steel. I knew and felt their unflinching allegiance prior to this tragedy but had never tested and measured the extraordinary lengths to which they would go to be with me during this trying course. They modify reality to every

extent possible as it uncorks before me so I can withstand the suffering that never stops. Instead of changing my name to Grace, I opted to find the grace in still being Elly. A year later, I decided that the doctor who maimed me plundered enough. I am still fighting an uphill battle and refuse to give up on life because of their refusal to give up on me.

For the duration of our time at the hospital my father slept upright in a plastic chair, affording my mother the only slightly more comfortable recliner. He captured levity just as he once educated me to ensnare the rare lightening bugs in Tennessee, prudently opening and tightly closing the lid of a jar to maximize the insects' longevity.

Each night, I took inventory of my right side with my left hand, groping until skin met other skin that felt like rubber, not anything corporeal. I am still on that same sensory treasure hunt for the half of me that resides in some subterranean basement of my nervous system. I am indefatigable in my futile effort to coax feeling back into the jumble of limbs I forget and remember, a broken record cutting into and out of consciousness. I dread the darkness of nighttime most; at least in daylight, I can see my right leg, arm, and torso and consider myself somewhat unified. In the darkest dark, the laxity of nostalgia tugs and tugs, a rope encircling my ankles, lurching me into ever-deepening waters of ruminative mourning.

The attending's pronouncement of the paralysis of my right half, fortunately, was expunged by movement's jerky crawl back into my right extremities, deserts of awareness. A unilateral corridor opened between my eyes and my right limbs, an unspoken discourse of motion that, more often than not, produces a chaotic frenzy of involuntary movements. My arm skyrockets through the atmosphere landing overhead, or behind my back, as I grasp for it, an anxious game of hide and seek. Other than my twisted visual field, another ongoing symptom of my bewildered medulla, the closest thing I have to a tracking device for my right arm is my mother. I awaken into twilight and bellow into the intercom system joining my bedroom to that of my parents for my mother. I seethe with maddening rage as I falter to feel my path with my left palm to my right arm, which is frequently dislocated overhead. I spend outrageously up to 40% of a day eyeing and babysitting my limbs, an ongoing dynamic of *Where's Waldo?*

It took me a month to navigate from my bedside to the commode, to stand but for a brief instant on a leg that was not, could not, belong to me. I feel like I free-fall onto air each time my right foot strikes ground. I spent the majority of that bed-bound hospitalization letting minutes tick by, hoping I could somehow trick them with my once brilliant mind into squinting into the brevity of seconds I had known so well, wishing for them to glide over me like tap water over hands.

If losses were a currency, I am convinced I could purchase anything. My right ear no longer hears the world but has become decorative. I cannot taste nor sense food in the right side of my mouth. I am deleted of depth perception and right peripheral vision, which has collapsed reality into a flatland inside my defective brain. The irony hits me like a brutal slap across the cheek that in losing physical perspective—paramount to the physics and math once a mainstay in my life—my mental landscape arborized, arraying too much resonance about mortality, meaning and heartbreak.

And what have I gained? Vestibular symptoms that render me forever spinning in the teacups on Coney Island, perennially on the verge of choking on my gastric acid and paresthesia—involuntary muscle contractions that cause my right limbs to flail about of their own accord and feel like micro-seizures rinsing through my right side. Imagine what it would feel like if every cell on one side of your body was converted into a vibrating cell phone. That is how I experience the world. Nothing staves off these persistent effects.

My survival could not occur in seclusion, because the modern world had, gallingly, not been overturned by my stroke. A significant portion of me, at age twenty-nine, is grateful for that fact—for the tablet on which I now make words meet, participate in online yoga classes, and listen to poetry. Technology is the vehicle through which I evacuate my body and enter the safety net of belonging. Yet, the cost is unrelenting. Before, I was a twenty-seven-year-old sometimes inept in distinguishing left from right. Now, I am an expert in that regard. In this *after*, I stuttered over who I was and desired to renew my lease on the girl who slaved with alacrity over her GPA and mistook empirical formulas for planetary gears. I thought I could calculate my way into a presaged future consisting of boyfriends, a nuclear family of my own, a scientific career, and a myriad of sacrosanct trivial experiences discharged of instantaneous hardships that prodded me out of my familiar. Who are you when all of your defining attributes are erased, save for in the biting stretch of memory? Life torn at its seams. Meaning seemed to decode its way out of my creation. I was amorphous, my right limbs adrift in translation of my trespassed nervous system.

Now, almost two years since my body hit the landmine of my stroke, I am revising how I live in this body. My mind alights on what persists. I am learning that the wall between my before and after is, actually, a dotted line rather than anything solid, more penetrable than impassible. While the doctor's needle distorted and disrupted my right half, it distresses me to admit that I neglected the toll that same misstep exacted on my immediate family—once invincible and now overcast with a trillion invisible fracture lines.

I am adapting to my shadow. I am rebooting myself. I am discovering that I am mutable, that there are components of my narrative I can include or exclude.

This sea change in what I can still control in this wallowing body does not imply that my grief has achieved closure. Rather, I volley back and forth between hiring myself and retiring from the project of my body a minimum of twice a day. I often feel debased, but I intuit a juncture between extermination and evolution and aspire to drive my way into transformation. In that vein, I am reaching toward my brothers and their children, weaving them into my incredibly mortal world, so that I am rooted in what is, what was, what will always be, no matter how my body behaves.

I consistently receive somatic reminders that I am, that all of us are, a work of art.

I undertake the massive architectural project of my body each day by staring my way into a mirror, into body parts on my right side starving for sensation, as I dictate into my phone precisely which ribs and limbs have transgressed their boundaries and the angles at which I find them. I spend two to three hours reconstructing and stabilizing my perplexing form and realize the sorrowful yet triumphant insight that this is my twenty-nine-year-old version of independence, that the endurance of my body and soul can never be recanted because I survived what should have been the unsurvivable. Oftentimes, my glance swipes across my face, and I see in my eyes something at once familiar and strange, someone inescapably mortal and shattered. I feel disjointed from my former life, uncertain how I landed here, looking for a through line yoking my before and after that does not exist. Then, my eyes ping to the illustration on my wall of neurons emblazoned with the word survivor in chalky letters. I feel a quickening of my own throbbing pulse, the seed of belief in *beginning* taking root.

Now, as I look my way into my being, I witness someone who does not want to resist a right side no longer leashed to her brain, someone who does not want to hurt herself more than she has been hurt, someone who views the long stretch of her shadow as the elegant child of darkness and light, someone for whom the words *tomorrow* and *walk* feel like electrocution from within, but someone who is unveiling the discipline of gardening her soul born of the infinite time and finite space of disability. I will always long for that girl I once was wandering through the loom of Cambridge side streets, elbow locked in that of a friend while discussing firing patterns of neurons and how they appeared like Van Gogh's *Starry Night*. I consistently receive somatic reminders that I am, that all of us are, a work of art.

I must reflect on the small but mighty graces that accompany my apocalypse. The hushed humming through my right interior—I yearn to know you, darling right side—you and I are torn asunder, but undeniably alive in this aftermath. An about-face of consciousness is taking hold, prompting me to quit my deluded post in the Grand Central Terminal of my brain and to practice listening intently to my body. I am a process, unfinished and unfinishable. We all are. I hope this impresses upon you how incalculably precious you are, irrespective of the state of your physical constitution.

My family no longer reaches into the pockets of planners or calendars—relics from another lifetime—but linger in the now. Just as abruptly as it was washed away, my naïveté courses through my shipwrecked body in absurd laughter at the outrageous mayhem of our days, keenly honed into my father’s witty banter with me as he pushes me in my wheelchair from kitchen to bedroom, sanctifying me with his jocularly into everything and nothing, the question drizzling with tragicomedy of what vacation means anymore in the sling of our surreal reality.

My once ample energy generator dwindled in the bruise inside my brain, and I dumped the remainder into anger and resentment lava hot. I could sense my cheeks grow beet red, tension wire lines across my forehead and into my jaw, at this derangement from self, at the rapacious doctor who flung me out of my own form. My world became one of austere sharp corners. I was thrown out of linearity, out of sync with the world, on some intergalactic space shuttle meandering to another universe. Even syllables no longer integrated into sense. The world was a cruel mutiny, a museum out of bounds. I felt terrorized by my story. I fretted. I itched to relent. After eight mentally abusive months, I decided that courage was something ripe I could pluck. It dawned on me that how I tell my story was, unlike its thorny facts, up to me. My oxygen-depleted brain was kinked, a seemingly useless organ no longer treading thoughts that once marathoned through me in linear algebra lectures.

* * *

I regained the leisure of digesting literature within the overground tunnel of the hyperbaric chamber, a sealed cylinder of pressurized oxygen readily accessible to my bloodstream. I now knock on doors of terse marvelous verses that diminish my loneliness, connect me to what feels like the entire galaxy. The physical synapse decimated by the doctor’s blade was replaced by more a subtle synapse, a webbing between me and other authors. David Whyte, Marie Howe, Ada Limón, Emily Dickinson, T. S. Eliot, among other voices, cut into me bloodlessly, poetry that rattles through me with gilded uminosity. I listen to their mellifluous work as my socked feet dance on the walls of the chamber. Riffs of rhythm and meter perfume the silence, notes shimmering in the air. I am struck by an epiphany that the decadent taste

of faith shaped into words was not hijacked by my stroke. Their language reinstates my incorrigible obsession with the written word, repatriates me into chains of syllables. I view poetry as an internal audit, a means of feeling my way into this stormed body.

**I define home in my body, this
remarkable assemblage of soft flesh
that never left me and is now
my tutor.**

I have hesitantly and slowly found the pen inside my vocal cords, the means by which I am dictating my way into this sentence. Life is inside out, flipped, but I am leaning into being on the cracked streets of this body, this disabled species of existence, forging my own legacy without an itinerary. I still feel inarguably regressive, torn like a magazine article out of my life. I refuse to regurgitate my unmaking in plain language, to lend it another life in my mind. But, as a writer, I am propelled to create and could not write about anything other than this untemplated side of being, a lion roaring ceaselessly in my ears. So, I turned to poetry, a verbal indirect attack through scenic tributaries of metaphor, not the pointed, unpolished truth of prose. At our essences, we are all poems, emptiness searching for form on the formlessness of the cosmic white page.

