

KALEIDOSCOPE

EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCE OF DISABILITY THROUGH LITERATURE AND THE FINE ARTS

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EXPLORING NEW VISTAS

"The Mission" by *Dan Linssen*

"Photo Album" by *Julie Guirgis*

"Globetrotting with a Stutter" by *Brandon Lomenzo Black*

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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.

EXPLORING NEW VISTAS

DEBRA JOHANYAK

“Exploring New Vistas” is our theme for Issue 79 of *Kaleidoscope*. As the new editor-in-chief, I am enjoying the opportunity of getting to know many gifted writers and our supportive readership. I had the pleasure of meeting with Gail Willmott, former editor-in-chief of *Kaleidoscope*, to learn about her experiences with the publication along with some of her favorite memories. I admire Gail’s longstanding commitment to literary excellence and wish her continued success in her current pursuits.

In Issue 79, the theme of exploration moves us both inward and outward. Contributors to this issue invite readers along on journeys of self-actualization as well as introducing distant vistas that beckon with new perspectives. I think you will appreciate the thought-provoking essays, stories, and poems that will make great reading on lazy summer days at home or while away on vacation. In commemorating our national independence on July 4th, we can also be grateful for freedom of expression through the medium of literature that encourages, motivates, and inspires us in so many unique ways.

Our featured essay in this issue is Brandon Lomenzo Black’s “Globetrotting with a Stutter,” which recounts his travel abroad as he notes cultural similarities and distinctions that lead him to reflect on the significance of verbal communication. Coming to terms with his stammer on the other side of the world creates new channels of communication with non-native English speakers of the region. Black considers his stutter to be a door, rather than a wall. This realization

provides newfound independence that frees him from the label of being “tongue-tied” at a time when he needs key information to traverse the city where he is a visitor during a time of political intensity.

Julie Guirgis shares a common, yet personal, experience of reflecting on old photographs and the narrative they represent about a family’s journey through good times and bad in “Photo Album.” The photos are arranged in her memory like a collage as she revisits nostalgic events in her loved ones’ past. A stroll down memory lane feels so comfortable on soft summer nights as crickets chirp their background chorus.

Artist Amanda LaMunyon learned at an early age to express her impressions through the medium of painting (mostly acrylic). Her art became the tool with which she describes her perspectives on life that are framed within her Asperger’s syndrome diagnosis. Honored with an award at the Kennedy Center in 2002, LaMunyon was also one of ten finalists among 37,000 nominees and was awarded a Kohl’s Kids Who Care scholarship in 2011.

Our fiction selection includes “The Mission” by Dan Linsen, which is a story about coming to terms with life’s limitations and the importance of dignity and choices on individual terms. Although we struggle to help loved ones make critical decisions at such times, the author underscores his belief that ultimately the decision should be an individual one.

“The Spare Room” by A. M. Todd offers an insightful perspective on the captivating force of OCD and its potential impact on a person’s life and relationships. It is easy to get into a routine that, over time, may become mundane or even meaningless. Sometimes it takes an objective observer to point out the obvious.

Fifteen poems appear in Issue 79. Several reflect on memories or daily life, like Linda Amos’ “Her Kitchen” and “Ah, the Peonies” along with Lola Neff Merritt’s “Summer Time” and Megan Seitz’s “Simple Things.” Other poems contemplate unique perspectives, such as “Malcolm” by Maria Thompson Corley, Jeanie Greensfelder’s “Dolphins and Daughters,” and Fabiyas M V’s “A Hunchback Boy from Manayur.” All tempt us to pause and savor shared experiences or new approaches to celebrating life in its various manifestations.

Reflection on previous experiences and exploration of new ideas offer seasonal literary fruits as well as pave new paths of discovery and adventure in the amazing world of *Kaleidoscope*. I hope you enjoy these summer reading pleasures as much as I do, and that together, we can appreciate the exciting new vistas that open to us through the creativity of our contributors.



Debra Johanyak

A. D. HURLEY

STORM OF SOUND

Sound.

Such a funny thing—
the intricacies of the voyage.
The waves that lap at your ear,
drift through the canal,
like an ocean barge
guided swiftly
yet carefully
through a narrow passage.
Once through,
the beating of a tiny drum
thump, thump, thump
like a Viking ship
encourages the
stroke, stroke, stroke
of oar-hands
gliding it further, *further*
tickling the barnacles
in a whirlpool of sound;
a complex vortex
swirling through
a twisted ride
before a fast-moving current
picks it up and delivers it to port.

It’s a funny thing.

Sound.

The complex ride to port.
Amazing
how the passage can be
smooth and swift
uneventful and fluid,
yet an unexpected storm
can turn the tide
change the current
and reroute the journey—
the sound doomed to drift
on an empty ocean,
Lost.
Forever.

GLOBETROTTING WITH A STUTTER

BRANDON LOMENZO BLACK

On a seasonably warm and very humid August day in 2013, hundreds of protesters, en masse, took to the streets of Jakarta, Indonesia, and had gathered outside the U.S. Embassy, chanting anti-U.S. sentiment. Many held up signs with messages of anti-Zionism and calling the United States “imperialist” for its military presence in Afghanistan and Iraq. The local police force and National Guard were dispatched to the area to guard the embassy and to instill order, should violence ensue.

What could possibly go wrong for someone fresh out of college and who, since the third grade, has had chronic speech disfluency? In each of the countries I had visited prior, I relished the opportunity to engage with locals and was never in fear of spontaneity. Confidently approaching a group of people or just one individual to engage in conversation was a commonality wherever I traveled.

Seven months into what would eventually turn out to be a nearly two-year foray traveling independently around the world, I arrived in the heart of Jakarta, Indonesia, to a situation I was unprepared for. Sure, I had seen similar protests play out on the silver screen, on the evening news, or in the newspaper, but this was real life.

The chaotic scene unfolding in front of me should have been a warning to steer clear, particularly for someone unfamiliar with the country and the sensitivity of its population to American policies in the Middle East. Unbeknownst to me, the U.S. embassy and consulates in Indonesia just days

prior, sent out an email alert to all U.S. citizens in, and traveling to Jakarta, to avoid the city due to the demonstrations.

The U.S. Embassy was already prepared for such an occasion. Barbed wire wrapped around the perimeter of the compound, security guards outfitted head to toe in tactical gear were armed with pistols and carried assault rifles, manned entry points up and down the length of the embassy grounds. Concrete barriers were also erected along the outside of the embassy to prevent vehicle entry.

As the minutes passed and as more and more curious on-lookers gathered to find out what the protest was about, I decided to enter the fray.

While the area surrounding the embassy was without violence—all but for one protester who decided to burn the U.S. flag—I decided to explore this dynamic, energetic environment and engage in conversation as best as possible with a few protesters and policemen about their views towards the U.S. I was overly enthusiastic because I was literally in a situation where I could finally put to practical use my studies in international relations and personal interest in global affairs. A quasi diplomat? Why not?

From the periphery, I nervously approached one of the demonstrators, knowing full well that it was obvious to her and everyone else that I was a foreigner. I was conscious of the fact that I stood out, and ironically, would use this to my advantage. Aware of my excitement and increased heart

rate—bodily signs that acted as precursors to instances of stuttering during conversation—I took a deep breath and remembered to enunciate my words, just as my speech therapist had instructed.

Mawar, a twenty-something-year-old woman who was from the area, came to protest the American military presence in Iraq and was livid about the past administration of President George W. Bush. I felt no animosity by Mawar, whose command of English—to the fullest extent we could converse—impressed me. Slowing my speech as time and again she would ask me to repeat what I was trying to say and to use fewer words for my questions, was in and of itself speech therapy and a bridge uniting our oft-broken conversation. Never did it cross my mind throughout our conversation that I did not stutter once.

With many distractions around me that engulfed my senses, my focus was concentrated on Mawar and understanding her feelings toward my country. I was not subconsciously thinking about my stutter or when my stutter would manifest during our conversation.

As I continued to roam the area, intent on speaking with someone from law enforcement or the military, I was unnerved because of the number of weapons both police officers and National Guard soldiers carried, and my lack of command of any of the native languages spoken in Indonesia. Meeting Marwar was a stroke of luck. How, then, would I approach armed policemen or members of the military and engage them in conversation?

As foolish or naive as this may sound, I decided to pull out my U.S. passport from my pack and walk toward several policemen who were hanging out by their motorcycles along a side street, parallel with the embassy.

Immediately as I came within their vision, they began yelling at me and waving their hands in the air for me to come to them. My heart rate skyrocketed, and I knew without a doubt I would have disfluent speech during conversation.

I walked over to the three police officers, showing them my passport and speaking slowly while enunciating each word in precision: “I am an American visiting Jakarta for the week,” I began. One of the officers grabbed hold of my passport, inspecting it for the proper visa, and told me as

best he could in English that I should not be in this area. “Go—leave!” he instructed.

I knew my time and their patience with me was limited, so I rattled off several questions to the officers about their impressions of the U.S. and other reasons they thought protesters had for demonstrating in front of the U.S. embassy. It became clear that neither the police officers nor I could make sense of what each other was saying. Trying to use alternative words and rephrase my questions elicited facial grimaces and abnormal breathing as I began to stutter.

My nerves got the best of me as I hastily spoke, disregarding the fundamentals of what I had learned in speech therapy and through many spontaneous conversations. The chants and sheer number of protesters, the heat and humidity of that afternoon, and the foreign environment that surrounded me all coalesced into one of the greatest challenges I have faced in communicating. Were it not for the soft smile and genuine appreciation for my attempt to converse shown by the officers, the experience of the afternoon’s event would not have been as enriching and memorable.

I refocused on my words and gave a pat on the back of the officer nearest to me in order to lighten the conversation and attempt to befriend them. The instant the mood and conversation changed from formal, serious questioning to informal and lighthearted conversation, I felt at ease as I waded into back-and-forth chatter. Exchanging smiles with the officers, I even showed them photos from my other travels prior to arriving in Jakarta.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said it best: “Do not follow where the path may lead. Go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.” My speech impediment has been a defining feature ever since I can remember. But on that unforeseen, chaotic, and hot, August day in 2013, a language barrier and speaking barrier by no means obstructed the intimate conversation or ability to understand between local Indonesians and me. Between facial expressions, hand gestures, and our personal aura, language, in all its manifestations, revealed itself in a way that was understandable. Were it not for living with a speech impediment and as a result, developing a highly-attuned sense of self-confidence that propelled me into spontaneous conversations, the path I blazed in Jakarta would have never come to fruition. ♦

THE GOOD EARTH

AL DANIELS

We walk on this earth for some seventy-plus or minus years, but do we really feel the earth? The farmer knows the feel of the earth, the good soil that brings forth our good food and pleasing flowers and plants. He on his diesel tractor, and the small gardener who uses a gasoline-powered tiller to turn the ground into soft productive soil, know the true beauty of the earth. I, with my shovel and spading fork, can dream as I turn the soil over. I pause, breathe deeply, and pick out a large rock or trailing root. If the soil is extremely dry, I know I will have to make it moist in order to grow plants. The agribusiness tells the farmer the soil should feel moist, crumbly, and precious. He has time to plow the lower forty acres before the rain. The upper forty will wait until the weather is warmer, and it is safe to put out the tender plants.

In my garden I lay out a section for now. It is marked by long, flat boards around the edge. I mark off each five-by-ten square as needed. The boards stop this blind gardener from stepping where he shouldn't. The boards also distribute the weight so the soil is not packed hard between the rows.

Each shovelful is turned over and hit with the shovel to break up clods. As each square is turned over, it is duly stroked with a garden rake, again to break up clods and remove tangles of roots. When this has been done, I look at or feel the soil and wonder at its capacity and potential to bring forth plant life. It has a beauty that can't be explained, but must only be experienced. I may have to wait a day or two until I have the time, the right weather, and the inclination to plant.

Before I plant, I usually mark the area to further delineate where the plants are to be growing. For a row of plants, I put a stake at either end and a string between the two. The

string tells me where to feel for the tiny plants that will spring up. It also tells me where to water most specifically. If the string is high enough, I will not have to reach all the way down to the ground to feel where the plants are in early stages of watering. As the plants grow larger, I can hear when the water is on the plants, versus the surrounding ground. If I am planting a plant, I usually mark the place with a vertical stick in the ground. It marks the plant so I know exactly where it is and may serve as support as it grows larger.

I reiterate, it is not necessary to turn over or plant the whole garden area at one time. IF you are tempted to do so, you may find that weeds have a head start in some areas where you are not planting right away. Also, different crops require different seasons: spring, summer, fall, or winter. Fertilizers should be applied as directed. The sun will do its job if you don't place your garden in a shaded area. Water is a never-ending need, and if you can't supply it daily, you may not be a successful gardener. Small amounts of water daily are preferable to infrequent soaking. Some geographic areas are preferred, because rain is a part of the daily growing seasonal climate. Each spring is a promise; a garden is also a promise. You will find something there: exercise, sunshine, nourishment, or just plain wonderment at what a beautiful world we live in. ♦

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CRAIG FIRSDON

LIFE (WITH PAIN)

It hurts

Grit teeth
Shake hands
Scream

Anger

Blame
God
Parents
Life
Get on hands and knees
Tear up

Sadness

Cry
Breathe heavy
Fall to knees
Pray

Acceptance

Wipe away tears
Breathe slowly and calmly
Try to stand up
Sit back down in wheelchair
Smile

Strength

Another day ends.

HUMMING ALONG

TERRY GROVES

Connor looked at the hummingbird feeder in the front garden. The red liquid was low in the reservoir. *I could fill that up!* He thought.

He looked toward his wife Julia, rinsing dishes in the kitchen sink.

He shuffled across the floor and reached for the cupboard handle. He noticed the liver spots on the back of his hand and wondered where those had come from.

“What are you doing?” Julia snapped as the door bumped her knee.

“The bird feeder’s low.”

She glanced toward the front garden where the feeder hung from the same post that held their address sign. Four red plastic flowers ringed the clear reservoir.

“Give me a minute to finish up, and I’ll help you.”

“I can do it,” he tapped her knee again with the door.

She sighed and moved her leg. Connor reached inside the cupboard, pulled out the bottle of hummingbird nectar, noted it was full, then headed out the patio doors.

“Are you sure . . .” Her words were cut off by the closing door.

The hummingbird feeder hung by a wire tie, double wound and twisted tight. The piece of wrought iron it was secured to curled up and around. Connor studied it, working out in his mind the best way to refill it.

It looked like the top had just turned off, so he set down the nectar bottle and reached for the feeder. Twisting it from the bottom only spun that part. He gripped it by the middle, which was difficult due to the feeding flowers and the height it was hung at. He couldn’t get enough leverage. Uncertain if that was how it worked anyway, he stepped back a moment to think. He rested his chin on one hand, the other crossed his stomach and gripped his elbow. He was pretty sure he had done this before; someone had filled it initially. Why couldn’t he remember this?

The patio door snicked open, then it closed, but he didn’t acknowledge it.

“Need some help?”

“I can do it.”

He reached forward and gripped the feeder by the top and middle again. He twisted it to unscrew the top. He was certain that was how it worked; it certainly “felt” right. It resisted his effort. Connor stepped forward a bit more, pressing his leg into the low shrub below the feeder, getting a little closer to improve his leverage.

“Let me . . .” from behind him.

“I have this.” He spoke the words more forcefully than intended. Why couldn’t she just let him be, give him some space?

He twisted the feeder harder, tipping it to one side. Red liquid spilled out through a crack near the bottom. Was that crack supposed to be there? He didn’t remember seeing it before, but he didn’t remember not seeing it either.

“Careful.”

Connor flashed a glance at Julia. She stopped mid-step from the patio.

Maybe the best thing to do was take the feeder off the pole. He began threading it around the iron curl, keeping it as upright as he could. The twist tie was too tight at the top of the curl, and he had to tip the feeder a bit more. More nectar spilled out.

Julia expelled a sharp breath. Connor heard her feet shuffle on the patio steps, but she stayed there.

He got the feeder off the pole without spilling any more. At a better angle now, he spun the top off, opened the refill bottle, then lined up the spout with the opening in the feeder.

“Why don’t you . . .”

His shoulders tensed, the bottle wavered, nectar spilled down the side of the feeder.

“Leave me alone.”

He steadied his hands and started pouring again. The liquid poured straight into the feeder. Connor smiled until he heard splashing, felt nectar pour over his hand, out the crack in the bottom.

“Damn.” He stopped pouring and took a step back, holding the feeder away from himself. Red drops spattered the low-cut bushes that edged the sidewalk.

“What’s wrong?” He muttered as he set the bottle down then pulled the feeder closer. He squinted at it. Julia huffed and Connor’s shoulders hunched.

He reached out his free hand and tried closing the crack in the bottom by spinning the very bottom counterclockwise. It didn’t help. He tried unwinding the bottom, but it didn’t want to turn.

He screwed the top back on, then turned the whole thing upside down. A large splash of the syrupy contents gushed out, then faded to a gurgle from the bottom, which was now the top, into the top, which was now the bottom. A sticky dollop of the nectar anointed his hand.

“Damn.” Rage flared inside him. *Why is this so fucking hard?* he wondered. Cripes, he’d rebuilt engines and run their boat for years. Why couldn’t he refill one stupid bird feeder? And why did SHE have to stand there watching as though he were a child?

He tried unscrewing the bottom, now the top again. It turned freely and spun right off.

“Will you let me talk?”

“I got it now.”

“But . . .”

“Shush.” He knew she hated that word.

He set down the bottom, picked up the refill bottle, and filled the reservoir. He set down the bottle, now two-thirds empty, picked up the bottom, and screwed it into place. With a flourish and a huge, conquering hero smile, he flipped the feeder upright. The nectar gurgled into the bottom reservoir.

Connor turned toward Julia, trying to gather a few smart-ass words to announce his success without her help. Before he could figure out the right words, he felt cold wet on his left hand, the one now supporting the bottom of the feeder.

