

KALEIDOSCOPE

EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCE OF DISABILITY THROUGH LITERATURE AND THE FINE ARTS

Number 76
Winter/Spring Online 2018



LIFE'S UNPREDICTABILITY

"Someone to Hold" by *Luke Emile Williams*

"The Way I Am" by *Lorna Rose McGinnis*

"The Almighty Caregiver of the Colonial Apartments" by *Laura Yeager*

Contents

	Count It All Joy	30	One More Ride	63
	<i>Marc A. Buchholz</i>		<i>Mark Quist Prince</i>	
◆ EDITORIAL NOTE	The Way I Am	38	Pregnant with a Frightening Diagnosis	65
Life's Mystical Journey	<i>Lorna Rose McGinnis</i>		<i>Petra Wheaton</i>	
<i>Gail Willmott</i>				
◆ FEATURED ESSAY	The Girl Who Was	46	◆ POETRY	
Gravity's Tilt	<i>Mary M. Sheridan</i>		The Long Ride Home	5
<i>Ellen L. Case</i>			In Your Winter Kitchen	26
	◆ PERSONAL ESSAY		<i>Jennifer L. Freed</i>	
	An Unanticipated Love	12		
	<i>Allan B. Goldstein</i>		The Meeting	11
◆ FEATURED ART	"You Can Do Anything..."	28	<i>Marcia Pelletiere</i>	
Old Masters' Style, New Technology	<i>Debbie Roppolo</i>		Tomb Visiting: For Yuan Hongqi	15
<i>Sandy Palmer</i>			<i>Yuan Changming</i>	
◆ FICTION	Someone to Hold	53	Davey, 8	22
No Green	<i>Luke Emile Williams</i>		Because of Davey	22
<i>Abby Lipscomb</i>			<i>Liz Dolan</i>	
	Acts of Silence	56		
The Almighty Caregiver of the Colonial Apartments	<i>Emily Klein</i>			
<i>Laura Yeager</i>				
	This is the Way the World Ends	59		
	<i>Staci Bernard-Roth</i>			

Conquering the Stairs 23

Janet Sobczyk

His Sorrow Land 23

Maura Gage Cavell

Infusion Room 27

Katie Irish

A Good Death 44

Ruth Z. Deming

Liberation 45

The Apartment 45

Glenna Cook

Snapshot 47

Demeter 48

Life 66

Barbara Crooker

Cliff Over Troubled Water 49

Alyssa Cain

A Fort Worth Bag Lady 60

Sheryl L. Nelms



Kristina Gehrmann, *The Vial Keeper*, 2012,
Photoshop CS3/Wacom tablet, 9.8" x 13.5"

◆ **CREATIVE NONFICTION**

Driving Home
in the Blurry White 50

Ruth Z. Deming

◆ **REVIEW**

A Promising First 61

Mark T. Decker

◆ **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES** 67

STAFF

PUBLISHER

Howard Taylor, President/CEO
United Disability Services

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Gail Willmott, M.Ed.

MANAGING EDITOR

Lisa Armstrong

ART COORDINATOR

Sandy Palmer

EDITORIAL ASSISTANTS

Lorraine Abbott

Lynne Came

Gillean Thom

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF EMERITUS

Darshan Perusek, Ph.D.

HONORARY EDITOR

Phyllis Boerner

MANUSCRIPT REVIEW PANEL

Fiction Review

Mark Decker, Ph.D.

Bloomsburg University
Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania

Poetry Review

Sandra J. Lindow

University of Wisconsin-Stout
Menomonie, Wisconsin



Kaleidoscope (ISSN 2329-5775)
is published online semiannually.
Copyright © 2018 Kaleidoscope Press
United Disability Services,
701 S. Main St., Akron, OH 44311-1019
(330) 762-9755 Phone
(330) 762-0912 Fax
email: kaleidoscope@udsakron.org
<http://www.kaleidoscopeonline.org>

Kaleidoscope retains non-exclusive world rights to published works for purposes of reprinting and/or electronic distribution. All other rights return to the writer/artist upon publication.

We request credit for publication as follows:

Previously published by
*Kaleidoscope: Exploring
the Experience of Disability through
Literature and the Fine Arts*,
701 South Main St.,
Akron, OH 44311-1019

Indexed in *Humanities International Complete* and the *MLA International Bibliography non-Master List*. Listed in *International Directory of Little Magazines and Small Presses*, *Magazines for Libraries*, *The Standard Periodical Directory*.

Submissions:

Email or online submissions preferred.

If submitting hard copy, send copies of originals with SASE if you want your work returned. The editors do not assume responsibility for returning submissions without ample return postage. Address all correspondence to the editor-in-chief.

Kaleidoscope, beginning in 1979, pioneered the exploration of the experience of disability through the lens of literature and fine arts. Fiction, personal essays, poetry, articles, book reviews, and various artistic media including two-dimensional art, three-dimensional art, drama, theater, and dance are featured in the pages of various issues.

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.

LIFE'S MYSTICAL JOURNEY

GAIL WILLMOTT

Life: a journey almost always shared with others that can be short, long, or anything in between. It is composed of ordinary moments and days (only because we usually refuse to see each moment and day as an unrepeatable miracle). This journey called life is, at various times, filled with joys or sorrows, much of these beyond our control. During our span of time we make choices and decisions which can have positive or negative consequences for ourselves and often those around us. Life consists of change and unpredictability which makes some people, including myself, very uncomfortable. As we gain maturity we develop ways of coping with the change and unpredictability inherent in life.

Still, many of these occurrences can leave us reeling, wondering, and asking questions for which there are often no satisfactory answers. For instance, why do the young and innocent, as well as those who do good in the world, have to die, often suddenly and unexpectedly, while the "stinkers," who are often selfish and hurtful seem to prosper and survive relatively unscathed? Why are children, by virtue of their place of birth, denied food, clean water, shelter, medical assistance, and educational opportunities, in other words, the chance to live a stable life free from constant fear and worry? Why are some children born with disabilities and some adults incur unexpected life-changing disabilities as they are going about the business of living their lives? Why are there such terrible diseases as Alzheimer's, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), and cancer? And a much broader, and equally unanswerable question, is why do human beings continue to insist on going to war? In practical terms, I real-

ize these are fruitless questions. Nevertheless, they are the sort of thoughts that occur to most of us at various times in our lives. Ultimately, what is important, is how we respond to the choices we make and to the circumstances beyond our control that happen as a part of our lives.

I would like to share with you a prose poem, written by Max Ehrmann in 1927. It is a piece that many of you may already know and that has long been a favorite of mine which contains some simple but sound advice for navigating the twists and turns, and ups and downs of life.

DESIDERATA

Go placidly amid the noise and haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence. As far as possible, without surrender; be on good terms with all persons. Speak your truth quietly and clearly; and listen to others, even the dull and ignorant; they too have their story.

Avoid loud and aggressive persons; they are vexations to the spirit. If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain and bitter; for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself. Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans.

Keep interested in your own career, however humble; it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time. Exercise caution in your business affairs; for the world is full of trickery. But let this not blind you to what virtue there is; many persons strive for high ideals; and everywhere life is full of heroism.

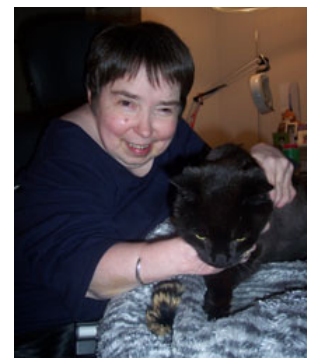
Be yourself. Especially, do not feign affection. Neither be cynical about love; for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment it is perennial as the grass.

Take kindly the counsel of the years, gracefully surrendering the things of youth. Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune. But do not distress yourself with imaginings. Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness. Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself.

You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here. And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.

Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive Him to be, and whatever your labors and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life, keep peace with your soul.

With all its sham, drudgery, and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world. Strive to be happy. ♦



Gail Willmott

JENNIFER L. FREED

THE LONG RIDE HOME

FOR B

There is the road, dark and slick.
 There are the trees, the deep green of fir.
 There is the slip of the car on the curve. Then the jolt
 of response, steering safe from the skid,
 and her thought: *Now be careful, black ice, go slow,*
 and her thought: *Or not.*
 She could let go.

She could let her hands drift like a fog
 off the wheel.
 She could let her foot rise off the brake.
 The shock of it there—two words, now free.
 Her hands holding firm, foot steady, slow, but
 those words, the thought, the haunt—
Let go.

Her hands on the wheel, her foot steady and slow,
 mile after mile, driving home in the snow
 to the weight
 of her days, to the nights
 without rest, to the husband so silent, and solemn,
 and sad, a husband she loves, and a son,
 so young.

And what would he do, her man
 with his moods? How would he know what to do
 with the son who at two has not babbled
 a word, who rocks, and stares, and flaps
 and wails?
 How would her man raise her boy
 without her?

So the boy who may never learn speech, or touch
 holds the mother
 who's consciously thought, *Let go.*

The exit is there, gives her strength
 to stay here.

For this day, and next, and on
 and on,
 with the door in the back of her mind, she holds on
 to the wheel, she holds on,
 and on. She does not
 leave her boy. She does not
 let him
 go.

GRAVITY'S TILT

ELLEN L. CASE

As morning fog thinned to mist on Oakland's Redwood Regional Park trails, my hiking buddy John and I traipsed uphill into slots of sunlight. Our dogs, Zeke and Hudson, sprinted after a muddy tennis ball. Through the corridor of pines and eucalyptus ahead, I spotted the parking lot, to my relief. My legs, tingling from multiple sclerosis, felt filled with cement this last half mile.

In years past when John and I ran the trails of Oakland's Redwood Regional Park, the pattern of our footfalls had provided a backbeat to our conversations. And when I'd run alone, my legs' rhythm let my thoughts roam. Now, the process had reversed; I actually had to think in order to walk. On this day, half my mind followed our conversation, while the other half concentrated on operating my legs.

The two dogs darted into the manzanita bushes. When they darted back to join us, Zeke's haunch grazed my left calf—the leg bearing my weight. Five years ago, I would have regained my balance instantly, without even thinking. But

my MS-ravaged neurons could not read gravity's sudden tilt, nor react in time. I catapulted backwards, my head slamming into the pine-needled path. The slots of sunlight narrowed. Everything went black.

As I swam back up into consciousness, I felt Zeke's rough tongue lick my forehead, and heard John shouting my name. I sat up, feeling more embarrassed than alarmed at having my hiking buddy see me sprawled in the dirt, and rubbed the back of my head. No blood, just a painful lump forming. John squatted next to me.

"Jeez, Ellen, you went flying. Scared the hell out of me. Can you stand up?" John helped me to my feet, and the spinning in my head settled a bit, my vision coming back into focus. He offered me his arm, which I turned down until he gripped my elbow so hard I had no choice. Slowly, we walked the final stretch to the parking lot.

John packed me into his Volvo wagon, drove me home, and we sat in my kitchen while my dizziness subsided. Zeke and Hudson lay on the floor, looking contrite. While I sipped ice water

and called my doctor, John disappeared into my garage. Even in my confused state I had a hunch why. He knew where my old downhill skis resided, next to my dusty road bike and a box of worn out Nikes. In a moment, I saw him dusting off a ski pole. Then he sat, facing me, the pole across his lap.

"Ellen, at the end of our walks, you sway and swerve as if you're fighting a strong wind," he said. "You need something to anchor you. A ski pole isn't exactly it, but it's a start."

I set my glass down and put my still-dazed head in my hands. What John had said was true. MS, in its assault on the myelin sheath of my brain's sensory neurons, had partially numbed the soles of my feet. The effect was like wearing three pairs of socks: MS had muffled the sensation of the ground beneath me. In the five years since my diagnosis, it had also attacked my motor neurons, weakening my legs, which used to ski, bike—and best of all, run miles of the trail we'd just walked.

Although I didn't recognize it at the time, the autoimmune disease had also knocked out much of my proprioception, the perception of movement and spatial orientation that keeps people upright. In order to keep my balance, I had come to depend largely on visual cues. I watched the horizon line like a pilot flying without instruments. On walks, I surveyed the trees and trail to keep myself perpendicular to the ground. If I closed my eyes, I was lost in space. Being able to stand upright is what makes us human and adult; toddlers struggle to achieve this ability, and I was losing mine.

Also, if I hung the placard on my mirror, its white-on-blue wheelchair graphic would be in my face, an unwelcome reminder of what my future might hold.

John's eyes scanned my face as if to read my state of mind. "I could go with you," he offered, "to shop for a walking stick." How careful he was not to use that four-letter word, cane.

He added, "I'm sure REI carries them." I'd bought the very ski pole he was holding at REI, as well as everything from running jerseys to bike helmets in my athletic years.

Maybe it was John's earnest face, or maybe it was the concussion clouding my usual resistance, but I agreed, if only tentatively, to his advice.

* * *

A week later, I circled the REI lot alone, having told John I'd rather shop by myself. He had rolled his eyes, probably recognizing the stubbornness that used to propel me past him on the last stretch of a 10K race.

In the parking lot I followed Subaru Outbacks and Honda Foresters, all searching for a space. The only open spots had blue curbs and large "Handicapped Only" signs with that blue wheelchair emblem—the emblem that always made me flinch.

I actually owned one of those blue placards that hang from the rear view mirror, courtesy of my neurologist. "MS qualifies you, there's no doubt," Dr. M had said. But I'd never used it. There were many other people with *serious* disabilities who needed the spaces more, I reasoned. Also, if I hung the placard on my mirror, its white-on-blue wheelchair graphic would be in my face, an unwelcome reminder of what my future might hold. And so the placard hid in my glove compartment, pristine in its DMV envelope.

I waited, the car's air conditioning humming in my ears. Finally, an SUV pulled out, and I slid into a space facing the store entry. But as I pulled the key from the ignition, my shoulders tensed. Images from past REI shopping trips flooded my mind: outfitting a Yosemite backpacking trip, buying downhill skis for Tahoe, river rafting shoes for a whitewater trip on the Klamath, reflective yellow vests for a cycling trip in Napa Valley. Each time I had entered the store's doors filled with anticipation, the thrill of the adventure to come.

Groups of tanned hikers and skiers chatted as they entered the sliding glass doors. People who could take their legs for granted, who could walk without thinking about it. My shoulders cramped ever more tightly. I tried breathing deeply and tucking the wings of my shoulder blades back to unknot them. It didn't help. Instead, a familiar, unwelcome grief rose through my chest.

A psychotherapist for fifteen years, specializing in trauma and loss, I knew the stages of grief by heart. I knew that one stage didn't always follow another neatly, and that people facing loss often cycle through the stages many times.

But I was unprepared for how MS doled out losses repeatedly, and at a relentless pace. Just when I'd come to terms with numb feet, the tingling sensation rose to my thighs. Just when I'd learned to inject myself with interferon and tolerate the flu-like side effects, MS stopped responding to the drug. Just when I'd taught my abdominal muscles

to help lift my legs, my hands went thick and numb. MS is merciless: despite the monthly IV infusions intended to slow its progress, the disease just kept upping the ante. Each loss I faced only heralded the arrival of the next.

I tried telling myself what I tell my patients: that such losses require daily care and acceptance, compassion for the battered heart, respect for the resilient spirit within. That the only way out is through.

I wasn't convinced.

A bereaved mother I'd counseled, a swimmer, told me of weeping into her goggles as she kicked through laps of her pool, alone.

"Your loss feels so deep," I had said, "Like swimming the English Channel. You can't navigate it alone; you need a team." She wept harder but began to let me and her family inside her broken heart.

So why hadn't I taken my own advice, and let John come with me? Or let anyone help me with this journey? My own headstrong independence was as much of a disability as the MS.

Gripping my keys, I willed myself to get out of the car and walk through those doors. *I can do this, I really can.* Surely it couldn't be as hard as the last half mile of a 10K race, when I would push through my nausea to the finish line.

But it was. I dropped the keys, let my forehead rest on the steering wheel, and wept. Then I drove home, empty-handed.

* * *

Later that week, I told my neighborhood pharmacist, Lloyd, who had known me since my athletic days, about my failure of nerve at REI. He suggested I think of the first cane purchase as a temporary measure, a gateway to something more suitable. Borrowing

his logic, I bought Lloyd's cheapest model, a plastic-handled aluminum job that clattered along at my side as I left his shop. Gear for silver-haired Sierra Clubbers recovering from knee replacements. At least its blue marbling resembled my downhill ski pole, a tool for someone used to going fast.

I was sure the cane would raise questions I wasn't prepared to answer, and brand me with an identity I didn't want.

And how I had loved going fast. In my twenties and thirties, I was a triathlete who once got a speeding ticket in my Miata on the way to Squaw Valley. Of all the ways to go fast, I loved running best. My legs were sinewy steeds whose power and sure-footedness I could count on. I'd loved how long, fast runs helped me think through decisions. Where to go to grad school, which approach to use with challenging patients, how to resolve a dispute with a friend. When my Nikes flashed along beneath me, my mind churned at a similar pace, generating the insights, answers, and words I needed.

And now, with the dilemmas posed by MS, what I needed most was a good seven mile run at a seven minute pace. Instead, I flung the cane into the trunk, and peeled out of my parking space.

Two weeks after my fall, I met John again at Redwood Regional Park. When I pulled the ugly aluminum cane from the trunk, he applauded. And he'd been right: I could walk with more confidence and enjoy the dogs' games and the spring day. The next week, John surprised me with a gift of trekking poles. He'd gone to REI without

me, and this gesture melted my usual stubbornness. The poles made walking feel a bit like skiing and gave me more of an upper body workout. Best of all, other walkers saw them as standard hiking gear, which let me feign the athleticism I could no longer claim.

But using my cane or poles on the sidewalks of Berkeley where I walked to my psychotherapy office, or attended meetings at the clinic where I supervised and taught—this I could not bring myself to do. I was sure the cane would raise questions I wasn't prepared to answer, and brand me with an identity I didn't want. I rationalized: the shakiness in my gait only showed after I'd walked several blocks. If I could manage not to wobble on the sidewalks from car to office, then I didn't need a cane. Not yet.

* * *

Until I started falling down on those sidewalks. Minor trips and stumbles at first, then a hard fall that jarred my spine and sent me back to my former sports medicine doctor, now my pain and rehab specialist. Dr. C had a basketball lapel pin, a slight Chinese accent and a low key sense of humor that sometimes slipped right past me, rebounding in my ears only later, on my drive home.

He saw the pattern that I'd been unwilling to admit: "Your falls are on sidewalks, stairs, curbs, but not up in Redwood Park? How do you explain this falling down in urban zones only?" His face was deadpan, but we both laughed. Mine was more of a sheepish chuckle.

"Well, on the trails, I use trekking poles. And I have a clunky aluminum cane in my car."

"But you don't use the cane on sidewalks?"

I shook my head and looked down at the floor, at my numb feet, my tingling and gradually weakening legs. The toes of my black flats were scuffed and

nicked from foot drag. I stood next to the exam table, one hand resting on it casually, but really to keep my balance. Without sensory information from the soles of my feet, it was hard to know where the floor was.

“Then my guess is you use your vision heavily,” he said. “You probably can’t walk and look at the person next to you without stumbling.”

“Urban cane” had the ring of history to it, and perhaps a touch of class.

Could he read my mind? Only yesterday I’d glanced at the new novels in the display window at Mrs. Dalloway’s Books and nearly fallen through the glass. Anyone seeing me had probably thought I was drunk.

“I just don’t want to be pegged as *that disabled woman*,” I said. If I could have shuffled my feet in embarrassment right then, I would have. “I guess it’s like that old saying, ‘pride goeth before a fall.’” I gave up standing and perched on the end of the exam table.

“Your pride could goeth before a head injury,” replied Dr. C. “So far you’ve only bruised your tailbone.” He held up his prescription pad. “So, what’s it going to be, a helmet or a cane?”

“A helmet would sure ruin my hair-style,” I snapped. Dr. C met my angry gaze and left his computer screen to come over to the exam table. He sat, angling his lanky, marathon-runner torso to face me.

“I remember when you first broke a six-minute mile,” he said. I bit my lower lip, squeezed my eyes shut. “You still have an athlete’s mind. Use that.”

“But how?”

“When you trained for a race, you constantly assessed what stage you were in, to know when to push the envelope. With MS, you have to make similar daily assessments—about how far you’ll be walking, how steady your legs are and what kind of footing they’ll be up against.” I raised my head and looked at his basketball pin.

“I’m recommending you buy an urban cane,” he said.

“An urban cane?” I stared up at him as if he’d suggested an unfamiliar athletic brand.

“A cane that looks classy, but is solidly built. You were an English major—think Henry James. In the nineteenth century, gentlemen didn’t go out without a proper cane.”

On my way home, I remembered the novels of Henry James and Edith Wharton, set in New York and Paris of the late 1800s. Upper class gentlemen’s haberdashery had included derbies, pocket watches, cravats, and walking sticks, which would have been a necessity in the rough and muddy streets they had to navigate, and a handy defense against young ruffians. “Urban cane” had the ring of history to it, and perhaps a touch of class.

* * *

That evening I called my best friend Debra, who, at fifty, still turns heads in her Kate Spade boots and handbag, and has more fashion sense than all Carrie Bradshaw’s friends put together. “Could a cane actually be part of my wardrobe?” I asked her. “I mean, something that doesn’t scream ‘disabled,’ but just blends in?”