The words somersaulted past my lips only once I redeemed the garbled texture of my right side from trauma’s tirade. “Mind-Body Solutions,” a virtual adaptive yoga community founded by Matthew Sanford, is my path back into fellowship and into my body. Before my spinal cord stroke, I never uttered the word yoga, let alone engaged in its embodiment. But, as months transpire, I refine laughter, warrior pose, mountain pose, prayer pose, camaraderie in silence, as I re-pose over and again, learning how to occupy space again, to redraft my story as I witness my body’s poise. I drape my shoulder blades downward and gently reach my sternum forward, a smile unfurling itself on the inside of my torso. I define home in my body, this remarkable assemblage of soft flesh that never left me and is now my tutor. Each member of the “Mind-Body Solutions” congregation is a stanza, the physical geography between us the necessary white of the page glowing with the ineffable. We carve positive and negative spaces, become something uniquely and unexpectedly united over Zoom.

We seek infinity within our disabled bodies. The oceans and continents between us seem to condense into a singularity. As we find ourselves in each other’s eyes, undistracted by social media, we are beheld, heard, segmented yet, somehow,

transcendently whole. The delicate significance encrypted in our kinship of recognition, an almost hallowed well of self-reclamation, is so profound that it does not survive criticism or analysis. It demands plunging immersion in attentive presence. My bungled attempts to sift it through mental concepts only reduce its experiential nectar into a sort of scholarly chemical water diluted of its magic. We are not scared of our impermanence. We are coterminous with everything. We are all unbound. My right side is not my dark nemesis. Not anymore. I hug my unfeeling right shoulder with my left hand, returning my body to its nest, reestablishing my right riverbanks. I extend my compromised spinal cord from my sacrum to the crown of my head, gesturing with my right arm—my current third cousin, my

soon-to-be neighbor, my will-be self. I will not begrudge you, no matter your recession from my brain.

I am an explorer rediscovering the unmapped and unmappable rugged terrain of my body. I am no longer afraid of the absences in my form, the lacunae in the logic that unwind and reincarnate us all in our incredible, untenable, and terrifying humanity. We are fragmented. We are undivided. We drink paradox. We are Armstrong on the moon of disability, showing the world how wondrous we are, how irreparably mortal we are. We know how to become our own constellations. There is a mixture of sorrow, divinity and beauty that threads us through on the ledges of selves. We are evolving, alive multicolored watercolors that simultaneously cry and sing. ♦

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

Kaleidoscope magazine has a creative focus that examines the experience of disability through literature and the fine arts. A pioneer in the field of disability studies, this award-winning publication expresses the diversity of the disability experience from a variety of perspectives: individuals, families, friends, caregivers, educators and healthcare professionals, among others. The material chosen for *Kaleidoscope* challenges and overcomes stereotypical, patronizing, and sentimental attitudes about disability through nonfiction, fiction, poetry, and visual art.

Although the content focuses on aspects related to disability, writers with and without disabilities are welcome to submit their work.

• Double-spaced, typewritten • 5,000 word maximum • Electronic submissions preferred

Submit online at www.KaleidoscopeOnline.org or via email at kaleidoscope@udsakron.org



NELLIE AND JUNE AND LITTLE DAVY CROCKETT

WENDY SHEEHAN

June is happy to have her niece Nellie move in with her, although she knows that Nellie can be a bit of a handful, even at age fifty. She, June, has no other family and is not getting any younger. She's alarmed to hear Dr. Cassidy mumble something about brittle bones, and the risk of falling. Truth be told, living expenses are stretching her tiny budget. She could use Nellie's disability check and, together, they could make ends meet and have a little extra for an occasional night of bingo at the Elks.

Nellie realizes her aunt should have someone living with her, and she's ready to leave the high-rise and the Mill City Housing Authority.

"It's like living in a tall, cramped box," she tells June. "I've wanted to get out of there for years."

Nellie wears a brace because her right leg is three inches shorter than the left. She walks with a lurch, and her only regret is that she can neither run nor climb. But she has a lot of energy, and as soon as she moves in with June she

gets right to work straightening out the clutter. June finds it difficult to take trash and recyclables out to the curb, so things pile up.

By the first of September, Nellie feels she's done as much as she can in the four small rooms. She'll strip wallpaper and paint the walls when the weather changes. Besides, she's itching to get out and do some gardening. In the high-rise, she had to make do with a potted geranium on the window sill. She had a tiny plot in the community garden, but someone picked her flowers, and the zucchini and cucumbers disappeared as soon as they ripened. After a while, Nellie gave up.

June's backyard is a tangle of weeds.

"I thought you planted some tomatoes," Nellie says.

"Well, I did, three, in fact. I was about to pick 'em when that nasty little boy next door stripped the vines and threw the tomatoes against the house." June points to the light blue siding. "Look at that, red smears. Couldn't get it all off."

Nellie wonders if vandalism has followed her from Mill City. She looks around at June's neighborhood and sees that it has become, if not exactly a slum, close to it. It was once a tidy little street. Now all the houses show neglect: missing roof shingles, pocked siding, weeds, trash and, at the house next door, a cracked window, its frame held together with duct tape.

June sits down on the back steps and wipes the sweat off her face with the edge of her apron. She's no bigger than a flea and all worn out. "The kid next door, Davy Crockett, can you believe that name? What a troublemaker he is!"

Nellie sits down next to her, taking the weight off her brace. "*Davy Crockett: King of the Wild Frontier*? I remember that TV program. How old is this kid?"

"Nine, ten, something like that." She glances over at the house next door. "He even wears a coonskin cap, runs around with the two Grealish boys, raisin' all kinds of hell."

"Has anyone complained to the parents?"

"Fat chance that'll change anything. The kid lives with his old man, a tough lookin' guy with a bunch of tattoos, spends his time tinkerin' with his motorcycle. I've never seen a mother, although a woman who might be the grandmother shows up once in a while."

June scratches her underarm, which has become red and blotchy.

"Let's go in, Auntie," says Nellie. "It's too hot out here. When it cools down later, I'll tackle these weeds. We can plant some lettuce seeds and some spinach."

June pulls herself to her feet and holds on to the railing for balance. "Don't bother, Nellie. The little delinquent will just pull 'em up."

"My blood boils just thinking about this," says Nellie, as she helps her aunt into the house. "I just hate bullies! I've had my fill of them, all my life. What kind of little brat would pick on an old woman? Maybe we should put up a fence."

"Forget it," says June. "Fences cost money."

"Well, then, when I see him we'll have a little chat. By the time I get through with him he won't come near us."

As Nellie whacks away at the weeds with a rusty hoe the next morning, she spots the coonskin cap bobbing up and down behind the dilapidated shed in the Crockett's backyard. Soon little Davy appears, with two boys tagging along. Davy has a firm grip on the leg of a dead cat, which he swings back and forth like a yo-yo.

Nellie loves all animals, especially cats. Using the hoe as a crutch, she springs up from her work with the weeds.

"What the hell?"

The boys pause. "Ain't never seen a dead cat before?" says Davy.

"What happened to it?" She already knows. Even from a distance, she sees its head is bashed in.

The boys ignore her and continue on their trek through the neighborhood, the Grealish brothers looking frightened and lagging behind.

Nellie abandons her battle in the garden and goes into the kitchen. She decides she will not mention this incident to June, who is also a lover of cats. Her aunt is already teary-eyed because their fifteen-year-old dryer broke down at the start of the high heat cycle set to dry a week's worth of towels. Stringing a clothesline off the back of the house becomes more important than whacking weeds. She goes back outside.

After lunch, Nellie limps out to the backyard to hang the wet towels and discovers the rope has been neatly sliced in half. June comes out, and they spend a lot of time tying the two ends together with a third piece, then hang the towels on the line. They have no sooner hung the last towel when the rope breaks and the towels fall to the ground, still pegged to the line.

June sinks onto the back steps and weeps. Nellie sees the boy in the coonskin cap dash off into the trees, and she swears she hears him snicker.

She tells herself she will somehow avenge the cat.

School begins the next day. The two women watch Davy climb onto the school bus, then Davy's father walks over to his shed with the coonskin cap in his hand. He squirts it with a bottle of dish soap, then hoses it down and props it on a bush to dry. As brownish water drips from the fur, the father gets on his motorcycle and roars off down the street.

The neighborhood is quiet.

"What happens when a king loses his crown?" asks June.

"Let's do it!" Nellie shuffles over to the yard next door and snatches the coonskin cap off the bush. They squeeze out the extra water and put it in June's room, in front of the window. It will take days to dry.

Little Davy comes home from school, and soon after, his father arrives. The boy meets the man out in the driveway, then they go into the backyard. June and Nellie watch from the window, hidden by a curtain. They know what will come next. The father points to the bush where he put the wet coonskin cap, and, seeing it gone, shrugs his shoulders and disappears back into the house. Davy searches high and wide; no coonskin cap. He eventually walks back to the front of his house and looks up and down the street.

June and Nellie don't know the boy has spent the day searching for other things, and now he adds the coonskin cap to his list. Before school, he had searched through his father's pockets for lunch

money and looked around the house for some clean clothes. In school, he was distracted by a bigger kid who'd made fun of him because he couldn't hear what one of the teachers said and threatened to beat him up. He'd been on the lookout for this kid all day. Now he searches for the Grealish brothers, but he won't find them. His pals have found a pickup football game and won't be tagging along after the king. They'd both had nightmares about the cat. Finally, as the day dies down, Davy looks for his grandmother. She might show up, or maybe she won't. He never knows. He sits on the front steps, a picture of misery.

"Look a' that poor little boy," says June. "Ever see a more unhappy kid in your life? Maybe we oughta get that cap and give it back."

"Not on your life," Nellie answers. "You can't let a bully win. And life is hard, so he'd better get used to it."

October brings rain, a thin rain that drizzles down for days, finding its way into a loose shingle on the roof and leaking into the kitchen, right over the sink.