His look of glory turned to one of bafflement, his smile to pursed lips, his raised eyebrows to lines across his forehead. Whatever words he was about to offer came out as a simple “Goddamn.” He looked at his hand, pulling it away from the feeder at the same time. The red liquid cascaded out of the crack in the bottom.

Connor resisted the urge to smash the feeder. Was the whole universe conspiring to drive him mad? How could such a simple thing be so difficult? And he knew SHE was still standing there, smug look on her face, laughing at him. He felt fire bubble from his guts, swell his neck, turn his face the shade of hummingbird nectar.

Giving into the seething rage would be so easy. Let it take him over like Bruce Banner succumbing to the gamma rays, allowing The Hulk loose. He let go of his control, felt his thighs press against his pant legs, his shirt tighten across his shoulders. One thought swelled in his mind, *Hulk smash*. Then a flash of clarity cometed through his brain, *You’ll have to deal with the carnage*. Connor returned to being a scrawny old man trying to fill a hummingbird feeder.

“Honey,” his wife spoke from two steps away. She’d moved closer without him realizing it. He glanced at her. She held one hand toward him, and he realized she was scared to touch him. The Hulk had run amok before.

“It’s ok,” he said, turning back to the feeder, “I have this.”

Connor studied the feeder. Why couldn’t he remember how it came apart? He used to be so good at disassembling and then reassembling. This was a simple gravity feed device. It should be easy. He sensed her behind him, uncertain what she should do. He felt her hand near his shoulder, hesitating to touch him, afraid of igniting the tinder box. Good.

Now the feeder. It didn’t look right, the crack in the bottom shouldn’t be there, it should screw tight; the bottom had to be sealed, except for the little flowers where hummingbirds fed. But no matter how he turned it, the gap wouldn’t close. He peered inside the crack; was there something in there jamming it? He couldn’t see anything. He gave it a little shake but only managed to slop more nectar onto the bushes.

Anger bubbled again, coming on fast and strong, erupting into his brain. *Smash it, smash it, tear those fucking plastic flowers off, stomp them into the sidewalk*. He closed his eyes and concentrated on breathing. A yoga class, taken after one outburst, had taught him this technique. He kept his eyes closed until the rage subsided, counted to ten to ensure it had been banished. Then he opened his eyes and saw it.

The bottom wasn’t a screw-on, it was a push and latch. He did, and the crack closed tight. He spun off the top again and poured the rest of the nectar into the reservoir. A quick spin, and the top was back on, and Connor rehung the feeder.

Holding the empty bottle, Connor looked at his wife. She was looking at the bushes. He looked, too. They were sopping with spilled nectar. A light crush squeezed his heart. He had made a mess of a simple job. Shoulders heavy, he turned and trudged into the house.

“Wash your hands,” Connor heard behind him.

He headed to the sink and turned on the tap. The water felt good running over his hands, rinsing off the stickiness. He glanced out the window but wasn’t seeing anything.

“Connor.”

He was roused from whatever he had been thinking. His hands were cold from the water running over them. What had he been thinking, and for how long? He braced for the beratement that was coming. He reached for the taps, starting to say something, but Julia placed a hand on his.

“Shhh. Look.” She pointed out the window with her chin.

Connor looked.

Outside, the feeder he had filled and the bushes he had drenched, was a waterfall of movement and color, a shimmering wall that took a few moments for him to focus on, recognize.

The feeder and bushes were covered with the ever-moving bodies of hummingbirds. They undulated and darted, hovering as a swarm. There must have been a hundred little birds, tiny wings a rippling, cascading, living mosaic.

“Beautiful,” Julia said, then hugged him. ♦

MATTHEW FEENEY

DARKNESS PRESENT

There is a Darkness
 That resides within us
 Whether fed or starved, caged or chained
 It's always there
 Lickin' its teeth
 Ready to prey.

Some people claim to have beaten "it."
 Prayed away the Predator.
 Washed themselves in the pure Blood of Christ.
 Purified themselves in the fires of therapy
 Or white-knuckled their sobriety from sin.

But Denial is more than a river in Egypt.
 The beast within never dies,
 It never goes away.

It can, however, be trained
 Managed, disciplined, controlled and ordered into obeisance.
 But the shadow stays
 A stain on the heart
 A burden on the spirit.

Recovery doesn't mean covering it up
 (or "re"covering it up)
 12 Steps forward
 13 steps back.
 Like Sisyphus
 Every day a new battle
 Sobriety of all flavors.

Years of success neutralized in an instant by a single sloppy moment
 Nobody wakes up one morning wanting to hurt others
 Or destroy lives
 But there is a Darkness
 That resides within us.

PHOTO ALBUM

JULIE GUIRGIS

On a warm spring afternoon I feel a surge of nostalgia run through me. While pondering the seasons of my life, childhood memories of my brother Anthony and me, flicker through my mind. Intellectually he is and forever will be one year old. A young brain trapped in the body of a forty-year-old. Born with a rare intellectual disability, he is dependent on his family for care.

I reach for old family photo albums now gathering dust on the bookshelf. Thumbing through its contents, I search through them like I'm on a treasure hunt, eager to find hidden clues. The ones that resonate with me I remove from plastic encased film, gripping the edges reflectively to examine them more closely. I spread them out on the bed in chronological sequence.

Photo 1: *Birth*. Mum and Dad sit huddled together on a red leather sofa while Anthony sleeps peacefully on my mother's lap. They are proud parents of their baby boy dressed in his blue and white jumpsuit with matching white beanie. Anthony is two months old and yet to be diagnosed. But while he was in the womb, Mum said she didn't feel him kick or move at all. Unlike me who constantly kicked. Then when he was born she had a nagging feeling that something wasn't right, as if the ground beneath her had shifted. At this stage it was only a small disorientation. She hadn't stepped into the thick quicksand as yet, but her mother's intuition was heightened.

Photo 2: *Awareness*. I am one-and-a-half years old, and my brother is two and a half. Wearing a white soft cotton capped sleeve dress with matching white booties, I am resting comfortably on my mother's lap.

My brother is wearing a light blue T-shirt and dark blue shorts, blue socks, and brown leather shoes. My father is holding my brother upright by clasping his wrists, an attempt to make it seem like he is standing up. Anthony's right knee is bent, and his left knee is straighter, slightly bent and curving outward. The expression on my father's face is solemn, yet the struggle and anguish in his eyes are clear.

Dad prayed for a boy to be like Samuel in the Bible, a boy close to God's heart, so when Anthony was born he experienced grief and disappointment over this shattered dream. To bring some solace for his weary heart, I became the son he wished he had.

Instead of me smiling for the camera, my gaze is turned toward my brother in confusion. Even at a young age, I knew something was amiss.

Photo 3: *The Miracle*. I am two years old, wearing my favorite powder-pink lace dress with bright pink fur-lined booties, which the French social worker bought as a gift for my mum. Her motivation was to bring some joy to my mother to distract her from Anthony's bleak diagnosis.

The photo is taken on the front lawn of our unit block. One foot is in midair, ready to step forward, and I'm staring toward something on my right. A few feet behind me, you can see Anthony's lower body peeking out as he's crawling around.

My brother didn't walk until he was six. Before that he would crawl, while I, nine months his junior, could run around freely. For fun I would jump on top of him, and he would crawl around, giving me pony rides. They were so much fun.

From the age of four until six, Anthony attended physiotherapy sessions, which consisted of exercising and short walking with assisted handrails to aid his balance. He also wore metal braces clamped alongside his thighs to his feet. Mum didn't drive, so during this time she transported my brother and me in the stroller.

One day while Mum and Anthony were making their way to a specialist appointment, the stroller broke at the bottom of the train station stairs. A kind Mormon man had compassion on her plight when he noticed her struggle of carrying both Anthony and the stroller, and offered to help Mum. When she arrived at her destination, the man once again helped her. She thanked him, then they went their separate ways.

Then she paced down the street toward the bicycle shop, hoping the repair man could fix the stroller. But when she arrived, the new retailers told her that he was long gone. Her only thread of hope had now broken. Children walked past, leaving a trail of stares and laughter behind them, puzzled about why a six-year-old boy was still being carried around by his mother. *Surely he could stand on his own two feet*, they would have thought.

Alone and destitute, she was at breaking point. Like the stroller she dropped on the side of the road, her heart also dropped. As she tried to hold back the tears, an older man slithered beside her like a snake. "That boy will give your life hell," he hissed in her ear. When they had reached the top of the stairs, Anthony miraculously began to walk.

When Mum arrived home, a neighbor spotted Anthony and Mum, and began dancing for joy.

"What are you doing?" her husband questioned with a puzzled look on his face.

"The boy can walk; it's a miracle!" she exclaimed.

Photo 4: *Running*. Anthony is six years old, and I'm five. We are both running around on the grass at the front of our unit block. His chest is puffed out, and his head held high, his arms positioned in running form.

Photo 5: *Sibling Care*. At age four I'm squatting down behind my brother with my arm cuddling him like he's one of my teddy bears. I wear a beaming smile. At this young age, seeds of nurturing and ardent protection had been sown in fertile ground. My introduction to motherhood came at an early age. Growing up, changing nappies, dressing and feeding him were not uncommon tasks. I became used to his ways, so it was natural for me to read the signs. This catapulted me into the "mother" role almost overnight.

I lived as a perfect child, putting enormous pressure on myself, afraid to disappoint anyone. I felt obliged to compensate for my brother's limitations, acting as a surrogate parent, and assuming more responsibility than would be usual in the care of a family. It felt natural for me to take on a caretaking role. But it was a double-edged sword. I was caring and sensitive to others, putting their needs first; yet, I neglected my own in the process.

Having so much responsibility placed on me at an early age made me super-responsible as an adult. I couldn't differentiate between my responsibilities and that of others. I would leap too quickly into the fray, fighting battles I didn't need to fight.

Photo 6: *Contagious Joy*. I see Anthony stare into an interesting nothingness on the wall, which the rest of us cannot see, then giggle cheekily like he's in the company of an old friend. Every time he laughs, I can't help but laugh with him. I feel his joy permeate my whole being and love being in his company. When I am with him, my sorrows and problems subside.

Photo 7: *Father's Pride*. It is a summer afternoon, and Dad has just finished mowing the lawn. The smell of fresh grass tickles my nose. For a laugh, Dad lets Anthony grip the handle of the mower to make it appear he's been mowing the lawn. On the other end of the camera lens, their smiles almost fill their faces. It's a joyous moment.

Photo 8: *Painful Years*. Although he is smiling in this photo, I notice red specks scattered around his right eye. Because he is nonverbal it is difficult for him to express when he is in pain. His only means is to whack himself hard on the side of the face. When he does it so hard and so long, he leaves a red mark around his eye. I feel so helpless in that moment to relieve him of his pain. For many years the doctors were convinced his problem was behavioral, not physical, so they dosed him with antipsychotic meds. The result: my brother became a zombie. He was no longer vibrant and effervescent. Yet, the meds didn't stop the smacking; it only slowed down the intensity. We later found out he had bowel problems that caused severe pain, so we got him off the psych meds immediately.

Photo 9: *Unconditional Love*. Anthony and I are young adults in this photo. We are standing on the veranda, his arm around my neck and me holding his hand tightly, smiling so hard that my cheeks hurt. I gained valuable insight into human nature at a young age. Seeing the way people behaved around my brother, I understood there is incredible kindness and unimaginable cruelty in the world. I learned there's no such thing as "normal" because we are all different, with our own weaknesses and strengths. Thanks to Anthony, I did get an extra helping of patience, empathy, diplomacy, maturity, and compassion. ♦

Call for submissions

KALEIDOSCOPE
Debra Johanyak, Editor-in-Chief

Kaleidoscope magazine has a creative focus that examines the experience of disability through literature and the fine arts. A pioneer in the field of disability studies, this award-winning publication expresses the diversity of the disability experience from a variety of perspectives: individuals, families, friends, caregivers, educators and healthcare professionals, among others. The material chosen for *Kaleidoscope* challenges and overcomes stereotypical, patronizing, and sentimental attitudes about disability through nonfiction, fiction, poetry, and visual art. Although the content focuses on aspects related to disability, writers with and without disabilities are welcome to submit their work.

• Double-spaced, typewritten

• 5,000 word maximum

• Electronic submissions preferred

Email submissions to kaleidoscope@udsakron.org or online at kaleidoscopeonline.org.

LINDA AMOS

HER KITCHEN

Last year she decided to finally
Make the kitchen in this old house, hers.
No longer would be it her Mom's kitchen—
Mom was dead and gone ten years now . . .

She had a team of painters come in
And they washed, scrubbed, and scraped
Then they primed and painted
Now bright, warm Buttercup Yellow was on the walls.

And she had installed the prettiest
White picket fence wallpaper with hydrangeas
And birds of all kinds were the new wainscot.

Kitchens were "*the heart of the home.*"
Her children were all grown and gone
And it is *not* her favorite room
But, it came with the house.

She might live alone and no longer
Did she create family feasts
But, here, in this room over cups of coffee
Revelations, and celebrations of life happened

Here in her kitchen now!

*Excerpted from COUNTRY LIVING, A Free Verse Poetry
Anthology. Reprinted with permission of the author.*

LINDA AMOS

AH, THE PEONIES

My Mother said that the primary reason
 Why she and Daddy bought this house
 Was because of the two Don Juan rose bushes . . .
 One that arched over the arbor above the pantry door
 And the other rose bush by the doorway to our garage.

And the peonies . . .

Every end-of-May she would have my Dad,
 The true gardener in our family,
 Come to the backyard and cut bouquets
 Of fresh red roses, ferns, irises and greenery

And the peonies . . .

Then my brother, my Mother, Daddy, and I
 Would get into our family car
 And we'd drive across town to the largest cemetery in town,
 Where generations of our family were buried.
 We would decorate the graves, in red, white, and blues...

And the peonies . . .

They were the true stars, shining bright
 By both day and by lonely May nights
 Keeping watch over the heroes of our family
 Who had shed their blood and their lives;

Ah, the peonies.

*Excerpted from COUNTRY LIVING, A Free Verse Poetry Anthology.
 Reprinted with permission of the author.*

MALCOLM

Malcolm is mysterious.
Autism does that
when the “cures” don’t work.
He talks
to himself
a lot,
to me,
only occasionally.
He answers
where, what, when,
not why or how.
His smile,
luminous;
his laugh,
irresistible;
reasons for his hilarity
(in bed each night
or randomly, inappropriately)
obscure:
“What’s so funny, Malcolm?”
He won’t say.
Or can’t.

I pray.

Malcolm is bound
by misunderstandings.
Autism does that
when the “cures” don’t work.
How to explain
not waving at men
when he’s been taught
to greet everyone?
“It doesn’t make sense, but . . .”
So he doesn’t listen.
Will he get a job?
Will he fall in love?
I pray he has the chance
for willing surrender,
to a woman.
I pray the police never ask
for his unwilling surrender
or mistake his autistic behavior
for noncompliance.

I pray.

Malcolm is free.
Autism does that, too.
Free
to immerse
in his favorite virtual reality,
no glasses needed.
Free
to like
any music at all
without worrying
if he’s cool enough
or black enough.
Free
to do
zumba and tap,
no matter who sees.
Free
to be
gentle.
Free
to be
sweet.
Free
from having to impress
with a stone cold, rigid mask
of masculinity.
Free
to be
Malcolm.

And because
Malcolm
feels free,

I pray.

*First published on Scriggler, where it
was chosen as a Poem of the Day and
added to the Treasure Chest. Reprinted
with permission of the author.*

THE SPARE ROOM

A. M. TODD

Anna left her addictions behind.

Anna left her addictions behind.

Anna left her addictions behind.

(Think it three times for good luck.)

The thought made Anna light and weightless as she shut the door to the spare room behind her. She felt certain that the past half hour had been the last time she'd ever indulge in her habits. And tonight, she would tell Steven about her success. She would tell him she had gotten rid of her addictions, and he would be proud.

Anna left her apartment and hurried down Ninth Avenue, feeling, as she often did, a spike of fear as she merged with the crowds around her. The streets teemed with life that seemed on the brink of bursting, cyclists streaking by on her left, a passing subway rumbling beneath her feet. But she took comfort

in the order of the city: the clean lines of skyscrapers, intersections at neat right angles, the city's grid-like structure and its rules, traffic laws, and parking tickets.

She stepped on a crack in the pavement. *Careless!* she thought. Better count, just to be safe. One, two, three. It was a small thing. Steven would never know she'd done it.

As she rounded a corner, the Eight Bean Café came into view. The place where she'd met him. She remembered the days she'd spent watching him from behind her tablet screen at the café, where he was a regular. When she first saw him, she'd been overwhelmed by fascination, attraction, and repulsion, all at once. She was repulsed by those dusty plaid shirts he wore, and that giant beard (she wondered if food ever got stuck in it), and those stretchy earrings in his earlobes. But she was delighted when she overheard him ordering nothing but local, gluten-free, vegan food and decaf coffee with soy, and when she saw the books he read—Sartre, Heidegger, Camus. Once, three of them were on his table at the same time, which delighted her further.

(Three was her lucky number.) She couldn't stop watching him. She'd never interacted with such a wild-looking man, and it was fascinating to observe him in his natural habitat, reading his books and occasionally meeting with other tattooed, pierced, plaid-wearing strangers to discuss politics and veganism. Everything about him looked incongruous next to her neat blazers, her tablet flashing with her Twitter feed and the financial news.

For weeks Anna watched, hiding behind her screen and hoping to lure him with significant glances. Their moment finally came. One afternoon, a rat darted from the kitchen into the dining area. Anna and Steven fled outside with everyone else. When a staff member killed the rat with a broom, they bonded by exchanging their expressions of mutual outrage. People could be so disgustingly cruel. They vowed to discuss it further over craft beer. He looked just as surprised as she was to find himself sitting in a bar discussing veganism, animal rights, and politics with this suit-wearing woman. The

night ended at 2:30 a.m. in her room, with the strange, novel feeling of that scratchy beard on her neck.