“Of course!” Her voice chuckled into my ear. “Just consider it an accessory. Like a scarf or a belt.” I grunted my skepticism. Her voice grew more somber: “El, until there’s a cure for MS, it might be your best bet.”

After I hung up, a small flame of hope rose in my chest. Perhaps an urban cane would call less attention to the MS than this piece of blue aluminum junk. It was time to take action, one step at a time.

So Debra and I set off to shop, my clanky aluminum cane at my side, per Dr. C’s orders. But, I told Debra, I hated the way people looked at me.

Within minutes, we encountered a middle-aged couple strolling our way. I aimed a quick smile, and the woman nodded back. Then they both glanced at my cane. Rapidly, their eyes scanned me, as if to discern the nature of my disability. Perhaps they saw only an apparently healthy fortyish woman without a limp, bandaged ankle or knee brace as they passed by—without making eye contact. I glanced sideways at Debra and her eyes widened.

“See,” I said. “They gave me ‘the cane look.’”

“Hmm, I see what you mean. But consider this,” said Debra. “One, when you use a cane, you’re able to walk at a normal, actually rather rapid pace. You don’t lean your weight into it the way elderly or injured people do, so people are naturally curious about why you need it.”

“The momentum of faster walking makes it easier to keep my balance,” I said. “It’s like riding a bike. If you pedal slowly, you wobble, and the faster you go, the steadier you are.”

“Well, you and I know that, but other people don’t,” she pointed out. “Two,” she said, “you look down in embarrassment, which they respond to, not the cane. Three, you have trouble accepting a cane, so you expect others will, too.”

“Hey, I thought I was the shrink here!” I said.

At a medical supply store, we ruled out the standard wooden models with curved handles. Too grandfatherly. We tried a vintage clothing store and struck gold—a slender, dark burgundy cane with a silver handle in the shape of a duck’s head, which I quickly put on my Visa card. I thought we were done, but Debra felt otherwise.

“You’ll need several canes, to go with different outfits,” she said. I surrendered to her fashion expertise, and we went next to a few antique shops, where we found a slender ebony with silver inlay through the shaft, and a mahogany with a T-shaped carved brass handle that moved soundlessly at my side as I tried a stroll down the furniture aisle. Halfway down, I looked up and caught a glimpse of myself in a beveled glass wall mirror. The person I’d expected to see—defeated, her downcast eyes focused on the floor—had been replaced by a stalwart woman with a steady stride, swinging her cane forward with a smart whipping motion. And most of all, a direct and welcoming gaze.

I *looked* ready to face the world. But was I?

Back home, at my laptop, we discovered a website called *fashionablecanes.com* and ordered a collapsible black derby cane with a rhinestone collar for dressy evening events. That made a total of four, which Debra said was a good start. She commandeered my copper umbrella stand and evicted the umbrellas. The new canes took up residence in the stand by the door, ready to be of service.

That Monday my legs were shaky enough that I took the mahogany cane to my office, parked across the street from my building, and hung the blue placard so I wouldn’t have to move my car every two hours. Fewer parking tickets are one of the only perks of disability. And when that blue and white wheelchair logo eyeballed me, I glared right back.

At the day’s end, I walked out, cane in hand, and waited at the light to cross the street. From the other side of the crosswalk, a colleague recognized me and waved. “Hey Ellen,” she called, “Nice walking stick! Did you sprain your ankle?” I crossed at the green and went to tell her the truth.

* * *

Over the next few weeks, I put my athletic discipline to use and did cane workouts. Whether I felt like it or not, just as I’d run daily no matter what mood I was in, I chose one of the canes every morning, in the hope that I could break through my mind’s resistance just

as I’d once broken a six-minute mile. My right palm developed a blister, which healed into a callous of tougher, thicker skin. As one colleague after another encountered me with my cane, I steeled myself for inquiries about my disability. I was surprised that their first responses were often admiration for the artistry of my cane’s carved brass handle.

Three months after my fall in Redwood Regional Park, I was walking to my car at sunset, after work, mulling over the day’s patients. Suddenly I realized I’d completely forgotten the cane as it swung along at my side. I was walking without thinking about it, no longer burdened with the need to keep my eyes on the horizon.

And so I let my mind roam to the years ahead. A wheelchair is likely in the cards, given the progressive nature of my type of MS. I imagined myself in that future, looking back on the cane years as ones of independence, years I might one day treasure.

When I reached my car, parked in the residential neighborhood around the corner from my office, I tossed my briefcase in the trunk. Then, on a whim, I locked the car and headed down the block, under the stately elms and red oaks. Dusk was descending, and the street lamps flickered on, spilling pools of light onto the sidewalks. I walked from one pool of light to the next, pushing onward around the block as the moon rose into the darkening sky. ♦

MARCIA PELLETIERE

THE MEETING

There's the long wall, blinking
its transparent plastic lights. That's me,
hunting down each bright red flash,
stretching up to press the high ones off,
but not as quickly as I could do now.

Others hunch at tables, sorting
bowls of colored beads.

There's the older guy who aims
long wooden pincers at his leg—
much work for pulling up
a cotton sock.

See how we look stunned, as if
the rain's gone rogue, so it burns,
instead of waters, all the foliage.

There are our families,
coming to the meeting.

That's the girl.

The one we can't forget.
She's twenty-two.
She can't work
her mouth, her limbs.

Her mother tells it for her—

how the substitute van driver
got lost for hours, while she
rode alone in back, the last
to be dropped off;

how she couldn't speak,
could only wait, as they
sped past her street.

That's her body, which will never
correct its terrible grammar.

Hearing her own story fill the room,
see how her limbs jerk fast,
like nervous dogs trembling in a lightning storm.
There's her throat, making a startled sound
most like a goose would make.

After it's told, here are the rest of us,
finding our coats, filing outside,
climbing silently into our cars.

AN UNANTICIPATED LOVE

ALLAN B. GOLDSTEIN

I never thought that my younger brother Fred, who sported permanently crooked eyeglasses, spoke with difficulty to understand sounds and required assistance with daily living, would be involved with a significant other: a partner, someone to relieve his not quietly fitting into this world. I never thought someone would rely on *him*.

In 1957, Mom and Dad authorized New York State to look after Fred at the age of four. He lived in his first institution, the Willowbrook State School for the Mentally Retarded, for sixteen years before it was shut down for ignoring children who were slamming their heads into walls or sitting in their own feces. After a journey through smaller New York City institutions, Fred arrived at a group home. Fred and I became mere acquaintances after he “went away.” Our parents were his connection to the typical world. Now, with Dad dead ten years, and Mom having just died, I gained guardianship and had the opportunity to learn about him, his world, and most importantly, how to be a brother.

Because of Fred’s charm, people referred to him as “a real ladies man.” During a big brother moment at one of his kidney dialysis sessions, I told him he couldn’t flirt with everyone. In words that had never been so clear, he said, “I like Michele best.”

“Would you like me to meet her?”

“Yes,” he said, his features softening.

Although Michele and Fred lived near each other, they had to be assisted to meet outside of work. They had had their first date at a diner lunch, chaperoned by Michele’s sister. Walking down the street behind them, she took a picture of the two of them holding hands.

When Michele’s name was mentioned, Fred smiled. When he saw her picture, he kissed her image.

Now, two months later, Fred was introducing his family at the workshop where he and Michele created paintings reminiscent of Picasso, Mondrian, and Henry Moore, and where they volunteered as gardeners in a local churchyard and animal-bed makers for a neighborhood shelter. It was a meeting that I had never anticipated.

“I brought you a gift,” I said to Michele, in a conference room where we had brought home-prepared food. I handed her a package from The Body Shop. “You can open it later.”

“Thank you,” she said, daintily taking the purple-ribboned, transparent plastic sack. Her closely cropped, dark brown hair framed upward slanting, lively eyes that revealed intellect . . . spunk . . . curiosity.

“You’re very brave to meet a stranger,” I said.

“I like to meet people,” she said, her speech, clearer than Fred’s, showing mild to moderate Down syndrome.

“Where do you live?”

“With my sister and brother-in-law.”

Her dad was dead and Mom had just entered a nursing home because of Alzheimer’s; she was excited about the possibility of moving to a group home. She also said she was younger than Fred, but wouldn’t say by how much.

“I’m fat,” said Michele.

“Who told you that?” I said, newly alert to discrimination.

“My nurse . . . I’m on a diet,” she said, referring to her cut-up vegetables. I was unaware that obesity was a problem for people with her disability. Fred ate a lot, all the time, but was small in stature.

Weeks earlier, I had asked Fred, “Do you think about girls?”

“Yeah,” he said.

“Do you think about Michele?”

No answer. A private matter. Institutionally-raised people learned that to survive they need to be docile. Had he been withholding?

Michele was not withholding. She said, “Fred asked me to marry him.”

Surprised, I said to Fred, “Did you ask Michele to marry you?”

“No,” he said.

“Wait a minute, wait a minute,” I said, and the two of them began laughing. “Did you ask her to marry you?”

“Yes,” said Fred.

“He got down on one knee,” Michele added.

Where did he learn to get on one knee? People isolated by their disabilities gained cultural and political knowledge from television. In addition to Fred’s counselors’ probable joking with him about marriage etiquette, he had obviously watched a lot of TV.

“I’m waiting for a ring,” said Michele.

I knew that Fred’s agency housed couples in its group homes, each person having his own room. I liked the idea of a special other for Fred, someone besides me to protect him.

So what about sex? How did Michele’s family feel about sex? How did Fred feel about sex? My brother had received instructions on the use of a condom. The three male and three female group-home residents watched as their supervisor rolled one onto a plastic penis. Before further instruction would be offered, he was required to ask. “Sexual consent,” it’s called. But how does a person know if he wants something if he is unaware it exists? Or does nature simply direct? Or does it only take one knowing partner? I later arranged for Fred to meet with a social worker specializing in this topic. She concluded that Fred wasn’t interested. He sometimes kissed Michele, but as the snapshot taken by Michele’s sister, now on my desk, showed, he really liked holding hands.

“Can I take a picture?” I asked Fred and Michele.

Fred immediately grinned, a person always ready for the camera. Michele moved her chair closer to Fred. Fred raised his arms, staring directly into the lens. Michele glanced at the table, looked away. Shyly peeked at me. “Don’t smile,” I said to Michele. Her mouth curved up revealing even teeth as she giggled, looking first at the ceiling, then at me. Snap. “Okay, one more,” I said. Michele looked down, then at Fred. Fred looked at her. She reached out, took his hand. The air in the room stilled, the street sounds ceased, maybe even the minute hand on the wall clock stopped. Peace descended onto the three of us.

Snap.

* * *

A year later, Michele, Fred, and I returned to the diner where they’d had their first date. Michele’s sister and I had been sharing stories of the developing relationship—lots of holding hands. We never took the ring request seriously. “It’s the family joke,” said Michele’s sister. My failure was not discussing the ring with him—did he understand its significance? My other failure was that up until then, I had accepted professional assessment that Fred was not as

able as Michele, so he could not be considered for the same residence as she. I didn't yet know that *all* people could learn—that they just needed teachers who could teach. But when Fred asked to learn to read and write and the work program supervisor said, “We don't bother when they reach that age,” I understood Eunice Kennedy Shriver's statement that “sometimes people get lost in the system set up to serve them.” I had been reading the history of disabilities, including the fight to close places like Willowbrook: the basis for deinstitutionalization, spurred by Scandinavia, was that all people have goals, desires, and the ability to choose. Yet when Fred began refusing to shave, shower, and cut his hair, I asked him, “Are you happy where you live?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“It's boring there.”

“You can live in a more interesting house. But you have to show you can take care of yourself.”

Motioning with his hands, he spoke the most eloquently I'd ever heard him. “I wash the table, I clean my room, I put my clothes away.”

Stunned, I said, “Do you want to move?”

Fred looked at me.

“You can move to Manhattan. We can see each other more often. You can live with more able people. But you'll have to leave your friends.”

Change is difficult for people with disabilities, yet Fred immediately said, “I gotta get outa there.”

The residence supervisor lectured me: “He's been with the same people for twenty years. His not shaving is his choice. Think about what's best for your brother, not for *you!*” And she reportedly said to Fred, “You don't *really* want to move, right?” Much later, Fred told me, “She pushes me around.”

When she began discussing meds for his behavior, I knew my brother needed freedom from people who had given up on him, who no longer “saw” him.

And I needed to prepare Michele for change.

“Fred will be moving to Manhattan,” I said.

“When?” she asked, poised above her cup of tea and the lemon meringue pie she loved. The diet had been hard to endure.

“Not right away,” I said, unhappy to be jeopardizing an im-

portant relationship.

“Why?”

“We want to live closer together so that we can visit more often . . . We'll arrange for the two of you to see each other.”

While I paid our bill, Michele presented us to the middle-aged woman behind the cash register. With elaborate arm motions, perhaps practiced at the workshop, she said, “I am Michele. This is Allan. And this is my boyfriend, Fred.”

I had been reading the history of disabilities, including the fight to close places like Willowbrook: the basis for deinstitutionalization, spurred by Scandinavia, was that all people have goals, desires, and the ability to choose.

Two months later, Michele's world flourished. Moving successfully into a group home a bus ride away from Fred yielded myriad activities. Phone tag barely kept the two of them together during the ten months before Fred received a cadaver kidney, releasing him from his three-time-a-week three-hour dialysis sessions.

Six months later, Fred moved to a Manhattan group home and began working at a new workshop, both providing counselors whose higher expectations helped Fred shed his label of “severe” disabilities.

Michele called Fred at his new residence regularly. Sent cards on holidays or just to say hello.

The staff fashioned a private dining area in the residence for Fred and Michele to share a dinner.

“Did you speak with Michele?” I'd often ask Fred during our phone calls and frequent visits.

“Yes” became less common than “no.” Over a period of six months, Fred ceased initiating calls or responding to Michele's frequent messages.

“She bothers me,” he said.

And then her calls stopped. Michele’s sister and I also lost touch . . . until she called five years later. “I just wanted you to know that Fred is mentioned in a newspaper article about Michele.”

“How is she? Is she still living in Brooklyn?”

“She’s in Brooklyn, but in a different home.”

It was located near my workplace. “I can visit,” I said.

“Yes, but she might not recognize you. She’s become unresponsive, even to me.”

I didn’t know that Alzheimer’s was common in people with Down syndrome. In the article, Fred was referred to as the love of Michele’s life. That she had beamed whenever hearing his name . . . that she had spoken of him to anyone who would listen . . . that he had asked her to marry . . . that she was still waiting for a ring.

* * *

All people can lose opportunities, be distracted by life, fall out of love.

And many can’t replace that love.

I recently asked Fred, who now plays the keyboard at a weekly music group, volunteers to deliver meals to the elderly, is learning letters with computer software, and earns money doing industrial piecework, “Do you have a new girlfriend?”

And simply, unaffectedly, maybe unaware of why, he said, “No.”◆

Previously published in Smith Magazine (online), May 2011. Reprinted with permission of the author.

YUAN CHANGMING

TOMB VISITING: FOR YUAN HONGQI

Last year, before burying your ashes
Right beside Grandma’s gravesite
(To guard her Buddhahship, as you had
Wished) I opened your urn for a peek
And found your biggest bone chip
Glistening against the January wind
As pink as a piece of charcoal

Now, too far to attend your anniversary
Like every other good Confucian son
Burning joss sticks and fake money
Lighting a huge pile of firecrackers
Before your tombstone, on Big Wok Peak
But I did make three loud kowtows
Toward the east, and in so doing
I saw a little rosy cloud drifting around
Like an inflated bird beating its wings
Along the horizon, amid evening glows
And wondered whether that’s your spirit
Still lingering between earth and heaven
What was it tightly holding in its beak:
An heirloom, or simply our family name?

NO GREEN

ABBY LIPSCOMB

Emma was eight years old when they moved to the Isle. The house, once a fishing cottage, sat alone in a field recently stripped of its pines and palmettos to make way for the Isle of Catalina.

“Lovely,” her mother said, gazing at the rough-rutted acres of dirt. “A blank slate. I can’t wait to see what you’ll come up with to do here, Emma.” She might have meant it: Emma’s father hadn’t left them yet, and Emma did have quite the imagination.

Emma collected magicicada husks and strung them across her window to catch the afternoon sun in their tinsel-town wings. She found a creek, shucked off her flip-flops, and waded in to search for the blue glassy stones her father said were slag. She helped her mother unpack and hang up the poster of the girl in the pink dress dragging herself up the hill. And she wished for a friend.

By the second week, things had already changed, as things will. Emma’s father, a carpenter, had left in search of work since construction on the Isle was delayed. Emma’s father, the carpenter, had become the Worm who’d moved them out to the middle of nowhere and abandoned them. Her mother, a woman of only occasional inspiration, had retreated to the tattered sofa in front of the oscillating fan.

Evenings, Mama perked up a bit and opened a can of soup. She and Emma lay at opposite ends of the sofa and watched TV with the volume turned up to drown out the bug chatter outside.

“We’re living in a jungle, my chum,” Mama said, “without the greenery.”

Eventually, Mama resumed contact with the wider family and an uncle Emma had never met before began to visit. Then a house was finished next door and a family moved in. The house was storybook, with a peaked roof, window boxes, and real grass in the yard. Mama sent Emma over with a plate of frosted graham crackers to welcome them.

“You must come in and play with our Juney,” the mother said with her black hair swinging shiny beside her smiling face.

A redheaded child half-hid on the landing above. She pretended to study the wallpaper as she crept down the stairs sideways.

Now, mornings held promise. Emma shook free of her damp bedclothes and pulled on shorts and a shirt from the pile on the floor. After fixing Mama her special iced tea with the tonic in it, she’d grab a Pop-Tart and skip next door. Mrs. always seemed to be waiting for her, often opening the door before Emma knocked.

“Princess!” she’d call. “Emma’s here.” Juney would clatter down the stairs, jostle past her mother, and burst from the house. Emma and Mrs. smiled, so wonderfully unbridled was their Juney.

Juniper Berry Cole was a magical child, unfettered by convention. Every day she wore a pinafore over her shorts and a red jacket with yellow mittens hanging from the sleeves. The pinafore was for the pockets, the jacket for the color, the mittens for the pleasure of swinging. Emma didn't have to be told.

They ran as far as possible before Mrs. could finish the "don'ts." (Don't go near the road. Don't go near the creek. Don't go where I can't see you.)

In the field, Juney twirled, her red braids rising, pinafore billowing, and mittens swinging wide. She was a fairy tale child, a Heidi or an Alice, except that she hadn't yet been orphaned or drugged. She'd spin, stumble, fall down dizzy, then point to where they'd go that day.

They became many things—scientists looking for plant cures, baby food makers looking for bugs—but mostly they were mermaids looking for water, terribly dried out and near death. Juney was Ariel and Emma was Beth, Ariel's sister, who explained Ariel's wishes to people. It wasn't exactly *The Little Mermaid*, but it was a lot like it.

On hot days Juney pointed to the creek when she spun. They'd drop to the ground and drag themselves on their bellies, hauling their heavy tails behind them, until their elbows were scratched raw and their mouths filled with dust. If they didn't find water soon, they'd fall into weakness and go to sleep in the sun. Their thin mermaid blood would boil and they'd die right there in the field. Their bodies melting into the earth, leaving no trace whatsoever.

Just past the cottonwood trees was the creek, shaded and cool. The mermaids shed their shoes and slid down the bank to dip their tails in the water. Birds sang and dragonflies whirled double-decker inches from her face, but Juney didn't notice, so fixed was she on the sun-dazzled water. She'd have sat there all day if Emma hadn't had the idea to make a mermaid pool. They waded into the creek and moved rocks to make a dam to make the water deeper to make a pool for mermaids to swim in. No one had to actually swim.

At the end of a day, they became girls again and returned to the cool of Juney's house for apple juice and gingersnaps. Then the bath full of warm, pink bubbles. Juney closed her eyes, crossed her arms, and screamed as her mother tugged off the muddy pinafore. There was no question that Mrs. had talent. She spoke softly and held on far past the limits of most, but it was Emma who made Juney let go.

"The seaweed is always greener in somebody else's lake. You dream about going up there, but that is a big mistake," Emma sang until Juney loosened her grip.

"Thank you, darling," Mrs. said to Emma.

After the bath, Juney, wrapped tight in a fluffy white towel and smelling like flowers, tried to put the dirty pinafore back on. Never before had Emma seen a child so determined to immerse herself in make-believe.

Emma's mother didn't have bath rules.

"How old are you now?" she'd said when Emma asked. "Certainly old enough to do your own hygiene." Emma agreed, but she would have liked to smell the way Juney smelled.

Emma was always welcome to stay for dinner. Mrs. said they should invite Emma's mother to join them. Emma said she'd let her know when her mother got back from New York, where she was working for the government.

After dinner the girls sat on a big white sofa in the family room and watched *The Little Mermaid*. Juney liked to hold her stuffed starfish and have Emma beside her but not too close. At first Emma thought this was because she smelled like Camels, but really it was because Juney didn't like to be crowded. Or touched. She was artistic. So artistic that Mr. and Mrs. talked about sending her to a school for artistics.

“You can’t begin to give her the kind of attention she needs,” Emma had heard Mr. say to Mrs. in the kitchen.

* * *

On rainy days Mama talked about the Worm.