"At least it's not drippin' onto the stove," June says. "Then we'd have a problem. We can let this go for a while 'til we can afford to get someone in to fix it."

Nellie's come to realize that a house is a lot of work. It eats up their money as fast as the two checks come in the first of the month. She makes repairs as best she can, but draws the line at scrambling up ladders, even if June had one. Her brace doesn't allow for climbing.

She also knows that *any* leak is a problem, even one that drips over the sink. It will only get worse and before they know it, water will sprout out all over the place. They need to hire a roofer, but a roofer will expect to be paid. She's been mulling over ways to make money without the government

taking away part or all of her disability check, something, ideally, that pays under the table. Waitressing would bring in some cash, but she could never move fast enough, not with her uneven gait and heavy brace.

**Nellie spots the
coonskin cap on a
crowded table just as
it's being snatched up
by a skinny, middle-
aged woman with frizzy,
orange hair.**

There's a church consignment shop a few blocks away that takes high-end clothing in good condition and gives back a percentage of what they sell. The problem is that none of Nellie's clothes are high-end. She buys at thrift shops or discount stores when things go on sale. June lives by the principle of "making do" and keeps her clothes forever, until they're often little more than rags.

One morning as Nellie is eating her cereal, she spots little Davy Crockett leaving for school, and she remembers the coonskin cap. That ought to bring in a few bucks! She goes into June's room and sees that the cap is gone.

June's in the living room watching TV.

"Where's the coonskin cap?" Nellie asks.

June looks up. "That old thing? I put it in a box for the church. They came around collectin' for their rummage sale. Why? Do you think I shoulda given it back to little Davy?"

"No, no, absolutely not. He hasn't bothered us since we took the cap, have you noticed? That cap was bad news. I think it gave him a sort of power, permission to raise hell."

June sighs. "I don't know about that, Nell. Seem the rain's keepin' him in. Wait til Halloween, then you'll see him up to his old tricks." She turns the channel and settles in to watch a cooking demonstration.

"Auntie, did you give it to the consignment store or their rummage sale?"

"Can't remember. They mentioned it in the bulletin that's in the kitchen somewhere."

Nellie paws through a pile of papers stacked against the bread box and finds the church bulletin. She learns that the rummage sale will be held on Saturday, so she goes over to the church early, but not early enough. There's quite a line, and once the doors open, everyone rushes to get in, and Nellie gets pushed aside. But soon she's in the room that smells of dirty clothes, mothballs, and the slight whiff of incense from the church next door. It's a busy place, clothing piled on tables, and miscellaneous items and household goods sitting in boxes scattered throughout the room. This is rummage. The consignment store is closed today.

Nellie spots the coonskin cap on a crowded table just as it's being snatched up by a skinny, middle-aged woman with frizzy, orange hair. The woman looks familiar and Nellie's sure she's seen her around.

Nellie wants the hat and will pay almost anything for it, because she's sure she can make a nice profit once she unloads it at the consignment shop. She approaches the woman, and sees a dangling price tag. The hat is selling for two dollars.

"My grandson would love that hat. I'll give you five dollars for it."

The woman brings the hat closer to her flat chest. "My grandson will love it, too." She moves off to pay for her treasure.

Nellie gives up on the hat and wanders around looking for other items suitable for the consignment shop, but this parish does not attract people who buy high-end clothing. She does find a sweater for June, and she tries on a snappy looking winter jacket. On her way out, she looks over the notices pinned to a bulletin board, a schedule for weekly masses, information about fuel assistance, a flyer announcing a Halloween party.

She also sees they're looking for someone to help out in the food pantry, part-time work, good pay. Applicants call Father Bert for an interview.

Never one to put things off, Nellie fishes her cell phone out of her bag and calls Father Bert. She learns that he'll see her on Monday at ten o'clock.

If Father Bert were a few years older, he'd be a dead ringer for Santa Claus. And like Santa, he's a jolly elf and takes to Nellie right away.

"Nellie Savage? Any relation to June Savage?"

"Yes, sir, she's my auntie. I moved in with her last summer and aim to stay."

"June used to come to mass every morning. She's not well?"

"Arthritis and old age."

They talk for a while longer until Father Bert makes a decision. "Give me a couple references, Nellie, and the job is yours. You have to know, though, that this is a grant funded position. No taxes, no Social Security deductions. We'll need you two days a week, nine to noon, when the food pantry's open. Will that suit you?"

This will suit her just fine.

As the rain continues, the leak grows. There's now a damp patch over the stove, and June knows she has to get the roof fixed, but, hopefully, not replaced. Nellie's pay from the food

pantry will come in handy, especially since the new dryer she had to buy last month emptied out her savings.

She risks a glare at Davy, who's fidgeting like a caged mouse as he stands close to Pauline.

June also admits to herself, reluctantly, that it will be a relief to have Nellie out of the house two mornings a week. Although she loves her niece like a daughter, she finds that her high energy is draining. She's learned that Nellie has a lot of bottled-up anger. She lashes out at right wing commentators and politicians on TV, screams at people who don't pick up their dogs' poop, rails at all the injustices in the world. Nellie's a fighter, but June is a tolerant woman and manages to find some good in everyone. If a dog walker fails to pick up the poop, June will take a scrap of old newspaper and do it herself. Still, a family accommodates different personalities. She hopes Father Bert will smooth out some of Nellie's rough edges.

Nellie's mornings at the food pantry pass quickly. She bags cans of vegetables, pasta, jars of peanut butter and other nonperishables, organizes the vouchers for dairy products, stacks donated bread and rolls onto shelves. Sometimes a farmer will bring in a load of apples. It's a busy place with a steady stream of people stopping by to supplement the food they have at home.

At the end of the day during her second week at the food pantry, Nellie sees that the line has trickled down to two: the woman with the orange hair, and with her is little Davy Crockett, the coonskin cap clamped firmly on his unruly brown hair.

Now Nellie knows where she's seen this woman, right in her own neighborhood. She's the grandmother, and, with that hat, the little creep is once again king of the wild frontier, ready to terrorize them all.

As Nellie hands her a bag of food, she decides to meet the enemy head on.

"Excuse me, but I'm Nellie Savage, and I believe we live next door to this young man here."

Davy's eyes widen and dart to Nellie's brace, and he starts to say something until his grandmother pokes him in the shoulder, a signal of some sort, Nellie suspects.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Pauline Crockett, the boy's grandmother. I'm living with Davy now."

"I think I've seen you around," Nellie answers.

"It's good to have friendly neighbors," Pauline continues. "I've noticed an older woman over there. She was putting some seed in the bird feeder."

"That's my aunt, June Savage. She loves all living things." She risks a glare at Davy, who's fidgeting like a caged mouse as he stands close to Pauline.

"Let's go, Grandma."

Pauline raises her voice. "You take this bag and go on out to the sidewalk and wait for me. I'll be there in a minute."

Davy dashes off, and Pauline gathers up some apples. "That bird feeder's quite a reach for your aunt. Maybe Davy can bring a ladder over and do it for her."

When it snows in hell, Nellie thinks. "Maybe."

"You look familiar," Pauline adds. "Didn't I see you at the church rummage sale? Weren't you the one who wanted the coonskin cap?"

"Er, yes, I did. But I'm glad you got it for Davy."

"Well, you oughta know I've moved in with Davy because his daddy, my son, Jason, went seekin' better opportunities. Don't know when he'll be back."

"Well, I suppose those things happen. Lucky the boy has you."

"Jason's a restless soul." Pauline heads for the door, toting her apples. "I thank you for this food. Money's tight, and the boy's in a growin' spurt. This'll help."

Nellie's not used to people, virtual strangers, confiding in her. She decides she likes this Pauline Crockett, a woman full of gossip and a well of information.

When Nellie arrives home, she finds June in the kitchen and tells her about their new neighbor. "One thing, Auntie. I first saw her at the rummage sale. She's the one who bought the coonskin cap, and, well, I lied. I told her I wanted it for my grandson."

June shakes her finger at Nellie. "Lies can come back to bite you, right in the you-know-where. But I'll cover for you, if it comes up." She opens a can of tuna and mixes it with mayonnaise.

"She's a strange lookin' woman, with that orange hair," June adds. "They got a kitten, too, cutest thing you ever saw, a little buttercup of a thing, all yellow."

Alarm bells ring in Nellie's head. She can either mind her own business and hope for the best, or tell Pauline Crockett that her grandson is a cat killer. Maybe with the grandmother on the scene, the boy will behave. She decides to wait.

There's a rush of people at the food pantry as Thanksgiving approaches, too many for Nellie to handle, so Father Bert is helping out. By noon, as they get ready to leave, he says, "I'm

coming over to see June. How about tomorrow, say around two?"

"That's fine. She'll be happy for the company of a priest. She misses going to mass."

Father Bert is enjoying a cup of tea the next afternoon with the two women when June wanders over to the window and says, "There's that cute little kitten now. Seems like little Davy doesn't know what to do with it."

Nellie joins her aunt at the window and sees Davy chewing on an apple, watching the kitten as it sits on the front step and uses its small front leg to scratch at a flea. Davy finishes his apple, tosses it into a bush, picks up the kitten and goes into his house. Nellie wonders if she'll ever see the animal again.

Later, there is a commotion outside and they rush back to the window. Little Davy Crockett is standing under a tree, pointing up through the branches. His cries are so loud they can hear him through the window. Father Bert, followed by Nellie and June, rush outside. They look up and see the kitten perched on a high limb where a few brown leaves still cling, and frightened at finding itself alone at such a great height.

"Oh dear, another cat problem for Davy. Let's hope this one has a better ending," says Father Bert.

"What do you mean?" asks Nellie.

He took her aside. "One day last summer he and a couple of his friends arrived at the rectory with a dead cat, wanted me to conduct a Christian burial, of all things. He'd found it on the side of the road where the poor thing had met its end under the wheels of a car."

"Did you believe him?" asks Nellie. "The kid's a terror, if you ask me. He goes around destroying things. Ripped

up June's tomatoes, among other acts of vandalism. Maybe he killed the cat."

"Good Lord, Nellie, I can't believe you'd think that. No, the cat was run over. Its owner told me herself, not soon after. She was quite broken up over it. Davy came along and picked up the body before she could, you know, dispose of it."