Within a month they'd talked about moving in together. The jokes her friends made about his scruffy appearance didn't bother her. He bought her three cacti, and every afternoon, she fussed over them and adjusted them on the windowsill over and over, to make sure they'd get the best possible sunlight.

"You're tense. Just relax and don't worry so much," he told her once. He said that often in the ensuing days. She wanted to just relax a bit, like he said, but she didn't know how.

* * *

Anna's hands trembled as she turned onto the driveway leading to the basement suite where Steven had lived since they split up. It had been a year since she'd seen him. She could've phoned first, but she wanted to surprise him. She was wearing her sharpest blue dress and looked clean, smart, and professional. The moment he saw her in person, he would see her triumph; he would see how much better she was doing.

She knocked on the door, three times.

Nothing. No sound came from behind Steven's door.

She knocked again.

He wasn't home. The thought rang out like a bell and made her wilt. Somehow this simple possibility had never

entered into the fantasies that had filled her head all day. She'd have to come back in an hour.

The streets didn't look the same. They grew longer and more perplexing as her mood shifted. The city seemed to darken, and car horns blared and startled her. The clean lines of the city, its grid-like structure and its rules no longer felt strong enough to contain the life teeming from within. Pedestrians crowded by, pressed in from all sides, jostling her with shoulders and elbows. Men stared at her, as they had on her way to Steven's, but this time it felt like they didn't look to admire; they watched her with suspicion, as if she were guilty of some crime.

One, two, three.

The pedestrians looked, stared, and laughed.

One, two, three.

They looked, stared, and laughed.

Just a bit more counting to clear her head. She was still doing fine. Her addictions were more or less behind her.

She ducked into a café, ordered a decaf soy latte, and sat by the window. It was cold outside, and night was falling, the buildings marked with yellow squares that grew in number as the sky darkened. In her mind, she watched little worries drift up and then disperse: the patch of dirt on her table; whether she'd left the stove on. For now, the fears were still indistinct. Her mind didn't

grab onto them for long, and they faded without demanding much attention, floating up and drifting away. But she wondered whether the real worries would come and take her soon.

* * *

"Don't go into that room again. It isn't healthy."

She remembered Steven's voice a year and a half ago. He stood outside the door to the spare room.

"It helps me," she said.

"It doesn't. You can stop. Please." His face was pale, and purple circles had appeared under his eyes. Last night she'd awakened him three times while getting up to go to the spare room.

Their conversation ended in a fight. One of the neighbors must've heard. Steven left the apartment. But an hour later, he came back with another cactus and apologized for getting angry. They made love, and afterwards he held her and said, "You're tense. Just relax."

* * *

As Anna waited in the café, a thought began to force itself to the foreground. She hadn't washed her hands before she left her apartment. It started as a small worry, but it grew and grew, until it pushed away all other thoughts. The room shrank. She felt as though she were under water; it was hard to breathe, and pressure weighed in from every side. A pageant began to play out in her mind as it might on a stage. Fear set the backdrop, like the

red curtains hanging around the stage, framing everything; then came shame and guilt, vague forms drifting through the pageant; scenes came in and out of focus, thrust into the foreground, then receding: she saw herself coming into the café and touching the doorknob, then the money she'd handed to the barista—she'd passed him a germ, no doubt—and above it all, in the air above the pageant, hung the impulsive desire to end the terror. To cleanse herself. To ensure safety. That desire frightened her with its intensity. It was deep and unspoken, and it must be kept secret. It was shameful.

Frozen, she stopped sipping her coffee when a new thought intruded. She had touched Steven's door. The thought flooded her brain like dark water. Her mind rushed and pulled. She saw Steven pale and sick, vomiting blood, and his father with red, strained eyes. She loathed herself for the stupid, careless thing she'd done. As everything outside that thought fell away, the world became small and contracted. Her world had been reduced to a single thought.

* * *

"I'm done with that for the day," Anna promised, shutting the door to the spare room behind her.

"Good," Steven said. "It feels like I hardly see you lately."

But later that night, she had a dream where Steven died of an illness. She jolted awake, but the dream wouldn't fade. In her mind, flowers wilted next to the bed in his hospital room, the petals withering and browning at the tips.

She slipped out of bed. Steven lay on his side, breathing softly. He looked thin and vulnerable, lying there in nothing but his underwear. He'd lost weight lately.

In her mind, the flowers withered, browned, and dried.

One, two, three.

They withered, browned, and dried.

The carpet in the hallway muffled her footsteps. At the end of the hall was the door to the spare room, left ajar. She moved without sound. The petals fell from the flowers one by one in her head. Somehow, she sensed that if she did nothing, she would be responsible if he did get sick.

Spidery cracks stretched across the wood of the door to the spare room. She pushed it open and shut it partly behind her—but not all the way in case the sound woke Steven. He'd never need to know she'd been in here. Heavy stillness filled the room. It was a storage area, and it felt separate from the rest of the apartment, scented by dust and rusted metal. Whenever she passed through the doorway it was as though she moved backwards in time. Boxes and random things cluttered up the space, but she barely saw them; she saw only the tall grandfather clock that stood against the far wall. A family heirloom. Wood twisted up and down its base, and living things were carved into it—leaves, animals, human figures—in a panoply of life and nature, but the images were frozen and unmoving. It had always struck her as unnatural for living things to be so immobilized, stuck in their wooden existence. The pendulum on the clock was the only thing in the room that moved, shifting back and forth, its movements regular, identical repetitions.

The time on the clock read 4:09. The angle made by the two hands was awkward and uneven, the minute hand sticking out on the right. The irregularity was unbearable. The room came alive with the fear she felt, visions of those dried flowers flooding her mind.

The minute hand moved to mark the change of time, now 4:10. The movement reminded her of the convulsive twitch of a muscle. Impulsively, she reached out and moved the hour hand back to 3:00. Then she moved the minute hand back to 12:00. The two hands were still now, arranged in a perfect

right angle. A picture of symmetry, order, and certainty. One, two, three. Symmetry, order, certainty. Relief swept through her body like a drug. Her mind felt cleared, reset, wiped of those visions. Blissful certainty overwhelmed her, and she shuddered with the intensity of it.

The world came back into view, a world that had other things in it besides the image of that hospital room. A world of details. Silvery light poured through the window, and the boxes were piled up in teetering towers. She remembered that she was a person with many interests, that her favorite smell was lavender, that she loved playing Scrabble, that she ate kale salads for lunch.

A noise sounded behind her. Startled, she turned around. A figure stood in the doorway.

"Steven?"

The figure took a few steps into the beam of wintry light from the window. He looked frail and exhausted, still wearing his underwear. The outlines of his ribs showed on his sides.

"You need help," he said.

"I'm done now."

His eyes were foggy and red. He hadn't been sleeping well lately. He'd been smoking more weed than usual, passing out and dozing fitfully; sometimes he started awake and looked beside him—she'd seen him do it when he thought she was sleeping—and then, if he saw her still lying beside him, his shoulders would relax, and he'd drift off again.

"I just don't get it," he said. "You've been in and out of this room all day."

"I told you. I know it doesn't make sense. But it clears my head. I feel better."

"Isn't that just superstition?"

"I had a dream about you getting sick."

"Listen, you can control this. I know you can. This is all in your head. Just don't worry about things you can't control, and try to relax."

In time, Anna sought help. They wanted her to stop resetting the clock and washing her hands and other things. But her intuition was strong. If she didn't do those things, something would happen. And she would be responsible. Besides, as she tried to explain to Steven, she was improving on her own. She was on the mend. She was going to leave the rituals behind her.

They fell into a routine. She did her rituals, and he caught her again and again. "You can beat this," he said each time. "This is just in your head." When she promised to stop, his anger drained away to leave weakness and exhaustion. Their lives became the movements of a wheel.

Eventually, Steven packed his things into cardboard boxes, loaded them into a van, and drove away, the leaves of his plants fluttering in the back window as the vehicle disappeared.

* * *

Anna's mind fixated on the spot where she'd touched Steven's door. She'd forgotten about the coffee she was holding. That patch on the door filled her mind as if a magnifying glass had been held up to it. It was right below the eyehole, to the left of three little dents in the paint. When she returned to Steven's, she would have to clean that door.

She made her way back outside, barely noticing the cold. Soon she would see him. She didn't want to go back to her apartment, where the rooms were too big for just her. Nerves tightened her chest, but she was excited. She'd done a few rituals today, but he wouldn't

know about those. She was most certainly doing better. She was on the mend.

One, two, three.

She passed a few figures huddled on the sidewalk, their eyes glazed. They must be drug addicts. There were a lot of them in this neighborhood. As she walked by, their eyes didn't follow her. Their world had been reduced to a single thought: their next hit and how to get it.

As she descended Steven's stairwell, her heart beat quickly. She pulled out a cloth and sanitizer, wiped the spot on the door with one swift motion, and shoved the sanitizer deep into her purse, where he wouldn't see it.

The door swung open.

A medley of impressions struck her at once. He was the same. He was different. His beard hadn't changed. He had two new tattoos on his left arm. And his skin looked harder than it used to be, the lines around his eyes deeper.

She had no idea what to say.

He broke the silence. "Come in."

She stepped inside and took off her heels. He brought beers, and they sat on the couch exchanging forced small talk about his cat and his job at the bar.

"I'm doing better now," she said when she'd gathered her courage.

"Are you?"

"Yes."

She strained to read his expression. There was an emotion in his face, but she didn't know what it was.

"I want to believe you," he said. "But you've said that before, many times."

Small muscles moved in his jaw, like they did when he was thinking. Slim and wired with lean muscle, his body was tense, one hand fidgeting in his lap. Around his fingernails, the cuticles were cut and red. She wished she understood the expression on his face.

"I haven't been doing well without you," he said. "Are you really better?"

"Yes."

As she looked at him sitting there, his thin frame hunched in a slouch, she knew that it was true, what he'd said a minute ago. He wanted to believe her. It was a good thing she'd hidden that sanitizer deep in her bag. He wouldn't go through her things, because he didn't want to find anything.

He believed her. She could tell. They folded into their weakness, and he kissed her. It felt the same as before. The same taste of cigarettes and weed smoke. That sameness, it was like the pendulum on the grandfather clock, moving back and forth, like the figures carved in its wooden base that never moved or changed.

She was almost telling the truth, she thought. She'd left the spare room behind her for the most part. If she still had to sneak in there when Steven was sleeping, it wouldn't hurt. There would be life in her home again: Steven's plants by the windows, green leaves catching the sunlight, and cacti cluttering the windowsill; the noise of the coffee maker in the morning when he woke up early; the semi-circle his arm made around her when they slept. There would be life in her home again, but the spare room would be there too, the minute and hour hands rotating around the clock moving in slow circles. ♦

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THE MISSION

DAN LINSSEN

From the safety of limbs high overhead, chattering squirrels protested his intrusion into their domain. And crows—sitting like so many black-robed judges. Their raucous voices admonished the illegality of his intent. Illegal. And gruesome. His family and friends would be horrified once they found out. But he had made his decision, and he was committed to seeing it through.

Each footstep crunched through dried leaves carpeting the forest floor. But stealth contributed no currency in today's mission. He looked skyward, closed his eyes, and allowed the sun to wash over his face, cleansing any remaining smudges of indecision. His flannel shirt gathered the solar rays and transmitted the warmth to his skin.

"October sun is best," he said aloud, as if engaged in conversation with a nonexistent accomplice. "Or maybe April. Certainly not July. Nope, October sun is best."

Indeed, the sunshine transformed the otherwise-nippy Wisconsin autumn air into a splendid woodland day. The low-angled rays illuminated the un-fallen leaves with a translucent quality, splashing the woods with scarlet and amber and orange like some abstract artist's canvas. All was precisely as he remembered—his boyhood sanctuary—a refuge constructed purely of Nature's design, free of the complications that inflict human interaction. Here, he and his dog had once connected in ways that humans do not. The serenity engulfed him. But the stark contrast to his recent struggles illustrated how much he had lost. Life had

been progressively stripped of serenity, sucked from his soul, replaced with tormenting chaos. He restrained tears. Old men do not cry—at least not those once-stoic leaders of other men.

For the moment, the incessant noises had retreated—disappeared back into the dark haunts from which they often emerged in their unrelenting campaign to distract him, to hamper his ability to think. And he desperately needed to think clearly today to complete his mission.

"Try to remember," he spoke again to no one. "Where was it exactly?" A half-century had elapsed since he had placed the marker.

Some days, simply recalling the immediacy of the present eluded him. But today, in the absence of static, with his synapses firing properly, he would find the spot. New trees had grown and old ones disappeared, erasing trusted landmarks. But the woods welcomed its long-overdue friend, guiding him compassionately toward his destination.

"Here? No—wait. What am I looking for?" Frustration initiated mental paralysis. So he stopped, closed his eyes, and felt the sun touch his face. The soothing October sun. He took a deep breath, held it momentarily, then slowly exhaled. An effective coping mechanism early on, the process worked again today. He opened his eyes and looked around.

"Must be a mound," he said to reorient himself. He glanced left, then right. "There—next to that oak!" His shoe scuffed the fallen leaves from a small hump on the woodland floor,

revealing the stone memorial. He knelt down, removed his backpack, set his shotgun against the oak tree, and brushed the accumulated leaves and dirt from the stone. Though blackened from years of moisture and organic decay, the engraving was still visible. “Jack’s dog—Bowser.”

Jack sat down, his back settling against the rough bark of the oak. The soil, damp from yesterday’s rain, offered a comfortable cushion. Scanning his arboreal surroundings, he recalled falling asleep in similar conditions as a teenager, while his dog chased curious scents in the underbrush. But he could not risk falling asleep today. When he awoke the noises might have returned, jeopardizing his mission.

“Hail to the Chief” began trumpeting from his backpack. His old friend Tony had sent him the pompous ringtone as a joke. Retrieving the phone he checked the screen. “It’s my wife,” he mumbled. Not answering pained him. He always answered, even if the caller was unknown. But now he feared answering—afraid it could scuttle the mission.

A honking flock of Canada geese passed high overhead, southward. Then, a puffy cumulus cloud momentarily obscured the October sun, its shadow swallowing him up as abruptly as his condition.

It was happening more frequently now. How much longer could he continue to live at home? This morning he had reacted violently, shoving his wife, his long-time partner and friend, when she tried to help tie his shoes. Now he cringed, recalling his explosion of rage and frustration, followed by regret and tears. He shook his head in disgust. “Once men looked to me for direction, called me ‘sir’ and saluted. Now I can’t even direct my own damned hands to tie a shoe!”

Family assured him they’d get through it together. He scowled. “Is that what everyone wants me to do—fight the good fight? But I don’t want to end up the pathetic old dog that should be put down.”

His chin dropped to his chest, and he sighed. “Old dogs should be put down.”

After a minute of silence he lifted his head and looked slowly around. “Where’s the old dog?” Surveying the land-

scape, nothing appeared familiar. “Damn!” He tried to affix some kind of connection, any connection, to his surroundings. “Where the hell am I?” Anxiety rose. Close eyes. Deep breath. Hold it. Now release. He feared opening his eyes. Think. Be calm. “Complete the mission.” His spoken words aided recall. He slowly opened his eyes, and the October sun presented its gift of calm. His left hand settled on the stone memorial at his side, and he remembered.

“Hail to the Chief” rang again from his backpack. Then a text notification. He looked: *Jack, where are you?* His heart burst, first with longing, then with guilt.

She had committed to support whatever course he chose. She courageously accompanied him to query doctors about possible euthanasia, ending things respectfully. But the high moralists and legislators obstructed any humane, purposeful end. “It’s okay for pets,” he grumbled to the woods, “but not for humans. We only get messy options.”

Deprived of the chance for a proper goodbye, his wife would be devastated. He contemplated going back. “No. I need to do this. Now, while I still can.”

A loud rustle in the leaves nearby diverted his attention. It came from the other side of an old stump. He got up and stepped in that direction. He peered around the stump, startling a large raccoon. It attempted to flee, but could only crawl, dragging a crushed hind leg. After only a few feet it stopped in surrender, looking up at him. Dirty, wet, matted fur stripped away any dignity the animal had once possessed.

“What the hell happened to you?” He pondered briefly. “Oh, I know. Damned highway, right?” He cautiously stepped closer. The animal flopped on its side in resignation, anticipating its imminent demise. “Looks like you got about as much chance for recovery as I do, my friend. I guess we’re two pathetic critters, eh?” He looked consolingly at the defeated creature. “You must be hurting something fierce to lose your fight like that. Tell you what. Want to join me? Otherwise you’ll end up being live fodder for some coyote tonight.”

He stepped back to the oak and retrieved his shotgun. The

Mossberg .410, a gift from his father on his twelfth birthday, had remained a cherished possession all his life. The polished walnut stock glistened in the sunlight. "Bowser and I used this for hunting," he informed his new acquaintance. "It served to put Bowser to rest once his time had come. So I figured it's good enough for me, too." He reached down into his pocket and produced two slugs. "Not sure why I brought two. One'll do the trick. But I guess this other was destined for you."

He opened the bolt, pressed both shells into the magazine, and closed the bolt. "Your pain will be over soon, little fella," he assured the raccoon. He took aim, but as he squeezed the trigger his phone rang again. Startled, he pulled up slightly, and the shot slammed into the ground just above the wretched animal. "Dammit!" In a chaotic chorus, the angry black-robed crows all flew off for safer roosts. He cycled the bolt to load the second shell. Then he realized—one shot left.

The sudden dilemma summoned the noises from their silent depths. "Not now!" he yelled. But confusion took control once more. He glanced around. Nothing but woods. He looked at the gun in his hands. No explanation. Must be hunting. Injured raccoon—must end its misery. He raised the gun to his cheek and took aim. "Complete the mission," he said aloud. But upon hearing his own words he lowered the gun back to his chest. "The mission." He stepped over to the oak, set down the gun, and tried to recall. When he noticed the stone memorial something clicked, resetting his memory. He looked back at the desperate raccoon. "I'm sorry, my friend. This isn't going to be so easy." Then he saw the rusted metal fence post once used as a marker for his dog's grave. He wrested it from the damp soil and stepped back to the raccoon. As he raised the metal post above his head, violent memories of hand-to-hand combat flashed to mind. His body shook in response. Hurriedly he brought the post down with all his strength. The animal jerked twice, then moved no longer. Jack collapsed to his knees next to his victim.