“Palm trees and bungalows,” he said. The only palm trees I can see are on TV. And if this is a bungalow, I’m the queen of England.” Emma brought Mama her pick-me-up tea and slipped out the back door.

“Who’d like to make sock puppets?” Mrs. said as she laid out socks, colored yarn, and buttons. She looked even prettier today, with her black leggings and yellow tunic—cheerful clothes like Emma planned to wear when she grew up.

“Juney will want to make Ariel,” Emma said, reaching for the red yarn.

But Juney was busy with the button tub. Busy burying her hands in the tub, filling them with buttons, then spreading her fingers to watch buttons stream back into the tub—over and over until Mrs. yanked the tub away. This was a big mistake, but Emma didn’t say so. Sometimes it was more interesting to watch things go ahead and happen. Juney screamed her train-whistle scream and waved her hands in front of her face.

“Juney, dear,” Mrs. said, “please don’t do that.” Juney threw herself on the floor and banged her head on the rug until Mrs. gave back the buttons. Juniper Berry Cole was a magical child capable of great make-believe, but she forgot to please her grown-ups and that was always a big mistake.

“Just look at the world around you, right here on the ocean floor. Such wonderful things surround you. What more is you lookin’ for?” Emma sang until Juney stopped to listen. It was all about attention with her. Juney put the wrong amount of it on everything. Singing got her back, and when it didn’t, pinching did.

“Bless you, Emma,” Mrs. said. “What about you? What kind of puppet would you like to make?”

“I’ll just make Beth, Ma’am. Juney’s used to Beth.”

Mrs. smiled and kissed Emma’s forehead. She smelled like daffodils and her kiss was a butterfly.

* * *

“Emma,” Mama called when Emma returned home, “come say hello to your Uncle Charles.” They sat in the living room drinking under a cloud of smoke. Mama had changed out of her nightie into shorts. Uncle Chuck wore his usual

cutoffs and tank top. Their faces were shiny red.

“Hey, little girl, whatcha got there?” Uncle Chuck said.

“Just a sock puppet.”

Juniper Berry Cole was a magical child capable of great make-believe, but she forgot to please her grown-ups and that was always a big mistake.

“Your mother says you’re always over there. What’s the deal? Crafts?”

“It’s cooler there. And crafts.”

“They have craft kits or what?” Chuck wanted to know. They studied Emma the way Juney studied lights, and Emma didn’t like it.

“They use whatever’s lying around, I guess.”

“Emma’s arty,” Mama said. “Always has been. Colored inside the lines right off.”

“We have stuff lying around,” Chuck said.

Just a bunch of empty bottles and cigarette butts, as far as Emma could see.

* * *

After the movie, Juney and Emma often played in Juney’s room—a pink room with a canopy bed. Emma planned to have one just like it someday. Stuffed animals covered the bed. More really than any one child could use.

“Hey,” Emma said one evening, “let’s make a zoo. What can we use for cages?”

Juney stood in the doorway and flipped the light switch on and off. She was looking for the colors that flashed off the glass tear drops on the chandelier, but it was dark now and they hung there empty. Juney began to whimper. As the

lights flickered, Emma sensed their mermaid sisterhood flickering as well, so she did the only thing she could do: she slipped Juney's beloved starfish under her shirt and headed down the stairs.

"I paid a shipload of money so you and June could enjoy the club pool this summer," Mr. was saying in the kitchen.

"She doesn't do well at the pool, Paul. She's a special child with special needs."

"Keep making excuses, and she'll get *real* special."

"She can't help it."

"You're raising a fairy princess, Marilyn."

It was true that Juney was like a princess. She didn't worry about details or others, and though she was older, probably eleven, she was never helpful. You needed servants to help raise a princess. Emma had seen Mrs. sitting in a chair looking out the window with a tissue box in her lap. Perhaps she would've preferred a child who wasn't so special. Or royal.

* * *

One morning Uncle Chuck brought Mama and Emma a window unit. As it rumbled the little house to freezing, he set out craft supplies. Plaster of Paris, a plywood board, a hammer.

"Emma," he said, "you ever hear of mosaics?"

She hadn't. Chuck showed her how to mix the plaster and smear it on the board. How to break wine bottles and set the shards in plaster to make a picture. She made a mermaid of course; the green glass was perfect for the tail. Mama donated her red bead necklace for hair.

* * *

"Don't-cha want to stay with me today and keep cool?" Mama said from the couch on the last day of summer. "If I get to feeling better, we could go out and buy you a new lunchbox."

"No thanks," Emma said, "Juney and I have plans."

They'd go to the creek. It was that hot.

The row of rocks was still there, the pool was still holding water. They'd make it deeper.

Emma rolled rocks under the water with her feet. Juney used her pinafore until a rock ripped through it. Carefully she pressed the torn edges together and watched them fall apart.

"Juney!" Emma called, "You have more of those at home. Let's get in!"

Side by side they slipped into the pool and held on to the rock wall.

She didn't worry about details or others, and though she was older, probably eleven, she was never helpful.

"Swish your tail," Emma said. And they did.

"Put your face in," Emma said. They did.

"Now get your hair wet."

Juney looked so much like a real mermaid with her pale skin and streaming red hair that Emma was not surprised when she let go of the wall and turned away. Gathering her shoulders and ducking her head, she dove under. When she flipped her tail, the sun caught her scales and turned them from gray to emerald.

* * *

Soon after that day, school started and Emma's mermaid world ended, as worlds will. There was third-grade homework, Brownie Scouts, and a playmate who spoke. The Saturday she went to Juney's, no one answered the door. Through the front window she saw no trace of her friend. Emma figured the artistic school was the sleep-away kind. She'd seen Mrs. working in the yard. Mrs. had waved to Emma, but her eyes no longer sparkled.

Emma thought about her alone in that big empty house, sitting with the tissue box. Emma could heat up soup and sing for her. Make her pick-me-up tea. She could wear Juney's clothes and stay in Juney's pink room. She could fill that house with the sounds of a child again.

Emma's own mother was getting dressed and going places now—the local salon, the liquor store, the VFW to play bingo. She'd even taken up bottle-cap art. Spent hours sorting little caps and gluing them on boards to make surprisingly recognizable images of her favorite movie stars.

Which mother needed her most?

Emma had her things all packed in her mermaid backpack along with Juney's starfish when Mama came down with bronchitis and needed her again.

"Why so glum, Emma-my-chum?" Mama asked when Emma brought her tea one morning. "You miss that freak child?"

"Not really," Emma said. Her mother wouldn't understand.

Now and then Emma did think of Juney and the fun they'd had. Sometimes she wondered about Juney's school, but then she'd stop herself and think instead of Juney's green tail and how the scales had lit up when she dove under.

"Her mother was a flake," Mama said.

And so Emma learned how to shut out her mother's voice, something she was going to do eventually as a teenager anyway. She found she could do it with music on her cassette player with headphones. She'd be listening to The Beatles in her room and look up to see her mother leaning against the door jamb with her mouth moving. Eventually, even with her ears unprotected, her mother's words failed to reach her, as though she was speaking under water.

When Emma finished community college with a certificate in accounting, she found a job farther north and moved away. Uncle Charles was living with Mama, but then Uncle Charles died and Mama called for her. Mama wanted to move to a condo and needed help packing.

"You can do this," Emma's boyfriend, Frank, said. "Go down, help her out, and come back. Three days—tops."

* * *

The house was smaller, dingier, as though smoke from all Mama's cigarettes had seeped through the walls and stained the white clapboard gray.

"Don't let the cool out," Mama said as she opened the door. She was thinner but still strong when she hugged, and Emma couldn't back away. "Your hair is short," she said, pulling pieces of Emma's hair down onto her forehead. "You need bangs to soften." Hers was finally gray; it sat on her head like a helmet of cobwebs. "Your room is ready. I boxed your stuff."

"Sorry about Uncle Charlie," Emma said, "I couldn't get away."

"It's OK," Mama said with a wave, "I have pictures."

"Of what? The body?"

"They don't let you do that anymore."

Not much had changed. A larger flat-screen TV and a glossy leather recliner. Beside the recliner was an oxygen tank, plastic tubing coiled on top. Mama had emphysema; the cigarettes were gone.

"Do you ever think about your little friend?" she asked. "Joan, was it? Didn't talk. Retarded or something."

"I'll bet the place looks different to you," she said. "They finished the Isle. Put some trees back in—hello. Packed it with prefabs. Nothing original like this one." She sank into her chair and clipped the tubing to her nose. "I saved your art. We had it on the walls till now."

Chuck had brought Emma paint-by-number kits after Juney. Sitting with her mother at the wobbly kitchen table, she'd carefully filled in each of the outlined areas with the designated color. She'd been proud of the pictures, though less so as time went on. No matter how thickly she gobbled on the paint, you could still see the lines between the sections.

"Bedtime," her mother said at seven thirty. Grasping the oxygen tank pole and pushing it ahead of her like a walker, she headed for bed.

In the morning Mama sat in her chair and watched Emma wrap plates in newspaper.

"Do you ever think about your little friend?" she asked. "Joan, was it? Didn't talk. Retarded or something."

"No." Emma said. Her mother was tarnishing her memories the way her cigarette smoke had stained the walls.

"They bought that house just for summers. Assholes."

"They were nice."

"Nice assholes."

In the afternoon the cicadas geared up like tiny buzz saws and Mama grew cranky. “You never visit. You never call me with your problems like other daughters do.”

You are my problem, Emma thought.

“I might not have been the best mother but I was there. That woman—what’s-her-name’s mother—how does someone do that? Just walk away? And your father—don’t get me started.”

“Nap time, Mom?”

In Emma’s room were boxes labeled *E’s artwork*, *E’s schoolwork*, and *M business*. Inside *M business* were her mermaid things. The sock puppet, *The Little Mermaid* backpack. Inside the backpack was a toothbrush, the cigar box of slag, and Juney’s starfish.

“Accounting?” Mama was leaning against the door jamb. “Doesn’t sound like my Emma,” I told Charles. “She’s arty.”

But Emma had exactly the life she wanted. She was an accountant because numbers were finite. Her relationship with Frank was uncomplicated too. Juney and her family had shown her that people could live in better ways.

“Remember the mosaics? We had that one hanging in the living room.” Mama said, pointing to a large package in the corner. “Gorgeous. The Coles would never have hung it over their mantle, you know. Even in their summer place.”

“Okay, Mom.”

“Hoity-toity assholes. Who puts their ten-year-old in a home just because she won’t talk?”

Emma remembered the shiny black car pulling out of the driveway, the tires shushing through wet leaves. Juney, drawing in condensation on the rear window, her pale, round face growing smaller and smaller until the car looked like any other car driving away.

“You played with that child every day.”

“Mom.”

“Assholes. Especially him. They were happy enough to have you babysit all summer, then the second they didn’t need you, it was ‘Keep her away from us. She’s upsetting my wife.’” Their blank faces when they’d opened the door. Mr. staring at her bulging backpack and dirty feet in flip-flops.

“I can stay if you want,” Emma had said.

They hadn’t.

* * *

“She had a pink canopy bed,” Emma said.

Another wave of dismissal. “Water under the bridge, honey. They were lucky to have you.”

Emma and her mother ate tuna sandwiches on the tiny screened porch. They listened to Isle air conditioners rumbling on and off as they ate and sipped—Emma her beer, Mama her oxygen.

“We’ll go see the new place tomorrow,” Mama said. “It’s swank.”

In her room, Emma pulled the trash bag from over the mosaic. It was heavy as a plywood board loaded with plaster and glass will be. Ridiculously heavy. The mermaid was blocky, a childish image with a round head, square belly, and beaded strings of hair. The face was flat, no artful shading of features there. Two blue bottle caps for eyes, a red one for the mouth—the face of a blow-up doll. The green glass tail ended in what you’d expect—a two-pronged fin. But there were places in the cobbled tail where the curved pieces of glass she’d so carefully chosen conspired to create the impression of undulation, and Emma was pleased. ♦

*Previously published in Ghost Town
Literary Magazine, Issue 9, December 2016.
Reprinted with permission of the author.*

LIZ DOLAN

DAVEY, 8

Like every other day Grandpa drives Davey
to the boardwalk for their mile hike.
The red wagon Davey pulls in the trunk, the hood up.
But Davey doesn't leap out of the car as usual.

Instead he sits weeping, his head bent
his hands lying open in his lap.
Do you want to go home, Grandpa asks.
Is something aching, your ear, your stomach?
But Davey keeps weeping.
Almost silently. Like a lost puppy.

At home Grandpa places his warm hand over Davey's.
Bread, ketchup? He nods yes.
A lone tear washes his cheek.
Olivia Goes to Venice? Grandpa says
pulling the book from its stack.
Prego, Davey says, prego.

LIZ DOLAN

BECAUSE OF DAVEY

As Davey who has Down's
propels his Big Wheel
over macadam not using the pedals
I struggle to keep up
dragging his red wagon behind.

The swifter he flies
the louder he laughs.

At the end of Pine Lane
where cars streak by Silver Lake
I block him.
If you want to see the fountain, I say
get into the wagon. Now.

Like a fat-bellied frog
he flops onto the grassy mound
surrounding the water garden.
The lilies are falling asleep
the blue lighted fountain spouts stars
the cattails curl. He is mesmerized.
A butterfly lands on his cap.

JANET SOBczyk

CONQUERING THE STAIRS

Low muscle tone
makes it very hard
for a child with Down syndrome
to learn to crawl.

Never alone
with hours of practice
we helped her reach this milestone
on hands and knees.

Next in our home
the challenge of stairs
she could fall when she would roam
we must teach her.

So she was shown
and practiced each day
up and down until she'd grown
more confident.

One day she moaned
and wanted to quit
we urged her up on her own
just one more time.

But lying prone
on the bottom stair
she sighed and said with a groan,
"No, you come here."
Her first sentence!

MAURA GAGE CAVELL

HIS SORROW LAND

He walks half drunk down the street.
The darkness clouds, a cover.
He scares everyone he meets.
He dreams of a former lover.

He stays out in the rain,
never seeking refuge
as if he deserved the pain
and he cannot refuse

to greet the cold
in a forthright fashion
whatever he's told,
for he lost his passion.

Homeless and aching, he wanders
through dark winter shadows
in a sea of madness ponders his survival—

on nothing and with nothing that matters.

THE ALMIGHTY CAREGIVER OF THE COLONIAL APARTMENTS

LAURA YEAGER

I never thought I'd be alone at fifty-seven. Robert died of kidney failure. There weren't enough dialysis machines to go around.

Now I find myself in a one-bedroom apartment on the lake. I like to watch the big boats come in and the sun set over the gray, choppy water. My niece, Nancy, found this place for me. It's got an unheated swimming pool. At night, after work, I like to sneak out in the dark and float on a blow-up raft, looking at the stars. My husband and I were photographers. Well, Robert was a photographer. We were successful. I painted the black and white photos with oil paint.

After Robert died, I found a job at the mall in the photography studio. Photography is all I know. My mother was a photographer.

Lorain, Ohio is a small working-class town that sits on Lake Erie. It has a grocery store called Gene Cola's, where

I pick up my beer and smokes. Nancy's daughter, she's three, comes to visit me, and we go to Gene Cola's late at night right before it closes. She wears her pajamas, no shoes, and she's got her security blanket tied around her neck like a cape. A little black kid calls her "Batman in his pajamas." This makes her laugh. She would tell me years later that was the first time she heard a metaphor. She's a writer.

Nancy and her kids come every weekend. Her husband, Phil, stays home. When he does make it up here (they drive up from Akron), I make him my delicious spaghetti with pork instead of meatballs. This delights him, and he says, "Oh, Sarah, I love you."

So I have a nice, little life.

My neighbors are as wild and as lonely as I am. Jose lives alone down the hall. I believe he has a man friend. Jose plays his music loudly, Spanish songs with lots of crescendos and percussion. It's not out of the ordinary for him to

leave his stereo on after he's drifted off to sleep. His Trini Lopez album always skips at this one particular place. I must enter his apartment through an unlocked door and turn off the music. Jose does not wake up. He snorts.

Directly across from me live Mary Jean and Joe Mitchell. I barely have a pot to piss in, but they have less than I do.

They can't afford a phone. I let them use mine whenever they want. They barge in here at all hours of the day or night. And then, there's John, who constantly bums cigs and condiments. And Mrs. Lewis who always needs help with her laundry. I'm not a saint, but I like to help people out when I can.

Joe Mitchell is in real estate. Mary Jean pours beer at the Italian Club. She hands out booze in little, plastic glasses, crinkly plastic; it's 1966, and plastic is a new thing.

I try not to be reminded of my loneliness. That's why I kind of take care of these poor losers.

My week perks up on Friday when Nancy shows up with the kids—Mike, Bob and Laurie. I put my big satin quilts on the floor for the boys, and Laurie sleeps with Nancy in my bed. I sleep on the couch. I let the boys stay up late. We watch Johnny Carson. They like to gaze at the ember of my cig, glowing when I take a big puff. By this time, I'm sipping whiskey out of a jelly jar, feeling no pain.

"Scotch and soda, mud in your eye, baby boy, do I feel high, oh me oh my."

But pain is what it's all about, isn't it?

One night, I'm alone. I miss Robert. I go into my bathroom, pull the razor out of my shaver, and slit my wrist. Then, I sit on the john and wait for something to happen. I must not be too serious because I only cut one wrist and not very deep.

I'm sitting there about to drift off when Joe Mitchell comes in wearing his dirty raincoat. How do I know this? The man wears the awful coat all the time, even when it's not raining.

Sometimes all the strength in the world can't counter a few drinks. But thanks to God, along comes Joe.

I can hear him pick up the phone and dial.

"Sarah," he shouts. Then, he talks to the person on the other end of the phone. "Yes, it's a three-bedroom ranch. They just updated their rec room in the basement."

Joe's business.

God, I hope he makes a sale. Both he and Mary Jean are looking kind of thin.

He hangs up.

"Sarah?"

In a blur of consciousness, I say, "Yah?"

"Are you in here?"

He comes to the door of the bathroom.

The blood from my cut wrist has dripped onto the aqua tiles of my bathroom floor. "My God, Sarah."

He rushes to grab a washcloth out of my linen closet.

He wraps the cloth around my wrist.

"Sarah, what were you thinking?"

"I was thinking that I'm glad you needed to talk real estate on my phone when I needed you most."

"I'll drive you to the hospital, but we'll need to take your car. Mine's got a flat."

I'm not surprised.

He puts me in the passenger seat.

"Be careful," I say when he sits in the driver's seat. "There's a big hole in the car floor under that rug."

"Will do. Isn't that your good oriental rug that Doctor Dix gave you?"

"I didn't have anything else to cover the hole with. This way I don't see the street when I drive."

We get to the hospital, and they stitch me up. I barely avoid being thrown in the psych ward. I talk them out of it, telling them I have to babysit my niece's kids.

I guess I seem lucid.

Joe takes me home and fixes me some chicken soup. My wrist is wrapped up tight in gauze, white layer after white layer.

Who would have guessed that he would have saved me?

I stop feeling like the Almighty Caregiver of the Colonial Apartments.

It's good to be taken down a few notches.

When Nancy comes that weekend with the kids, she gasps when she sees the gauze.

"It's nothing," I say, not wanting the kids to hear my story. "I was trying to open a package with a knife, and I cut myself."

Before she can say anything, I bring out the Fritos and ginger ale—the kids' favorite. We munch and drink ourselves silly. The kids want to go swimming. I can't go in due to the gauze. Instead of jumping in, I throw them quarters which sink to the bottom of the blue pool. They dive down and grab them, perfect little swimmers. Even my Laurie can make it to the bottom and back up.

How much of my story will I burden Nancy with? She too misses Robert fiercely. I never thought I'd find myself alone at fifty-seven.

We all go to mass on Sunday. Nancy whispers to Laurie, who's chattering very loudly, "We have to be quiet here. This is God's house."

She looks around and says, "Who's that?" She points to St. Luke, who's wearing a big hat, in the stained glass window. "King Tut?"

This makes me laugh.

I haven't had a good laugh in months. I don't care if I'm in a church. People should laugh in church.

For a moment, I forget my sadness.

Directly across from me is a bronze relief on the wall. It portrays Jesus falling down, the seventh station of the cross.

"It happens to the best of them," I whisper. ♦

JENNIFER L. FREED

IN YOUR WINTER KITCHEN

Because of you,
and the recipe you once wrote for me
in your elegant hand,
I bought bittersweet chocolate
in the store today,
hazelnut spread, and heavy cream.
This afternoon we will bake
mousse cake, warm
your house against the blowing cold
and early-dark of winter.
Light from your kitchen windows
will spill out
on bony trees,
on tight-furled leaves of rhododendron,
and you will ask me who
I am,
and I will think
of yet more things I didn't ask you
when I could have,
and I will pretend
we can inhale the memories
drifting in the chocolate air.

*Previously published in Living with Alzheimer's & Other Dementias, Chicken Soup for the Soul Publishing, 2014.
Reprinted with permission of the author.*

INFUSION ROOM

I wake
differently
on these days.

Annoyed,
troubled or
bothered as

lists fill
my head of
what not to

forget,
items for
distraction:

Starbursts,
magazines,
a seltzer.