He dropped his voice. "It's his disability and parental abandonment. That's why he acts like a little hellion. He's looking for attention."

Nellie points to her brace. "Disability? What disability? *This* is a disability."

"So's a hearing impairment," Father Bert tells her. "The boy has lost most of his hearing. His mother did that to him, with her fists, when he was not yet two years old. She's been gone for years, and now the father's gone, too." The priest takes a handkerchief and wipes his eyes. "Thank God for Pauline. She's his family now."

As if on cue, Pauline races out of the house, and Davy screams at her to do something about getting the kitten down from the tree.

"I'm too old to climb, honey."

"But Davy's not," says Nellie. She beckons him over, makes a sling with her strong hands, and hoists him up to the lowest branch. He scrambles to the top of the tree, scoops up the kitten, and makes his way back down to where Nellie is waiting, ready to take the kitten and then catch Davy as he slides to the ground.

Later, they gather at June's house for an early supper.

"Now, tell me about your grandson, Nellie," says Pauline. "Is he the same age as Davy?" ♦

RECOVERY

JENNIFER LEE AUSTIN

Sometimes I feel like I'm dead.

Like this is all just me fooling myself and the reason I'm constantly *dizzy* and half of my body aches and half of my head is still numb and *inflamed* and it feels like there's a hatchet sticking out of *my skull* and it sounds like there's a river running next to my *dead ear*, *screaming* an everlasting high-pitched *howl*, is because it's all over. I didn't make it through, after all.

THC helps drown out the *metaphorical noise*, the internal chatter and depression, sometimes, most times, but not the literal noise, the tinnitus that rages on and on to fill the *absence of sound*. But I can fool myself into ignoring that, sometimes. The mind plays *funny games*. We can convince ourselves of almost anything.

And then I realize that I'm not dead, just deaf in one ear with a skewed peripheral vision, half of my face *frozen*, *vanity aching*, one slanted, dry, blurry eye and endless drops and

gel and ointment and the inability to close or cry, making me look like a *madwoman*, while my other eyeball can't stop crying all alone, stunted, sad, plagued by pain, and a plugged nostril full of pea gravel, twisted lips that I *no longer recognize* when I speak, spittle foam in the broken corner, battery-tasting tongue, wobble-head sensation whenever I change position, and a baseball-stitch scar curving along the base of my skull. *A permanent dent in my armor.*

This is when I know I'm *alive*. This is what is left of my head. No more pretty, symmetrical smile. *This* is the new, crooked *smile and life*.

And on a bright, sunny day, while I am grateful for this life and the *beauty and blur* all around me, I wish I could hear the fans whoosh whooshing and determine their directionality. It all feels different, sounds different now, the "new normal," as so many call it, which I hate both for its cliché and its truth.

Muffled *voices blend* with my *dulled senses* and I know *I am home*. ♦

THE MISSING

ROWAN MACDONALD

Spitting out blood for six months, figure I should see a doctor. Easier said than done when in a foreign country. To reach the hospital, I must traverse the 501; its bed bugs and junkies and mystery pools of liquid congealed to seats. But fuck, I'm spitting out blood, can barely move and my bones ache.

When I get to emergency, I tell the nurse it's my heart, that it keeps racing. "All this other shit is annoying too."

She looks at me, raises an eyebrow. "Cardiac?" she asks. "I see."

I wonder how the hell to claim on insurance.

"When you say your bones ache," she continues, "what do you mean?"

I grip my lower leg, illustrate the point. "Feels beyond muscular," I say. "Comes from deep within."

She nods her head, scribbles on a form, tells me to take a seat. I sit down opposite a man in an orange jumpsuit. He grins at me; silver handcuffs around his wrists, large guards either side. The 501 starts to look like a safer option.

I gaze out windows into darkness, light snow beginning to fall. Woman in a wheelchair removes her oxygen mask, attempts to light a smoke.

Orange Jumpsuit stands, helped by his companions. He shuffles away, hands and feet shackled, disappears behind a curtain. I wonder how long his sentence is, how much time he has served. I stare at my body, frustrated at its lack of cooperation. I'm held captive too; just differently. Freedom gone.

My name is called and I walk the corridor, clutching papers. Orange Jumpsuit smiles through a gap in the curtain, one arm cuffed to the bed. I enter a small waiting room, amazed at the efficiency.

I sink into a warm chair, think of whoever sat before me. Leafs game plays on TV in the corner. Nobody watches, probably for the best. I contemplate existence, wait my turn at the gallows. A nurse walks over, gestures to follow.

"Lay down here," she says. Surface is hard, lights dazzling. I stare at the ceiling, sense movement around me. Machines buzz. I ponder what led to this hospital slab in a faraway land. Nurse sits beside me, grabs my arm, positions it between her legs. I look the other way. She prods my vein, draws blood.

"Please remove your shirt," she instructs. Electrodes stick to my chest; the beeping sounds.

"Just relax," she says.

I want to say something like: *How can anyone relax here?* But instead, take a breath, close my eyes. I imagine being home, waves lapping ashore, afternoon sea breeze rustling beach grass in the dunes. No one around.

“Thank you,” she says. “A doctor will be with you soon.”

A goal is scored, beds roll by. Fragile futures, unchangeable pasts. A man emerges, forces a smile, reads a clipboard.

“We have your results,” he says. His voice, monotone, rattles off tests, obscure names for a body that doesn’t feel my own.

“Don’t see anything remarkable here,” he sighs.

It’s my life. My ability to partake in society. Nothing remarkable.

“What about spitting blood?” I ask.

He shrugs his shoulders.

“Good thing is that your heart is fine,” he smiles.

I want to celebrate *and* commiserate. No answers. No reason for being unable to function like normal people—whatever “normal” is anymore.

“Have you been under stress lately?” he asks.

My thoughts dart to a failed relationship; arguments and secrets chipping away.

“Not really,” I say.

I wander outside; snow falls heavier. Leafs lose their game. I lose my answers. Adrift in a world no longer mine. I dial a cab and wait, then give up. I stumble through flurries, until I’m at the corner.

“Want to join us?” asks a smiling couple. They sway against a pole; brown paper bag and cigarettes in hand.

“I’m fine, thanks,” I lie.

Instead, I join twenty-four million others; the invisible and missing; those fighting chronic fatigue syndrome/myalgic encephalomyelitis worldwide. I cross the street; leaving one life, and stepping into another. ♦

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THE DO-SI-DO GIRL

DAVID BACHMANN

My mom once told me that there are people born into this world who don't know how to love but they are the ones who probably need it the most. And that if you love them long enough and hard enough, without expecting anything in return, someday that love will bubble up inside and spill out onto everyone around them.

I think she might have been thinking of Benny when she said that.

Before I start, I'd like to make one thing clear. This may be a story with a whole lot of square dancing in it, but I do not like square dancing. Or any kind of dancing, for that matter. Which makes it kind of hard to explain what happened.

Unlike me, my mother loves square dancing. In fact, she loves it so much that she teaches others how to do it. Besides being a teacher, she is a caller which is a big deal in the square dancing world. A caller "calls out" the moves the square dancers are supposed to make and if they don't do it right, skirts go flying, boots get tangled, and

it can get messy real fast. If you've ever seen an "allemande left" too close to a "weave the ring" you know what I'm talking about. If you haven't seen it, believe me, you don't want to.

As you might guess, even though I don't like square dancing, I've become a bit of an expert when it comes to square dancing terminology.

It wasn't always that way.

When I'm not going to Central High School (Go Bobcats!) I am my brother's caretaker. Well, one of them to be precise. Benny was born with a genetic spinal cord injury. The doctors said that his intellectual and physical disabilities could range from mild to severe.

Benny's are severe.

I've been helping feed Benny since I was five years old. I'm fifteen now so I've been at it for quite a while. Still, hardly a day goes by that I don't hear, "Winnifred, you're feeding him too fast" or "Winnifred, you're putting too much food on the spoon"

or "Winnifred, there's spaghetti sauce dripping down Benny's chin."

By the way, Winnifred is my God-given name, something I keep hidden from my friends who know me as Winnie. The only one who calls me Winnifred is my mom and she only does that if she's angry.

I get called Winnifred a lot.

I don't blame my mom for getting upset. She works really hard. In square dancing terms, Mom's life is a "phantom load the boat" at a C4 dance.

In other words, her life can be a little complicated.

Even though working with Benny can be frustrating, I try to stay positive about it. My best friend once asked me if I resented having to take care of Benny. "Sometimes," I answered honestly. "It's hard to care for someone who doesn't know you exist, who can't talk, and only makes grunting sounds. But every so often, when I'm feeding Benny, there's a moment when he looks at me and I think he sees me. Really

sees me. And it's those moments that keep me going, hoping that someday, Benny will say a word that makes sense or maybe even smile at me. I suppose in the meantime, it's up to me to love him, even if he can't love me back."

Mom always took Benny with her when she taught her square dancing classes, believing that it stimulated Benny. I never had an opinion about that because the only thing square dancing stimulated in me was to get away as fast as I could.

Which is why one evening, after I had just finished feeding Benny, I was shocked when Mom told me I was going with her to square dancing class.

"You're kidding," I whined. "That's the last place on Earth I want to be."

"That may be," Mom spoke slowly, enunciating each word to emphasize the importance of her decree, "but I'm starting a new class tonight and I need your help to register the dancers. Benny's got the sniffles and won't be going so it'll just be you and me."

"I could stay home with Benny," I offered, looking for a way out.

"Nice try but Aunt Lucy is coming over to watch Benny."

"I've got English," I tried again, not willing to give up so easily, "we're studying *Macbeth*."

"Winnifred!"

I cringed. Mom had resorted to *Winnifred*. Negotiations were over.

I must admit, registering people for Mom's square dancing class wasn't all that bad. They were friendly and funny, and it almost made me think that square dancing might not be so bad after all. Almost.

The class started and I tried to concentrate on *Macbeth* with the sounds of "right and left, promenade, roll away to a half sashay." If you've ever tried reading Shakespeare with square dancing going on in the background, don't waste your time.

And then, something remarkable happened. Well, actually, more like a miracle.