The noise inside grew to a furious crescendo, accompanied by more combat images. He jerked his head around, looking for threats. He scrambled to his feet, ready to run. Run where? From what? A cold sweat beaded on his forehead, and his heart tried to escape his flannel shirt. Why did a raccoon lay dead at his feet? The damned noise! He needed to think. He saw his gun leaning against the tree. What was that stone on the ground? He scanned again for anything threatening. All secure. The stone. "Jack's dog Bowser," he read aloud. He sat down on the soft soil. The October sun stroked his face consolingly. The noise gradually diminished. He continued to stare in confusion at the raccoon.

Then it came back. "The mission!" he said. "I remember the mission." He looked at the raccoon. "Now it's my turn. On my terms."

A light breeze released a cascade of crimson maple leaves, which floated down upon him. The October sun continued to caress his face. The noise receded to its lair. He reached over to the backpack and extracted an apple. A drop of sweet juice trickled down the corner of his mouth as he bit into the crisp delight. A lone squirrel dared to venture out from its shelter and stared down at him from above.

He reflected upon his decision and reassured himself. "This is the time."

After finishing his apple he flung the core into the woods and reached for his phone. He snapped a picture of the stone memorial, and texted the image to his wife, and a message: *I'm here. Thank you for loving me all these years.*

He reached over, grabbed his Mossberg, and released the safety. As he put the barrel into his mouth he wondered if it would hurt briefly. But he knew the pain couldn't compare to the shrapnel wound, or even the kidney stones. He reached down, securing his right thumb on the trigger.

One last time he gazed around at this favorite retreat of his youth. He couldn't imagine a more tranquil final image. Far better than some hospice room. The October sun held his face in its palms. His left hand rested on Bowser's memorial. He smiled as he pressed on the trigger.

* * *

And then all was silent. Maple and birch and hickory leaves continued to shower down. The October sun blessed the final scene. One by one, squirrels resumed their chatter. ♦

FIREWORK

SARIKA CHAWLA

“Cause baby, you’re a firework!” sings my friend Regina as she dances around the makeshift party room before making her way back to the middle and blending in with the crowd again. She seems to be having the time of her life here at this dance party.

I, however, am not. Sitting in the corner of the room, I gaze at her, wishing that I could dance without a care in the world, too. I close my eyes and wish with all my might, but when I open them, nothing’s changed. I’m still completely out of place and stuck in my stupid wheelchair.

I clench my fists and bite my lip, trying not to cry. What was supposed to be one of the best nights of sleep-away camp is turning into the worst one yet.

Just then, Regina twirls past me singing, “Baby, you’re a firework!” again, and this time, I join in. But while she’s smiling, all I can think is, *Yeah, I’m definitely a firework. I’m the kind that can barely make it halfway across the sky before pathetically fizzling out.*

A few days later, I see some girls playing cards in their room, so I ask if I can play, too.

They say no, because apparently playing cards is one of the many things my wheelchair stops me from doing. Sighing, I go away, but I’ve had enough of this nonsense. I grab my notebook from my bag, open to a clean page, and begin to write, pouring out everything that’s been bottled up inside me for an eternity.

“I dream of the day that I will walk,” I scribble in my crooked, eleven-year-old handwriting. “I dream of the day I am set free.” *If only I could dance, and run, and fit in, then maybe I could be a beautiful firework like everyone else, I think.*

But as I close the notebook, I start to realize something: I already am. Sure, I can’t walk or dance the way most people do, but I can paint the stories of my heart with words and worlds full of passion. I can sing with compassion and give with love, and I can love with fire so strong and so deep that it’s boundless, forever glowing.

Someday, I’ll show the world that I’m a firework—the kind that shoots across the sky and bursts into bright colors, leaving behind a faint, smoky trail as a reminder of how special and beautiful it really is. ♦

PRANK

YUETTING CINDY LAM

We went to the Cultural Centre today for a Russian classical pianist's recital. It doesn't mean I know classical music, though. The only music I ever listen to these years is Anita Mui's songs. I sometimes play her "Written in Water" album on repeat after my students have left, and I am alone in my small art-jamming studio. Then I don't have to hear Fat Keung burp in his makeshift office next door. Fortunately, Yau-yau was born on the other end of the musical intelligence spectrum. She plays the piano by ear, and she plays it forty hours a week. Imagine fish meets water.

The piano will be your best friend forever; I like to tell her these days.

After the recital ended, I was going to bring her to an outside cafeteria for lunch. I planned to take the Salisbury Road exit so she would not see the exhibition in the lobby of the Cultural Center. What's there for her to see anyway?

"Mama, there's an exhibition over there," she said, pointing in the general direction of the crowd browsing the

clusters of black-and-white photo panels. Her gifted ears must have caught the other children's chatter.

"They have this type of stuff there all the time," I said. "Let's go eat." I zipped open her daisy-shaped backpack to get her eyeglass case. A new addition to her backpack. The doctor said she needed her anti-blue ray, anti-UV eyeglasses whenever she looked at monitors or spent time outdoors. He had previously uttered a bunch of other things when I went without Yau-yau, after her electroretinography test results had returned.

"How much does she have left?" I asked.

"Around thirty percent."

"So she won't become totally blind if she wears her glasses?" I asked.

"Her glasses will only prevent further damage from the sun or from monitors, but how the disease will unfold varies among patients." Then he went on to explain more about rod cone dystrophy. "There are no effective cures, but there

are visual aids that help maximize vision—"

"What has caused it?" I interrupted. At that moment, I felt that if I could nail down the cause, I might be able to save my daughter's eyes.

"It's quite likely her genes," he replied.

"Her genes? She was born with perfect vision. Things only started to go downhill this summer," I said.

"She'll need genetic tests to find out," he said.

I haven't been in touch with her father since she was two (she's now six), but I am certain I am the one who has passed it to her. I have what they call "lazy eyes"—something I used to my advantage when I was in my teens and my mother complained about my not reading the Bible.

* * *

"But I want to look at the pictures," Yau-yau said.

She wants to look at the pictures.

“Just five minutes. I’m hungry,” I said.

“You might like those pictures,” she said, her dainty dimples appearing. “You always do.”

“A tapestry of Hong Kong’s working-class memories from the 1950s and ‘60s,” I mumbled the line printed on the introductory panel before we went on to browse the grainy black-and-white photos. Yau-yau folded her hands at her back beneath her backpack. I looked at her large, yellow peony hairpin; I have bought her a few similar ones. She likes to draw and paint them in her sketchbook.

Now she was gawking at a photo of market stalls with canopies that looked about to fall, and then one of a dark alley haphazardly festooned with laundry. Frankly, I didn’t care about old Hong Kong’s slums; I was dying to ask my daughter: *What can you see?*

* * *

Fat Keung isn’t someone I would normally seek advice from. He’s usually reticent, and even when he speaks, his opinions are either uninspiring or biased—for example, whenever I hinted at Yau-yau’s musical genius, he would mention that his four-year-old nephew could play piano by ear as well. I have a pathetic habit of talking to him about Yau-yau after *doing it* with him. So that day, while I was pulling my Indian pants back on, he poked my calf with his toe, his bare mass still lounging on his Salvation Army thrift store couch, and said, “What’s the point of constant-

ly asking her, ‘What can you see?’ She doesn’t need more eye exams to tell her what *she cannot see.*”

The first sign that her vision was deteriorating was when her crayons began brazenly crossing the outlines on her coloring paper.

Since I couldn’t talk about the photos with Yau-yau without asking about her vision, I decided to appreciate those slices of historical specimens myself. The exhibition had drawn flocks of tourists, so we had to weave through the panels in random order. We didn’t say a word to each other as we perused photos of tong laus with lots of handwritten Chinese billboards hanging from their exteriors, and photos of the hazy harbor with junks and sampans sailing past, looking like origami boats shrouded in fog.

I must have stopped in front of the photo with the boats longer than the others because Yau-yau looked up at me and asked, “Mama, is this one your favorite?”

* * *

Before the summer, Yau-yau had always seen the world all right. Whenever I told her it was rude to look at people from the corner of her eyes, she responded by turning to me and gazing

directly into mine. She would flaunt her dimpled smile and full set of milk teeth, and I would tickle her armpits and ribs until she drooled on my arms. Teachers liked to display her artwork around the school and gave her extra stickers and fancy erasers to reward her for nice paintings.

The first sign that her vision was deteriorating was when her crayons began brazenly crossing the outlines on her coloring paper. We were having dinner with Fat Keung, and I secretly suspected she colored that way because she didn’t like having him around.

One night last summer, when I lay down in my bed, I found an envelope on my pillowcase. It was a birthday card Yau-yau had made for me. The cover had two large carnivorous-looking daisies on it. Inside it read: “Mama, Happy Birthday!”

Each of the jagged Chinese characters was as large as seven water bottle caps put together. I stood the card on my bedside table and stared at it the whole night. The next morning, Fat Keung found a “popular and affordable” eye doctor using a mobile phone app. I called the clinic and was told the next available time slot was three months away. *Three months?* I felt the walls in my studio crumbling in on me. I started crying. “Imagine you have a child losing his eyesight . . .” The receptionist relented and got us in the next day.

From then on, Yau-yau practiced the piano four hours a day, Monday to Friday, and ten hours a day on Saturdays and Sundays. Sometimes she complained that she was tired or couldn’t see the notes on her scores. I made enlarged photocopies and spent hours

organizing the sheets for her. I sat next to her piano bench to make sure she kept playing.

* * *

“Why don’t you let her rest?” Fat Keung has asked me time and again, as if he didn’t understand my previous answers.

“One day the world she knows will disappear; all she’ll see will be darkness. I want her to achieve true mastery of the piano while she can still see, so that it will be her company when she cannot.”

She said the large scores were hard to follow. “You only have to memorize the piece, then you won’t need to read the scores again,” I coaxed.

Once she got so frustrated she faced the wall next to her piano. She didn’t cry, but she asked me what was wrong with her eyes.

“It’s only temporary,” I said.

“When will my eyes recover?” She demanded as if I had borrowed them from her.

“A few months.”

“How *many* months?”

“Perhaps three to five.”

“So you don’t know,” she said. Then she stood in the same spot facing the wall for three hours.

True—I don’t know how much longer she has, so I’ve decided I won’t allow any more tantrums. One day I caught her drawing daisies on the back of her piano score instead of practicing. Without thinking, I fetched her sketchbook and shredded all her paintings along with the empty pages in the book. Then I snipped open a few tubes of her acrylic paints and emptied them down

the drain. She pulled at my arms as I did this, weakly because she was sobbing so hard.

In the end, she retreated to the same spot beside her piano and stood there facing the wall, unwilling to speak. I lay still in my bed thinking about the trauma I must have brought her. Feeling devastated, I closed my eyes and tried to empty my mind. When I heard her playing piano in the living room, I opened my eyes to find night had fallen.

“Mama, I’m hungry,” she said when she saw me get up. I made dinner, and we ate together. “I like this cha-siu,” she said. That was her way of forgiving me, I assumed. I couldn’t forgive myself, yet I couldn’t bear the thought of her giving up her only friend, either.

The next day while I was looking for my other sock under Fat Keung’s Salvation Army couch, I said, “He’s playing a prank on us.”

“Who?”

“God. He gave her a talent for painting, but he is making her blind.”

After Yau-yau left for school that morning, I found her painting of cherry blossoms on a paper napkin on the kitchen counter. She had used my cup of milk tea to weigh it down. She must also have dipped her fingers into the tea to create the different shades of brown to make the cherry blossom petals

* * *

“I don’t have a favorite,” I told her when we were leaving the Cultural Centre. “Do you have one?”

“My favorite is that photo with a woman walking her dog.” She pointed to the photo on our left. It gave me chills.

“There isn’t any dog in that picture. There’s only an old woman walking alone with her cane in an alley. She’s holding a large bag in one hand,

though,” I said. I didn’t mention her hunched back. Nor did I mention the dark silhouettes of the canopies and of the empty laundry rods. Nor those cryptic pre-war French windows of the tong-laui. I couldn’t make out whether it was haze filling the air in the alleyway or daylight. What I saw in the photo was profound loneliness.

“No dog?” she asked.

After a while she added, “But there could be a dog in real life. The photographer might not have included it because he was trying to trick our eyes. Ten steps behind the granny in the photo is her dog along with two of her granny friends. All three granny rascals are scouting the alley looking for nice big flowers on people’s balconies that they can cut and take home. And *this* granny,” she said, tapping the photo, “is responsible for their plan!”

“They climb up to the balconies?”

“No. People see their canes and invite them in to rest their knees.”

“And do the people let the dog in as well?”

“Why not? He never barks or bites anyone. These three grannies never go on a mission without him.”

We brought our sushi takeout to the promenade. We ate with our fingers and looked at the harbor. “Mama, I see a small wooden boat!” she called, pointing to the water. Soon I found myself humming the chorus of one of the songs I always played on repeat in my studio.

My heart is like a small wooden boat. I can't see afar, but forward I flow . . . ♦

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XANADU

GIRL AND MANDOLIN

In a red that's full and ubiquitous
like no Picasso round or square
known . . . *ubique*
or unknown . . . *hic*

The twist of perspective takes Moldovan
instead of just Picassoesque turn
when chairs seem broken if not
drifting next to mushrooms or lamps

And classical figure to the right (of her left)
may be considered to be seated
playing the mandolin high in front
of her chest topped by a

Golden redly shaded head
as fallen from Dali up to Pablo.

The poem is a poetical portrayal of a modernist 1949 painting by Antoine Irisse, Girl with Mandolin (Fată cu mandolină), that is on view in Muzeul Național de Artă al Moldovei in Chișinău.

LOLA NEFF MERRITT

SUMMER TIME

The haunting cry of a Mourning Dove
floats on the warm, summer air;
a ballet of fluttering butterflies
dance by with a delicate flair.
Hidden away in the lilac bush
a bird joyfully sings his song;
as white morning glories sway in a gentle
breeze
and pink Chicory winks in the sun.

BLOSSOMING

SANDY PALMER



Amanda LaMunyon, *Sunflowers*, 2002, age 7, acrylics, 8" x 12"

"Art is another language I can use to communicate with people."

~ Amanda LaMunyon

Sitting in a first-grade classroom, the blond-haired darling with big blue eyes begins to squirm beneath lights that are too bright. Every sound is amplified and overlapping—teacher talking, pencils scratching paper, ticking clock, scooting chairs. The tag on her shirt scrapes her neck like coarse sandpaper. She tries to focus

on what the teacher is saying, but she isn't interested in the topic. She tries so hard, but the onslaught of aversive sights and sounds is overwhelming. She stands up, scurries across the room, and rushes out the door. She doesn't want to cause trouble; she just can't sit there any longer.

Teachers said Amanda LaMunyon didn't pay attention in class, and her actions were disruptive. She knew the rules and could recite them, but

couldn't apply them and behave the way people expected. Mom, Sherry, recognized her second child's difficulty interacting with people. Her little girl had begun reading by the time she was four. She was smart! But she struggled in social situations, experienced regular meltdowns, and started getting into trouble at school. Sherry wondered how she could help her daughter come out of her shell and alleviate some of the frustration that seemed to well up within her and periodically burst forth. She



Amanda LaMunyon, *Via Dolorosa*, 2006, age 11, acrylics, 40" x 30"



Amanda LaMunyon painting *Via Dolorosa*.

decided to focus on an area of strength. The little girl loved doodling and making things with paper and tape, so Mom signed her up for one-on-one lessons with a local art teacher, hoping to provide her with a way to unleash some energy and develop her creativity.

The excited seven-year-old entered the home of Mrs. Foulks for her first painting lesson, and Mom left, reluctantly. She didn't go far though—just around the corner where she parked her car and waited for a call from the instructor. The call never came. Two hours later she knocked on the door. When it opened, she saw her precocious daughter covered from head to toe in paint, beaming with pride as she joyfully

displayed the fruits of her labor, which included a painting of watermelons. Mrs. Foulks (who was also covered in paint) announced, "I think this girl can paint."

Sunflowers filled the canvas during the second lesson, and with paintbrush in hand, she was able to express herself in a way she never could with words. Just like those beautiful sunflowers, the budding artist began to blossom with each lesson. Each week she completed another new painting. The headmaster of the school she attended invited her to hang the paintings in a hallway of the school where everyone could enjoy them. Once her talent was revealed, Mom says, "She was no longer seen

as the girl who caused trouble. She became known as the girl who could paint . . . it was truly a gift from God."

A diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome came when LaMunyon was eight years old, and the skill she exhibited with a brush in hand garnered her recognition as a prodigy. Her vocabulary was tested to be the equivalent of a twenty-one-year-old at that time, and she was diagnosed soon after with dyslexia, dysgraphia, and ADHD. Each diagnosis helped her parents understand their daughter better, but they were also cautioned that she might not reach the milestones other children reach. They



Amanda LaMunyon, *Faces in the Rock*, 2003, age 7, acrylics, 8" x 12"



Matt Savage and Amanda LaMunyon



Amanda LaMunyon

knew their daughter, and they knew better. They were certain she was capable of more than what the experts deemed possible.