Efforts
to divert
myself from

two hours
of constant
interruptions

pulse, blood
pressure and
temperature

all at
once as my
vein is linked

to a
needle and
linctus pumps

through tubes
I sit in
a pleather

chair, legs
stretched out and
face other

patients
as they face
me, each of

us hooked
to IVs
pretending

this is normal.

This is
not normal
just the sheer

bother
of it all;
drugs flow as

machines

beep, then
nurses set
dates for next
“visits” or

“treatments”
either way
these blocks of

time that
must be set
each month for

this to
properly
work, so we

sit each
month in the
infusion

room.

“YOU CAN DO ANYTHING . . .”

DEBBIE ROPPOLO

“**Y**ou’ll never use that arm again.”

I stared at the doctor, allowing his words to penetrate the thick fog that’d occupied my brain for the past week. My right arm lay by my side in the sterile hospital bed like a petrified log. I squinted my eyes and focused on my fingers, hoping by sheer willpower I could make them move—nope, not even a smidgen.

Just four days earlier I stood in my kinesiology class at St. Edward’s University, hurling a softball (right-handed) across the gym to my partner, rejoicing in the sound of leather hitting skin, enjoying the power of my muscles. I could never throw that hard in high school—my college classes were paying off. And I had a lot going for me: 4.0 GPA; member of the sorority, Alpha Sigma Lambda; loving husband and child; three classes left until I became a girl’s athletic coach.

A little over half of a week later, I had nothing—all taken away by an angry

person who decided I was driving too slowly (I was driving 5 miles over the speed limit), and decided to kill me. Over-dramatic? No, I don’t think so. Any time a person rips around another car, cuts them off and slams on the brakes, they’re not wanting to say “Howdy-do.” Yep, that’s what it boils down to . . . they wanted me dead. At the time, I couldn’t—and still can’t—understand how someone could have such hatred for a person they didn’t know.

And so, for four days I lay in a hospital bed, slipping in and out of consciousness. On the fourth day, I listened to this doctor, who—judging by the expression on his face and monotone voice—could care less about me. He tossed phrases such as “massive nerve damage” as easily as a kitten playing with a ball of yarn. I was a number, nothing more.

Tears gathered in my eyes as I realized my life was changing forever. Sure, I could probably still coach, but who would hire someone who couldn’t demonstrate proper techniques? That dream was as dead as my arm.

I still don’t know what triggered it, but as “Dr. Personality” blathered on about therapy, and that it “might be useless,” memories from my childhood flooded my mind and warmed my soul. Clips of my father praising my kindergarten artwork were replaced by segments of him comforting me through various trials in my young adult life. Each memory was accompanied by him saying “be strong,” and “You can do anything, as long as you put your mind to it.”

That’s right . . . I **COULD** do anything. I frowned and cleared my throat. “If you’re through spewing verbal garbage, I’d like a turn to talk.”

Dr. Personality folded his arms and leaned back in his chair, obviously amused that this cripple, this moronic thing could put two thoughts together.

“I think you’re full of poop,” I continued. “You carry on about what I can’t do, but I’ll beat this.”

The doctor leaned forward and stared deeply into my eyes, as if reading my thoughts and seeing inside my soul. A slow smile worked its way across his face. “Know something, I think you can,” he said patting my knee. “Don’t give up.”

I didn’t plan to.

I won’t waste your time making you believe my life evolved into a Pollyanna-type story, because it didn’t. But I made the decision—I wouldn’t allow the injury to define who I was.

It was a trial sprinkled with bouts of angry tears, but slowly my left arm took over as the dominate limb. Thankfully, it didn’t take too long to learn how to feed, bathe, and clothe myself. Good thing, huh?

I had wonderful support from my loving husband and the rest of my family, but they could do little to heal the

wounds on my heart. Frankly, they couldn’t see what was beneath the surface. I slapped a mask of happiness on every time loved ones were around, but the triplets, anger, sorrow, and resentment boiled in my soul.

Drawing and writing have always been my passion, and because of the unsteadiness of my left hand, I made the decision to embrace the latter. Writing helped me escape my anger, my weakness, and allowed me to focus on my strength—my imagination. At the time, I didn’t know how this decision would change my life.

I wrote a story about my father, his bond with his dog Snowball, and submitted it to *Chicken Soup for the Dog Lover’s Soul*. Why not? Daddy said I could do anything, just as long as I put my mind to it, right?

Half a year later, I received a call from an editor at *Chicken Soup*. I remember, because I thought she was a phone

solicitor and hung up. Thankfully, she called back, and my career as a published writer began. I have been published in a few more *Chicken Soup* books, in magazines, and in newspapers.

A couple of years ago, Dancing With Bear Publishing took a chance on me, and published my first children’s book, *Amelia Frump and her Peanut Butter Loving, Overactive Imagination*. *Amelia Frump and her Peanut butter Loving, Overactive Imagination is Cooking up a Peanut Butter Storm* was my second book in the series, and on a whim, I entered it in the Purple Dragonfly Book Awards, and it received second place.

I can’t say all my decisions have been good—hey, I’ll admit it, I’m not perfect. But the best decision I ever made was to follow my father’s advice: “You can do anything you want, as long as you put your mind to it.”

And he’s right—I can. ♦

COUNT IT ALL JOY

MARC A. BUCHHOLZ

They say you remember your birth, the moment when you fight your way into a world far different from the confined space within your mother's womb. He swore he remembered movement. The force of his legs moving against rib and muscle. His arms reaching for the familiar voice who cradled him. But then it all stopped. He felt stuck in some narrow channel, claustrophobic and wanting out of the caged environment entrapping him.

Forceps seized the baby boy's head. Not a minute to waste. He had to come out. The doctor's hands moved with such intensity against his skull that the delicate bones in his neck snapped like a twig. His mother never heard her baby's cries. His breath lost in the chasm of a C1 (atlas) and C2 (axis) injury. His first experiences in his new world: the lock between the shank gripping his skull into a submissive birth and then the minuscule breathing tube forcing air into his tiny lungs, lungs so incapable of breathing on their own.

And then the words came, words no one wanted to hear, words that would change his family's life forever. His life.

"Your son is paralyzed," the doctor said without a hint of remorse. It was a normal day for him. Say what you need to say and be on your own way to the rest of your hospital rounds. His mother's eyes darted back and forth between her little boy and his father. Tears of loss, tears of anger, and tears of hope washed over both of them as they grasped each other's hands.

"God will get us through this," his father said as if it were a promise, a declaration to his wife that they would weather this storm even if they only had faith the size of a mustard seed.

"He's never failed us yet," she said as she put her hand against the incubator holding her newborn son. "Let's name him Alexander. I saw it listed in the book of baby's names, and I remember smiling when I saw its meaning."

"What does it mean?" his father asked.

"It means warrior. Our son will be a warrior," his mother said.

"You mean our son, Alexander, will be a warrior?"

* * *

The battle waging against Alexander required a warrior spirit. Every day the rhythmic whooshing sound of the ventilator coupled with the momentary pauses his parents grew accustomed to, maintained his survival. In his first month of life, they inserted a G-tube for nourishment. Seeing an apparatus feed Alexander, made his mother jealous and sad. More than anything she wanted to cradle him in her arms and nurse him. She wanted to be the nourishment, not some pumping monster.

The twenty-four-hour care left his parents emotionally and physically drained. While one slept, the other cared for Alexander. The dark circles around their eyes and their slow movements throughout the day, as they did everything the doctors taught them to do, indicated their level of exhaustion.

“We can’t do this alone,” his father said. “You need sleep. I need to get back to work. We need help.”

“I am afraid to leave him alone.”

“Having nursing care is not leaving him alone.”

“That’s not what I meant. I don’t know if I can trust anyone else to care for Alexander.”

“You have to. You don’t have a choice. If you run yourself into the ground, you won’t be able to care for him. Come on, you know I’m right. We can’t do this on our own anymore.”

“If we hire a nurse, they are going to be scrutinized from head to toe.”

“That doesn’t surprise me one bit. You have always been the Mama bear protecting her cub. You are just as much a warrior as Alexander.”

Alexander never reached the milestones of little boys his age. He never rolled over, sat on his own, or toddled across the room. He did, however, go to school with other children his age, but that even became difficult when seizures began plaguing his life. His night nurse saw his twitching body, which presented differently from his normal spasms, especially when his tongue thrust in and out of his mouth. The entire house awakened to her call, and his little brother fearfully watched out the front window for the ambulance to arrive. Low sodium levels caused the seizures, so they started adding salt and water to his G-tube.

Surgeries became commonplace. Rods reinforced his spine because of scoliosis. When they removed his colon, things went from bad to worse. His bowel twisted like a can of worms. Fluid from his descended stomach could not be emptied fast enough into his ileostomy bag. Shooting pain ripped through Alexander’s right side, cutting deep into his body as well as exacerbating his fear. A microperforation of his bowel caused peritonitis. He couldn’t understand what was happening to his body as he fought for his life. He was dying.

“I recommend hospice care,” the doctor stated in his usual compassionless bedside manner to Alexander’s parents. “He is unable to eat, which means he won’t live past a few days.”

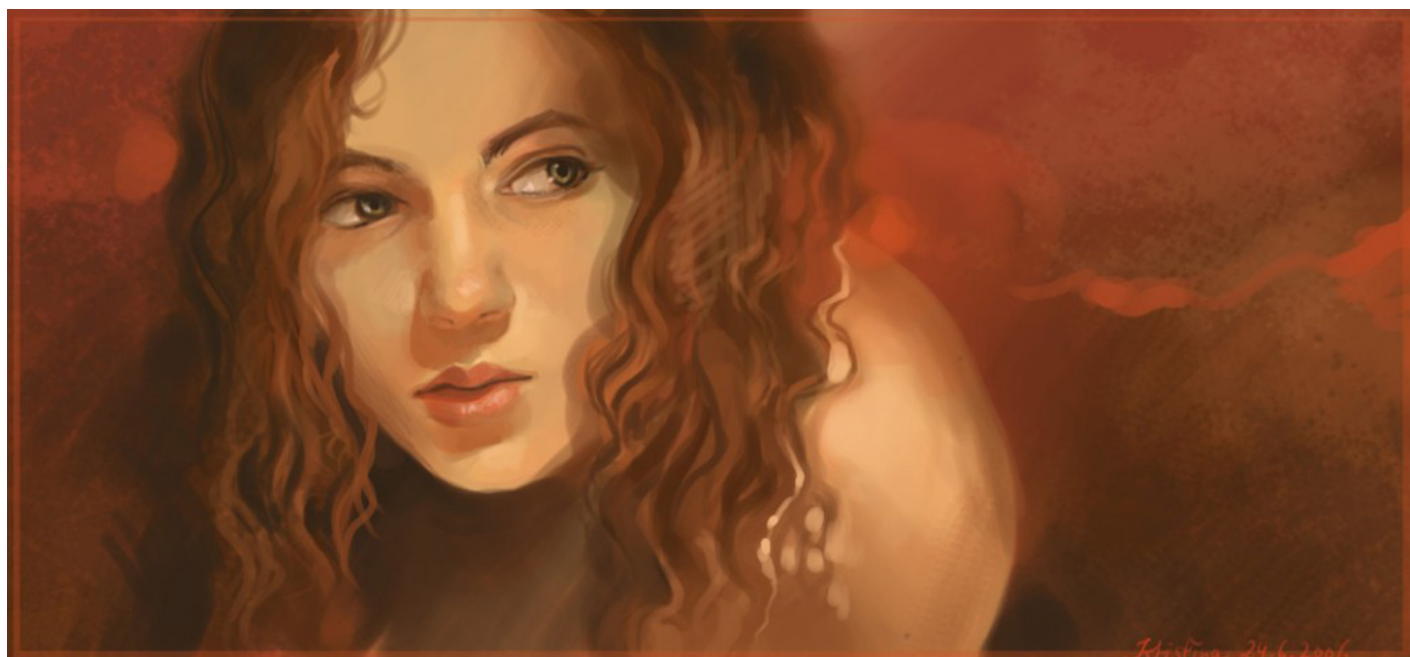
His parents watched over Alexander, lying in the bed, as they always had, but this time death lurked just around the corner waiting to take him as he slept. Unbeknownst to them, Alexander was not asleep as they made the phone calls to the family to have them come and say their good-byes. As everyone stood by his bedside saying prayers and saying goodbye to their beloved son, brother, grandson, and friend, Alexander opened his eyes.

“If it is meant to be, it will be,” he declared. “But I don’t believe this is my time and I am not ready to die.”

Alexander didn’t die. In fact, he is doing much better. He has his ups and downs due to being bedridden, but one thing remains true in his life. He has made it known to everyone he meets that he counts it all joy when he encounters various trials and tribulations, and God never gives him more than he can handle. ♦

OLD MASTERS' STYLE, NEW TECHNOLOGY

SANDY PALMER



Kristina Gehrman, *Suspicious*, 2006, Photoshop CS3/Wacom tablet, 7" x 3"

"A great history illustration can be almost like a glimpse through a time machine."

~ Kristina Gehrman

This young artist, with Wacom tablet and stylus in hand, seems like an old soul. There's a depth of emotion in the lifelike figures she portrays. Whether it is a historical depiction of the two ships of the Franklin Expedition embarking on a fateful voyage into frigid waters or a teenage self-portrait with a tentative sideways glance of suspicion, Kristina Gehrman's images have a story to tell. She prefers historical subjects because, "unlike fantasy, they're about something that actually happened or could

have happened in our own universe. And of course, history offers plenty of drama for entertaining stories—human relationships, love, death, conflict, sex—everything is there!"

Born in Leverkusen, Germany, her parents realized early their first child couldn't hear but several doctors disagreed. Eventually they found a physician who confirmed what they already believed to be true and their daughter received her first hearing aids at eight months old. Her parents were very motivated to make sure she learned to speak and hear. "Of course I don't remember my earliest years, but by age five I could read and had the same language development as other children."



Kristina Gehrmann, *Baby Dragon*, 2017, Photoshop CS3/Wacom tablet, 9.5" x 14.5"

Cochlear implants offered the possibility of improved hearing so she received her first implant when she was nine years old. The second implant followed eight years later. “Although I hear absolutely nothing without my devices—I often take them off when I draw for better focus—I identify as ‘hearing impaired’ rather than ‘Deaf’ since I grew up around hearing people, without any Deaf culture, without sign language.” Gehrmann can hear well in a quiet environment but most everyday situations are difficult, talking on the phone is out, and if she is watching something she needs subtitles or captions. If she could hear “normally” she believes she would be doing exactly what she’s doing now. When pondering how things might be different if she could hear, she wonders if she would find herself in more social

situations and, thus, possibly have more opportunities, but dismisses those thoughts saying, “I don’t dwell on thinking about that, it’s unproductive.”

Practically “born with a pencil in hand,” always doodling, she was thirteen when she realized “randomly drawing wouldn’t lead to improvement and that I actually had to do studies and exercise and read books about it if I wanted to get anywhere.” She received a graphics tablet from her parents for Christmas and began learning how to use it. “Back then there weren’t as many tutorials on the Internet as there are today so I relied a lot on experimenting and figuring things out on my own.”



Kristina Gehrman, *Catherine of Aragon–Tudor Queens 1*, 2011, Photoshop CS3/Wacom tablet, 9.4" x 13.3"

During her teenage years she was drawn to manga-style illustration but eventually found the highly stylized cartoon images too limiting so she began to focus on learning from nature and more realistic work. After high school she studied classical painting at Angel Academy of Art in Florence, Italy. It was there that she received an education in art similar to that of nineteenth century ateliers. “The goal is to teach the student the mastery of craft—drawing and painting techniques, and seeing—to give them a fundament on which they are supposed to develop their own artistic vision.”

In 2011, inspired by dramatic stories of Tudor queens, she completed a series of portraits including Anne Boleyn, Catherine of Aragon, and Elizabeth I. The portraits resem-

ble the classical style of traditional oil paintings of that era but they’re actually digital images she created in Photoshop. With careful attention to nuances of the human figure and elements of composition, she uses light and shadow to illuminate a haunting beauty in these historical characters that is reminiscent of oil paintings by the Old Masters. Look at her traditional oil paintings alongside her digital images and you’ll probably agree, it is hard to distinguish the difference between the two.

Intrigued by the disappearance of Sir John Franklin, his ships, and crew members, Gehrman decided to write and illustrate a three-volume graphic novel of the treacherous Franklin Expedition. The goal of the British voyage was to



Kristina Gehrman, *Icebound*, 2012, Photoshop CS3/Wacom tablet, 10" x 14"



Kristina Gehrman, *North-west Passage*, 2012, Photoshop CS3/Wacom tablet, 8.5" x 13"

complete a northwest passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific. No one survived and no one knows why. "I reconstructed it from reading many different sources and interpretations about what could have happened on this fateful expedition. I estimate the plot is about 50 percent actual facts and 50 percent fiction. We know about the early part of Franklin's journey in 1845, and we have several remains found in the Arctic, including the wreckage of the two ships. Yet there are no clear answers. The whole thing is like a 1,000-piece puzzle of which only one hundred parts were found. That's what makes it so fascinating!" Her novel series, *Im Eisland*, means "in the land of ice," and is available as a print book and Kindle ebook. In 2016, the first of the three books won the German Children's Literature Award.

Expanding upon her interest in the Franklin Expedition she is currently preparing for a solo exhibition, featuring mostly ink and watercolor works, that will tell the story of the lost expedition. "I'm interpreting it in a series of new work, in three parts—from the start of the journey, to the Arctic environment, to the death of the entire crew." Although most of her work is created digitally, she has never stopped working with traditional media. "The upcoming exhibition will be a welcome opportunity for me to experiment and reconnect with painting on paper without an undo key, and for expanding my horizon." Her work will be on display in February 2018 at the IMBA Galerie in Hamburg, Germany. She says, "This will be my first solo exhibit at an art gallery and I'm quite thrilled!"



Kristina Gehrmann, *Nike-Winged Goddess of Victory*, 2012, Photoshop CS3/Wacom tablet, 9.4" x 16.7"



Kristina Gehrmann, *Steampunk Portrait*, 2013, Photoshop CS3/Wacom tablet, 6.4" x 8.4"



Kristina Gehrmann



Kristina Gehrman, *Venus*, 2009, oil paint, 19.7 x 27.5"



Kristina Gehrman, *Palermo 1820*, 2010, oil paint, 17.7" x 25.6"

The artist shares a two room flat with her fiancé where the living room doubles as their workspace. A large area isn't needed to create digital work on her computer but if she decides to pursue more traditional art in the future she knows she will need to look for a studio, especially if she wants to work on larger formats. The artist, in her late twenties, draws inspiration from "reading, seeing, and consuming interesting, new things all the time." She enjoys the sights and sounds of towns like Florence, Siena, Ljubljana, Amsterdam, or Antwerp, and loves seeing the work of other artists. "I have way too many favorite artists to name and there are always more to discover."

Gehrman has been a full-time freelance illustrator since 2012 and offers services such as storyboarding, cover illustrations for books/CDs/DVDs, scenic or storytelling illustrations, landscapes, portraits, and the list goes on. She creates everything digitally—from rough sketches to the finished product. You can see more of her work at www.kristinagehrmann.com. She is a young artist who has mastered both brush and stylus and combines them, in a sense, by bringing the look, feel, and mood of traditional work by the Old Masters to our high-tech digital world. ♦

THE WAY I AM

LORNA ROSE MCGINNIS

The vomit tasted hot and sour in my mouth. It rose up my throat and I tried to choke it down. Not here, not now, not in front of the whole class. If I threw up now I'd have to go to the nurse. I couldn't play hot lava tag at recess with Joey and Evan. Mommy would have to come and get me. I wasn't sick. Sick was when Joey had the chicken pox. Mommy said his parents were idiots for not vaccinating him. I didn't know what idiot or vaccinating meant. I asked her what an idiot was and she said it was someone who wasn't very smart. I asked her if I was an idiot and she said no.

It was show and tell day. Miss Asher asked if I wanted to go first. Everyone looked at me. I said no, but I don't think she heard. I asked Daddy if I could bring his special cigar box, but he said no. A cigar is something grownups put in their mouths and smoke comes out. Mommy doesn't like it when Daddy plays with his cigar box. So I brought my Pokemon cards instead. I had Charmander *and* Charizard. But I didn't have Pikachu. Joey and Evan had Pikachu. Even Timmy, who still wet the bed, had Pikachu. I swallowed some of the vomit in the back of my throat. What if they laughed at me because I didn't have Pikachu? My mouth opened and I threw up all over the floor. I wasn't going to get to play hot lava tag today.

* * *

I slouched at my desk. It was too small for me and some other kid had drawn a frowny face on it. There was probably gum stuck underneath too. Up at the board, Mr. Adams was writing out a long division problem. He had a permanent scowl on his face, and he could always find the kid who didn't know the answer. I crossed my fingers under the

desk. Please don't call on me. Please don't call on me. I was sick yesterday. I didn't have time to do it. I hate math. Don't call on me. Call on Joey—he knows it.

“Noah, how about you?”

I flushed. My stomach churned. Not now. “Ten?” I guessed.

“No.” He paused. Go away, I thought, go and pick on someone else. I slid even lower in my seat.

“Do you want to try again?”

“I didn't do the homework,” I mumbled.

“What?”