"Circle left," my mother called out, "then do-si-do."

I looked up from *Macbeth*, startled by what I thought I had just heard. I waited, nervously, for Mom to repeat the call, something I figured she'd do as it was a new class. *Macbeth* could wait.

"Circle left," she repeated in her standard, singsong style, "then do-si-do."

My hands began to shake. Keep in mind, this is before I knew anything about square dancing, the terminology, the calls—anything. But this. This was something I was sure I had heard before.

I waited, whispering to myself, "One more time, Mom. Just one more time to be sure."

"Now circle left," pause, wait, pause, "then do-si-do."

"Do-si-do!" I cried. "That's it! Do-si-do!"

The room went quiet. Everyone stared. I had shouted down the official caller. I had committed square dancing heresy.

But surprisingly, Mom did not look angry and in a quiet, faraway voice, simply uttered, "Winnie? Sweetheart? Are you OK?"

"Mom! We've got to get home. Now!"

Square dancing class ended early that night.

When you want something to happen fast, it never does. The ride home took forever. But poor Mom. Her life was tough enough and now she had a crazy daughter sitting next to her in the car, chanting a weird mantra, "Do-si-do, do-si-do, do-si-do."

Home. Finally.

I hoped he would be up. Prayed he would be up.

"Aunt Lucy, Aunt Lucy, Aunt Lucy," I cried, erupting into the house. "Is Benny—?"

"Child, what are you doing home so early?"

"Yes!" I exclaimed. He was still up, sitting in his wheelchair, getting a before-bedtime snack from Aunt Lucy. Perfect.

Mom trailed in behind me, lugging the assorted accoutrements of her square dancing class, a distraught look on her face. "Winnie, you need to tell me what's going on!"

Good, she hadn't resorted to Winnifred yet. Time and a mother's concern for her biological offspring were still on my side.

"Aunt Lucy, let me take over for a minute," I pleaded.

Aunt Lucy looked at me then looked to Mom for her approval. Perhaps, wishing to see a quick resolution to this madness, Mom nodded.

I scooted into the chair directly in front of Benny. "Ok, Mom. Before I do this, tell me what a do-si-do is."

My mom looked at me like I was crazy which I was beginning to think I might be.

"What do you mean, Winnie? It's a square dancing move."

"I know that now, Mom. I was there tonight and heard it. But what does one do exactly when they do-si-do?"

My mom hesitated. It might have been because she was so flustered by everything going on and couldn't remember what a do-si-do was. Or maybe it was because she was afraid to continue encouraging her daughter's crazy behavior.

Finally, Aunt Lucy spoke up. Like Mom, she was a square dancing enthusiast. "A do-si-do, Winnie, is when two dancers pass around each other, back-to-back, then return to their original positions."

I smiled and silently cheered. "That's what I thought," and then, turning my attention to Benny, I gently took his hands in mine. "Benny," I began in a firm, clear voice, before repeating myself a little louder. "Benny. Look at me, Benny."

Benny stared, adrift, unfocused, seemingly disconnected from anything or anyone.

"Watch me, Benny," I continued, undaunted, "watch me. Here I go."

And with that pronouncement, I slowly stood, then circled around Benny's wheelchair, emerging on the other side, and sat back down.

And then, in a voice that wasn't a voice, was something different, a guttural, hollow, shell of a voice, Benny croaked, "Do . . . si . . . do."

"Did you hear that?" I screamed, "Did you hear that?"

"Oh, my goodness gracious," my mom managed in a trembling voice.

"Lordy, Lordy," Aunt Lucy gasped.

"Do it again, Winnie," my mom pleaded.

As before, I took Benny's hands in mine. "Alright, Benny, let's go for two out of two. Watch, Benny. Watch me now," and I rose and circled around behind him and back again.

"Do . . . si . . . do."

"He's talking Mom!" I exclaimed, "He's talking to us!"

The three of us looked at each other, in a suspension of belief over what we just heard, then rushed together in a three-way hug of sobbing, laughter, and finally, sobbing laughter.

"But . . . but how?" My mom stammered. "How could this happen, Winnie?"

"About a week ago, I was feeding Benny and dropped his fork. I got up to get a new one, circling around him in the process, before sitting back down. When he said "do-si-do," I didn't recognize it as anything but . . . well, Benny babble. It wasn't until tonight, when I heard you call out "do-si-do" in your class, that I realized it was much more."

"But how in the world did Benny learn—?"

"It was you, Mom. You took Benny to your square dancing classes. You may not have known it, but he was watching. And learning. And now, he's talking to us."

Mom wrapped her arms around Benny and hugged him. She held on for a long time. And for some reason, though I'm not sure why, it almost seemed like he was holding onto her, too.

That was four months ago. And a lot has changed.

In addition to do-si-do, we discovered that Benny could say "circle," "swing," and "who!" That is what the ladies say when they square dance into the center of a ring and curtsy. And after a lot of coaching, he learned to say "hello," "goodbye," and "awesome." (I taught him that last one.)

Benny's therapist says that this is just the beginning of what Benny might be able to say and do.

As for me, in addition to becoming an aficionado of square dancing terms because of my brother, I now have a new nickname—The Do-si-do Girl—which I must admit, I kind of like. But don't start thinking I'm going to be rushing out to buy a calico dress anytime soon.

Finally, I guess my mom was right when she said that if you love someone long enough and hard enough, some day that love is going to bubble up inside and spill out on everyone around them.

Because today, Benny smiled. At me. ♦

MEMOIR, IN SECOND PERSON

NOTTY BUMBO

So. Here you are. Born. Existent. The doctor hands you over, like a slab of wriggling meat. But, there's a problem, the doctor says. He gives the problem a name. He explains the problem, tells your parents the problem can be fixed. Your parents are relieved. They do what they are told.

You grow. You survive infancy, toddlerdom. You survive surgeries. Braces. Countless walks nearly naked, in plaster casts, in braces, in confusion before dozens of doctors, medical students, your mother. Your father is seldom there. You grow older, barely survive the bullies in school. The endless humiliations. Your father's growing rage. Ugly footwear, more braces, metal, leather, a medically prescribed bondage. Frequent pronouncements of your future failures as a human being by your father, often following another application of his wide leather belt. Not sadomasochism. Just sado.

You spend years of your life trying to manage the endless pain, the frustration of wanting to do so many things the world has been telling you are outside your wheelhouse. You stare at your body in mirrors, convinced they lie, they spite your dreams, they reinforce the absolutism of pending failure after humiliation after unanswered demands to any and all absent gods. You realize, early in your teens, that you are completely on your own. At sixteen, even the doctors abandon you: "You are now cured. Go have a life."

It takes many years before you understand that doctors who specialize in adults have no idea whatsoever what to do for you. How to help.

You finally reach the moment when you tell the world to go fuck itself. You will do all those things everyone keeps insisting you can't do, shouldn't do. You work, you climb mountains, you fight forest fires, you run from bears, you lose jobs as fast as you find them because the pain always wins. You fall into love, stumble out again. Finally, a relationship lasts, though filled with more challenges. Some you handle, others you survive. Nobody can believe you did any of these things.

Years go by. You slowly feel the effects on your body earned by all your earlier foolishness. You fight daily against internalized judgement, you were just trying to live the best life you could. But a price is always owed, consequences unavoidable.

You get older. New things erupt. You learn one day you weren't born with just one named flaw. You were born with several, never diagnosed. They begin to visit you, drag at your spine, your legs, your mind. More surgeries, newer pains, sharper regrets. You keep going. You have no real choice. You get up, place your feet on the floor. Hope this day goes a bit easier on you. Hope grows into a ghost whose moans no longer frighten anyone.

You recite the names of all your demons. You study them better than the doctors ever bothered to or considered necessary. Doctors can do no harm if they do nothing, obscuring the fine print in their sacred oath. Knowing what a thing is called offers scant relief. Brings instead a deepening knowledge of what the future holds for you. Holds against you. Holds you under until you drown in pains impossible to describe to a doctor, in any language they think they understand.

You often think of giving up, of collapse, of presenting the accumulated bill to those absent gods. You realize, early in life, you are curious, have a strong desire to learn, to understand, to find answers to *why me*, one that morphs eventually into *why anyone*. But no one did this to you, and you stop believing in gods that refuse to respond. You will never answer this question. You can never stop asking it.

You continue to seek the answers to yourself, your purpose, your path through the wilderness, your unnecessary inclusion into the fabric of existence. You are never asked to arrive, you will never be asked when, if, how you will leave. You are never asked to stay. You were *not*, you *are*, you *are not*. You don't even get to end in a spectacle, go nova, remind the world you were here.

Your bones are a cage for your softness. Your skull a prison for your truth. Your feet have been bound since the beginning: you tell yourself you've become an expert on living inside cages. You get up, you struggle through, you lay back down. Everyone, everything, you are told—by people who don't even know the names for your despair—over and over, dies. Ends. Ceases to be.

Yet, you remain . . . curious. You've done so many things, thought yourself across the universe, paid the price of this body while continuing to try for more. Became an astronaut of dreams. Deepened your knowledge. Widened your vision. Disproved endless echoes of failure and despair, though despair, well . . .

So. What else is out there? How can I get there? What will it cost? How will I return? So many questions, never enough answers.

Even the most important ones: Will there still be cages? Will I ever be free?♦

NEW HAND

HANNAH EHRLICH

“Ethan, where the hell have you been?” Mom shouts, rising out of her green plastic lawn chair. Her arms are outstretched and her mouth is wide open, a circle ready to swallow whatever I say and spit it back out at me.

I look around the backyard. The little cousins are already double fisting bomb pops, adding more layers of goo to the growing red and blue crust around their lips. There are three empty beer bottles lined up on the plastic table by the grill where Dad and Uncle Nate are standing. Both of them guzzle their new bottles so fast that I can see their throats go up and down and up and down all the way from here. The Labor Day barbecue with Aunt Cathy’s family must have been going on for a while, though I am not sure exactly how long ago it started. It’s not easy to tell time by the size of the Popsicle crust on someone’s face or the discarded beer bottles of two functioning alcoholics.

My phone buzzes in my back pocket. Did Jackson reply to my text? Can’t check now. Not the right time.