LaMunyon is now twenty-four and says, "My mom is awesome. She was told to keep me at home because I would never be able to succeed in school or graduate. She helped me by pushing me and never giving up. Without the love of my parents, I wouldn't be where I am today. They helped me embrace myself. I owe a lot to them." She has already received more accolades than most can boast in a lifetime. Yet, she is humbled by the attention and grateful for the opportunities she's had to travel across the country and meet other people with Asperger's, like incredibly talented jazz musician and composer Matt Savage (featured in issue 62 of *Kaleidoscope*). In 2002, Savage was performing at The Ken-



Amanda LaMunyon, *Winter Wonderland*, 2002, age 7, acrylics, 8" x 12"

nedy Center in Washington, D.C., and LaMunyon was there to be honored with an award. Both young prodigies had been featured in the book *Islands of Genius: The Bountiful Mind of the Autistic, Acquired, and Sudden Savant*, and the young artist was able to meet the musician after his performance. They became friends, and LaMunyon's art is featured on two of Savage's album covers, including his most recent CD, *Splash Variations*, for which she created a vibrantly-colored pour painting.

When the LaMunyons built a new home, the floor plan included an art room for their daughter. There, she doesn't have to worry about getting paint on the floor, and she says, "I love being able to be creative and express myself. It makes me happy. Once when I was angry, I don't remember why, it was in the middle of the night, and I

went to the art room and threw paint on a canvas I had painted black. I guess it made me feel better. The next day when I saw it, I could see pink roses in it, so I inked the roses. That made me happy, so I painted in some bubbles. The painting is called *Chaos to Calm*."

The young artist has explored a variety of media, but is most comfortable using acrylics. Considering herself an impressionist painter, she enjoys creating realistic scenes, but in recent years has explored abstract forms of art, including pour painting. She likes the freedom and uniqueness of it—watching liquid flow across the canvas as she tilts and turns it in different directions, creating an array of intriguing effects. "I must say they are nothing but fun and definitely different from my realistic work. You'll never get the same results twice. Pure imagination and surprise."

A portion of the proceeds from the artist's work goes toward agencies that improve the lives of children with autism, and she also donates paintings for charity auctions. LaMunyon's art has been displayed locally as well as in galleries like the Salmagundi Club, one of the oldest arts organizations in the United States. She has received state and national recognition for providing information and promoting awareness about autism. In 2008 she was chosen by the Autism Society of America to receive the Outstanding Individual with Autism of the Year Award, an honor bestowed upon an individual (of any age) who demonstrates exceptional dedication, effort, or achievement. She was only twelve years old. In 2011 she was the recipient of a \$10,000 Kohl's Kids Who Care scholarship. Of 37,000 nominees, she was one of ten national finalists who received awards. She hopes her art and public speaking will help



Amanda LaMunyon, *Pink Geraniums*, 2006, age 11, acrylics, 11" x 14"



Amanda LaMunyon, *Bubble Up*, 2012, age 17, acrylics, 16" x 20"

promote acceptance and understanding. Not pity. "We're not that different. We have our challenges and differences, but we are all beautiful people."

Girls Under the Umbrella of Autism Spectrum Disorders, by Dr. Lori Ernsperger and Danielle Wendell, features her painting, *Girl Under the Umbrella*, on the cover and shares some of her story within its pages. LaMunyon has been featured in several books, newspapers, and magazines, and has appeared on numerous television shows. When she was only twelve she addressed United Nations delegates during World Autism Day and shared a poem she had written in hopes of spreading awareness about autism.

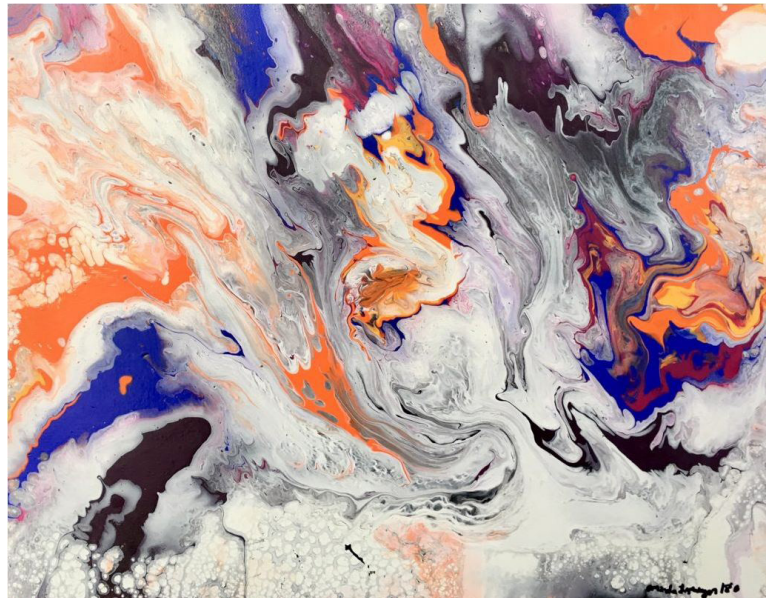
She's an Oklahoma girl who lives "out in the country" with her parents and



Amanda LaMunyon, *Girl Under the Umbrella*, 2006, age 11, acrylics 11" x 14"

their three dogs that love to run free, especially Gigi, the tiny Pomeranian that thinks she's bigger than she really is. LaMunyon has taken some college courses but is still undecided about a major. Psychology? Something within the field of art? Working with children? All viable options. She's not in a rush to decide and says, "Right now I'm figuring out exactly where I want to go with my career." She's painting, exploring, and developing a sense of direction as she decides which path she should choose.

This beautiful young woman has her share of struggles, as we all do, but she's become comfortable in her own skin. Faith, family, and discovering her voice through art have all played a large part in that. You can see more of her work at amandalamunyon.com. ♦



Amanda LaMunyon, *Neon Waves*, 2019, age 24, acrylic pour painting, 16" x 20"

REDEFINING MENTAL ILLNESS

SCARLETT DUBOIS

Mental Illness.

No matter how you phrase it, the words evoke the sensation that something is *wrong*. No matter how able you are, how stabilized your condition is, how strong you have become, the implication of sickness is so entwined with these words that you immediately become reduced to something lesser-than, someone *broken*. It is because of these negative connotations that many of us struggle so much to be proud of our journeys, why so many of us feel shame in admitting our conditions. If Emil Kräpelin first presented the concept of psychological disorders in 1883, then why is it that, 135 years later, we still deal with stigma surrounding our mental health? Why, given that over a hundred years have passed, do we have the same understanding of mental illness as in the nineteenth century?

I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder at eighteen years old. At the time I was beside myself, convinced that my life was over. After all, my understanding of bipolar disorder was limited to what I saw in movies, or news stories about yet another homicide and a beautiful life lost—all because “the perpetrator was obviously mentally ill.” These are the only times mental health is ever brought up publicly; is it any wonder that we associate these neurological conditions with danger? When we talk about mental health, we don’t do so with pride; we talk about school shootings. We talk about kidnappings. We talk about suicide bombers, drug addicts, people who have burnt their futures to dust. What we don’t talk about are the one in four people who experience it every day, or the three in four who are indirectly affected by mental health conditions. We talk about the dead, the fallen, when there are so many of us alive who need to know that there’s hope.

When we *do* talk about mental health in the average person, mental illness is presented as equivalent to a disease; victims will never be able to live to full potential if they have it. The doctors hesitate to give the bad news, we sob as if it were the end of the world, we swallow pills without fully understanding which symptoms we are trying to hide. We characterize mental illness by its struggles, by our lack of control, and by the tragedies that have plagued many of our fallen peers (may they never be forgotten), and we try our damnest to get better, to get *normal*.

Our first mistake lies with the name we use: The term “mental illness” implies a cure. Think about it: When you picture an illness, you imagine the flu, a case of the chickenpox, maybe the measles. These are conditions that are usually preventable, but are also curable. The word “ill” implies a temporary period of sickness, after which you will return to “health.”

But my bipolar disorder is a permanent condition. I will never “get over it.” I will never be able to share my success stories or preach about how I “overcame” my struggles. I will forever be a *victim* of this condition, forever defined by my mood swings, and I will never have full control over my highs and lows.

These were the thoughts that filled my mind with the verdict of my diagnosis. I seemed doomed to a life of struggle, barred from enjoying the fulfilling existence that I had been promised. This looming notion of a cure is one of the reasons we are so motivated to do anything—*anything*—to get back to whatever it is we consider “normal.” I am bipolar, and I will have this condition for the rest of my life; does that mean I should be considered terminally ill? I can do everything a “normal” person can, but hey, my brain looks a little different from theirs. Why does this immediately define me as disabled?

We try so, so hard to become “healthy,” that sometimes we forget what health really is. I have bipolar disorder, but I am alive. I am breathing. I am eating. I get mood swings, but I can still laugh and cry like any other person. My organs do everything they’re supposed to do. I don’t have any broken bones. If I went for a physical and never mentioned my neurological condition, my

doctor would declare me healthy. Because, despite my mental illness, I *am* healthy.

It took me a long while to realize I had lived most of my life thinking I was the same as everyone else—neurotypical. Despite unknowingly being born with a disability, I considered myself a well-functioning human being. I succeeded academically, I worked two part-time jobs, I accomplished amazing things in my short lifetime. So why should any of these things change now that I have a label? Why, now, am I considered disabled if I have accomplished the same feats as everyone around me? Why only *now* am I “broken?”

Having learned how to recognize and work with my symptoms, I gradually realized that bipolar disorder isn’t as tragic as they had made me believe. There is still some dissonance—“Am I actually happy, or am I experiencing a high?”—but having now experienced and done my own studying, I am much more comfortable—even, dare I say, *proud*—of my label. I like talking about it, educating and spreading awareness. But I don’t like having to present myself as “mentally ill,” because I am not sick. I am not broken. I look a little different, but I am me.

A few months ago, I made a decision: I refuse to call myself a term that is not only incorrect, but carries such a negative ambiance. I am *not* sick, and I refuse to be referred to as such for the rest of my life. So I sat and brainstormed for a word I could use instead.

“Non-neurotypical” is, by definition, correct, but it implies a lack of something, like we have lost something important. What I decided on, when I finally capped my pen, is that I am not mentally ill: I am neuro-alternate, “neuro” referring to the brain and “alternate” simply designating that something is different. My brain looks a little different from the norm; that is not good nor bad. It’s just me, who I am.

Whether or not you like the name I choose to call myself, I ask you all to redefine the way we view mental illness, from the title to its implications. I ask you to critically examine why our conditions are more than simply mental “illnesses,” and I challenge you to view mental health conditions not as diseases, but as neutral neurological differences that are on par to neurotypical experiences. I ask us all to redefine mental illness not as “sick,” but as “strong,” in the hopes that we will someday be acknowledged as the capable human beings that we are.

We don’t realize how damaging our mental health discourses are until we are the ones searching for light at the end of the tunnel—or until we realize there will never *be* a light, that this tunnel is our new life, and we have to tread forward blindly through the darkness. But after a while—trust me on this one—your eyes start to get used to the dark, and maybe you start to see more clearly than those who rush toward the light. ♦

CRAIG FIRSDON

MORE THAN A DISABILITY

Behind these blue,
green,
hazel,
brown,
dull,
glossy,
bright eyes
and wheelchair-bound
broken-down flesh
burns a fire.
You will never see it
because you will never look at me
or give me a chance to show you
a passion to create
and develop a better way to live.
A better way to understand.

We want to be a factor
in this world,
not a burden.
We want to be heard.
We speak with our hands,
our keyboards, our pens,
our paint, our clay . . .
Our words.
We wish to speak as equals.

We are people with hopes and dreams.

See us as a part of the human race
and not just another number
you write in your reports
or another file,
organized and filed away.

See us as people,
as the future,
as more than a disability.

THE CROAKY BAR

TERESA MILBRODT

This is where the hopefuls come, musicians without a band who need a place to show off their skills, a place where other people will care about guitar or drum riffs. That's why I started the Croaky Bar, though really it was for my husband who worked in the grocery store dairy cooler stocking cheese and eggs and milk, but played his guitar every night and longed for a band with commitment.

"Either they wimp out after two weeks or they can't be flexible on hours," he said, meaning they didn't want to practice at midnight when he woke up, or at noon when he got off work.

I figured he couldn't be the only guitarist without a band, but it was hard to form a band of guitarists, especially angsty ones. I had a non-thrilling job managing a coffee shop, but because of that I knew Rob, this guy who owned a bar, or was taking it over from his dad, and was crazy enough to listen to me.

"The barflies are dying," Rob told me every morning when he came in for a

triple shot of espresso. "They're my grandpa's age and have been coming in forever, but soon our regulars will have to haunt us for a drink."

That's when I explained my idea, which was the opposite of karaoke. Instead of singing to taped music, musicians would accompany taped singing, jam with the performers they'd never get to meet. I called it the Croaky Bar, since that's how most people I knew said "karaoke" when drunk. For Rob it could bring in a few more patrons, young musicians who'd play for free and cheer each other on with beer. Rob was curious enough to upgrade the sound system and find vocals without accompaniment, so musicians could play guitar for Aerosmith or AC/DC. The idea was a hit, and my husband was happy for six months until I found him sitting on the closed toilet and rubbing analgesic cream on his swollen knuckles. It was the same cream his mother used, but he looked up at me with a guilty grimace like I'd caught him flipping through porn.

"Are you okay?" I asked, though I knew he'd say "yes," and I'd schedule the doctor's appointment anyway.

"What are they going to tell me that I don't know?" he said. "Mom has arthritis and I have arthritis and my genes screwed me over. End of story."

"How long have you been hurting?" I asked.

"Why does it matter?" he said. "You can do a few things for the pain, not get rid of it."

But in the dairy section he was always lifting milk crates and arranging cartons of eggs and stacking blocks of cheese, then he came home to twang guitar strings. His hands needed a rest. The doctor agreed, gave him a prescription to reduce the inflammation, and suggested wrist supports and a transfer to Customer Service.

While my husband used to complain about having to constantly rearrange cartons of yogurt so the earliest expiration date was first, he resents Customer Service.

"I didn't know there were so many whiny people in the world," he says. I know he misses the rhythm of moving and arranging and tidying his cold and remote empire, behind swinging silver doors where he didn't have to talk with people. But mostly he's mad because you're not supposed to be arthritic at thirty-six. He has good days and bad days, which I discern from his facial expression at seven in the morning and when he returns home at five thirty, but he never misses Croaky Night.

"Are you sure you want to go?" I ask.

"Better than moping around here," he says, slipping on shoes since he's done away with laces.

We run Croaky Night on Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, with three days off to let everyone's blisters heal. In emcee, Rob works the bar, and his dad calls a couple times each night and reminds us to obey fire codes. I enjoy the variety of performers, especially this new girl named Elena who comes onstage wearing a black velvet jacket and pants like she has a regular gig at some Mexican restaurant. She plays Peruvian guitar to Roy Orbison's "Pretty Woman." I wish she could have the stage all night since the next guy does a bass solo that vibrates the floor so much I think he'll fall through, but such are the perils of an open mic.

The old barflies come in Monday through Wednesday when Rob's dad tends bar. Rob and I call those days Old Men Bitching nights, but sometimes my husband joins them, since he's young but understands pain, and prescriptions, and resents that I have to open jar lids for him.

"Damn mustard anyway," he says when his joints are uncooperative. He ignores the doctor's dietary suggestions, refusing to eat more beans and grains and vegetables and fish, which everyone should be doing, not just people with arthritis.

"Eat right, meditate, and hurt anyway," says my husband when he opens a bag of chips, which are on the verboten list, but I've given up trying to convert him as he listens to "Hotel California." He's more cuddly when I don't lecture, so I remind myself I'm his wife, not his dietician.

Every Tuesday morning my husband and his mom come to the coffee shop for lattes, cinnamon rolls, and a corner table conference about the latest homeopathic remedies for arthritis, everything from magnets to herbs to fish nibbling at your joints. Everyone can treat you for a price, since as long as there have been diseases, there has been snake oil.

My husband's mother holds his hand in both of hers, inspecting it like she's reading his palm.

"You look okay today," she says, phrased as a hope.

"Yeah, okay," he says, even if he feels like shit.

Two days later we're at Croaky Night, though I know it kills him to listen to the Joan Baez backup wannabes, heavy metal drummers who can't keep the beat, and this high school kid who comes around with his trumpet and newsboy cap and performs the Heidy Ho song. I want to love the poor kid, but after the third reprise it gets annoying, which is why it's helpful to have alcohol around. Our customers are drunkenly polite, and they clap and holler for everyone in this commune of the hopeful.

Then there are nights like tonight, when my husband has rested his hands after a day of processing returned items and selling cigarettes and lotto tickets. He can get onstage to the heartbeat of applause, and test the strains of "Stairway to Heaven," making everyone cheer. The tempo is more important than any ache, the heat of stage lights warming his body and swaying shadow, injecting chords into his joints, rejecting tomorrow morning for a slew of notes. I know the grimace I'll see at breakfast, so for now I capture his calm concentration, the thrum of his fingers, bottling the memory for later. ♦

THE GAME

CORINNA DOOHA-CHAMBERS

I was in the top ten percent of my class in both high school and college. I earned both a B.A. and a teaching credential in four years, and I expected ten-and-a-half years later to be a general education elementary school teacher with my own classroom.

I am not, not even close.

Best laid plans, right?

I was born with cerebral palsy. It's a neuromuscular disability, which means neurons misfire and cause muscular contractions, muscle weakness, and prevent the use of muscles in some areas with totality in certain cases. It's caused by a lesion on the brain, and depending on where the lesion is, the person can end up with the inability to walk, the inability to talk, intellectual disabilities, blindness, deafness, a speech impediment, be totally catatonic or walk with a slight limp, or any combination or severity scale of any of the above, and more. It's non-progressive, so what one starts out with is what they'll keep, but it's a vast array of WOW that can make or break futures.

In my case, my intellect was unaffected, but I was left with the inability to walk, eyes that can see with the help of glasses but that tend to wander, ears that can hear a pin drop but are overly sensitive to loud noise, a speech impediment that makes me sound like a Muppet with mumps to most people, slower motor coordination, and muscle contractions that randomly hit me and make me look like I'm doing sudden, odd yoga in the middle of a task or conversation. Oh, and said contractions hurt.