“I said I didn't do the homework.” There were snickers in the back. Emma and Alison were giggling. They always had the answers. Joey sat up straighter in his seat. Mr. Adams might call on him next. I felt queasy. The signs were starting. First my face would get hot and then I'd get a lot of spit in my mouth. If I didn't get to a bathroom soon, I would throw up in the middle of the classroom. They'd call Mom and she'd have to come pick me up from school. She would frown and talk about taking me to the doctor's office. And I wasn't even sick. I always felt okay after I got out of the room.

“I'm disappointed in you, Noah. You're normally such a good student.”

Emma and Alison giggled louder. I knew my face was bright red. My stomach heaved. Come on, hold it down I thought. You can do it. It's just laughter. They're just laughing at you. It's nothing to be scared of.

"I was sick, okay!" I yelled. "I was sick!"

"Noah!" Mr. Adams gaped.

I pressed my hands over my mouth and ran for the bathroom.

* * *

There was a knock on my door. My shoulders clenched. I put a keep out sign there for a reason, so people would keep out. I turned the music up. I was listening to "Eye of the Tiger" by Survivor. If I turned it up high enough I couldn't hear anything else. I couldn't hear the neighbor's lawn mower. I couldn't hear my parents' voices outside the door. I couldn't hear myself think. If I did it for too long it would hurt my ears, but it was worth it. I tapped my foot to the beat. "And the last known survivor stalks his prey in the night . . ." Whoever wrote that song wasn't afraid of going to school or making presentations. He probably never got called "upchuck" by his dickhead classmates.

The door opened. Mom and Dad entered. My stomach clenched. Mom and Dad hadn't spent any time together for the past month. Dad went to work early before Mom woke up. In the evenings, when we were all at home, Mom ate dinner in the kitchen and Dad camped out in front of the television in the living room.

"We have something to tell you." Dad looked at the floor. Mom clenched her jaw. The jaw clench was hard to spot unless you knew her well. But I could see it. She'd clenched her jaw like that when she'd had to come pick me up from the nurse's office, which was *a lot*. Some teachers had commented and she'd taken me to a gastroenterologist, but he'd said there wasn't anything physically wrong with me. Since middle school, I'd gotten better at getting to the bathroom before anyone noticed there was something wrong. As soon as the signs started, I was out of there. Sometimes, if we had a presentation, I'd skip class. But I couldn't do that too often or one of the teachers would tell Mom. Mom and Dad had enough problems. They didn't need to know that their

son was a freak who threw up all the time.

"Later. I'm busy." I flopped backwards on to my bed. My sheets had *X-Men* characters on them from when I was a little kid. Wolverine was my favorite. I curled up into a ball, facing away from them. The music blared in my ears, "rising up to the challenge . . ."

Mom reached over and gently took my earbuds out. "Honey, we need to talk now."

"Hey!"

"I'm sorry sweetie." A tear quivered in the corner of her eye. I had never seen Mom cry before. My stomach lurched. Oh no.

"Sorry bud." Dad reached over and ruffled my hair. I didn't move away even though I was way too old for that. He cleared his throat. "Your mother and I . . ."

Mom glared. "Bill . . ."

"Your mother and I don't feel the way we used to." He looked at Mom, waiting for her to speak. She stayed silent. Spit started to collect under my tongue.

"We're not getting along very well anymore." He paused and mouthed something to Mom over my head.

Her jaw tightened even further. "No, that wasn't our deal."

My stomach knotted. They had made a deal.

Dad spoke very quickly. "Your mother and I have decided to get a divorce."

I went cold. My guts felt like water. "No."

Dad turned to Mom. "See? I knew this wasn't the way to tell him."

Mom propped her hands on her hips. "Well how were you planning on doing it?"

“Be right back,” I mumbled. “Have to go pee.” I rolled off the bed and lurched to the bathroom.

* * *

“I have to go to the bathroom.” I was curled in an armchair in the guidance counselor’s office. The chair was old and squashy with scuff marks on the side. Generations of damaged teens had probably sat on it, waiting to be told what was wrong with them. I’d chosen it because it was in the corner, as far away from him and Mom as I could get. Even though the blinds were open the light didn’t reach where I was sitting. They wouldn’t be able to see me clearly.

The guidance counselor, Mr. Lloyd, raised his eyebrows. “Can you hold it?”

I gave a small nod. I just had to sit here for a few more minutes and then I could bolt. My stomach rumbled. This meeting was taking up my lunch period. Mom looked over at me, her brow furrowing. Her hair was a mess. She had sweat stains under the armpits of her blouse. Before she and Dad split she had always been neat. She’d smelt of jasmine perfume. This was a work day and she had to take time off for this. Because of me she’d have to work overtime tonight. Dad’s child support wasn’t enough for her and me both so she’d started working as a librarian after the divorce. My stomach rumbled again.

“Your son is having trouble adjusting academically.”

“How?” Mom leaned in.

“He has a lot of potential, but he’s underperforming. He is currently failing Spanish and history.”

Mom looked at me. “Noah, is this true?”

I shifted in my seat and nodded.

“Why? I thought you loved history.”

“Simply put, Noah refuses to do any presentations in front of the class. His grades would be much higher if he were willing to present.”

I flushed. Last semester I had thrown up again during my final presentation in history. I had thrown up a lot in elementary school, and in middle school after Mom and Dad split. In elementary school, Mom had taken me to the doctor. In middle school, I had made sure that Mom never knew about the throwing up. After the divorce, she had been too busy crying on the couch when she thought I was asleep to notice that I was throwing away teachers’ notes. It was better that way. Besides, she might have told Dad. He wouldn’t have said anything to me about it but I’d catch him looking at

me like he was about to roll his eyes. But now it was high school. And Mom was starting to notice things again.

This meeting was pure bad luck. I clenched my teeth. Mr. Lloyd had bumped into Mom when she was picking me up one afternoon and pounced before I could hurry her away. He practically chased us down on our way to the car. Why couldn’t he mind his own damn business?

I just had to sit here for a few more minutes and then I could bolt. My stomach rumbled.

“He has shown signs of social anxiety disorder. Do you know what that is?”

I clenched my teeth even more tightly together. He handed Mom a shiny brochure. Like the white-toothed, glossy-haired morons on the cover could make it any better. She took it in between her thumb and forefinger, holding it at a distance. Great, now she knew she had a defective son. What good would that do? It wasn’t like she could return me. I pictured how that exchange would go.

Excuse me, ma’am. I believe my son is damaged and I would like to return him.

I’m so sorry. Why don’t I give you an upgrade while you’re here? We have football players, 4.0 students, class presidents . . . Which one would you like?

I felt the burning in my throat that meant I was about to throw up again. If I threw up here it would go all over Mr. Lloyd’s office. I might even get some on Mom’s work skirt. My face flushed and I sprinted out of the room.

* * *

I rubbed my temples and stared down into my plastic cup. The music was obnoxiously loud and there was a purple strobe light moving from place to place around the room. Why had I come to this party anyway? It was too crowded—I could hardly get any elbow room. The noise was giving me a headache. And I didn’t really know anyone here. My stomach squirmed. I gulped. That was never a good sign.

I hated everything about parties. I hated the sloppy way people would try to hit on each other. I hated the constant grating noise. My stomach burred again and spit gathered in the back of my mouth. Shit. I hated the way I clung to my corner, examining the same stupid picture for twenty minutes so I would look occupied if anyone walked by.

Earlier on one of Evan's friends, Joey, came to talk with me. I don't know if it was his idea or if Evan had asked him to do it. It ended with him edging away in an awkward silence. He had tried to tell a joke. Jokes were my kryptonite. I could never tell if people were laughing at me or with me.

"So a farmer walks into a bar with a horse . . ." Joey began. I froze. My face started feeling hot.

"Ok."

"So in the end the man shows the horse his . . ." Joey stopped and looked at me, then shrugged. "Well I thought it was funny anyway."

"No, I thought it was really funny too." I forced a smile. I couldn't even remember what the joke was; I had been too busy willing my stomach to stop lurching.

I sighed. Evan had asked me to come to this party and I had told him I would. He said he wanted me to be his "wing man." Some wing man I was, standing in the corner with my hoodie pulled up around my face. I had spoken with one person so far and that conversation had ended with him backing away slowly. I ground my teeth. Why hadn't I just told Evan no? Because he was my one friend and I didn't want him to dump me? Because I wanted to prove to myself that I could go to a party like a normal teenager?

"Hey man," Evan came up behind me and cuffed me on the shoulder. "How's it going?"

"I'm doing good." I tried to smile.

Evan's eyebrows pinched. "Really, 'cause you look kind of green . . ."

"It's just the strobe light." Great, now Evan noticed it too. That was the inconvenient thing about friends, sometimes they could see stuff you wished they couldn't. I hadn't told Evan about my . . . diagnosis. But he'd known me since kindergarten and he'd caught me throwing up in the rest room a couple of times during middle school.

Evan rested his hand on my shoulder. "You can definitely go if you want."

Wait? What did he mean by definitely? Had he only asked me here out of pity? Had he asked me hoping I would say

no? There was a sour tang in my throat. I could taste the stale chips I'd had for lunch.

"I'll hang out for a few more minutes and then I think I'll be ready to go." I kept my mouth as tight shut as possible so none of the throw up could escape.

That was the inconvenient thing about friends, sometimes they could see stuff you wished they couldn't.

"OK man, if that's what you want."

"Yeah." I nodded and tried not to look too obviously at the clock.

* * *

"So how do you feel about that?" Mr. Lloyd laced his fingers together and looked at me over the top of his desk. He had bushy eyebrows and a mustache with crumbs in it. I sat curled tightly in his green office chair, trying not to let my knee bounce up and down. There was a picture on his desk of him petting a golden retriever. Didn't he have a family or anything? And why did he have to ask how I felt? Was that written in a book all school counselors get when they start? *Make sure to ask whatever sad kid you get in your office how they feel, that way they'll think you care. They'll start to trust you.*

"Like shit." I spoke through clenched teeth.

Mr. Lloyd raised his eyebrows. "Can you elaborate?"

Could I elaborate? No one who says they feel like shit wants to elaborate on that feeling. I crossed my arms. "No."

"OK." He shrugged.

I clenched my teeth, so that was it? He wasn't going to ask more questions. He wasn't going to try to examine what was wrong with me. What was he even doing here then? I swallowed. "I mean I felt queasy. Like I usually do before . . ."

"Understandable."

“What do you mean understandable?”

Mr. Lloyd nodded slightly. “You feel queasy when you are in social situations. You were in a social situation—therefore you felt queasy.”

“Yeah, but why?” I leaned forward. “Why do I throw up like this?”

Mr. Lloyd shifted backward in his seat. “The short answer is that you were unlucky. You received a genetic component for social anxiety disorder and the environmental factors brought it out.”

I tried to quit my medication (Lexapro) the first week of college. It was a disaster.

I ground my teeth. “Great. That’s just what I wanted to hear.”

Mr. Lloyd raised an eyebrow. “What did you want to hear?”

“I don’t know. I wanted to know why I am the way I am—I guess.” I scuffed my shoe against the floor.

Mr. Lloyd put up a hand. “Noah, this is our first time speaking together. I’ve only known you for fifteen minutes.”

“You knew me before, when you brought me and Mom in . . .”

“But we haven’t spoken alone.” Mr. Lloyd paused. “I haven’t gotten to listen to you yet.”

* * *

The street was sunny and cold. My feet thumped against the hard asphalt. I never liked team sports but I had always loved running. I ran whenever I needed to get out of the house or out of my own head. I’d spoken with Mr. Lloyd about it and he said he was glad I had something I could use to help me cope. When I ran it was just me and the road. I pumped my arms harder and felt my calf muscles burn. I turned my face up to the sky and inhaled. The air was fresh and crisp. I wanted to gulp it down like water. A couple of boys were playing basketball outside one of the houses. They were flushed and their shirts were damp with perspiration, but they seemed to be having a good time. The sun

was just setting, branding the horizon with orange flame. I tasted the sweat on my upper lip and forced myself to run faster. Any minute now I’d catch my second wind. I’d stop feeling the cramp in my ribs and I’d start to glide. My lungs felt like sandpaper. I sucked in another breath and released it, watching it turn white as it curled out into the chilled air.

* * *

I tried to quit my medication (Lexapro) the first week of college. It was a disaster. Mom told me not to quit. The college advice book I’d read had told me not to quit. They even said it at orientation: If you are on medication don’t quit now. But I decided to quit.

I wanted to fly places without double-checking my carry on to make sure I’d packed my meds. I didn’t want to have to worry over whether I’d accidentally taken them twice. Other people didn’t have to do this so why should I? I was almost completely better. I had finished my senior year of high school with all A’s and B’s. There was no reason why my roommate should have to see a little green bottle and wonder why I needed it.

But quitting didn’t work. It’s medicine and you can’t just stop taking your medicine. There’s a reason they call it medication. I started throwing up again almost immediately after I quit. It was like being back in fourth grade. I barfed on my sociology professor’s shoes and he had to call the custodian to come clean it up. While he did this, I sat in the back of the classroom with my arms wrapped around my knees. I could almost feel the world hurtling forward beneath me. Any minute now I would be thrown off of it. I looked at the blank, impassive face of the custodian and felt my queasiness return. Silently, I picked up my bags and left for the bathroom. I stood in the stall, stomach churning, waiting to be sick. Then my gut surged and it happened. Again. I could hear it splattering against the water in the toilet bowl. I leaned back and rested my forehead against the cool metal of the door.

I took out my phone and dialed Mom’s number. She picked up, even though it was in the middle of a work day.

“Noah? Are you okay?”

I sighed. I could have hidden the hitch in my voice from almost anyone else, but not from her. She knew it too well by now. “Not exactly, no.”

She spoke quickly. “What’s wrong?”

“I threw up again.”

Her breath caught. “Oh honey . . .”

“All over the professor’s shoes.” I clenched my teeth.

“I’m so sorry.” She breathed out. There was a pause. “Have you thought about . . .?”

“Yeah.” I rubbed a hand across my forehead.

“And what do you think?” She let the words drop slowly, one after the other.

“I don’t want to be that guy, you know? I don’t want my roommate wondering if I’m going to suddenly go off the deep end.”

Mom sighed. “You have social anxiety disorder, you’re not suicidal. Besides, why would your roommate even have to see it?”

“If something happened by accident . . . If I forgot to put it away . . .”

I could almost see Mom’s hand resting on her hip, the wrinkles furrowing in her brow. “I just think you’d be happier if you took it. That’s all.”

“Fine, I’ll think about it.” I pushed my forehead harder against the cold steel partition. It felt solid and smooth as my skin pressed against it.

“Okay honey, I love you.”

“I love you too, Mom.” I hung up the phone.

A few days, later my prescription arrived. *Here we go again*, I thought. I examined the green plastic bottle in front of me, Lexapro, prescribed for depression and anxiety. I had told myself that I wouldn’t need it by the time I went to college and yet here it was, sitting behind my toothbrush. The bottle cap was smooth and white, with one of those little arrows that you have to pull up on. My eyes narrowed as I looked at it. I picked it up and held it lightly in the palm of my hand. In one fluid movement, I pulled off the cap and downed a pill.

* * *

I leaned against the porch railing, looking out into the darkness. The night was clear so I could pick out a couple of stars and something larger I thought was a satellite. From inside, I heard the sounds of “Shut up and dance with me.” Some of it was from the host’s iPod; some of it was boozy students singing along. I didn’t think any of them could carry a tune even when they were sober. That’s why I’d come out, because my ears felt like they were bleeding. Also, I wanted air that didn’t stink of sweat and beer. I needed a place where I could sit and nurse my pretend drink in peace.

I couldn’t have alcohol with the Lexapro, so I went with Coke instead. I didn’t really mind. I’d had a sip of Dad’s Heineken once in high school and it had tasted nasty. I was only at this party in the first place because my roommate Sean had promised me that he’d see the new *Star Wars* movie with me if I came with him to this. I wanted to see who the new dude in the Vader suit was, but maybe not this badly. I tapped my foot against the wooden boards.

“Hey man, how’s it going?” Sean came up behind me and put a hand on my shoulder. I was lucky to have Sean as a roommate. He played on the football team, which was kind of a big deal, but he didn’t mind that I put up a poster of Wolverine on our wall. I still liked *X-Men*; some things never change. The wind blew against my face and I wrapped my jacket closer around me.

“It’s going alright.” I nodded.

“What are you looking at?”

“Uh, the stars.” I shrugged.

“Deep.”

“I guess.” Really, this was nothing, just a couple of sad little pinpricks. Sean should see the stars out in the country. They looked a lot more impressive without all the light pollution.

Sean gestured expansively. “So if a tree falls in a forest . . .”

I interrupted him. It was getting late and he had told me this at least twice before. I rolled my eyes. “So if a guy walks out of a party . . .”

Sean looked up at me. “And?”

My mouth quirked. He actually wanted me to finish. I had meant it as rhetorical. I sighed. “And his roommate comes out after him. Do they agree that the music is too loud?”

He cocked his head for a moment, listening. “Yeah, they do. Good one.”

Sean slapped me on the shoulder and turned to go back inside. I tilted my head up again, seeing if I could spot another star. He was already going in the door when it hit me. My breath whooshed out and I snorted a little. I had made a joke. ♦

RUTH Z. DEMING

A GOOD DEATH

The doctor told me my kidneys would fail
I wanted to know when
so I could start practicing being dead

Empty house
filled with things
my jar of feathers
the bird's nest
pine cones and shells
on the windowsill

She loved nature so much
someone would mutter

The rosebush I clipped
so the mailman wouldn't get bit
the maple I watched from the high
bathroom window
framed just so
a Van Gogh

From my bed with the cool
breeze caressing my hair
I watch the smoke from
the crematory that dispenses with
the little girl who loved her
bicycle and rode no-handed
down the hilly streets
and back home to
feed her fish

Summers, she would ride to
Uncle Marvin's
read gloomy Dostoevsky
on the porch steps
and dream of
George Gordon, Lord Byron
in love with a dead man:
impossible!

The girl was finished
kidneys useless as if
raisins grew there
she was not old yet
still enjoyed snuggling with the
one she loved
he would get her ashes
as would her children

Toss the red berries on her windowsill
the feathers, the shells
the Christmas lights
into the landfill

Still she sees the moon
shining on the For Sale sign.

GLENN A COOK

LIBERATION

Morningside, the center for adults with disabilities, is putting on its first dance, and Phyllis is going. As she dons her new polyester slacks and brightly colored knit shirt, her face glows with anticipation.

The music is loud, and all the specially challenged, even those in wheelchairs, are rocking and rolling, swinging and swaying, clapping and stomping, twirling and burning up the floor. They dance, faces up, eyes closed, voices raised as they sing along with the music—Dionysius' happy people.

Don't think for a minute they don't know they are different. They've seen a lifetime of stares, carefully averted eyes, condescending friendliness. But tonight, it's safe to be different. Tonight, normal is not normal, and there is a place in this world for them, right here, with Elvis, The Beatles, Jeremiah Bullfrog, "Mack the Knife," and "Y.M.C.A."

*Previously published in the author's book,
Threshold, by MoonPath Press, June 2017.
Reprinted with permission of the author.*

THE APARTMENT

Though Mother opposed the idea,
I thought you should have your own apartment.
I found a nice little studio,
across the street from where you worked.

We shopped for a new bed, found a little table
with leaves that folded down,
pans, dishes, linens, vacuum, TV, chairs—
everything with your own money.
We had such fun, unpacking boxes,
putting everything in place.

You spotted a Budweiser sign
in a nearby grocery store window.
Beer! you said, with a gleam in your eye.
I said, if there were beer,
there would be no apartment.
You pouted, but thinking it over, agreed.

A woman from Catholic Community Services
came once a week to help plan meals,
take you shopping. You kept the apartment neat,
stayed with Mother on weekends.

It was the best gift I could give you.
After a year, you moved
back with Mother, into a senior home.
She wanted you close,
needed you to share the rent.

*Previously published in the author's book,
Threshold, MoonPath Press, June 2017.
Reprinted with permission of the author.*

THE GIRL WHO WAS

MARY M. SHERIDAN

Crueled January winds pushed her far inside the only dark and narrow opening in an endless brick wall. The building was as derelict as the girl, and by the filthy state of the hall it was clear that no one bothered with its old electrical panels or took shelter where turning around might be impossible. But she was tiny, and out on the sidewalk the kind of cold that ate your bones made her feel anxious and desperate.

She sat against the back wall where the edges of streetlight barely touched her. Scraping her boots across cold concrete, she wrapped her arms around her knees and made herself as small as she could. If anyone saw her or asked why she was there, the girl wouldn't know how to organize something to say. Words were often a jumble. Her life seemed like a picture book she might have found on a bench.

On the day when the train entered its station and she made the choice to stand motionless, she gave up and gave in, assigning all of her power to depression. Only afterward did she realize the disease was a conniving thief that imprisoned her, stealing pieces of her mind and locking them in a secret place to prevent her from being whole again. Her thoughts slowed, and when there was nothing sensible left to say, her voice abandoned her.

That winter's night, a sharp-eyed member of a charity street patrol spotted an unusual bundle in the one doorway that had always been empty. The girl was mute and immovable but they gave her what they could: a sleeping bag, an extra blanket, and a warm woolen hat and mitts; hot soup and a

sandwich. The girl's face remained on her knees. She made no move to accept anything. A woman hesitantly felt for a pulse—surprisingly strong—and sighed as she tucked the sleeping bag around the girl as best she could before they left in search of others like her, lost in the cold.