“I asked you a question, Ethan. Where the hell have you been?”

It’s too hot, I feel like my hand is going to fall off, and I really want something to eat. But right now all that matters is *Where the hell have you been?* On a walk? She won’t like that, and that would basically give me away right there. My room? No, she could have checked. Shit. I’m taking too long.

Aunt Cathy creeps into the corner of my eye, her hair a mess from sweat and humidity. She’s coming toward me from the left, Mom is coming toward me head-on. It’s too hot, I feel like my hand is going to fall off, and I really want something to eat.

“Ethan! Let me see that new hand,” Aunt Cathy says.

I extend my left arm out, feeling my shoulder muscle fire up as I do. Mom’s eyebrows unfurrow and her mouth switches from circle to smile as Aunt Cathy approaches.

Aunt Cathy strokes all the fingers on my new prosthetic, and of course I don’t feel any of it. Ew. What if

someone touches it and I don’t even know?

“This is like a real robot hand from the movies or something. You’re a cyborg man now,” Aunt Cathy says.

“They could have made it the color of his skin, but Ethan just wanted it like this,” Mom says. “I thought it was a ridiculous choice, but you know what? I think it’s growing on me.”

The new hand is all black except for spots of gray where the fingerprints would be, and a clear rubber glove covers the whole thing. I could have gotten some caucasian glove for it, even one that had pretty realistic fingernails. But I thought it would be better to look half-robot than pretend this hand is part of my actual body or something. Right now, the hand is in its resting position, with the index finger and thumb touching at the tips. Imagine if people just walked around like that, with their index fingers and their thumbs touching. Crab people.

“Move it for her, Ethan,” Mom says.

Aunt Cathy lets go of my arm, and I disturb the reservoir of sweat that has built up in the prosthetic's socket as I flex my left wrist. The movement of my wrist triggers the hand to open. The thumb moves out slightly, and the rest of the fingers extend pretty far back at the same time. It's in a position where I could hold a full family-sized bag of Doritos from the side while I eat the chips with my real hand. I should try that. I really want something to eat.

". . . It's great that you got that hand before college. It looks powerful . . ."

"Wow! Oh wow. How does it work?" Aunt Cathy asks.

"There are electrodes inside of the socket, and the hand knows to move when he moves his wrist," Mom says. "Isn't it amazing? I've been waiting years to finally get something like this for Ethan. Now there is so much more he can do, and it looks pretty cool, too."

So much more I can do? What wasn't I able to do before?

"It is amazing!" Aunt Cathy says. "Is the socket comfortable?"

I hate this heavy fucking socket in this hot fucking heat.

"It should be, considering how many appointments we had to make to get that thing fitted!" Mom says.

"Jesus, Miriam! Let Ethan say something. Is it comfortable, Ethan?" Aunt Cathy asks, staring into my dry eyes that I really wish I could rub right now.

I see Mom's smile fade as she lets the rage of being told off by her crazy-haired little sister kick in.

"Um." I clear my throat and force some saliva onto my tongue. I think I can speak now. "It fits, but you know, it's heavy and it's hot, so it's kind of sweaty and slippery in here. I feel like it's gonna. Like it's gonna—"

"Fall off?" Aunt Cathy asks.

"Yeah. Kinda," I say.

"Well, it better not! That thing costs a fortune! Didn't cost me anything, though. Thank goodness for insurance," Mom says.

She walks back toward her lawn chair, probably to return to that book she has laid out on it. Is that a Holocaust novel? Why would she read that at a barbecue?

"This is very cool, Ethan. This hand is very cool," Aunt Cathy says to me.

"Thanks," I say.

"Hey! Ariel and Elijah, you are cut off from bomb pops! We haven't even eaten yet!" she screams, abruptly stomping away.

I am now alone in this section of grass. My cheeks are being pinched by the sun, and my left shoe is tied too tight and my right shoe is tied too loose. I try to take a deep breath because that is what you're supposed to do when you're anxious I think. I breathe in through my nose, and I'm hit with the smell of hot grass. I hate the smell of hot grass. And it's too hot, my hand feels like it's going to fall off, and I really want something to eat. Something to eat. That should help.

I walk over to the grill and the socket of my prosthetic pulls on the skin near my elbow as I swing my arms. The plastic table now has five beer cans on it, and Dad and Uncle Nate are already working on another. They're probably drinking an equivalent of two loaves of bread each. Bread. Bread like a hamburger bun.

"Dad, when are you going to make the burgers?" I ask.

"Ethannnnnnnnnnnn. Is that your new hand?" Uncle Nate asks, slapping me on the back.

Ow.

"Yeah. Just got it today," I say, staring at Dad.

"Give us a few minutes, E. We have all night," Dad says.

"Yeah, what's the rush? Maybe you should grill us some burgers with that thing," Uncle Nate says and points to the hand.

"Heh. I don't know if I can do that with it yet."

"Next year then," Uncle Nate says, taking another sip of beer. "Hey, why aren't you at college yet?"

"I'm leaving tomorrow. My school starts late."

"Tomorrow? Holy shit. Glad we got to see ya before you left. It's great that you got that hand before college. It looks powerful. People are really going to respect you now that you have something like that."

"Mmm. Yeah," I say.

"September. Really late to leave for college, actually," Uncle Nate says. "I'm sure your parents are happy that they've had some extra time with you though."

"Yeah, except for the fact that he's been all mopey ever since his boyfriend left two weeks ago," Dad says, smirking.

Oh my god why did he just say that.

"Ah, the boyfriend. What's his name again? Jonah?" Uncle Nate asks.

"Jackson."

Jackson Jackson Jackson Jackson Jackson Jackson. I want Jackson to be here. I miss Jackson. This would be so much better if Jackson were here.

“Word of advice: break up now. Everyone cheats on their high school boyfriends and girlfriends once they get to college,” Uncle Nate says, with an *Oops I just said something drunk and stupid* face that quickly follows. His stubbly upper lip gains a few more drops of sweat.

“Really, Nate? Ethan, you’ll . . . you guys . . . it’ll be fine. Don’t start worrying, okay? There’s bomb pops and macaroni salad in the kitchen if you’re hungry,” Dad says.

“Bomb pops are disgusting, and I saw Mom put the macaroni salad in the bowl I used to throw up in when I was sick,” I say and walk away to the corner of the backyard.

Drunk assholes.

These shoelaces are killing me. I squat down and pull out both knots with my right hand to retie them. Then I look at my left arm. There’s a hand there. I have never had a hand there. I don’t know how to tie a shoe with two hands. But I’m in too deep. I have to try now.

I grab one lace with my right hand, and then I try to grab the other lace with the new hand. When I close the hand, I miss. I try again, and I miss. This time, I let go of the lace in my right hand, and I feed the prosthetic the other lace. With both laces secure, I manage to get the shoe tied. But now it’s way too loose and even worse than before. I untie. Need to try again.

“Ethan, let me do it,” Mom says.

I look up from my shoes. I see Mom’s face right in front of me, and that’s when I feel her yanking on the laces of my right sneaker.

“Stop,” I say. “I got it.”

“You don’t. You will eventually, but you don’t right now,” she says, already working on my left shoe.

I am transported back to fifth grade gym class. Coach stopped the entire soccer game to tie my shoe. Eleven silent fifth-graders spread out across the field pretending not to look at the one-handed boy who can’t tie his shoes, and me in the middle of the field with Coach at my feet. I spent the time cracking my right fingers against my left arm just so I could do anything but think about what was happening. Too bad that I didn’t master one-handed shoe tying until sixth grade. Now I have to master two-handed shoe tying as a college student.

Mom goes back to her chair, and I’m left squatting in the grass with freshly cracked fingers and two shoes that are too loose. Mom doesn’t do it right, even with her two real hands. My shoes feel weird, it’s too hot, I feel like my hand is going to fall off, I really want something to eat, I miss Jackson, and there’s red and blue shit all over my prosthetic. Wait, why is there red and blue shit all over my prosthetic?

“I touched it! I touched Ethan’s new hand!” Elijah screams, running away from me with a bomb pop melting all over his hand and dripping down his arm.

“Elijah!” Aunt Cathy screams, and I do not even stick around long enough to let her force him to apologize to me.

I shut the door to the backyard, walk into the kitchen, kick off my shoes, and lay my head on the counter. I may never go back out there. Maybe I will for the hamburgers, but I could also just make food for myself. Is it weird to make Kraft Mac and Cheese while there is a barbecue out there? It probably is. Mom would hate that. I need to wash this hand.

I head into the upstairs bathroom and stare into my eyes in the mirror. Jackson says there’s some green in them, but I can’t find any. My pupil is so dark. It looks like a cozy hole that I want to crawl into. I can see so many little red veins in the white part.

I remember that time I was throwing up in here as a little kid when I had the stomach flu. After I had cleared the last of the vomit out of my system, I stood at the mirror and looked into my eyes. One of my eye veins had burst and a red, bloody splotch filled the white space. I didn’t cry when I was writhing in pain with stomach cramps or when I was throwing up, but after seeing my bloody eye, I screamed and cried for hours. It freaked me out to see that reliably blank, clean space disrupted with a red blotch that I couldn’t clean.

I don't know how to tie a shoe with two hands.

I turn on the hot water, and I am ready to shove the prosthetic under the tap and let the sticky bomb pop residue melt away. Wait, I probably shouldn’t run a thousands-of-dollars prosthetic under hot water, even with this rubber glove on it. I rip a few squares of toilet paper off the roll, get it wet, and scrub away at the bomb pop residue. Little bits of toilet paper get stuck to the rubber, and the residue is still clinging on like glue. I want to scream, but instead I switch to a wet washcloth. That gets everything off. I squirt a few pumps of hand soap on the hand for good measure, and once I wipe it away, the relief of feeling clean makes my head feel light.