But to be honest, given the laundry list of things I could have faced, most days I feel like I got off easy. I can live independently, provided my attendants show up and help me get to the bathroom the two times a day that they come, that they help me bathe and dress, and that my service dog feels like picking up what I drop in between the short periods when my attendants are here. (She almost always does.) The vast majority of days all this goes off without a hitch, and I feel pretty dang normal.

But there are the days when my attendants don't show up, when I have to crawl on the floor because my silly self forgets my phone in the living room when I go to sleep, and without it, I can't get help if I need it. There are those times when people stare when I go out, when they ask questions like, "Where are your parents?," even as I'm thirty-three and college educated, as though the chair or the way I talk has rendered my mind inoperative, which I guess it could have, given the list of side effects I listed earlier, but which it hasn't in my case, as I said. And, as such, my patience for being talked to like a child or having able-bodied people asked about me in my presence, as though I'm not there, has gotten thinner with each passing year.

And remember the plans I started this story with? The plans I was sure were going to happen just because I got my degree, credential, and worked hard?

Well, most job fairs I went to, principals didn't even want to speak to me, and the one interview I did get, the interviewer spent the entire time asking me how I would manage a classroom

the way I am. It was demoralizing, and after a few years of subbing, I gave up on my hope of teaching.

Perhaps that is the hardest part of life with a disability, at least in my case; my brain doesn't match my body, and people are so focused on the latter, they dismiss the former as some sort of interesting parlor trick. "Who taught you to be so smart?" is a question I've gotten more than once, as though I'm a trained orca and not a scholar.

My family always treated me as a typical, age-appropriate behaving child, and then adult. And I was and am very grateful for that, but I also know from discussions they worry about what will happen to me when they are no longer here to help and one of my attendants doesn't show up, or I have to go somewhere that isn't easily reachable by bus. Their worry is valid, and it dogs me as much as it does them, because I have no answers, only hopes and prayers to the universe for my continued independence, no matter what comes.

And then there is the flip side of that coin, where while I appreciate and understand their worry, I also feel like I've let them down by not being able to find a job that matches the mind I've been given. I got into a serious

disagreement this week with someone in my family because they suggested I focus my writing career on disability issues. Writing is what I've fallen back on because teaching was a failure on my part, and I reacted with pain and fear when they suggested I use my writing career to deal with disability because I felt disability had already stolen my teaching career.

They didn't mean to hurt me and when I reacted, they assumed that they were just bad at communicating with me when, in fact, the reality is I feel like I've done nothing but let my life be defined by my body, which I didn't choose, instead of my mind, which I worked hard to cultivate. And thus, I worry I have become the parlor trick strangers think I am and not anything my family can be proud of or find loveable. That I've wasted all the gifts I've been given or overestimated my abilities. These are the hard moments, the moments when the feeling that I've got this covered slips away, and I'm left drowning in a sea of difference and failure.

The pendulum of disability is a difficult one to navigate, because we can feel we've mastered coping, only for a curve ball to throw us completely off course in the other direction. I think the

key I've discovered to living with disability is to always figure that whatever comes my way, I can handle it because I've gotten this far. And to understand that though I feel like I've failed, my family is just happy I'm in their lives and that I have gifts to share, no matter whether those gifts are defined by my body, my mind, or both. (I think that's true of every family that has someone with a disability.) Strangers who behave oddly toward those with disabilities are the strange ones, hence the "stranger" moniker becomes very fitting.

Disability affects every aspect of life, from day-to-day tasks, to relationships with family to interactions with the community. It isn't just a lesion or a set of symptoms; it's a life path, one not chosen, but one with which it is possible to cope, and even enjoy, if one has ice packs for when those curve balls hit, one trusts people to still find one loveable and worth something even when seeing stars from that wayward ball, and if one concentrates on hitting a homerun, even when getting heckled in the stands or by self-doubt.

That's the way to win the game of life, disability or no. ♦

COHL WARREN-HOWLES

THE YORKSHIRE MAN

Everyone looks forward to making memories together
 Come rain, come shine, whatever the weather
 But sometimes, it doesn't work out as we've planned
 And the cards we've been dealt, are not the hand
 We've assumed the path, our lives will take
 And all our ideas, we may have to forsake

And we walk the road, that none would choose
 When delivered a diagnosis, with the news
 That one has a condition, that will change everything
 With the pain and heartache and the tears it will bring

For this courageous man, I write these words
 Whose love for his family, flies as high as the birds
 With determination to never give in
 And against all odds, he's resolved to win

He's a man from Yorkshire, who's fighting a disease
 That's robbing his movement and his voice, it will seize
 But with strength of purpose, he remains steadfast
 To fight this condition, he did not forecast

He knows he is already, losing his voice
 So using technology, has become his choice
 To preserve, how he sounds, for his girls and his wife
 To remember him by, when he no longer has life

As one's voice is as unique, as one's face
 He's decided to record and to embrace
 The help of thirty voices, that sound like his own
 With its modulation, its rhythm, and its tone

By moving his eyes and the use of infrared
 He can spell out his words, which the computer speaks instead
 But the beauty of this ability, is he keeps his identity
 And doesn't sound like a synthesized, generic non-entity

A preprogrammed voice, would just not be him
 It would confuse his girls, which would be grim
 So this machine makes all the difference in the world
 For himself and his wife, but especially his girls

Diagnosed with MND, the cruelest disease
 However much one prays, however much one pleads
 It relentlessly progresses, as it steals one's health
 And carries on robbing, with its insidious stealth

But this concentrated man, has focused his mind
 To not be its victim and has not resigned
 Himself to be stopped in doing all the things
 That make him happy, that life brings

From zip wire and to driving, a Formula One
 And flying a microlight, just had to be done
 And tackling the terrain of the Yorkshire Moor
 In his electric wheelchair, 4 x 4

He wants to make others more aware
 Of this disorder, that's so unfair
 Six people in the UK, are diagnosed each day
 And a third of these, in a year it will slay

So my thoughts and praise are with this man
 Who against all odds, does what he can
 Whilst he battles with this beast, he can't control
 But to enjoy every moment, now is his goal

I speak because I witnessed my father fight
 This dreadful disease, with all his might
 More money must be found, for a cure
 So we all can be really sure
 That this beast can be controlled
 Before more stories like this, will be told.

SARIKA CHAWLA

THE GIRL IN THE WHEELCHAIR

Last night
I dreamed I could fly.
My arms were wings
that touched the cusps of the clouds,
and when the wind died down
and I fluttered to the ground,
there I stood,
the grass tickling the tips of my toes.

What a sweet lapse of reality.

Last night you told me I was
incapable
of ever being like you

because I can't walk.

Last night you jumped rope in the
playground
in the dying light,
and I studied the motions of your wrists and
the way the rope flowed under your feet
like a song, legato,
every time you leapt in the air.

Last night you twirled across the stage and I
watched,
watched the wings on your eyeliner flutter in
time with the melody of your legs, with
the cadence of your grand jetés.

You flew so high you could have touched
the waning moon
with your fingertips.

Last night your heart beat to the rhythm of the wind
whistling in your ears as you ran around the
track and tasted the cold rush of freedom on your tongue.

Last night I tried to join you.

Last night you told me to leave,
that The Girl in the Wheelchair was all I'd ever be.

Last night
I tried to stand on my useless, paralyzed legs
and crumpled to the ground,
because The Girl in the Wheelchair really was all I'd ever be.

But last night
The Girl in the Wheelchair soared above the clouds.
Her words spilled into the stars and caught fire,
then blazed across night's black beach,
leaving footprints in the sand.
Last night her songs jumped rope in your playground and
danced to the tune of the waxing moon.
Last night her soul ran side by side with the wind
and planted seeds of kindness that grew
in people's hearts,
and when the wind calmed into a breeze
and she fluttered down,
there she stood,
blades of grass tickling the tips of her toes.

JEANIE GREENSFELDER

DOLPHINS AND DAUGHTERS

At a Key Largo swim-with-dolphins pool,
dolphins ignored me. The guide said
if I was missing an arm or leg,
they'd be curious, come close, and connect.

When I was six, downtown with my mother,
I saw a man with one leg walking on crutches,
My mother yanked my arm and said,
Don't stare. A year ago, my friend

Kathy saw her six-year-old stare at a man
in shorts, one of his legs artificial.
Kathy asked if he'd show her daughter
how his leg worked. He sat on the ground,

and unbuckled it. Like a dolphin, the girl
came close, looked at the man,
touched his leg, and held his prosthesis.
She smiled. He smiled.

MEGAN SEITZ

SIMPLE THINGS

Nights spent crisscross on my quilt
talking about Ireland and mountain hikes,
when you caught that wasp in a jar,
made me vegetable soup with your
grandmother's recipe, brought me calendars
full of sleepy kittens and we would pick
our favorites, the time you caught my braid
between your fingers and let it go.

I clung to these thoughts like prayers
when only I could hear the steady beep
of the heart monitor, feel the piercing
tubes in my veins, watch the seasons
tick by like seconds on a clock,
and ask for just one more simple thing.

FRESH START

DIANE JOY SCHMIDT

The new moon of this month marked the beginning of the High Holidays, Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, followed next week by Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, when we ask for forgiveness. The harvest cycles and autumn also begin now. On the Saturday before Rosh Hashanah, penitential prayers are begun in order to prepare for the holiday.

Rabbi Min Kantrowitz led a profound meditation Saturday night in Albuquerque that began with the idea that in order to forgive others, we must first forgive ourselves. She led us through a visualization of self-forgiveness, after which we then asked forgiveness from others, forgave them, and finally, asked for forgiveness from God.

My intention in life now is to share my gifts as a writer to the greatest extent that I can—and in having failed to do so up until now, I have much to forgive myself for. I blocked this writing for the better part of my life. It was, I now realize, in part a result of choices I made as a child that prevented me from living up to my potential.

One of the traditions for beginning the New Year is that we take slices of apple, dip them in honey, and wish each other “Shanah Tovah,” a sweet and whole New Year. This year, I realized that even though I am now already chronologically in my sixties, I still must address these blocks of my earliest childhood. Coincidentally, one of the most significant moments in which I decided to hide my light and withdraw from the world had to do with apples. Baked apples. I was four years old.

My parents had gone to Europe for two weeks. This was a big deal in the 1950s. They flew on a transatlantic DC-7 Pan Am flight from New York’s Idlewild Airport to London, where they saw the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace. Our elderly grandparents drove from Cleveland to Chicago to take care of us.

My two older sisters had spent the first years of their lives in Cleveland, where they had enjoyed a close relationship with my grandparents. Then I came along, five years later. Now suddenly I was the baby, the youngest, the favorite.

One day, my grandmother decided to bake apples. A wonderful smell of baking filled the house. I couldn’t wait for the apples to come out of the oven, and I wanted to taste one immediately. She said, “No they’re too hot, they have to cool first,” and she set the baking pan high up at the back of the stove. When I climbed on a chair to try and reach them, she yelled at me and pushed me away from the stove. *Verboten!* Forbidden fruit.

When they cooled, I didn’t want any. They were cold. They didn’t smell delicious anymore. They looked slimy. My grandpa, who liked me to pretend-pick fleas off his bald head and who taught me gin rummy when the rest of the house was asleep, now was unaccountably mad at me. He wanted me to eat that cold thing. He took a spoonful and tried to stick it in my mouth, as if I was a baby, and next thing I know—I’ve squirmed away from him, and I’m under the kitchen table, and they’re holding me down, and he’s sticking the spoon in my mouth. I’m scared and angry.

My sisters are laughing from the next room—finally she’s getting her come-uppance! Humiliated, crying, I went upstairs in our split-level home and climbed into the linen closet onto the bottom shelf where the blankets were stored, and I curled up in the dark. I felt safe there, I felt special in that place, even if nobody loved me and they were laughing at me.

There is a special prayer, The Release of Vows, said at the evening service that begins Yom Kippur. It pertains to vows that we may have made in the last year, or will make, unconsciously or consciously, that we now ask to be released from. It might well apply to decisions we made as children. These decisions have acted like vows, and have continued to bind us to a way of being that we need to release ourselves from.

They are the sort of things we tell ourselves as children in order to survive all kinds of traumatic episodes. In this case, I decided that I was both unloved and special. The corollary belief that remained lodged in my subconscious was that, if I was special, I was also unloved. This incident of the baked apples became a defining part of me. When there is anger, blame, shame, and guilt, there is not much room left to forgive oneself.

With this year’s new-won knowledge, the dragons that guarded this unintentional sin, this valuable belief that so much of my life was invested in, are fading away. At the ceremony of Tashlicht during the New Year observances, where we cast bread on the waters to cast away our sins of omission or commission, I stood on the banks of the Rio Grande and cast away the belief

that I am unloved, this sin of a limiting belief. Now, in the spirit of the New Year, the spoiled, poisoned, half-baked evil apple is transformed into the golden apple of knowledge, allowing light, breath, and renewal and the capacity for forgiveness of self. A first step. ♦

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TALK TO ME

SHIRLEY PALMERTON

I'm holding the screen door open, and you pass through with your walker. I've already placed the folded-over cushion in the old rocker and hold it steady as you back up and sit down.

The plate of cheese and crackers and your cinnamon whiskey and water sit waiting for you on the little table next to your chair. My goblet of wine is there as well.

We sit on the deck under an old maple tree whose leaves keep the sun from peeping through. We have always enjoyed looking out over our lawn to the large hayfield, and the woods.

I know the next words you are going to say before you speak, "Look at the clouds. Look at the wind blow the trees in the woods," and nothing more.

More times than I can remember I have asked you to "Talk to me," more times than I can bear. You answer, "I don't know what to say," as you look away.

We have shared so many moments and memories in our life.

You got up with me every night when the babies needed to be fed. We'd trade off warming their bottles and changing their diapers, as we talked about what happened that day.

The only time it was different was when our daughter was born. She weighed only four-and-a-half pounds and wanted to eat every two hours. It was exhausting, and we quickly agreed to take turns.

I was so tired one night, I heard her, poked you, and said, "It's your turn."

You turned to me and said, "Oh no, I just got back in bed." We laid there laughing. I'm sorry you don't remember that.

You held me tight when the doctor told us that our second son had a brain tumor and wouldn't live. He was as tall as you when he died at seventeen.

You worked hard so we could pay for our children's college and weddings. When we finally had some money for ourselves, we bought a motor home and began traveling. Our daughter was in the Air Force. We went to see her and her family wherever she was stationed.

We were so excited to be in Plains, Georgia, to attend Easter morning sunrise service at Jimmy Carter's church. The former president asked us to have breakfast with him and his family—that doesn't happen to many.

Then there was our trip to Alaska. I always thought you were so remarkable driving there and back. I wish you'd remember, and we could talk about it.

You recently fell and injured both ankles, forcing you to spend time in rehab. Once when I was walking to your room, I saw a man sitting with his wife. She was in a tilt-back chair with her eyes closed. He sat there holding her hand, and I could just feel he wished she'd talk to him.

I know I'm not alone. There are thousands of men and women wishing the same thing.

Night after night you sit in your tilt-back chair where you now have to sleep—me across the room. Neither of us talking. How I wish, when I get you ready for bed, you'd smile at me and say, "I love you," like you used to.

How I wish you would say, "Remember when . . ."

You have no idea how much I want to hear you say those words. How much it hurts to be the only one who remembers.

Please talk to me. ♦

FABIYAS M V

A HUNCHBACK BOY FROM MANAYUR

There's a miniature volcano
on his back
with mortifying eruption.
"Beauty is
in mind," his mom intones.
But nobody
recognizes. His classmates
"honor" him
with some funny sobriquets.

It resembles a cactus. He can't
eschew its
thorns. He withdraws. Solitude
is a shelter.

It's like a gas-producing
cassava; his
mind bloats with thoughts
of inferiority.

Whistles and whoops from
the playground
pain him no more. Recurrence
blunts sorrow's talon.

He falls down through a siesta.
Each
posthumous pity is as a wreath.

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SO YOU'RE A GROWN-UP NOW

DEE PARKER

For as long as I can remember, the idea of growing up has been shoved in our faces. It's in our books, our TV shows, even our video games. Everywhere you turn, it's there. The inevitability of adulthood is ever looming, always there and always pressuring everyone it gets its hands on.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" is a question I can remember being asked by my kindergarten teacher at just five years old when I barely knew how to spell my name. It's asked by every authority figure anyone comes into contact with, from your teacher to your parents and even, in some cases, your doctors. No matter what you say, there's always going to be that one person, even if it's yourself, who will tell you that it's unrealistic or you can't do it for whatever reason. Some people will say they support you, but that in order to get to where you want to go, you have to hide or change part of who you are.

For instance, I had always wanted to be a teacher. The idea of helping kids learn and, hopefully, giving kids a better experience with education than I had was something that I wanted to do so badly. Then I was hospitalized when I was fourteen. The memory is foggy now, but I remember being asked, "So what do you want to do when you grow up?" All I could think about was how I didn't expect to make it to "grown-up," so I just blurted out a past dream of mine.

For the first part of that appointment, before I was asked that horrible question, we had been talking about my symptoms and what was going on in my head. My mother tells me that the doctor told her I had multiple personalities. "There's at least two people living in Destiny's head, both of which all the members of the staff here have met, at the moment. That's enough to qualify for a diagnosis." You would think that would make it official, that her saying that I have it would be how I was diagnosed. Unfortunately for me, that didn't happen. I was asked The Question. "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

I could tell as soon as I said the word "teacher" that it was the wrong answer. I was told that people with dissociative, schizophrenic, or bipolar behaviors just couldn't be teachers. There was no way someone would hire me, she had said. I was too crazy; how could I be trusted around kids? So instead of putting down the proper diagnosis so I could get the right treatment, my doctor wrote down "Mood Disorder NOS (not otherwise specified)," which later morphed into "Borderline Personality Disorder."

"I'm just trying to help," she'd said. And because of that "help," I was misdiagnosed and denied the treatment I needed to get better for six years. Six whole years not understanding what was going on in my head, why I was missing huge chunks of my time, why it would seem like I would blink and six hours had passed, and I would be in an entirely different place with no memory of how I got there. Six whole years of medication after medication with no end in sight.