Sunrise brought only a little relief. The girl's sleeping bag fell away as she rose. She stepped over the other untouched items but instinctively turned back to grab the half-frozen sandwich.

Standing in the light she was instantly aware that this was one of those rare days when depression allowed her to remember fragments of her past: warmth, food, a house, a bed, and people who seemed vaguely important to her. Clenching and opening her fists, she tried to grab and hold onto something meaningful.

Passersby and even other lost ones yelled at her, even pushed her out of their way.

“Go home!”

“Get a job.”

“Get a life.”

Those things meant something once, long before her abilities were stolen.

“Stupid!” That one was wrong. She was not stupid, she had depression. She was sick. She was alone and helpless and hopeless. But she had only been stupid since her illness disabled the parts of her that used to work.

A week later, the street patrol stopped again where the strangely quiet girl had taken shelter. The sleeping bag and other gifts seemed untouched. It looked as if no one had been there since the night of the storm. The woman who tried to cover the shivering girl sifted through the items on the floor. Under the blanket, she found a bent carpenter’s nail, white with dust, and words scratched into the old concrete floor.

“People said they cared, but
 smiles and warm feelings
 Fade away, fade away
 Does it matter that I’m here?
 a girl worth nothing
 Fade away, fade away
 I fear what I am
 my sickness, the most
 I am broken
 no one knows
 I was Linnie, once
 Fade away” ♦

BARBARA CROOKER

SNAPSHOT

They were drinking coffee and smiling.
 You saw the photograph.
 There was a small table, a pot of geraniums.
 Two dark cups, simmering.
 You don’t see the accident,
 the daughter in a coma.
 The weeks the parents didn’t speak.
 The way she turned from him in the dark.
 You don’t see the daughter’s return,
 the slurred speech, the stumbling gait.
 The way she had to learn everything over
 again, ABCs to cursive, kindergarten
 to physics. She lost her balance,
 couldn’t dance, but the teacher let her
 use the barre in the studio. Small steps
 led back to pointe. Later, a May
 recital, the mother sobbing
 in the auditorium. The camera
 didn’t catch this. The camera
 is a liar. It edits every frame,
 shows only the sunlight
 falling through the plane trees.
 It doesn’t know how to count:
 minutes, hours, long black
 nights. That December,
 it would have showed
 a happy family on a glossy
 card. It’s a blind
 eye, doesn’t show
 what’s missing.
 The girl went off to college.
 The parents took back
 their lives. But nothing
 was ever the same. The ground
 had shifted. They knew
 that loss was waiting, only
 around the corner. They are
 drinking coffee, and smiling.

*Previously published in More, C&R Press, 2010.
 Reprinted with permission of the author.*

DEMETER

It was November, when my middle daughter descended to the underworld. She fell off her horse straight into Coma's arms. He dragged her down, wrapped her in a sleep so deep I thought I would never see her again. Each day, the light grew dimmer, as Earth moved away from sun. I was not writing this story; no one knew the ending, not even the neurosurgeons, with their fancy machines. Every twenty-four hours she slipped further away. I called and called her name, offered to trade places, ate six pomegranate seeds, their bleeding garnets tart on the tongue. Her classmates took their SATs, wrote their entrance essays. She slipped down into the darkness, another level deeper. I was ready to deliver her to college, watch her disappear into a red brick dorm, green trees waving their arms in welcome. Not this, season without ending, where switches changed the darkness to light, and breath was forced through tubes and machines, their steady hum the only music of the dim room. The shadows under her eyes turned blue-violet, and pneumonia filled her lungs.

And then, one morning, slight as the shift from winter to spring, her eyelids fluttered, and up she swam, a slippery rebirth, and the light that came into the room was from a different world.

*Previously published in More, C&R Press, 2010.
Reprinted with permission of the author.*

CLIFF OVER TROUBLED WATER

Gradually come out of the pharmaceutically-induced “coma”
Better quiet and asleep than the alternative
As the same old story always goes, grab the rope and hoist myself up
Ready to face the aftermath
Time to pick up the pieces again
Say “I’m Sorrys,” or the ever famous “Never will I ever again...”
Half-smile—my head is clear enough for DBT skills again
“Fake it ’til you make it”
That will never be enough
Opposite Action must be employed
Skills needed for survival

But after the storm it feels like I was a casualty
Every time a part of me gets swept away
Is there really any truth in the word “survival”?
Nobody would want a life like this
Up then down or, even better, both at the same time
Can you say, “Reality Wreck”?
A complete mind maim.
The “roller coaster” metaphor doesn’t even begin to describe it

It’s like standing on a cliff in the most dangerous storm,
Grabbing onto the lightning
Gathering up all the power in the world to charge the biggest battery in the world;
My heart and soul breathe fire
Then it all becomes too much but wait, look what is underneath me
Dark seas and high tides—a current that will sweep me away
And rock my mind to bed
Floating back and forth catatonically
To stop the anguish I cliff-dive
Little did I know I’d land on the rocks below

Paralyzed.
The tide rises and takes me for a ride
Same story again—riding from the bottom to the top
Wasn’t the goal to stop that topsy-turvy carousel ride?
Beeping sounds. Bright lights.
A foreign substance being shot through my veins.
On par, I have been brought back to life once again.
But for what purpose?

Always analyzing and realizing how I am God’s gift to the world
Purpose: to help and serve
Definitely not in the terms of the military—never touching that subject again
Still scarred as hell and receiving fresh wounds on a daily basis.
Ten years of this. Only warriors could have achieved what I have
There is a light at the end of the tunnel.
Her name is Hope.

So pull myself up by my bootstraps.
I better get good at this
It’s a round-trip ride that never stops.
This train might go off the tracks time and again
But do I see all the passengers riding it through with me?
Love. Unconditional Love.
I am not alone.

DRIVING HOME IN THE BLURRY WHITE

RUTH Z. DEMING

I was the only group therapist at Northwestern Human Services in Bensalem. All the other therapists were afraid to run groups, but I loved it. Unlike one-on-one therapy, there wasn't a boring moment. What does a therapist do? Hold a conversation with someone. A back and forth in which the goal is to make a client feel good about himself.

My office was the huge conference room that I decorated with Audubon calendars in a straight line across the four walls, with colorful birds on wing. Since I was also the intake person, I wrote atop each calendar, different diagnoses. My favorite was 296.44, Bipolar Disorder, with Mania and Psychosis.

That *was* my diagnosis.

Best of all in my corner suite, I had four huge windows—every prisoner's dream—which provided spectacular views of the outdoors, where we all longed to be, and of the vast expanse of sky, with whatever came into view—honking geese in formation, dandelion fluffs in the summertime, or today, snowflakes, falling ceaselessly for hours.

"Cancel your clients," said my boss, who came in and stood over by the window. A man with big hips and belly, Dave McGowen was a show-off and braggart. He wore a Rolex watch, though everyone knew he gambled and couldn't hold onto a cent.

"Thanks, Dave," I said. "I've got one more client. My pedophile."

"Oh?" he said, wanting some dope on him.

"Yeah, gotta get ready for him."

Since Linda the receptionist had gone home early I went out to the waiting room to see if Gary would show up. I looked out the glass door. There he was in the parking lot, pulling up in a red truck.

I held the door open for him.

"How was the driving?" I asked.

"No problem. My mom bought me this truck."

Gary had lived with his mother his whole life. He was mandated for treatment by the Bucks County courts. We sat in my office at a round table where I kept collections of seashells, tiny pine cones, and shiny buckeyes. When a client began to bite their fingernails, I pushed one of my nature tokens his or her way for them to play with.

This was our third session.

“You look nice,” I told Gary, who I had advised to wear deodorant and clean clothing. Later on, it occurred to me that I’d been responsible for his freshening himself up for his next victim. An adolescent boy.

“Well, thanks,” he smiled, showing his lack of teeth on the side. “My boss is happy with me.”

Miraculously, Gary, an ex-con, had found a job with a small company that received special funding for hiring former inmates. He drove a forklift in their warehouse. His felony was “corrupting the morals of minors,” which meant having sex with adolescent boys. He’d pick them up at parks or while walking in his downtrodden Croydon neighborhood. It’s no small irony that British names—such as the lovely town, Croydon, south of London—was, in Pennsylvania, a poverty-stricken area and filled with pollution from factories.

When Gary attempted to tell me about his favorite “catch” as he called Jeremy, I stopped him. A restraining order had been filed by Jeremy’s family, which kept Gary physically away under threat of arrest.

“Sorry, Gary,” I said. “The idea is to get these underage boys out of your head. The more you talk about them, the more the memories will embed themselves in your mind. We want to create new memories, healthy memories.”

“You’re a smart one,” he said. “You’re Jewish, right?”

“I am,” I said. “I must say Gary you’re one of the most perceptive men I’ve ever met.”

I reached over and rolled one of my buckeyes toward myself and began tapping it on the table.

I looked up at him.

“Have you picked up your drums again like we talked about last week?”

Not surprisingly, he had not. I was trying to get him interested in this wonderful world we live in and all the choices we have. I was also glancing at the endlessly falling snow

outside the window. A pot of red geraniums, rescued from outside my house during the summer, sat atop the windowsill.

The hour went by quickly.

“Had enough?” I joked, at the end of the session.

“Thanks, Dr. Deming,” he said, though I was certainly not a doctor. People often called me that. It made them feel they were in good hands. It made me feel nervous, wondering, if indeed, they *were* in good hands.

We walked out together and I locked the door behind me. Nearly an inch of snow lay on the parking lot.

“Gary, I hate to ask you this, but can you help me clean off my car?”

His tall, thin, slightly stooped body removed a snow brush from his back seat, as I stood by my snow-covered white Toyota. I hoped he didn’t notice that “bad hubcap karma” kept my little car from looking all dressed up. It only had a single hubcap. Like bad teeth, they’d spit themselves out onto the pavement.

“Thanks, Gary,” I said, extending my hand. “Really appreciate it.”

“Drive carefully, Dr. Deming,” he said, getting into his truck and turning on the wipers.

I backed out of my space, shifted into first gear and crawled out onto the main road. Good. The road was fine. Nice and wet. I shifted into second gear, and kept up with the traffic. I switched on the radio and heard one of my favorite bands, The Dave Matthews Band. Good! They would accompany me home. Once again I reflected upon the irony that me, a woman with bipolar disorder, who had been locked away in a psych ward for the worst week of my life, had so recovered that I now was keeper of the keys. Bipolar wasn’t so bad, I thought, as long as I took my meds.

Gazing out the window, I looked for my favorite scenes. After the Wawa, which sold a great cup of chili, came the

King David cemetery, heralded by a bright blue banner and iron gates frosted with snow. Nancy Spungen, the girlfriend of Sid Vicious of the Sex Pistols was buried there. A troubled Jewish girl, who, like my clients, got mixed up with a bad crowd, Nancy was found stabbed to death in the London apartment she shared with her lover.

Slowing down for my left turn, I slid a tiny bit and thanked God, the same God that Spungen was with now, for letting me stay safe. Forty minutes remained for my ride home. All my attention was required to watch the road and I snapped off the radio for a moment. Immediately my mind was flooded with the clients I saw today. Most had canceled, but not Karen, whose husband Ron, drove her in. A fragile woman, she'd been sexually assaulted numerous times by her stepfather, while her sheepish mother did nothing to stop him. Would I ever forget what she told me about the Mel Gibson movie about the crucifixion of Christ? She saw it three times, each time passing out in her seat.

Identification with suffering. Could that be why Christianity was so popular?

"Enough!" I said out loud and put the radio back on.

Finally I was on the last leg of my journey home. So far, the streets were all on a flat surface. Not so in my own neighborhood. I tried not to think about it and turned up the radio. REM was singing, "I'm Sorry."

A logjam awaited on a two-way street two miles from home. We stayed in our cars for nearly half an hour, while the sun was going down and slowly turning the snow and slush into ice. The next thing I did was difficult to do, but absolutely necessary. I turned off the engine of my car, let myself out on the driver's side, and went behind some bushes to pee. The lithium I took to control my bipolar disorder had me drinking at least a gallon of water a day. I kept a red thermos by my bedside to quench my everpresent thirst. A nuisance, for sure, but my illness was under control.

Wish I could say the same for my car.

The procession of cars had advanced and I was now on Terwood Road, one mile from home, the start of our "Moreland Hills" development, emphasis on hills.

With REM accompanying me, my poor little car began to slide like I was in a bumper car at Dorney Park. Down into a gully we bumped, hands on the steering wheel, safe in my seat belt, bumpety-bumpety-bump, finally settling on the outskirts of a huge front yard, right on Terwood Road, underneath a sheltering pine tree.

Home is where I had to be. My medicine was there, my food was there, and so was the telephone.

Grabbing my keys and my red leather pocket book, I stepped out into the bitter cold. Like a fool, I was wearing my "good shoes," little black pumps and black silk slacks, which let the wind sail through. My feet were freezing. I climbed my way out of the gully, slipping and sliding all the way. I had forgotten my gloves, so my hands were freezing. What I feared, though, was getting a cramp in my feet. This is something I've suffered from since I was ten years old. The first time it happened I was in the kitchen with my mom and my two little sisters. Without warning, I fell screaming to the floor, grasping my toes. I writhed about as if I were having a seizure, which it was, of sorts.

Over the years this strange condition afflicted me. It was simply the most painful feeling imaginable, usually lasting a good twenty minutes, while I massaged the poor darlings, to no avail, until the cramping mysteriously ceased.

Please don't cramp, I silently ordered them as I walked down Terwood Road, a seven-minute drive from here, but possibly a forty-five minute walk. After debating a bit, I stuck out my thumb to hitch a ride home.

Car after car passed me by.

"Bastards!" I shouted, as tears streamed down my cheeks. I walked onward, on the side of the road, under the cover of trees, turning around occasionally to stick out my thumb.

"I'd pick YOU up!" I shouted after the cars.

My toes were behaving. Look, I told myself, the Jews at the concentration camps marched out in the cold and it didn't kill them. Other things did.

"Sing!" I commanded myself. Marching down Terwood Road, with a steady stream of slow-moving cars to keep me company, I sang "Chances Are" by Johnny Mathis, "Mr. Tambourine Man" by the Byrds and a medley of Bob Dylan tunes. As I turned left and walked up Greyhorse Drive, I crooned "If I Had a Hammer" by Peter, Paul and Mary and then, rounding the corner to Cowbell—my street!—I launched into the "Hallelujah" chorus of Handel's Messiah.

At home, I peeled off my wet clothes and spread them across the living room floor to dry, then changed into my black and white polka dot pajamas. The world looked lovely out my living room window, as I sipped on a cup of hot chocolate. Tomorrow, though not the sabbath, would be a day of rest. Big John's Texaco would rescue my car and I'd look out the window at the splendid mountains of glorious snow, glistening in every color of the rainbow, while I put my feet up and caught up on my reading. ♦

SOMEONE TO HOLD

LUKE EMILE WILLIAMS

A reverberating memory of my son: sitting right in the center of the soda aisle in Walmart, his quaking body clutched to my chest. I wrapped his stubby arms across his torso, restricting him straitjacket-style with his own limbs. Just a moment prior, Gabriel was mid-swing in one horrendous meltdown, bouncing Cheerwine two-liters off the brown linoleum. Passing Sunday shoppers wore a farrago of expressions, whispering to spouses what they'd do if that were their child. Some connected eyes and rattled their heads with public disapproval; some pretended we were invisible beyond brief peripheral stares; one scoffed loudly, to be witnessed scoffing, as though I then and there validated her re-shared Facebook meme about my generation's parenting ability. Another little shit spared the rod, another hippie-dippy parent that can't make their child mind.

Gabriel's occupational therapist recommended the strategy. Whenever Gabriel rioted, I was instructed to drop everything and physically restrain him with a firm—but safe—bear hug. The method subtly imparts accountability: as Gabriel settled his own body, my grip would also loosen. While petulantly raging and rearranging the room he inhabits, Gabriel isn't in control of his emotions, of himself. With his body intertwined with my own, I'd sporadically reaffirm in his ear that when he chooses to regain control of himself, he will, indeed, regain control of himself.

My grandmother, Margot, has never been remotely close to a loving woman. Fueled by misery, she chased her entire family away. When my father was eight years old, Margot expressed disappointment that he'd been born male instead of female like he was "supposed to be." Current day, Margot spasms atop a hospital bed in her designated quadrant of my home. Nobody visits her. Sections of her rise intermittently as a hydraulic air mattress puffs up to prevent skin breakdowns. Her son lives fourteen steps upstairs and he chooses to keep his distance. I don't judge him.

According to my father, Margot assigned blame to the outside world for each failure she encountered. I don't know Margot like those who endured her motherhood, but inside the last four years of caretaking her decline with Alzheimer's, I do know the brain reaches a point where it dispenses with social inhibitions. The self-imposed ones go first. Negative perceptions, no matter how deeply buried, float to the surface with Alzheimer's—oftentimes intense and ravenous from their hibernation. I cringe thinking of how unbearable it must've felt to lip service familial commitments to someone who's never happy with anything, most of all you. It wasn't, as my father reported, a home bursting with hugs.

My son frequently plants the crown of his head into our La-Z-Boy recliner, attempting to submerge himself into the crevice where it folds up. He gets to his eyebrows before the remainder of his skull blocks progression. Gabriel does this exact action to his mother's midsection as well, like a reverse birth, an infant regaining entrance. Some people

with autism crave bodily pressure, soothing themselves by tilting into things. At any point, Gabriel will lean against a sturdy surface rather than support his own weight, like a boxer swooning over a good scratch. He can sit this way—“sit” an already inaccurate descriptor—without complaint of neck cricks, constantly rocking his L-shaped block of a body. When finished matting a crop-circle pattern into his fine blond hair, he’ll lay back and engorge his pale complexion with blood as he dangles off the side of the chair. He will, if allowed, spend hours alternating between the two, recreating sensations that abstractly mimic physical touch.

Margot constantly begs for physical attention. Her arms stretch to the ceiling as though reaching for an invisible hand—that is to say, whenever her anaconda grip isn’t compressing flat a body pillow. It takes two of my hands to loosen just one of hers. Aloud, she speaks longingly of her mother’s embrace; every other utterance reflects her desire to “go home.” If you try to comfort her by holding her hand, she’ll jerk it away or thrust out jabs better suited for a speedbag. My grandmother winces from all and any contact, already complaining about how you’ve broken a bone without having laid a finger on her. Warning her of the next physical sequence—prefacing what’s to come is just as crucial in caretaking as it is in parenting—elicits the same response. Changing her is a taxing process full of exaggerated screams of abuse, when you’re just freeing her from the soggy clutches of a urine-soaked gown. If you stood outside her door, you’d think my wife and I were beating her senseless.

My father maintains that Margot has always been a well-documented martyr, having accompanied her several times a month to the doctor for agonies stemming from imaginary traumas. Now I’m the one who takes her to appointments; my father fudges no facts.

Hugging Gabriel comes with unspoken terms. He has an aversion to all bodily contact he doesn’t initiate. He squirms when held, writhing as though drowning, unable to process the extra dermal heat layered atop his own. As Gabriel began to speak in articulate sentences, he’d inquire exactly what we were doing when embracing him. He’d ask us, “Why?”

Autistic children often isolate themselves, preferring to eschew recess politick to play alone. The worlds inside their minds are in perpetual categorization. Involving another’s output is one more variable to analyze, to process for particulars. Gabriel can be found at any point in the day tucked away in his room by himself, constructing levels with his patterned wooden blocks for his Super Mario toys to run through. With extensive behavioral therapy and social immersion in the classroom, he’s improved significantly, but for years, sitting down to play with Gabriel meant sitting

down to *watch* Gabriel play by himself. The minute you picked up Luigi, his small hands snatched back the toy as mandated by the little towheaded player.

Margot frequently presents with bruises on her arms. At times, her skin is more prune-purple than its normal milky-yellow tint. The contusions don’t stem from bathing, clothing, or feeding, but rather from the contractures she suffers in the late stages of her condition. Without routine movement, without the exigencies for it; lacking elasticity, her ligaments calcify. Her hands and arms congregate at her abdomen daily, stuck in a premature funereal pose. Moving her with the contractures is arduous because they are painful when rearranged, and any reminder of hurt reactivates ancient martyrdom protocols in Margot. When she is in pain, she awakens, lucidly calling me names comedians could battle back their hecklers with. Though cloistered away for years, Margot has kept track of all the profane words she wouldn’t be caught dead uttering.

Margot retains unbelievable digital strength, despite her frail state. Both hands interweave and clasp the other as if in genuflection, every syllable of unspoken prayer rendered into subdermal hemorrhaging. We medical-wrap mauve oven mitts around her hands as an interim remedy until the bruises, visibly filled with sloshing fluid, deflate. When the swelling has healed enough, we give her wadded up wash rags to clutch in the palms of her hands. It is the best preventative measure we can offer.

Gabriel used to speak in code. I’d ask him a question and he’d parrot selected words. If I listened carefully for tone and the emphasis he placed on certain words (and employed a hell of a lot of hand gestures), I could deduce meaning from his awkward communication. The language he spoke, when not immediately mimicking, came from memory-based catalogues. Lacking context, his transmissions sounded garbled, and usually inappropriate. This period of childrearing was also paired with mercurial meltdowns: Gabriel’s from the frustration that no one could comprehend him, and mine from the anxiety that I was unable to interpret my son’s needs. A story revolving around the color of a slushy received in a park one balmy afternoon two zip-codes ago, *while* in the very same moment defecating inside a gas station bathroom is quite an impressive way to go to convey thirst.