This afternoon was perfect before I had to come back to the house for this stupid barbecue. I want to tell Jackson about it so bad. I wish I could tell him while we smoke a joint in our willow tree with the leaves that engulf us like those parachutes we used to play with in elementary school. I wish I could tell him after my band practice, while he cringes as I pull off the duct tape that attached my drumstick to my left arm. I wish I could tell him on a Thursday afternoon while we walk home from Astrophysics Club. I wish I could tell him while I do my AP Bio

homework next to him and he does his AP Spanish homework next to me, and it wouldn't even matter if I don't get all the questions right because high school is over. I wish I could tell him while we play *Super Smash Bros.* or go on a night hike in the woods by his house or get that shitty pizza that comes with a free drink on Fridays. But FaceTime is the best thing we have right now, so it will have to be good enough.

I can't go back to the questions and the touches, the sun, and the grass.

I pull my phone out of my pocket, and the fabric feels good on the back of my hand. These are nice shorts. Mom bought me these for college. Mom does everything. I open FaceTime, and tap on Jackson's name, which is right at the top. I let it ring, staring at my face on the screen. It has already rung three times, and though I know at this point he probably won't pick up, I just hope and hope and hope that his face will appear and replace mine. But the fourth ring comes, and nothing. Just my face. That's okay. I can use the second-best thing we have right now. I open the Messages app, hoping to see a reply to the text I sent earlier asking how he was doing. Nothing. Is it too much to send more on top of tha—

The phone screen feels hot on my thumb as I text:

I got high in our willow tree right before the family barbecue and everything feels so fucking weird

But also I got my new hand today!!!!!! I smoked the joint out of it lol

We should call later tonight if u want so I can show it to youuuu

Also I wanna hear about your day I hope it's going well and I miss you sooooo much

All the messages go blue as I click send and send and send and oh my god why did you do that? You sound so annoying. He doesn't have time to hear about you getting high and feeling weird. You do at least one of those things every day, generally both. What else is new? The hand? Why do you need a work of real-life science fiction to get your boyfriend to call you later? He'll probably be too busy fucking some cool two-handed guy who doesn't need a a boyfriend to roll him thirty joints to bring to college anyway. He doesn't even miss you and your relationship is never going to last so you should just break up with him now. And after you break up with him you will be single forever because nobody at college is going to respect a stumpy stoner loser who can't even roll his own joints enough to even consider datin—

I think I need to get out of this bathroom. I open my new hand, put its palm against the metal doorknob, and close the fingers around it. Why can't I finish opening the door? Oh yeah. This prosthetic doesn't have a moving wrist, so I can't even open doors with it. It can't open doors, it can't tie shoes, the only thing I have successfully done with it is hold a joint (though, it was pretty badass to smoke a joint from a robot hand). I guess I did discover I could hypothetically use it to eat Doritos out of a giant bag. Doritos sound amazing right now. I really want something to eat. I think I need to get out of this bathroom.

I let go of the door with my prosthetic and open it with my right hand. My eyes are immediately filled with a prickly neck. I step back into the bathroom, and I see a prickly chin and chapped lips and eye wrinkles and a bald head.

"Woah, didn't know you were in there," Uncle Nate says.

"Sorry," I say.

"Why are you apologizing? This is your house."

"You're right. Sorry."

"A man should never apologize for stuff he shouldn't be sorry for. It looks weak to hand out apologies," Uncle Nate says, and I would be mildly interested in considering his sentiment if he weren't slurring his words or leaning so heavily into the doorframe. "Are you sorry, truly?"

He stares into my eyes, and my tongue is stuck to my mouth like Velcro.

"Say, 'I'm not sorry, Uncle Nate. This is my house and I have a right to be here.' Say it, and then I'll let you go."

"I'm not sorry, Uncle Nate," I say, his eyeballs still looking into my eyeballs still looking into his eyeballs. "This is my house and I have a right to be here."

"Are you high, Ethan?" he asks, smiling.

"Please let me go now," I think, and apparently I say.

"A deal is a deal," Uncle Nate says, slapping my back yet again and stepping to the side.

I walk into the hallway with pain tingling in between my shoulder blades, and I hear the door to the bathroom shut and lock with one loud motion.

I shuffle to the top of the steps, and I rest my prosthetic on the railing. The left side of my body relaxes as the weight disappears, but breath is passing in and out of my throat and mouth so fast. I can't go back to that barbecue. I can't go back to the questions and the touches, the sun, and the grass. And Uncle Nate is going to tell Dad I'm high and Dad is going to tell Mom I smoke weed and Mom will be so disappointed in me and now the drive to college is going to suck ass because

she's going to be so angry. Everyone is going to look at me eating my burger and they're all going to say, "Look at that high loser eating his munchies. He's going nowhere in life." Now I can't even have a burger in peace.

"Ethan, what are you doing, buddy? Why are you still up here?" Uncle Nate says from behind me.

How did he piss so fast? Did he even wash his hands? He's making the burgers, and he didn't even wash his hands.

"I'm fine," I say.

"Pshh. Yeah, that's what people who are fine say when nobody asked them how they're doing," Uncle Nate says.

If I don't speak, then maybe he won't either and the universe will forget we exist and I could simply disappear.

"Dude, c'mon. What's the problem? You can tell me," Uncle Nate says, holding down a burp as he speaks.

He's not going to let up, is he?

". . . it's just . . . it's too hot out there . . . and . . . I feel like my hand is going to fall off."

"You feel like your hand is going to fall off? Is that a bad high thing or a prosthetic thing?"

"Prosthetic thing. It's too sweaty and too heavy and I feel like it's going to fall off."

"Gross. Why don't you just take it off then?"

Why *don't* I just take it off then? Oh, yeah.

"My mom wants me to wear it. It's, like, new and expensive and exciting. I'll look ungrateful if I just take it off after just a few hours," I say, stroking the fake knuckles on the fake hand.

"I've never met an eighteen-year-old dude who cares so much about what his mother thinks. I'll tell you that much. But, hey, good for you," he says.

. . . I hate this prosthetic.

I stay quiet, but I can see that there's something extra stupid hanging off the edge of Uncle Nate's brain, and it's about to fall out of his mouth. "You know, I'd be happy if Elijah is gay. Seriously. Gay guys are much nicer than straight guys."

"I don't think being nice has to do with being gay, Uncle Nate," I say.

"Oh, I didn't mean—"

"It's fine."

"Sorry, Ethan. I'm going now," Uncle Nate says.

Uncle Nate walks down the stairs with heavy steps. I wait until I hear the kitchen door to the backyard swing closed, and then I walk down the steps myself. My breathing slows as I focus on how good and squishy the stairs' carpet feels under my socks. I remember sitting on the stairs for hours as a kid playing *Mario Kart* on my DS, moving the fibers of the carpet with my toes. I'm going to miss this carpet tomorrow, when I won't even be able to leave my dorm room in just socks. Shoes in the hallway. Shoes in the bathroom. Shoes in the shower. My life will just be filled with foot prisons and stump prisons from now on.

My feet leave the good carpet and step into the just OK carpet of the living room. I lay down on the couch, clutching the green throw pillow against my chest. My prosthetic socket presses too hard into the bend of my elbow, so I straighten out my left arm and hold the pillow with just my right. I stare at the ceiling, trying to ignore all

the boxes and bags stacked against the wall that we have to load into the car tomorrow. Uncle Nate is probably out there telling Dad what he saw already, and Mom is going to be furious in no time. Jackson has probably seen my texts by now, and I bet he hated seeing them all come through while he's so busy. He doesn't like me anymore, and me reaching out this much is only making him like me less. I fucked up everything. I fucked up so bad.

I feel tears push against the back of my forehead like how a sneeze feels in your nose. They squeeze out of the corners of my eyes and drip down my temples. So now I'm going to have to go back out there with everyone knowing that I'm high and looking like I just cried? At this point I should just . . .

I pull my prosthetic off. My sweaty stump shines under the lamp by the couch. I lay my prosthetic on the floor, watching even more sweat pour out of the socket and pool onto the carpet. Mom would be disgusted. Whatever. I don't care. I don't care if she cares that the carpet is sweaty or that I hate this prosthetic, because I do, I hate this prosthetic. I don't care if she cares that I smoke weed or that I got high for this stupid barbecue with her stupid family. I'm done.

I hear the door to the backyard swing open and closed, and someone is walking through the kitchen. What now?

Dad walks into the living room, holding a spatula. "The burgers are ready, E. Come outside. People want to see you."

"Okay, I'll come out in a second," I say, sitting up.

"Do you want me to ask why you're crying or do you want me to leave you alone?" he asks, studying my face.

I become aware of the volume of tears that have fallen out of my eyes. They got all over my cheeks and my shirt like a melting bomb pop.

"Don't ask. But can you stay here with me for a second?"

"Yeah, uh, sure," Dad says, leaving quickly to put the spatula in the sink. He comes back in the living room, sits on the couch, and mumbles, "Nate is killing me, so I'd actually take any excuse to get away."

I nod.

"And the kids are so fucking loud," he adds.

"Yeah, and it's too hot out there," I say.

"It is too hot out there."

My tears start to dry up, leaving my face feeling sticky and raw. The sweat on my stump has gone away. I hold my left arm in my right hand, and I play with the squishy skin that takes the place of where a hand would go. I love this squishy skin. I don't know why everyone thinks it's such a miserable thing to have a stump. My stump is awesome.

"Okay, I'm ready to go," I say.

"I'm not, but I guess we're doing this," he says, slapping his hands down on his knees as he stands up.

We both walk out into the backyard, and Elijah screams, "He's back!"

Elijah runs to the table next to the barbecue, and he grabs a paper plate with a cheeseburger on it. Ariel follows after him, grabbing a can of Pepsi from the red cooler underneath the table. Both of their hands are clean from the bomb pop residue (thank god). Running up to meet me at the door, they hold out both items like an offering.

"I'm sorry for touching your prosthetic without asking," Elijah says.

"I did nothing wrong, but I wanted to help," Ariel adds.

"Thank you, guys. Both of you," I say.

I grab the Pepsi with my right hand, and transfer it to the crook of my left arm. I take the cheeseburger from Elijah, and I look up at Aunt Cathy who is sitting with Mom across the yard. She winks at me, and I smile back, trying to forget how pathetic I must look with my red eyes and swollen face.

Ariel and Elijah run off, and I walk over to an empty lawn chair next to Mom and Aunt Cathy. I get a perfect view of Dad having to put up with Uncle Nate by the cooler.