Now here I am. I've made it to "grown-up." I've got my diagnosis. I'm getting the right treatment. I'm succeeding far past what I or anyone in that facility thought I would. And I'm here to tell you that what that doctor said is bullshit. It doesn't matter what you want to be when you grow up when you're trying to get treatment. What matters is what you need at that time. We shouldn't have to hide behind fake diagnoses in order to achieve our dreams—or even to do what other people can do. We should embrace our illness and show people that their fears are beyond irrational and we are no less human, we deserve no less respect, just because we have a more complex life.

Nothing can change and improve if you let the injustice and discrimination sit. Nothing can change if you just go along with what other people say you need. Speak up, say your truth, and get the help you need. Because sometimes, if you don't, it won't matter what you want to be when you grow up because you'll never get there to see it. ♦

SRAVANI SINGAMPALLI

EVOCATION

The pillows on my bed
 Are not stuffed with cotton.
 They are stuffed with
 My mother's old sarees
 And lots of other childhood memories.
 The picture hanging there on the wall
 Is still full of vigor and charm.
 The nail hammered into the wall
 Ten years ago with precision
 Appears rusty yet very strong
 Unlike decaying minds
 And constipated thoughts.
 The flower vase gifted
 To my aunt by us
 Is a part of the soil now
 In their backyard.
 It hasn't lost its shape
 Just the color has faded
 And scratches have deepened.

AFTER

MELISSA CRONIN

Standing within a circle of physicians, I leaned toward the crib, gazing at the three-month-old conjoined twin girls cooing back and forth, speaking their own, intimate language. One twin quietly looked up at the circle of white coats, her mouth open in the shape of a Cheerio, while her sister batted at her face. So it made sense to nickname the laid-back twin Turtle, and her active half, Turbo.

It was 1999, and I thought I had seen everything in my twelve-year nursing career: burned children, one-eyed babies, twenty-three-week-old preemies. But never conjoined twins. Such cases, I learned, were rare, occurring once in every one hundred thousand live births. For the experienced physicians at this children's hospital, however, the girls were not an anomaly. Specialists had separated more than a dozen conjoined twins over the previous four decades, and had cared for numerous others whose separation was not possible.

I stepped closer to the attending surgeon in the group as he launched into a listing of statistics: "The stillborn rate for conjoined twins is as high as sixty percent." Turbo called out, "Boo-oo," as though she understood what he had just said. Everyone laughed at her uncanny timing. "We go into these surgeries fully aware of the numbers," the surgeon continued. "About thirty-five percent die on the first day of life, and five to twenty-five percent survive." I ignored the dire statistics, and reached through the crib slats to touch the girls' downy skin. I needed to feel what I had previously seen only in nursing journals.

The surgeon explained that, for unknown reasons, females have a better chance at survival than males. I held onto that hopeful statement and envisioned the twins disentangled from one another, unbound from the tug of another being's needs and wants. But the staggering realm of fission theory trumped my vision for a moment and my mind's eye rewound to the beginning of the twins' existence: A single fertilized egg incompletely splitting, developing into two identically fused embryos, those embryos evolving into fetuses, floating together in amniotic brine, exchanging placental nutrients, inhaling and exhaling simultaneously in a buoyant center for nearly forty weeks.

A monitor alarm blared, stirring me from my reverie, bringing me back to the confident voice of the attending physician discussing the fortunate circumstances presented to Turtle and Turbo. Since they were a common twin type—omphalopagus—their likelihood of surviving the separation procedure was promising. And they didn't share the heart or brain, which would have ruled out surgery all together. Connected from the lower half of the sternum to the navel, they shared a portion of their ribs, and part of the liver, diaphragm, and the membrane surrounding the heart. My vision of the girls freely running, hopping, and skipping now felt more certain, as certain as parting clouds.

When holding Turtle and Turbo, I'd sit in a rocking chair and prop them against my chest. But when cuddling them—four arms, four legs, and two wobbly heads—I felt more like a referee distracted by another player, my hands busy holding up the twins, unable to stop Turbo from grabbing onto the nose or ear of Turtle. Laying them face up on my

lap allowed more freedom of movement: I could easily hold their hands and rewrap them in an oversized blanket when one of them kicked it loose. Their mother, who spent much of her time with them in the hospital, had learned to adapt in the three months she had spent with them at home. She'd hunch her shoulders inward to protect their teetering heads while walking around with them. And if that wasn't enough, having traveled from Eastern Europe to the United States for the first time, she also had to adapt to the English language by learning essential phrases like "Where's the bathroom?" and "Can I use the phone?"

Because of the location of the girls' connection, their heads were positioned so that they faced one another. I'd shift my eyes from one twin to the other, rubbing their blond heads while talking to them: "Itty bitty cuties . . . ba, ba . . . goo, goo." Since there were no tops large enough to cover both of them, I dressed the girls in two shirts that snapped together down the middle. Their mother showed me how to change their diapers with speed and proficiency: Lay twins down on bed next to crib, hold back one twin's set of kicking feet with elbow while un-taping other twin's diaper. Slip diaper out from under bottom, then toss to floor with free hand. Grab clean diaper from stack within arm's reach, slide under bottom. Tape diaper closed. Release elbow.

The surgeons had inserted silicone balloon expanders beneath the skin of the twins' shared chest and abdomen. Each day I cared for them, I slowly injected saline solution into the balloon. Over a period of three months, the skin would stretch long and wide, so each twin would have enough tissue to completely cover her own chest and abdomen after the surgery. When I fed one twin, sometimes the other would vomit. Though it's possible for omphalopagus twins to share part of their digestive system, this was not the case for the girls. Maybe it was a fluke. Maybe it was a jealous protest, the id of one sister stronger than the other's: Why are you feeding her first? If one twin was asleep, and the other awake, babbling—usually Turbo—I'd whisper, "Shhh." At the same time, I'd be thinking, you won't have to endure this much longer. Soon you'll be on your own. I'd give her a pacifier, and stand by the crib watching her watch me until her eyes closed.

The twins' mother knew she'd be sacrificing months apart from her other children while her husband stayed home to care for them—an ocean away. And the notable reputation

of the hospital instilled great confidence in the parents, not to mention the surgeons' steadfast belief that the twins would go on to live productive lives. But the surgeons, and the parents, knew Turtle was more vulnerable because her heart was in her sister's chest. I wondered what would happen if Turtle died. Did the girls' parents really understand what the surgeons meant by vulnerable? Did the parents agonize over their decision to have their daughters separated? Did culture play a role? What would the twins have wanted if they had possessed the cognitive capacity to choose? Maybe they would have wanted to remain together. If Turbo had understood that her sister might die, and she could have voiced her worry, what would she have said? "I refuse to risk losing my sister. We're staying together."

As part of a team of nurse practitioners and surgeons, whose goal was to unyoke the twins from one another, I assumed the girls would want the same. Why not? They would eventually be free to form individual friendships, attend different colleges, and choose their own careers. If they were not separated, imagine them dating different partners and having sex while literally joined at the hip. But Chang and Eng Bunker, conjoined twins from Thailand, more than managed. They chose different partners to marry, then had nearly two dozen children between the two of them. They proved that it is possible for conjoined twins to live as separate, sentient beings.

The evening before the twins' surgery, just before I left to go home, I embraced their mother. She pulled me closer to her. When she stood back, she swiped tears dripping down her wintered cheeks. I pointed to my chest, then to the calendar hanging above the nurses' desk. In block letters, "November" spanned the top of the page. I walked over to the calendar, tapped my fingertip against the third square where it read, "Turbo and Turtle, separation surgery." I pointed to my chest again, said, "Me. Here. Tomorrow."

"Yes, yes," the twins' mother affirmed. She reached for both of my hands, held them in hers. They trembled. I squeezed them, pressed into her palms an extra dose of assurance. Her brown eyes, as brown as both of her identical daughters', glimmered. She pulled me close again. I'm not sure whose heart was beating faster, hers or mine.

I gave the twins a long hug, inhaling their baby-powdered skin. "Tomorrow's the big day." Turbo flapped her

arms, calling out, “Oh . . . Eh . . . Eee.” Turtle hummed, “Mmmm,” then opened her mouth into a large oval, showing the whitecap of a bottom tooth. After caring for them three days a week for the past three months, they knew my end-of-the-day-voice, the voice that confirmed, “I’ll see you soon. I promise.” At six months old, they had no perception as to how different their lives would be twenty-four hours from now. If they survived, they would be aware of the “after,” but would likely not remember the “before.”

The next afternoon, the twins were surgically separated from one another during a several-hour procedure. An irrevocable separation. While monitoring the wide swings in Turtle’s blood pressure and heart rate throughout the initial post-operative days, I thought, *What if she doesn’t survive?* Would the parents regret their choice? Would the surgeons regret having made the decision to separate the twins? Would I regret anything I had done to prepare the twins for surgery?

The two cribs seemed out of place. Turtle and Turbo were now not only physically disconnected, but distanced from one another by several feet. One sister could no longer easily touch her sister, reach for her hand. They were both heavily sedated, but I imagined they sensed their corporeal separateness. They had been attached at the chest and abdomen for nine months in utero, then for another six months as infants. How could they not sense the change—bare chests once kept warm by each other’s beating heart.

Every day, the twins’ mother sat between the two cribs. She learned to split her time between her daughters, but now she had to make choices she hadn’t had to make before, like which twin to hold first when both were crying for attention. During those initial post-operative days, she’d dash over to the more awake twin. She’d slide down the crib rail, take her daughter’s hand, and talk softly into her ear, “Mama Jest Tutaj (Mama’s here).”

Several weeks later, after Turtle had stabilized, I carried Turbo to her sister’s crib for a visit. I sat them facing one another. Turbo squirmed, shifted her torso back and forth, as if she were eager to play with her sister. She patted Turtle’s soft belly, grabbed her feet, then her hands. She uttered a string of sounds: “Gi, gi, go.” Turtle mimicked her sister. They giggled at the same time—a musical, singular giggle. Turbo leaned her pudgy face close to her sister’s. They stared at one another, their eyes like wet glass, then brought their faces even closer together, each smelling the other’s familiar breath, feeling remembered warmth on their cheeks.

If our bodies are capable of storing memory, is it possible that both Turtle and Turbo now feel an occasional reminder of their once-upon-a-time physical union? A twinge in the liver, a spasm below the diaphragm, a skipped heartbeat?

Fifteen years after separation, long after they had returned to their homeland, a news headline about conjoined twins roused my curiosity. How were the girls doing as fully blossomed teenagers? I searched their names on the Internet and found a YouTube video of them. In it, Turbo chatters while Turtle listens. Turbo takes her hand and flips long hair out of her face, sharing a full smile. Turtle lets her hair shade her face from view, so all you see is a slice of a grin. Turbo is taller and more muscular than Turtle, and bounces from step to step. But the twins’ arms sway in sync as they walk along, together—holding hands. ♦

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LITTLE ELEPHANT

AMY D. LERNER

You know the story of the blind men and the elephant? They're trying to figure out what this creature is in front of them. Each of the men feels a different part of the elephant, the trunk, the foot, the tail, and describes the elephant based on only that one part. They each come up with wildly different ideas about what an elephant is, and not one of them sees the big picture, the whole elephant.

My elephant is only three feet tall and thirty-five pounds, yet this story applies.

Here are some of the blind men in her life—I mean specialists who come in contact with her because of her health needs: her pediatrician, nephrologist, cardiologist, chiropractor, physical therapist, nutritionist, dietician, home nurses, phlebotomists, speech therapist, pharmacists, preschool teacher, enteral feed supplier, various people at the insurance companies, and let's throw in the swim instructor because my husband had a long conversation with him about her scoliosis and other special needs.

Despite her being only three feet tall and three years old, none of these people see the whole picture. None of them know everything that's going on in her life or can even weigh in on the other parts, so as the main caregiver I'm left figuring out myself whether we should try chiropractic care to help with her scoliosis or whether we should focus on feeding or potty training . . . How best to spend our days, that's a question I often ask myself.

We recently wrapped up a five-month trial of chiropractic care to try and treat her scoliosis. It's not any better, so we're going to try a brace at the orthopedist's suggestion. As the doctor, X-ray techs, and residents take pains to point out at every visit, though, the degree of curvature can vary by five degrees each time you X-ray, leaving me wondering what the blind man is even touching.

Yet we each stumble forward, feeling around for the best direction to go, while the elephant runs circles around us, giggling all the while. ♦

MAUDIE PARKS

SAM PROVENZANO

Maudie Parks rode the bus every Sunday morning to the huge Baptist tent on Lexington Avenue in Corliss Park. She took the 7 o'clock bus because she wanted to be sure to get there before the singing started. There was "nothing on earth could bring a body closer to God than voices lifted up in harmony," was what she always said.

She especially liked the 7A bus because it brought her right to the flapped-over entrance to the tent. The 10E brought her to Lexington Avenue, but it turned on Park, three blocks before the tent, and her tired old arthritic legs made her wait for the 7A even though the 10E ran more often.

So she waited that Sunday morning, just as she had waited every Sunday morning for the previous twenty-two years. It was a particularly cold morning, and her arthritis was aching even as she sat. An old white man was sitting at the bus stop when she got there that morning, and even though she didn't usually talk to white folk, he said

"hello" so she said "hello" back. She noticed, through the corner of her eye, that a cane was leaning on the bench next to his leg. She thought to herself that a cane wouldn't be a bad idea for herself as well. She was going to stand and wait, but her legs ached so, and though she didn't fancy sitting on the same bench as a strange white man, he was sitting all the way at one end, so she sat at the other.

"It sure is a cold morning," he said, a puff of smoke from the cold coming out of his mouth as he spoke.

"Coldest one so far," she said.

"It must be about 10 or 15 degrees," he said.

"Definitely freezing," she said.

"You taking the 10E?" he asked.

"7A," she said.

"Does that get you to Lexington?" he asked.

"Yep, right to Corliss Park," she said.

"Corliss Park? Why, that's where I'm going," he said.

"Well, the 10E will get you close, but the 7A will take you right to it," she said.

Maudie wondered why this old white man was going to Corliss Park, since everybody knew it was a rundown park in the middle of a ghetto, but she wasn't curious enough to ask a white person a personal question.

"If I take the 7A, would you mind telling me when we get to Corliss Park?" he asked. She thought it was kind of an odd request since there was no way he wouldn't be able to tell when they arrived at Corliss Park, but she agreed.

"Sure," she said.

"My name is Thomas," he said, as he leaned toward her and held out his hand. She took his hand and shook it.

"Maudie," she said, all the while think-

ing he was the oddest duck she had ever met.

Two 10E buses came and went before a 7A arrived, but they waited patiently. He took her arm when she got up to get on the bus, and they took a seat together. She looked around at the others on the bus; most were people she knew who were regular early-Sunday morning bus riders. She felt a little embarrassed about getting on her bus with a white man, and then sitting with him. They rode in silence for a while.

“You ride this bus often?” he asked suddenly. She had been looking out the window and thinking that the sky looked like it might snow.

“Every Sunday morning,” she said.

“You must know every stop and many of the people who ride with you,” he said.

“Yeah, I guess I do,” she said.

They didn’t speak again until they reached the tent on Lexington Avenue. The tent was situated at the entrance to Corliss Park.

“This is it,” she said, thinking she was stating the obvious.

“Ahh, good, good, and where is the tent where the beautiful singing takes place?” he asked.

She looked at him.

“The tent is right in front of you. What are you, blind?” She said it without thinking.

“Yes,” he said, “I am.”

She felt stupid, and she grabbed his hand.

“Come with me,” she said, “that’s where I’m going, too.”

As they entered the flapped-over entrance together, an organ played softly in the background. Numerous friends of Maudie’s greeted her as she and her companion passed through the rows of people seated in folding chairs. She found two empty folding chairs and, seating him first, she took the seat beside him.

The minister stepped up to the pulpit and spoke about forgiveness and healing. It was an inspiring sermon, and the singing that followed began softly, as if the congregation was so moved that they could not at first remove themselves from the spell-like substance of the words. Slowly, though, the congregation began to sing out, and the quality of the voices was rich and beautiful. Even after so many years of singing these songs, Maudie held the book of psalms before her and read as she sang. She held the book for her companion to read, and then, remembering that he couldn’t see, she turned to him. His eyes were closed, and he was singing. He sang every word correctly, and his voice was rich and deep, and in perfect pitch with the congregation. Maudie kept staring at him, amazed at how perfectly he sang every word and at how beautiful his face had become.

Maudie believed that almost everything that happened to people was accidental, but interspersed with all of these accidental happenings there were what she liked to call *events*. Events, unlike accidental happenings, were intentionally-woven patterns in people’s lives, a

part of our destiny. She believed now, as she watched this old white man sing, that he was part of her destiny. There seemed to be nothing about him that she could predict. Accidental happenings were predictable in their lack of reliability; everything about this white man that she was able to observe was that he was reliable, but only in retrospect, and therefore unpredictable. She began to like him, and it frightened her because every white person she had ever liked had hurt her.

When the services ended, and people began to file out of the tent, the white man reached for her hand. She took it and squeezed gently.

“I got you,” she said, and he squeezed back.

“Thank you,” he said.

“For what?” she asked.

“For helping me get here,” he said, “and for being kind to a stranger.”

“Well, you sure didn’t put me out any,” she said. “I was coming here anyway.”

“Would you like to have a cup of coffee with me?” he asked. Maudie stiffened at the thought. The only place close that she knew about was Coffee Jones, and she hardly felt safe going there herself; going with a white man seemed foolhardy.

“Uh, my legs are aching from the cold, and I think I best be getting home now,” she said. She looked at him, and he looked so disappointed that she quickly added: “How about I fix us a fresh pot at my house; it’s close to where we caught the bus.”

“Well, if you’re sure it’s no problem,” he said, “I’d be honored to have a cup of coffee at your home.”