The guesswork was unwieldy, and also guilt-infused. Gabriel would repeat phrases I said at less-than-composed moments. All parents flog themselves for the angry tones they expose their children to, but not all parents have a kid with terabytes of direct-access data storage and an infinite capacity for eidetic recall. It’s not difficult to feel like the deck’s stacked against you. On depressive days, I’d wonder whether Gabriel’s echolalia served as a gut-check, a flexed bicep to remind me of the powerlessness of parenthood. To what

degree am I talking to Gabriel, the boy behind these words, and to what degree am I speaking to residuals, echoes of myself, from months past?

Margot also employs the ghosts of memories to converse. She alludes to certain people and places, but each invocation loses tether to reality once outside her head. The memories sound structurally weak, dressed with mismatched clothes. I have been Margot's mother, her estranged son, her adopted daughter, her cruel captor, her deceased husband of fifty years (who died on her birthday in a room adjacent to hers; Margot was far more crestfallen over the fact she'd receive no celebration that day) but I've never been her grandson. What little identity I ever held has long since swirled down the void. When I talk to Margot, always reassuring or redirecting, my words fail to penetrate; Margot will fall silent, initially echoing the sentence starting with her name, but the words become too many, too overwhelming, and she'll interrupt with a volcanic shriek for help. The hospice nurses who check on her weekly refer to her as terminal, because each sunset takes a fragment of her with it. She dies a little every twenty-four hours—more so than the rest of us—because her identity, the individual context and depth and rationale that provided dimension to her consciousness, will flatline long before her body ever pushes off. Margot will die twice before it's all over.

To someone with an intimate connection, Margot's scenario would be a car crash straight into the heart. As an employee, someone able to separate abject sadness from occupational responsibility, Margot serves as cautionary tale. My own genetic coding has markers indicative of manic depression, both hemispheres of my family marinating in it. When I look upon Margot, I feel I can pinpoint the wrath she has brought against herself. The causative science behind the plaques staining an Alzheimer's brain is murky at best, but I'd be shocked if there were no corroborating link to anxiety or depression's several thousand waves of inner turmoil eroding the shores. My grandmother is the worst kind of alone now, surpassing even the isolation she's brought upon herself.

As he's aged, Gabriel has developed a more advanced algorithm than just memory-binary. He talks skillfully in the passive-aggressive tense, every question presented as though it were your idea, as though it *should* be your idea. He reminds incessantly on what should come next, despite preassembled parental plans. Simply put, he's honed his ability for sideways communication. "I am thirsty" becomes "Dad, I really love ice-cold water." His intellect is astronomically impressive, among the highest percentiles in the state, but also emblematic of the tragic hell intellectuals face: all these smarts and none of the confidence to do anything with it. What he finds interesting is poured through a filter detached from his own want and hinged on the approval of others. "Dad, isn't that funny?" is somehow

congruent with "I think that's funny." This indirect methodology has thoroughly infected multiple areas of his personality now, like a rampant virus too fast acting for meds.

Getting Gabriel to recognize his mistakes, identifying that an action *was* a mistake let alone *his* mistake, is like completing a marathon of equal size right before lining up for the original marathon you'd intended to run. It's his classmates' fault for his hitting them; his teacher's fault for his blatant back-talking; my fault for his door-slaming tantrums. Gabriel has become quite adept at resisting, denying, and deflecting. I can empathize with the aversion to owning a mistake—why would anyone propelled by self-interest voluntarily expose themselves to pain—but those who gaze upon pain without flinching are typically the ones to extract wisdom from it.

What's distressing, in the shadow of Margot, is the way Gabriel now uses arrogance as a defense. Arrogance is one of depression's underreported symptoms, more complex and treacherous than the stereotypical inner loathing. Excessive self-deprecation is a cry for help from a person with a shred of awareness on how their depression beats them down; arrogance is insidious because it persuades a person to lock themselves in with their own righteousness. It feigns as accuracy, helping construct a barrier around oneself so that ego-soothing, alone, under the banner of how very correct you are and how very wrong the rest of the world is, can continue without interruptions. It condemns one to an interminable cycle of failure and pain. It closes the feedback loop.

I worry, being a witness to how Gabriel grows and Margot withers. My worries are, cruel irony notwithstanding, representational of the exact trap I fear will befall him: I struggle with acceptance. I accept, parentally, that I can't save Gabriel from the outside world; I have yet to accept that I can't save Gabriel from his internal world. How might Margot have turned out if, like her Alzheimer's, her destructive mindset had been noticed earlier? What preventative measures could have been taken? I worry, as every parent does, about the degree to which I can save my child from himself. He is already too large for me to sit down with him in the middle of the soda aisle. ♦

ACTS OF SILENCE

EMILY KLEIN

“**R**ed. Red. Red.”

I say everything to Joy in threes these days. Then I stare at her lips. They are full and pink and—still. I place the red marker into her art box.

“Up. Up. Up.”

I speak in triplicate again while I continue to stare at my three-year-old’s Cupid’s bow. I wait for the slightest flicker of movement, proof of a connection between the motor center in her brain and her mouth.

“Yes. Yes. Yes.”

Her silence stings my ears.

All the unanswered questions nip at my heart. *Why can’t she sit or stand? Why can’t she walk or be nourished without her feeding tube? What can she see?* The doctors talk a lot but have no answers, and so I no longer even hear them.

Seven months ago, my daughter’s unexplainable medical condition also stole her words. Her language development had always been abnormal, though she usually had a handful: “up,” “mama,” “dada,” “good girl.” Then, those words would disappear (as if never there at all) and new ones would emerge. My husband and I lived with these cycles long enough for them to feel normal. I miss that time. Those

few words were proof that she understood us. That she had something to say. They functioned as glimpses into the real Joy, beyond the body riddled with ailments. They were our connection.

Then, we noticed we hadn’t heard any new words in a while. A few weeks later, we realized we weren’t hearing any words at all. Finally, all of her vocalizations were gone. I remember sitting at the dining room table with Joy’s speech therapist. Joy was seated in her activity chair at the head of the table. When her therapist asked her to repeat “la-la-la,” Joy’s jaw moved, but no sounds came out. Her therapist checked her old notes at the end of that session and we saw that the silence had been slowly seeping in for months. Since then, I have been trying to find her words. I repeat her favorites every day—three times each. Sometimes Joy can say “ahh.” It sounds beautiful.

Now, she squirms in my lap. She arches her back to protest the futility of my exercise. I readjust her legs the way her occupational therapist showed me, with her ankles, knees, and hips all at 90-degree angles and her feet planted firmly on the floor. My body is her chair.

“Baah . . . Bah . . . Baah.”

I try a singsong approach. She smiles, exposing an uneven row of baby teeth.

“Can you say baah-bah-baah?”

Joy kicks her feet out in front of her and thrusts her hips forward until she slides down my lap onto the floor. Her back rests against the tan, shag carpet. I brush a dark curl from her eyes.

When my husband and I sit up in bed, our backs resting against oversized pillows, Joy often lies between us. She tells us she wants to sit up with a low whine—a sound I hear so frequently now that it registers in my brain as white noise. As we look down at our daughter, I remember all of the excuses we made over the last few months while she was losing her words. “Maybe she’s having a bad day,” Eric once said. “I think she is focusing on other areas of development. She almost sat on her own this afternoon,” I told him a few weeks later. “She’s not talking because she is sick,” we agreed when she had an ear infection. But our rationalizing soon faded. There are no more excuses to hide behind. There are no more words.

Eric sighs and reaches over to pick Joy up. We study each other and fall into the silent conversation we have daily. I shake my head and think, *How are we going to handle this?*

Eric shrugs. His silence says, *We will just care for Joy as best as we can.*

I turn away. My lips tighten. Eric repositions Joy in his lap and reaches across the bed. He places his hand on mine. A silent plea floats between us.

I, too, am familiar with silent acts. My fingers are frequently poised above the keyboard, ready to pounce at my brain’s command. I fumble for the right words. I type and delete. Start and stop. I talk to no one when I’m at this, and the silence is a gift. But not always. My fingers move in fits and bursts until I rest my wrists on my desk in defeat. I lay my head back on my chair and look up at the ceiling as if in prayer. My fingers still. Then, the silence mocks me and snuffs out my voice.

I often fear the silence will cloak my daughter completely and she will disappear. I work hard to strip it from her. I pile Joy’s body into my lap.

“Dada. Dada. Dada.”

She looks away.

The quiet fills with memories of her voice. It was sweet, yet firm; a child who knows what she wants. That was before the silence crept in between us, a force holding us apart.

Joy pulls her Elmo doll onto her lap. She tugs and twists his furry red paws until she hits the button. “Elmo loves you.” *The doll speaks!* I toss Elmo aside.

“Mama. Can you say mama?”

Joy shakes her head; slow, small movements from side to side.

“That’s okay,” I say. Guilt spreads through my body like a cancer. I pull her to me, feel her warmth against my breastbone. “You don’t have to say it.”

I kiss the smooth skin on her forehead. “Kiss.” From habit, the word tumbles out of my mouth. Once.

Mwah. Joy’s lips pucker and push forward against the air.

“Thank you for the kiss, Joy.” I smell the sweet scent of her baby shampoo and murmur into her ear, “Mama loves your kisses.”

I think about silence and go in search of its meaning, its significance. I want to understand not only what it takes away, but what it gives, and how.

Silent personas have stretched across a canvas of melodies—the famous late mime Marcel Marceau was one of the world’s most treasured artists. Hoards of people collected in movie theaters, huddled around television sets and packed theaters to feel his genius. His art was magnetic. His silence illuminating.

Performance halls rumbled with laughter when Marceau appeared. Sobs also echoed through the theaters. He was always silent, but music was often his backdrop. “Music and silence combine strongly because music is done with silence, and silence is full of music,” he once explained. Through his work, *L’art du silence*, Marcel Marceau bestowed a loud and brilliant gift upon the masses.

I consider how silence and music and movement intersect in Joy's world. At Music Together class, the Flutes CD, track 8, always makes my daughter cry. Ever since Joy heard the slow, haunting rhythm at twelve months old, this song has moved her to tears. Music is a way in for Joy, seeming to pierce through her pain, rocking her body with glee. James Taylor soothed her after many surgeries when she was an infant. The tune of "Itsy Bitsy Spider" still sends her into hysterics. Like a golden retriever who never leaves your side, music is Joy's steady companion.

"It's called closing the circle," Joy's music therapist explains, pecking out a snappy rhythm on the piano, pausing at the last note. She urges Joy to complete the phrase by tapping the keys in front of her. "It creates a musical back and forth; like a conversation." Joy rests her head on the back of her chair and smiles. Her hands are still in her lap.

"That's okay, Joy," her therapist says and plays another incomplete melody. "Can you hit the keys?" I shift in my chair, which was built for a three-year-old, and look out the window at the children running and shouting on the playground.

The therapist begins to hum along with her playing. Bah—dah—pause. Bah—dah—pause. Joy's silent beat creates a sound of its own. This unexpected waltz coaxes my attention back into the classroom.

Plunk. Joy drops her hand down on the piano. "Excellent, Joy!" Her therapist and I share a quick glance. *Will Joy one day talk, I wonder, through music?* Through the silence between the notes?

One day, at a friend's barbecue, Joy sleeps in her stroller next to me while I watch three teenagers sit shoulder to shoulder on a bench in the backyard. A fire pit crackles and pops in front of them, and around us, conversations click, a dog barks. I see only the teens' backs and the faces of their phones, aglow and buzzing. The teens hold their phones close to their eyes, elbows sealed to their waists, backs

slightly rounded. Their thumbs dance frantically over keypads.

They pause briefly—as if taking a breath in a monologue—before continuing. The boy laughs. The girl to his right stops texting and peers over at his screen. They look at each other and smile. She swings her leg, narrowly missing a soda can.

His phone nags at him with a low hum. They return to their silent conversations.

I contemplate the voiceless dialogues playing out before me and glance over at Joy. I struggle to quiet the noisy chatter about soundless communication that is banging around in my head.

At home, I lay Joy down on her blanket and turn on Elmo Radio and our silence shatters.

I lie next to her and blow a quick breath against her neck. She raises her hands to my face and laughs, a deep belly laugh that rocks her whole body.

"More?" I ask. She grins and raises her chin to expose her neck. I blow again and she squeals in delight.

I scoop her up into my arms and dance around the room. She wraps her small hands around my arms and pulls me tight to her. Our bodies surrender into each other. She nuzzles her head into my chest, her breath, a quiet steady rhythm, resonating against my heart. Hush. Hush. Hush. ♦

Previously published in Literary Mama, December 2013.

A version of this essay was published in the anthology Monday Morning Coffee and Other Stories of Mothering Children with Special Needs, October 2013.

Reprinted with permission of the author.

THIS IS THE WAY THE WORLD ENDS

STACI BERNARD-ROTH

“Well, that can’t be good,” I said as I looked at the glowing screen.

I had arrived at the imaging center with my eleven-year-old daughter in tow. The sun had begun to drop less than an hour before. We had rushed over from her voice lesson, which we had rushed to as soon as I had rushed home from the high school where I taught. Lying motionless and blindfolded while the MRI machine scanned my head was the first chance I had to relax all day.

The machine banged and pinged as I lay as still as could be.

I had had many MRIs in the past, but because my mild multiple sclerosis had been in remission for some time, it had been a while. I was supposed to have scans every year, but my insurance changed, and I didn’t care for my new doctor, and I began teaching, so I was really busy, and . . . excuses aside, this scan was long overdue.

Meanwhile, the machine continued its loud and uneven clatter.

My husband was certain that my recent symptoms meant only that the MS had relapsed. That seemed to be the case, at least at first. Numbness started in my toes and climbed up my legs, and I became even clumsier than usual. Then I started falling, several times in the previous couple of months. We blamed uneven pavement for the first fall—in which I tore something in my foot—and simple clumsiness

for the second. The latter caused me to twist my ankle, so we chalked the third fall up to the ankle being weak. That didn’t explain the time I twisted the other ankle, but I was a clumsy woman with MS, so I probably didn’t need to worry. I hadn’t disclosed my MS at work, so my students grew concerned and wanted to help. “Coach would say to walk it off,” some of the football players told me. I tried walking it off but ended up crying in pain. Maybe I wasn’t doing it right. Anyway, I rationalized, more walking just meant more chances to fall. I thanked my students for their concern and assured them that I was fine.

Something wasn’t fine, though, one night when I was hurrying across a level parking lot and my legs just crumbled. I picked myself up and continued my evening with the nagging fear that something even more insidious than my MS might be to blame. When I got home, I headed straight for the computer, where the combined efforts of “WebMD” and the “Mayo Clinic”—and, I admit, “Wrong Diagnosis” and some others—told me that I might have MS . . . or a brain tumor.

“I might have a brain tumor,” I told my husband.

“You don’t have a brain tumor. You have MS.”

I let it go at that, but I suggested the possibility to my general practitioner, whose ability to diagnose illnesses rivaled that of TV’s Dr. House.

“You don’t have a brain tumor,” he said as he wrote the order for my MRI. I felt a little better.

I felt well enough that when my MRI was finished, I asked the technician if I could look at the slides.

“I have MS,” I explained, “so I know what I’m looking for.”

I didn’t think technicians were allowed to show or discuss slides with patients, but I figured it was worth a shot. The technician indulged me, although I imagine it was the last time he would do that for a patient. What I was looking for as he walked away were the little white dots that indicated MS lesions. What I saw was a huge white blob on what a neurosurgeon later told me was my right parietal lobe.

The technician came over to see what I thought couldn’t be good. Under the sickly glow of fluorescent lights, he hesitated for an instant and said, “Oh, that’s probably nothing. You probably moved a little bit when you were in the machine.” His voice wavered just a little.

“I guess so,” I said. It seemed like someone else was saying the words. They sounded small and far away. “Yeah, that’s probably it.” Of course, I knew that couldn’t be it—partly because he did not redo the scan but mostly because that explanation made no sense whatsoever. I had had enough MRIs to know that, at least.

We stood for a minute, neither of us saying a word. Trying to process what I had just seen, I left him and headed toward the waiting room where my daughter was reading a book.

“Hey!” he called out.

I turned around.

“Take care of yourself,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said, almost overwhelmed by the sadness in his eyes, “you too.” I didn’t know what else to say.

I took a deep breath and found my daughter. We left the imaging center holding hands, stepping slowly and silently into the darkness. ♦

SHERYL L. NELMS

A FORT WORTH BAG LADY

brown oxford
on the left foot
white sandal
on the right
red knee sock
on the left
blue anklet
on the right

pink wool coat
tents her
body

black leather gloves
protect her
hands

as she probes
the wire mesh trash cans

along 8th Avenue

working thru
the papers
bottles
and apple cores
digging deep
for

edibles

A PROMISING FIRST

MARK T. DECKER

Review of The Right Way to be Crippled & Naked. Edited by Sheila Black, Michael Northen, and Annabelle Hayse Cinco Punto Press, 2017.

Literature professors often teach their students that fiction written by members of socially marginalized groups serves two beneficial purposes. First, such fiction allows those who identify with the marginalized group represented the catharsis of seeing their experience depicted on the page or screen—and thereby validated by a society saturated by fictional narratives. Second, such fiction allows those who do not identify with the marginalized group the chance to see the common humanity we all share transcend socially determined boundaries. Fiction, in other words, can perform the necessary cultural work that helps establish a just society. To provide a broad illustration, the validation, sensitivity, and social change generated by expansive reading explains why students are asked to read Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* much more often than they are asked to read Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*.

One might think, then, that there would be several anthologies of short fiction about disability and those who are disabled. Ableism, like racism, sexism, heteronormativity, and classism, depends on the deliberate misunderstanding of a caricaturally portrayed other. Unlike other misunderstood and misrepresented social categories, however, no one can claim immunity from disability. After all, if ableism is a problematic fixation with the “healthy” body, we are all ready or going to be disabled. Culturally, we need exposure to narratives about disability written by disabled authors. After all, people with disabilities—just like other groups—have often been used in fiction and film in ways that may have helped advance an author or director’s theme or plot but did not help readers or viewers gain a more refined

understanding. A character’s disability, for example, often serves as heavy-handed imagery suggesting some moral flaw. The most recent high-profile example of this comes in 2017’s *Wonder Woman*. In a film that is admirable in many respects, viewers meet poison expert Dr. Maru, whose physical disfigurement seems to serve as a misguided “explanation” of her willingness to create genocidal weapons. Disability has also been used to imply moral purity—perhaps less offensive but equally problematic in terms of helping dispel the myths that undergird ableism—with a famous example of such a depiction coming in Charles Dickens’ Tiny Tim.

Sadly, however, when it comes to anthologies of short fiction—the best way to introduce recreational readers to unfamiliar but instructive texts and an essential resource for English instructors—there had not been one that focuses on disability until the publication this year of *The Right Way to be Crippled & Naked*. As editors Sheila Black, Michael Northen, and Annabelle Hayse point out in their brief introduction, their anthology is the first one containing tales “by writers with disabilities that feature disabled characters” (11). Apparently, publishers have yet to realize that an audience for these stories exists. Furthermore, as Northen points out in his afterword, *The Columbia Companion to the Twentieth-Century Short Story* contains explicit discussions of short fiction focusing on issues of race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality but does not mention disability (280). On this issue, academics have no room to lecture their corporate colleagues.

It should be clear that Black, Northen, and Hayse's anthology is important, but it would be fair if potential readers wondered if it was any good. Fortunately, the answer is a resounding yes. The scope of *The Right Way to be Crippled & Naked* is truly impressive, and while it would not be possible to summarize the plots of the twenty-seven stories the anthology contains, a brief structural and thematic overview should illustrate how thoroughly the editors worked. The stories represent a range of genres. Many of the tales are brief memoirs or lightly fictionalized versions of events from their author's lives, but many of the stories are realistic fiction, with science fiction and detective fiction also represented. Most of the tales are written in the familiar cadences of contemporary fiction, but occasionally readers will encounter experimental narrators who use language to portray the thought processes of those with cognitive disabilities. The editors also deserve commendation for deftly balancing the "greatest hits imperative" of an academic anthology by including sixteen reprints of well-received stories while at the same time using their collection to promote promising new writers or unpublished stories by established writers, rounding out their volume with eleven never-before-published pieces.

The editors also needed to use their anthology to portray the breadth of the disabled experience, and in this effort they also succeed. While it would be difficult to depict every conceivable disability in a collection that a publisher could afford to produce and promote, the contents of the anthology will not leave readers with a narrow conception of what it means to live with a disability. Instead, by collecting stories depicting individuals who happen to have neuromuscular disorders, polio, cancer, strokes, bone tumors, fibromyalgia, post-traumatic stress disorder, dementia, psychosis, hearing impairment, blindness, diabetes, and non-normative bodies, *The Right Way to be Crippled & Naked* helps readers understand that a disability can be something that one is born with, something that develops over time, or something that results from trauma. Disability is not the fault of the individual, but something that one encounters as part of the human experience.