I sit down with the plate on my lap and I place the can of Pepsi on the grass. The sun has gone down a bit, and a nice breeze brushes the hairs on my legs and my arms.

"Where's your prosthetic, Ethan?" Mom asks.

Shit. She's pissed.

"I took it off. It was getting too hot."

"Oh. Well it's good you're taking a break, then," she says, taking a bite of her burger.

Hm. She's not pissed?

"I just want to say I'm sorry about what Elijah did earlier," Aunt Cathy says. "I hope his apology made it a little better."

"It's okay," I say. "He's just a kid doing what kids do. His apology was sweet."

"I'm glad," she says.

I'm hoping that's the end of all the talking, because I have never been so hungry in my entire life. I wait a few seconds, and then I take a bite of my burger. My phone buzzes with a text notification in my back pocket, but I can't even bother to check. All that matters is this burger, because this is the best fucking burger I have ever had.

As I finish the last bite and suck the ketchup off of my pinky, Mom brushes her fingers through my hair and says, "I'm going to miss having you around here, Ethan."

"I'm going to miss you, too. I'm going to miss everything," I say, and I sip my Pepsi so I don't start crying again.

"You're going to be great, though. College is going to be awesome for you."

"You think so?"

"Oh, I know so," she says. "Just don't get high all the time. Space it out or it'll make you stupid."

"Noted," is all I can say as my heart rate rises then falls in a matter of seconds. Maybe she knew I was high this entire time? I'm not going to ask. This is the best case scenario.

The sun has turned pink behind the trees, and the breeze has picked up with a soft intensity. It's getting chilly out here. I think I'll need a sweater soon. ♦

Jennifer Lee Austin is a writer, professor, scholar, aspiring filmmaker, and dog mom living in upstate New York. Austin's work has appeared in *Barrelhouse Magazine* (March 2016) and *NAILED Magazine* (August 2014). She writes because "literature, poetry, art, stories [and] creativity are the life force of our existence." Living with her husband and four rescue dogs, Austin also shares her experience with disability and recovery from brain surgery on Instagram. You can follow her journey through #JenAustinBrainTumorDiaries.

David Bachmann is a retired special education teacher residing in Upland, Arizona. His work has appeared in *GreenPrints* (2022), *Short Circuit* (Issue 14), and *The Mantelpiece* (July 2024), among others. Writing because it is what writers do, Bachmann formerly taught reading and writing to students with disabilities. Now, he writes stories and poems for children and adults.

Cassandra Brandt is an author, advocate, and aspiring Stoic philosopher living in Globe, Arizona. Published work includes *Iron Girl: Tomboy, Tradeswoman, Tetraplegic* (January 2020), *Seven Secrets of the Sedentary Stoic* (July 2023), and *In Between Us and Other Poems* (January 2025), among others. Stating that her disability has given her a new perspective on life, Brandt writes because she has found solidarity, support, and inspiration in the literature of others. She is the mother of a brilliant daughter and has two grandchildren.

Notty Bumbo is an artist, writer, poet, woodworker, and gardener residing in Fort Bragg, California. His work has appeared in *Phases* (2023) and *Tyrian Dreams* (2014), among others. He spent forty-five years as an orthopedic shoemaker, helping thousands of individuals walk with less pain. Writing because he must, Bumbo loves "the power of words and the wonders of existence."

Douglas G. Campbell is a professor emeritus, artist, and poet in Portland, Oregon. His work has appeared in *Tiny Moments* (November 2024), *Magnets and Ladders* (March 2024), and *The Windhover* (August 2021), among others. Campbell has been writing poetry since he was twelve years old and now contributes to a poetry community focusing on aphasia and brain injury. He is married with two sons and one granddaughter.

Mimi Eagar is a retired speech and language pathologist from Farmington, Connecticut. Her work has appeared in *The Manifest Station* (December 2024) and *Kaleidoscope* (January 2025). Eagar writes because it is cathartic and soothing, channeling her energy into finding the perfect word or phrase. She uses humor to survive and prides herself on her determination to succeed when attempting something new or difficult.

Hannah Ehrlich is from New York City and currently studying English and environmental studies at Kenyon College. Her work has appeared in *Rogue Agent* (June 2025). "Growing up and living as an adult with a limb difference has made me want to use my storytelling and writing abilities to communicate the lesser-known moments of struggle and euphoria that come with a body like mine." She is interested in crip ecopoetics and writing is a way she can understand the world and help the world understand her.

Elly Katz is pursuing a master's degree in poetry and lives in New York City. While working toward a doctorate at Harvard in 2022, Katz required a mundane procedure to stabilize her neck. Surviving a brainstem stroke secondary to a physician's needle misplacement, she discovered the power of dictation and the bounty of metaphor in the wake of tragedy. Her work has appeared in *The Stardust Review* (Spring 2025), *The Sacramento Review* (Spring 2025), and *Beneath Your Beautiful* (Fall 2024), among others. Her first collection of poetry, *Instructions for Selling-Off Grief* (2025), is forthcoming from Kelsay Books. Learn more about her life and work at EllyKatz.com.

Isolde Keilhofer is a licensed psychoanalyst practicing in New York City. Her recent work includes a chapter in the book, *Primary Process Impacts and Dreaming the Undreamable Object in the Work of Michael Eigen* (2024), titled, "Listening in with Michael Eigen." Keilhofer takes inspiration from the neurologist Oliver Sacks and says he "calls on us to bear witness, to make public, to broadcast experience, to share adaptations."

Rowan MacDonald is a writer living in Tasmania, Australia. His work has appeared in *OVERLAND* (2025), *New Writing Scotland* (Spring 2024), and *Sheepshead Review* (2025), among others. Writing because it keeps him connected to society, it has also given him an outlet to process emotions and challenges associated with chronic fatigue syndrome. "When my health often dictates what I can't do, writing has shown me what I can do."

Allegra M. Marcell is an ecologist residing in Baltimore, Maryland. Her work was published in *Wordgathering* (Winter 2025) and she is author of the children's book *The Sleeping Bees* (2022) published by Barnes & Noble Press. A neurodivergent adult with neurodivergent family members, Marcell prioritizes advocating for inclusion. Outside of writing, she enjoys traveling, spending time with her family, watching and photographing insects, and translating science to make it accessible for everyone.

Sandy Palmer is a child of deaf adults (CODA) and a freelance artist who works with a variety of media. She contributes to *Kaleidoscope* as the writer of artist profiles, having joined the staff as art coordinator in 2002. Palmer is the full-time graphic design specialist at United Disability Services.

Deb Robert is a genre-defying Jewish writer, school administrator, noise bassist, and multiple sclerosis warrior living in Portland, Oregon. Using humor to “fight the weight of chronic illness,” Robert states that MS changed the way she experiences life and expanded her creative boundaries. Her disability has given her the urgency to write from a place of vulnerability. You can view her written work and musical projects at DebRobert.Blogspot.com.

Wendy Sheehan is a retired social worker and grandmother of nine, living in Rhode Island. Her work has appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post* (December 2018), *Reflections* (Fall 2019), and *The Lyric* (Spring 2018), among others. Living with hearing loss, Sheehan writes because she enjoys developing plots and characters. “I’ve had a variety of experiences, both good and not so good, that have influenced my writing.”

Naomi Stenberg is a neurodivergent writer thriving in Seattle, Washington. Her work has appeared in *Sky Island Journal* (Winter 2025), *Knee Brace Press* (February 2025), and *Persimmon Tree* (Spring 2025). “My illnesses have been both the demons and saints of my journey. A huge influence.” In her spare time, she does improv and enjoys running with her dog.

Poppy Reeves is self-employed and lives in Chicago, Illinois. A believer in “beauty and the many forms it comes in,” Reeves is determined to chase what she still can and envisions an existence where she is content and helping others. Having spent time reflecting on the strength of the human spirit and its adaptability, consistent themes in her writing include resilience, adversity, and hope.

Mary Ellen Talley is a writer, retired speech-language pathologist (SLP), wife, mother, grandmother, friend, and citizen who has been “happily tethered to the written word and the world of education since elementary school.” Her work has appeared in *Deep Wild* (2022), *Cirque* (2025), and *Asheville Poetry Review* (2024), among others. Working as an SLP for more than forty years, Talley wrote and implemented some of the very first Individualized Education Program documents (IEPs). She is grateful she could make aspects of her students, and their disabilities, come alive through poetry.

Joseph Trance is a retired special education teacher and has also been a crisis intervention teacher, Christian worship leader, musician, and writer. His work has appeared in *Auguries* (Issue 17, 1993) and *Beyond: Science Fiction/Fantasy*. Focusing his poetry and fiction work around Christian and science fiction themes, he writes because it is his way of remembering what he has learned as an educator. Trance’s interests also include, piano, guitar, and harmonica, playing blues and country.

Susan Levi Wallach is a ballroom dancer and former modern dancer living in Columbia, South Carolina. Her work has appeared in *Solstice* (April 2025), *Rivanna Review* (December 2024), and *The Thomas Wolfe Review* (2014), among others. Believing that “dance is for every body,” Wallach is a certified DanceWheels instructor and trained in Dance for PD (Parkinson’s disease) and DanceAbility methods. “No one should ever have to sit on the sidelines.”

Devon Wells is a content marketing manager living in Westerville, Ohio, with his wife and son. Published works include appearances in *BULL* (December 2024) and *To Nepal with Love: A Travel Guide for the Connoisseur* (2013) from Thingsasian Press. With mental and physical disabilities being a daily reality for his immediate family members, Wells found they were such a part of his life he did not recognize how it influenced his writing until others noticed trends of neurodivergence throughout his work.

Emily Yates is a poet with Addison’s disease and diabetes, living happily in Los Angeles, California. Her work has appeared in *The Blunt Space Inc.* (April 2025), *Bitchin’ Kitsch* (April 2025), and *SixPence Society* (Summer 2023), among others. As someone with a rare and invisible disability, Yates uses poetry to understand herself and her feelings. She enjoys writing, reading, traveling, and spending time with family and friends.



Erika Marie York, *All for You*, 2023, acrylic on canvas, 16" x 20"



Erika Marie York, *Mind of My Mind*, 2020, digital art

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