They caught the bus almost immediately after stepping out of the tent, and they were soon standing at the bus stop where they had met. He had her arm, and they began walking the half-block to her home.

“Where you live?” she asked as they approached her house.

“1407 Magellan,” he said. “I moved in with my granddaughter yesterday.”

“This is 1403 Magellan,” she said, “You live two houses down?”

He looked puzzled.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Sure seems serendipitous if I do.”

“Seren-what?” she asked.

“My good luck,” he said.

They stood on her porch, and she reached into her purse for her key just as the door opened, and her daughter, Shanika, stood in front of her.

“Hello baby, what you doing here?” Maudie asked. Shanika didn’t answer but looked from the strange white man back to Maudie. Her face was battered and bruised.

“Who’s this?” she asked.

“This is—this is—What’s your name again?” she asked.

“Thomas,” he said, reaching out his hand in the wrong direction, “and I’m pleased to meet you.”

“This is my youngest daughter Shanika,” Maudie said. Then Maudie noticed her daughter’s face. “What happened to you?” she asked. Shanika’s left eye was swollen.

“Nothing I care to talk about right now,” she said, staring at the white man.

“He didn’t hit you, did he?” Maudie hollered.

“Mama, I do not want to talk about this right now,” she said.

“Look at me, Shanika,” he said. “Do I look like I’m going to assume guilt about somebody else’s problems?”

“Talk hell,” Maudie said. “Does your Uncle Joe know yet?” Her Uncle Joe had been a professional heavyweight boxer when he was younger, and Shanika was his favorite niece.

“I don’t want anybody to know,” she said.

“He’s not getting away with it,” Maudie said, “not again.”

“Let me handle it,” Shanika said.

“I don’t like the way you’re handling it,” she said. “Where is the baby?”

“At Tonisha’s,” she said. “Mama, I already been through hell last night. Please don’t make me sorry I came here.” Maudie went into the kitchen, leaving Shanika and the white man standing in the middle of the living room. They heard her making coffee, and Shanika left him and went into the kitchen. Their voices could be heard as Maudie told Shanika that he was blind and would she please show him to a seat while she made coffee. Shanika

came back into the room and, taking his arm, she led him to the sofa and sat him down.

“I hope you understand that our problems are not about you, Mister,” she said.

“Thomas,” he said, correcting her use of Mister. “About me? Why would they be about me?”

“I just want to make sure that you’re not one of those white guys who thinks that every time a person of color has a problem it’s because of something they should or shouldn’t have done,” she said. The white man looked very solemn and said nothing for a moment, and then he began laughing. The laughing began with a light chuckle and grew into a belly laugh.

“Look at me, Shanika,” he said. “Do I look like I’m going to assume guilt about somebody else’s problems?”

“No,” she said, “I guess not. How you know my Mama?”

“She helped me get to Sunday services this morning,” he said.

“Sunday services? What Sunday services?” she asked.

“The same Sunday services your mother goes to,” he said.

“You went to Corliss Park?”

“That’s right,” he said. “Your mama and I took the bus together.”

“But those services are for black folk,” she said.

“Well, blame my failing to notice on my lack of sight,” he said.

“Weren’t you afraid?” she asked.

“Of what?”

“Of being the only white person among all those black people,” she said.

“Close your eyes,” he said. “What do you see?”

“Nothing.”

“Right,” he said. “How can a reasonable person be afraid of nothing?”

“Not seeing something isn’t the same as it not existing,” she said.

“I think reality is in the head,” he said. “It doesn’t mean we don’t have to get out of the way of the bus, but we don’t have to take life’s trials personally.”

“You think our reality is in our heads?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “I do. I mean stuff is happening to us all the time, but how we take the stuff that happens to us is how we experience it.”

“What the hell does that mean?” she asked.

He smiled as he heard Maudie enter the room. “All we can control is our responses,” he said. “Instead of getting mad and hating someone when we feel wronged, we can turn that feeling into profit.”

“Profit?” Shanika almost shouted. “How do I profit from getting beat up by my nasty-ass old man?”

Maudie put the mug of coffee in his hand.

“Milk?” she asked. He shook his head. Shanika had been standing the whole time, and now she sat by her mother on the sofa.

“I came in on the tail end of your conversation,” Maudie said. “What were you saying about profit?”

“Shanika was just asking me about our morning together,” he said, “and somehow we got into a philosophical discussion on perspectives.”

“Thomas thinks we create our own reality,” Shanika said, “right, Thomas? We can make everything beautiful, and we can love everybody. Right, Thomas?” She got louder as she spoke. Maudie grabbed Shanika’s arm and squeezed it tight, but said nothing.

“Sounds like something Dr. King might say,” Maudie said.

“I think reality is in the head,” he said. “It doesn’t mean we don’t have to get out of the way of the bus, but we don’t have to take life’s trials personally.”

“It’s not a new concept,” Thomas said. “James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and many others who’ve known oppression have spoken eloquently about using their suffering as a fuel to propel and motivate them.”

“I guess,” Shanika said, “it’s easy to talk about profiting from getting knocked around when you’re a blind white man.”

“Shanika!” Maudie shouted. Thomas held up his hand.

“That’s quite understandable,” he said. “But how much suffering does a person need to go through in order to understand the idea that we can grow from bad stuff? Taking in what we find unbearable, and using it the right way, makes us wiser.”

“How am I going to use my frustrated, abusive, out-of-work, ex-con husband who is the father of my three hungry

children, Mr. Thomas? Can you answer me that?” Shanika asked.

“You can’t use him for anything,” he said. “What you use are your feelings about the situation.”

“Tell me something, Doctor Love and Beauty—”

“Hold it there,” Maudie shouted. “Don’t you be laying your heaviness and self-pity at this man’s feet like he’s responsible for everything that’s going wrong with your life. Why are you blaming him? All he’s doing is trying to offer you some pretty good advice.”

“I don’t need advice from a self-righteous white man who probably never went a day hungry in his life,” she said. “I didn’t ask for his advice, and I don’t want it.” Shanika stood up, grabbed her jacket, and ran out the door.

“Sorry,” he said.

“She’s just a mess right now,” Maudie said. “She got involved with a gangster, and she’s stuck with him.”

“Sorry to hear that,” he said. “Sometimes we can only wait and watch.”

“I’m getting better at letting her figure things out for herself. It’s her kids that make it the hardest for me. Would you like some more coffee?” she asked.

“Yes, I would,” he said. She left the room and returned with the pot, and after filling their cups, she placed the pot on a pot holder, which she first placed on the coffee table. As she placed the pot on the coffee table her face came very close to his, and he leaned forward and kissed her on the corner of her mouth. Shocked, she jolted back and stared at him.

“I hope that was an accident,” she said.

“Missing your lips was,” he said.

She was confused and angry as the door came flying open and Rasheed, her son-in-law, stood in the middle of the living room, staring at them.

“Where is she?” he shouted.

“You got no business barging into my house,” Maudie hollered.

“Where’s my wife?” he hollered back.

“Why don’t you settle down, son?” Thomas said, as he stood up.

“Who’s this white guy?” the young man snarled at her.

“That’s none of your business,” she said. “Now get out of my house before I call the police.”

“I’ll go after you tell me where she is,” he said. “Is she here?” he shouted, looking all around.

Maudie went to the phone and picked up the headset. Rasheed covered the five feet between them in one step and, swinging his arm, hit her across the wrist, sending the phone flying.

Thomas took a step in their direction, and Rasheed rushed to him and punched him in the jaw, knocking him to the floor. Maudie screamed.

“You fool,” she shouted. “He’s blind!” She ran to Thomas and cradled his head in her lap as he lay on the floor.

Rasheed ran from the house, and they heard an engine rev and then wheels peeling out.

“Welcome to my world,” she said as she caressed his forehead. “You okay?”

“Yes,” he said. And then, after a moment of silence, he asked, “Can I touch your face?”

She stood him up without answering, led him to the sofa, sat him down, and sat still next to him while he ran his fingers over first the outline of her face and then each line and crevice of her features. When he was finished, he rested his head in her lap and said nothing.

“How did my face feel?” she asked.

“You’re a keeper,” he said. And he fell asleep while she stroked his temples.

After a while, Maudie carefully slid her legs out from under the old man’s head and left him sleeping. She took the coffee mugs and coffee pot to the kitchen and did household things. As she quietly and methodically did her chores, she thought about the man sleeping on her sofa. Since meeting

him, the feeling never left her that he was a significant event in her life, and that it was no accident that they had met. She felt as if she had known him all of her life, like he had somehow played a part in all that she understood and had come to believe about people and ideas. She knew, without ever having spoken about it with him, that he understood justice in a different way than every other white person that she had ever met.

“Maudie,” she heard him call from the living room.

“Yes?” she asked, coming to the living room archway.

“What time is it?” he asked. She looked at the clock in the kitchen.

“One-ten,” she said.

He stood up, patted out the wrinkles in his clothing, and grabbed his cane.

“I best be going,” he said, “before my granddaughter starts to worry.”

“Let me grab my coat, and I’ll walk you there,” she said.

Moments later, as they stood in front of his granddaughter’s home, they embraced, and he kissed her again, this time by mutual consent. ♦

Linda Amos is a Pennsylvania poet with verse published in *Wild Onions* (2018) and anthologies. She earned degrees from York College, despite dyslexia causing her to mistype forty percent of her words. A voracious reader and daily writer, she has 23,000 books in her personal library and serves as a volunteer ambassador for Ten Thousand Acts of Kindness-York.

Brandon Lomenzo Black's work has appeared in *Los Angeles Magazine*, *Pasadena Star-News*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Pasadena Magazine*. He loves writing about the intellectual puzzle that each story demands, from researching and prepping questions, to interviewing, and then putting it all together. He considers his speech impediment an impetus for embracing adversity and getting things done.

Sarika Chawla is a student at Harvard University. She believes her disability leads her to address issues like ableism and false stereotypes as well as her personal experiences with disability. She is fascinated by the intersection of STEM and humanities, and she enjoys singing and language study.

Maria Thompson Corley is a Jamaican-Bermudian pianist, voice actor, writer, and composer who studied at the Juilliard School and the University of Alberta. She has published fiction, poetry, articles, and reviews in publications that include *Fledgling Rag*, *Midnight and Indigo*, the *Broadstreet Review*, and *Confluence*. Her poem "Malcolm," about her son with autism, was presented at the 2016 National Autism Conference in State College, Pennsylvania, and her novel *Letting Go* was published in 2016.

Melissa Cronin's work has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *The Jerusalem Post*, *Narratively Magazine*, *Tahoma Literary Review*, and more. She is a recipient of Vermont Studio Center Merit Grant and a Vermont Arts Council Development Grant. As a traumatic brain injury survivor, she is a public speaker on the topics of TBIs and post-traumatic stress disorder. She lives in Vermont where she is currently completing a memoir and working on her first novel.

Al Daniels is a musician and writer. His writing appeared in the Fall 2018 issue of *Dialogue*. Blind from an early age, he has performed in rock and dance bands from his teens to adulthood. Short form fiction and nonfiction are his forte.

Corinna Dooha-Chambers, a resident of California, writes because she has something to say, an emotion to express, an experience to share, or a personal perspective on a topic. She adores her service dog and delights in both humorous and serious conversation.

Scarlett Dubois is a resident of Ontario, Canada, and is working toward a bachelor's degree in psychology. She writes to share her ideas with the world. As a young woman with bipolar disorder, she hopes to eventually become a psychologist to help people who, despite struggling with a disability, want to be successful.

Matthew Feeney, a former actor, is currently incarcerated in Minnesota. His fiction won second place in the 2017 PEN America Prison Writing Contest, and his work has been accepted or published by *Blue Collar Review*, *Spotlight on Recovery*, and *Hawai'i Review*. A facilitator with the prison's Alternative to Violence Program (AVP), he is a member of the Restorative Justice Council, and a trained conflict resolution mentor.

Craig Firsdon of Ohio is the author of "Bards Again" (Summer 2016), "Long Lost Gone Forgotten Records" (2016 audio recorded poem), and "Delirious: A Tribute to Prince" (2016 anthology), among other writing. He was a National Spoken Word Award nominee/finalist. He has juvenile rheumatoid arthritis and finds writing is a form of therapy that helps him to deal with pain and offers hope that he might make a difference in another person's life.

Jeanie Greensfelder is a psychologist in California. Her poems have appeared in *Thema*, *American Life in Poetry*, *The Writer's Almanac*, and *Askew*, and she is the recipient of the 2018 Spirit First Award and the 2013 Lillian Dean Award. Writing lifts her spirits and helps her to value moments. Jeanie believes we all have disabilities, some of which are more visible than others.

Terry Groves of British Columbia earned a degree in software engineering and has published stories in publications that include *Strange Fictions* and *The Old Hedgy Times*. His disabilities help him to understand the nature of invisible challenges. He is awestruck by the world's possibilities, and he enjoys seeing the best in others. Speculation about the darkness in us and a love of writing spur him to frequently do so.

Julie Guirgis is a freelance writer from New South Wales. She has recently published several articles and loves to empower and educate people through words. She is also a caregiver for her brother, many children, and the elderly, which she finds tremendously fulfilling.

A. D. Hurley lives in the scenic mountains of North Georgia, with her large brood of children, a fantastically domesticated husband, and two dogs. She is a poet, writer, and artistic photographer. Her poetry, prose, and photography can be found in a number of literary journals and anthologies published around the globe.

Debra Johanyak is a former English professor and author of books and articles who enjoys working with various forms of fiction and nonfiction literature. She is currently editor-in-chief of *Kaleidoscope* where she reviews contributors' submissions for each issue. Having produced two films and several plays, she appreciates language performance as well as reading.

Yuetting Cindy Lam lives in Hong Kong and has published work in the *New Orleans Review*, *Quiddity*, *Brain, Child*, and *Wasafiri*. She writes because of her many stories to tell. She is the founder and publisher of *Zizzle Literary*, a short story magazine for minds as young as eleven as well as grownups. Her triannual hardcover publication features art and literary flash fiction.

Amy D. Lerner earned a bachelor of arts degree from York College and has had several works published. She is a wife, a mother, a Jew, a writer and editor, an American, a woman, an advocate, and more.

Dan Linssen is the author of *Leaving Juneau County* and *Who's to Blame? Living Along Society's "Fault Line."* A resident of Wisconsin, he enjoys expressing personal perspectives on life, and he advocates for personal choice, human dignity, and individual responsibility. He loves nature in all its manifestations.

Fabiyas M V lives in India. His poems appear in publications like *The Literary Hatchet*, and he has received the Merseyside at War Poetry Award from Liverpool John Moores University as well as the Poetry Soup International Award, among others. His work utilizes characters from local surroundings.

Lola Neff Merritt has published poems that include "The Secret Peace" and "Ideals." Now retired, she resides in New York and writes because she loves putting descriptive words together to create a picture. She has lived in rural settings most of her life, which has fostered a lasting love of nature, often the theme of her poetry.

Teresa Milbrodt is currently a graduate instructor in the English doctoral program at the University of Missouri. Publications include several short story collections. One, *Larissa Takes Flight*, won the Whirling Prize awarded by the University of Indianapolis Etchings Press. She also has published a novel, *The Patron Saint of Unattractive People*. Her vision disability has led her to consider issues about body variability and disability frustrations, and she considers herself to be inquisitive, imaginative, playful, and introspective.

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.

Shirley Palmerton of New York earned a nursing degree and has published a number of opinion pieces in *Buffalo News*, as well as a biography in 2018. Now at age ninety, she writes stories that come to mind on legal pads.

Dee Parker's writing interests stem from a desire to inspire others as she has been inspired, and because she loves writing more than anything. Her goals include righting the wrongs of media and fighting the stigma of mental health conditions.

Sam Provenzano has several degrees and recently retired from teaching freshman composition. He is a veteran of the Vietnam era and enjoys playing drums in a jazz trio and writing short stories. He and his wife live in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains with their four cats, two dogs, and a pot belly pig named Nigel. He says, "We continue to strive to be present to each moment of these magnificent lives we've been blessed with."

Diane Joy Schmidt is an award-winning writer and photo-journalist whose work has appeared in the *Chicago Tribune*, *Gallup Independent*, *Navajo Times*, *New Mexico Jewish Link*, and *Hadassah Magazine*, along with literary journals *Sweet* and *Geometry*. Her writing emerges from post-traumatic growth and spiritual healing through nature, often based on the environment and society.

Megan Seitz, originally from Kentucky, now teaches English in Spain. Her short story "Conscious" appeared in the John Hopkins University *(Dis)ability Short Story Anthology* in 2018, while a poem, "Life Sentence," was published in *Msllexia*. She feels a constant pull of stories waiting for a voice. Her free time is spent scribbling poems on the metro and traveling the world.

Sravani Singampalli is a pharmacy student in India. Her poems won first prize in the First Submittable-Centric Poetry Contest and the Fiesta Love Poetry Competition. She finds writing to be therapeutic and wants to express her opinions and feelings on sensitive issues that are common but infrequently addressed. In addition, she enjoys painting, singing, and listening to the sound of waves at the beach as some of her favorite pastimes.

A. M. Todd resides in New Brunswick, Canada. Currently at work on a novel, she received a 2018-2019 Toronto Arts Council Writer's Grant. Previous work was published in *Breath and Shadow*. Storytelling is her way of sharing ideas, emotions, and personal experience.

Cohl Warren-Howles lives in the hometown of William Shakespeare, Stratford-upon-Avon. Her published works include *The Silent Scream* and have been included in *Pen 2 Paper*, *Life Plus Two Metres*, and *Not My President*. She enjoys capturing his thoughts in both rhyme and short stories.

Xanadu lives in *Iv*, Space of Infinite Imagination, Public's Home 0. It consists in publications, performances and exhibits in art, jazz, and literary contexts.



Amanda LaMunyon, *Geode*, 2019, acrylic pour painting, 8" x 10"



Amanda LaMunyon, *Sunset on the River*, 2009, age 14, acrylics, 16" x 20"