For those teaching advanced high school students and university undergraduates, this anthology does much to establish that disability is not a master status—that a disability in and of itself is not the key to explaining a character who has that disability. The breadth of the individual stories found

in *The Right Way to be Crippled & Naked* allows readers to understand that the disabled also deal with issues surrounding sexuality and relationships, familial dysfunction, class, race, addiction, social and geographical mobility, and other pressing issues that we all struggle with in one way or another. Furthermore, by including brief explanatory afterwords written by the authors themselves—or in a few cases, the friends of deceased authors—the editors further enhance their anthology's ability to argue that disability takes place in the context of recognizable human lives.

Although *The Right Way to be Crippled & Naked* will be indispensable in the classroom, Black, Northen, and Hayse's collection will also be of interest to serious readers—both those who identify as disabled and those who do not—outside of the academy. Readers who are not worried about what will be on a quiz, however, will want to know if the stories in the anthology are good reads. This review has already noted the difficulties of paying close attention to each story; it would also be difficult to evaluate fairly each story in terms of readability for a non-academic audience because such an evaluation would ultimately rely on personal tastes and preferences. I would be strongly tempted, for example, to say that Nisi Shawl's "Deep End" is the best story in the collection because of my personal and academic interest in science fiction or to anoint Floyd Skloot's "Alzheimer's Noir" as champion because of my personal and academic interest in detective fiction and because my maternal grandfather had Alzheimer's. Instead, after observing that Jonathan Mack's "The Right Way to be Crippled & Naked" makes a very good choice for a title text because of its playful-yet-serious discussion of disability and body image, I will merely note that all of the stories are well written and well observed. After all, twenty-plus years of teaching has made me realize that not all students like the same stories. Those who read for pleasure will find much to be pleased with here, though opinions about individual stories will vary.

Black, Northen, and Hayse should be commended for their promising first anthology of short fiction about disability by those with disabilities. Everyone who teaches literature and is serious about using fiction to explore diversity should own a copy of this book. And while most serious readers should consider purchasing this worthy work, readers of *Kaleidoscope* should ask themselves why they do not already own a copy. ♦

ONE MORE RIDE

MARK QUIST PRINCE



Photo credit: Mark Quist Prince

Her paralyzed body dangled over the wooden platform, swaddled in a canvas sling, Bonnie's face showed at once fear and anticipation as Chad, the muscular nineteen-year-old ranch hand, slowly and skillfully maneuvered the lift over the waiting horse standing ready. Years after a riding accident had left the mother of four paraplegic, she was fulfilling her dream to get back on a horse.

The story begins on an icy Midwest February day more than a decade earlier, when too cold for normal riding clothes, Bonnie had donned a heavy barn coat to ward off the bitter chill. Training came naturally to her having ridden competitively since a child, and

there was no tonic like the smell of the barn in the early morning. This horse was the largest she had ever worked with, and mounting the big animal required pulling herself up onto its back, toggling on her belly, then swinging her leg over its back as she straightened up. This time, her movement was abruptly stopped. A pocket on the bulky garment had snagged the cantle of the saddle. The horse, feeling the familiar weight of the rider, broke into a trot as she lay helplessly atop the moving giant, caught—unable to move in any direction.

Suddenly, the fabric of the coat began to tear, and she was rapidly and help-

lessly falling headlong toward the ground.

Bonnie recalled the moment of impact: "It felt like an explosion in my back." Later she learned that in an instant, the fall had crushed her spine at the T8 level, the damage irreversible.

Years of surgeries, therapy, and counseling moved her toward a new normal, though her love for horses never diminished. "It wasn't the horse's fault," she reasoned, "and anyway, what good would it do to blame anything or anyone but myself?"

Paraplegia takes its toll on a body, with pressure wounds, undo stress on the

organs and breathing issues among the many challenges. Now restricted to moving between her wheelchair and bed, she sensed time running out on her dream of getting back into a saddle. “Just one more time,” she confided to Cindy, her caregiver and aide. When Bonnie learned that a small ranch named Healing Hooves in Kingman, Arizona had a program allowing people with disabilities to ride horses as therapy, she contacted them.

“I’m paralyzed,” she told the woman who answered her call. “I can’t feel anything from my chest down.”

“That’s okay” came the reply.

It was another February morning, with temperatures in the fifties, and a bright morning sun. Bonnie stared out the passenger window of the van, surveying a row of small fatigued houses as she neared her destination.

“This doesn’t look good,” she said nervously. “I hope this isn’t a scam.”

A few minutes later, her driver pulled the vehicle onto a circular dirt drive in front of a modest single story home. Guiding her power wheelchair through a side gate, she came upon a small shed filled with tack, four horses tied to a nearby rail, and a riding arena bordered by a long ramp and platform. She paused to savor the aroma of horses.

Kassie Scheurr, the owner and trainer appeared and introduced herself, then untied a big brown gelding that greeted his new visitor by nuzzling his long face into her waiting arms. “Go ahead and slobber all over me” she murmured with a relieved sigh. “I don’t care.”

“Ready to give it a go?” Kassie asked with a friendly grin.

“My mind went back to that morning,” Bonnie said afterward. “I suddenly wasn’t sure if I could deal with the memories.”

Summoning her courage, she clasped her trembling hands together as though in prayer as the lift raised her body from the wheelchair.

Lowered gently onto the quiet, waiting horse, Bonnie watched as Kassie adjusted her legs, carefully placing her feet in the stirrups after securing her torso in place against a tall back support that rose up to her shoulders.

“How are you doing?” Kassie said as they entered the arena.

“I think I’m good” Bonnie replied. “I’m ready to try this on my own.”

The muffled clopping of hooves was the only sound as Bonnie led her horse around and around the arena, softly clucking and using neck reins to expertly maneuver between the cones and other obstacles that dotted the training area.

Finally, toward the middle of the arena they stopped. Horse and rider were motionless.

A dusty Arizona wind swirled, as Bonnie once again reveled in the freedom and joy of bonding with a horse. ♦



Photo credit: Mark Quist Prince

PREGNANT WITH A FRIGHTENING DIAGNOSIS

PETRA WHEATON

I was twenty-six and pregnant. It was our first baby and I was a little scared as I wasn't quite ready to bring a life into this world; but who is completely ready for the unknown? We just bought our first home, a semi-custom in a planned development and watched the house emerge from the dirt being built to our specifications. We visited week after week watching the progress and even buried a quarter in the foundation for good luck. We were so happy to have this new nest, and welcome our baby in a warm loving home with lots of laughter, happiness, and our traditions and heritage to pass on.

It was about ten weeks into the pregnancy when we found out that something was wrong. The ultrasound technician looked at the screen twice and then looked again. She was quiet and excused herself as she walked out of the room. A few minutes later she walked in with a doctor who was wearing a white coat and had dark eyes and a heavy beard, looking serious. He briefly greeted us and looked at the ultrasound, did some measurements drawing lines from one point of the screen to another, repeating this process multiple times. Finally, he stood up and said that he needed to speak with us in his office. My heart pounded, I felt a lump in my throat, and I think I

was shaking a little as I stood up and straightened my clothes. As we sat down in the chairs opposite the big cluttered desk, I expected the worst. Obviously, something was wrong, and my mind was racing imagining all the possibilities, one worse than the other. "Your baby's brain is not developing correctly, it is called microcephaly." Hearing this was foreign to me and I was hanging on to some hope. *Sure my baby will be okay . . . we will be fine . . . right?* "This could cause severe developmental delays"—he continued—"and may not make it through birth." I was stunned. How could this happen? I did everything right: I married a good guy, we bought a nice home in the suburbs close to my in-laws, I didn't drink or do drugs, I had a good job, I was young and healthy . . . so why me?

He said that we had choices if we wanted to discuss terminating the pregnancy or he could provide more information on what to expect if we decided to keep *it*. Well *it* will not be terminated, because *it* is a little girl, and *it* already has a name: SONIA, and *it* is my child. I was angry. I was angry at the gloomy-looking doctor, at the diagnosis, at the prognosis, at the whole world. Nevertheless, we thanked the doctor and headed home in a state of shock. I was still hanging on to the pos-

sibility, the slightest sliver of hope that it was all a big mistake and everything would be fine. I guess I was in denial, but one day as my husband and I were painting and decorating the nursery, I finally broke down. It hit me that she may never see the Winnie the Pooh borders we just put up on the walls, or the big stuffed bear in the corner of the room. She may never lie in the soft little crib with Piglet, Tigger, Eeyore, and the others pictured on the sheets and blanket.

It disturbed me that I even had to consider the option to keep this child, that these thoughts were even put in my head, and that she may not survive through birth. I read somewhere that these children, if they survived birth, were not allowed to go home with their parents, but were left in institutions or were sold as exhibits for traveling circuses. I started bawling . . . we both did. We sank to the floor and held each other in all our sorrow.

A few weeks later I started feeling her little kicks and hiccups, saw her little foot poking under my skin when she was stretching, giving me a sense of calm. I knew that as long as she was inside of me, she was fine and I could protect her, that she was alive and well. I sang to her and read her stories. I was already her mom and she was my child.

I didn't want to give birth to her, not yet. I wasn't ready to face the reality that I may lose her. I wanted to carry her forever making sure that she was well nourished, warm, comfortable, and loved.

I dreaded it but the day came and we had to rush to the hospital one evening. It was inevitable, and I had to give up on my silly dream of being pregnant till the end of time. After being in labor for several hours and being exhausted from giving birth I was intently listening for the sound; the sound that means life, the sound that means I have a family, the sound that will make me a mother for real After what seemed like a lifetime, I finally heard it; from the top of her lungs, from deep within, she let the world know that she was a fighter and she would survive. Tears trickled down my cheeks, and I took a deep breath too, not realizing that I was holding it back.

Relieved and smiling I held my arms out for my baby girl. She had a small head typical of microcephaly babies, but she was beautiful to me. She was my little angel, my miracle, and I knew that we would be okay. Whatever the future would bring, I would be by her side fighting our way through life. She looked at me and we made a silent deal; she would keep fighting as long as I'd fight with her. She calmed as she nestled into my embrace and fell asleep.

Carrying a baby with a scary diagnosis puts life in a different perspective. I went through all sorts of emotions, but at the end I had to accept reality. No matter the outcome, there was nothing I could do to fix the situation. All I could do was keep my promise and fight for my daughter.

No matter what the circumstances, no matter the obstacles, we struggle through. We win some battles and lose some, but always keep on surviving. ♦

Previously published online in You and Me, June 16, 2016. Reprinted with permission of the author.

BARBARA CROOKER

LIFE

This is what life does. It hits you like a stone through the window, in the form of a phone call from your son-in-law who says your daughter's water has broken too early, and she's in the hospital, in antenatal care. It flips you back to forty years ago, when your first child was "born asleep," as it read on a gravestone in Ireland. But life also gives you a car, and a tank full of gas so you can drive to the city to see her again and again for three long weeks. Your grandson turns this into a quest: Big Green Dinosaur. Stone Jesus. The Bridge. Gold Dome. Ben Franklin's Kite. Lincoln on the Wall. White Greek Temple. The Swirl, aka, the parking garage. And life gives you dollars for the machine, which you gladly pay, hoping you don't need to save coins for Charon, not yet, not now. Your daughter is miserable, and scared. But every day is money in the bank. The babies in the NICU are so small. Some of them don't make it. Life shrugs. No skin off his teeth. It's all a coin toss. Then one night, some switch is flipped, and whoosh, here comes Caitlin Isabella, out in nine minutes. It could have been a hundred years ago, when babies this small didn't survive. But it isn't, it's now, and she's claimed us with her dark-eyed stare. Sometimes you put your coins in the slot, and it's cherries! cherries! cherries! Goodness has nothing to do with it. Look at this little one with her fleeting smile, the thinnest of commas. Which could have been an ellipsis, but isn't

*Previously published in Les Fauves, C&R Press, 2017.
Reprinted with permission of the author.*

Staci Bernard-Roth teaches language arts to high school seniors. She wrote an essay about her disability which appeared in *Voices of Multiple Sclerosis* in 2010. She says, “Writing about disability allows me to shape my own narrative . . .” Her most recent adventure was studying black bears in Ely, Minnesota, and she is writing an essay about that experience.

Marc A. Buchholz graduated in 2016 with an associate degree in liberal arts from Monroe Community College. He shares his writings on the internet and published a fiction piece, “Longer Than Expected” in September 2017. His disability is a spinal cord injury and he feels that sharing his experience may encourage others “to never give up on their dreams.”

Alyssa Cain graduated in 2015 with a B.A. in psychology from the University of St. Thomas. She expresses herself creatively through poetry, painting, mixed media, and photography. She says, “I am a survivor of bipolar disorder, ADHD, generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), and physical ailments. It took ten years to take back my life . . . with the support of my parents and my dog.”

Ellen L. Case is a writer and psychotherapist. Her personal essays have been published in *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *Ars Medica; a Journal of Medicine, The Arts, and Humanities*, and *The Rambler, a Journal of Human Experience*. She holds an M.F.A. from Mills College, Oakland, California, and an M.A. in clinical psychology from John F. Kennedy University. She is writing a family memoir and a series of essays about adjustments to multiple sclerosis.

Maura Gage Cavell is a professor of English at Louisiana State University, Eunice. Her poems have been published in *California Quarterly* (2016), *Westview* (2016), *Boulevard* (2014), and *Poem* (2014). She was nominated twice for a Pushcart Prize in 2014 and 2015 and was nominated for Louisiana Poet Laureate in 2015.

Yuan Changming, nine-time Pushcart nominee and author of seven chapbooks, published monographs on translation before leaving China. With a Canadian Ph.D. in English, he currently coedits *Poetry Pacific* in Vancouver. His credits include *Best of the Best Canadian Poetry* (2008-2017), *Best-NewPoemsOnline*, and *Threepenny Review*. He was born nearly blind in his left eye and has other congenital defects.

Glenna Cook lives in Tacoma, Washington. Her poems appeared in *The Avalon Review* (Summer 2015), *Quill & Parchment* (Spring 2014), *Gyroscope Review* (Fall 2014), and *Raven Chronicles* (Summer 2013). Her first full-length collection of poems, *Threshold*, was published by Moonpath Press in 2017. Many of Cook’s poems are written about her sister, Phyllis, who was born with Down syndrome.

Barbara Crooker’s books include *Les Fauves* (2017), *Small Rain* (2014), *Barbara Crooker: Selected Poems* (2015), and *Gold* (2013). She has received The Thomas Merton Poetry of the Sacred Award. Her thirty-three year old son has autism. She answers the question “Why Write?” “Because I’m here, looking at the ink-filled sky, / not believing, with the alternatives / of nuclear char or unchecked epidemic, / that anything from our time will last, / But still, I was here, on this rock, / for a short time. I suffered, / I loved in the face of everything, / and I have to write it down.”

Mark T. Decker is a professor of English at Bloomsburg University, Pennsylvania. His book, titled *Industrial Society and the Science Fiction Blockbuster: Social Critique in Films of Lucas, Scott, and Cameron*, was published by McFarland in 2016. He also coedited *Peculiar Portrayals: Mormons on the Page, Stage and Screen*, published by Utah State University Press in 2010. Decker believes, “Language structures the world, and I want to help people use language to call a better world into being.”

Ruth Z. Deming is a psychotherapist who writes nonfiction, poems, and fiction. Her work has appeared in *Blood and Thunder: Musings on the Art of Medicine* (October 2017), *The Intelligencer* (July 2017), online in *Your One Phone Call* (July 2017), and online in *BellaMuse* (September 2017). Deming is an insulin-dependent diabetic and the founder/director of New Directions Support Group for folks with depression, bipolar disorder, and their loved ones.”

Liz Dolan is a retired teacher. Her two poetry collections are titled *They Abide* and *A Secret of Long Life*. She has received fellowships from the Delaware Division of the Arts in both poetry and emerging fiction. She is a grandmother of nine, one of whom has Down syndrome.

Jennifer L. Freed is a teacher and writer. Her chapbook, *These Hands Still Holding*, was published by Finishing Line Press in 2014. Her poems have appeared in *Zone 3, Connecticut River Review*, and *Timberline Review*, all in 2017. Freed says she writes because “It has always seemed a natural way of sorting out my feelings, knowing who I am.”

Allan B. Goldstein is a senior lecturer at New York University, Tandon School of Engineering. He earned a master of arts in disability studies in 2015. He states, “As an actor, I escaped into others’ lives; as an ESL instructor, I assisted those seeking to fit in; as a writing instructor, I assigned disability-related readings; now, teaching disability studies, I am involving my students directly with disabled individuals . . .”

Katie Irish is an operations manager at The Legacy Foundation of Hartford, Connecticut. Her essays and poems have appeared in *Edible Nutmeg Magazine* (November 2015), *Natural Awakenings Magazine* (Spring 2015), *Dressing*

Room Poetry Journal (December 2016), and *34th Parallel Literary Magazine* (Spring 2015). Irish has multiple sclerosis and says, “‘Infusion Room’ is a poem I could never have written if I did not have a disability.”

Emily Klein is a writer from New Jersey who shares, “I believe in the power of stories.” She has published books as well as articles and essays in magazines, literary journals, an anthology, and online. She currently works as a ghost-writer and coauthor.

Abby Lipscomb is a former family therapist. Her fiction has appeared in *Greensboro Review* (Spring 2016), *Sou'wester Literary Review* (Fall 2015/Spring 2016), *storySouth Literary Review* (September 2016). She won the Rash Award for fiction in 2012. Lipscomb has relatives who have autism. She states that writing helps her to make sense of life and she hopes that it also helps people not to feel alone in their struggles.

Lorna Rose McGinnis graduated in 2016 with a B.A. from the University of Puget Sound. She is a development director for the nonprofit organization, Concern for Animals. McGinnis is an emerging writer of fiction and family drama. She shares, “My disability, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, has influenced who I am as a person, and as a writer.”

Sheryl L. Nelms is a prolific writer with fifteen collections of published poetry including her chapbook titled *Spanking the Tomatoes* (October 2017). Other full-length poetry collections are *Bluebonnets, Boots and Buffalo Bones* (2009), and *Their Combs Turn Red in the Spring* (1984). Nelms has been nominated four times for the Pushcart Prize and is the current fiction/nonfiction editor of *Pen Woman Magazine*. She has Parkinson's disease.

Sandy Palmer studied graphic design at The University of Akron and is a freelance artist who works with a variety of media. She contributes to *Kaleidoscope* as the writer of visual artist profiles, having joined the staff as art coordinator in 2002. Palmer is the full-time graphic design specialist at United Disability Services.

Marcia Pelletiere has received four Individual Writer's Grants from *Poets & Writers*. Her first poetry collection, *Miracle with Roasted Hens*, was published in 2011. Pelletiere describes herself as a poet, musician/composer, and interdisciplinary artist. A car/truck accident in 2006 left Pelletiere with a mild traumatic brain injury (MTBI).

Mark Quist Prince is the author of the personal essay, “One More Ride,” published in this issue of *Kaleidoscope*. He shares, “I am a person transformed by the role of caregiver/partner. I am also an advocate for, and an admirer of all those who struggle daily to overcome disability.”

Debbie Roppolo is a writer and editor who received the Purple Dragonfly Award (second place) for her children's activity/cookbook, *Amelia Frump and her Peanut Butter Loving, Overactive Imagination is Cooking up a Peanut Butter Storm*, Dancing With Bear Publishing in 2012. As a result of a nearly fatal car accident, Roppolo sustained nerve damage in her right arm. Her youngest son has autism.

Mary M. Sheridan is the writer and illustrator of a two-volume graphic collection titled *You Are Not Alone* (Volume 1, “Unlocked,” 2013 and Volume 2, “Never Stop Talking,” 2015) by GrayHaven Comics, focusing on bullying and violence against children. Her work has also appeared in *Amprosia, An Anthology of Outstanding Prose*, Piquant Press, Canada (2013). Sheridan is also an artist and a member of Toronto Urban Sketchers. She struggles with generalized anxiety disorder.

Janet Sobczyk is a special education substitute teacher. Her poems have appeared in *Fine Lines* (Autumn 2017) and *Screamin' Mamas* online magazine (several issues in 2016 and 2017). She also writes creative nonfiction and contributes posts to “Wordsowers Christian Writers” and has her own personal blog, “Mom's Musings.” Her sixteen-year-old daughter has Down syndrome.

Petra Wheaton is an accounts manager. She had an article published in *You & Me—America's Medical Magazine* (June 2016). Wheaton's daughter is severely disabled due to several medical conditions. She writes, “to inspire and enrich the lives of readers and bring about positive change.”

Luke Emile Williams works as a pool technician. He studied creative writing at The University of Tennessee. His fiction has appeared in *Day One* (October 2015), *The Passed Note* (June 2016), and *The Bloody Key Society* (February 2017). His oldest son has autism.

Gail Willmott has been a staff member with *Kaleidoscope* since 1982 and became editor-in-chief in July, 2003. She received both her bachelor and master degrees from the University of Illinois. “This is a career I have loved—getting to know our contributors as well as working with very accomplished and supportive colleagues.”

Laura Yeager teaches writing at Kent State University and Gotham Writers' Workshop. She is a graduate of The Writers' Workshop at The University of Iowa. She struggles with bipolar disorder and is a blogger at “Psych Central,” a religious essayist and a cancer blogger at “Cure Today.” She says, “My mental health issues have given me a great deal of material to write about.”



Kristina Gehrman, *Vintage Self Portrait*, 2012, Photoshop CS3/Wacom tablet, 8" x 10"