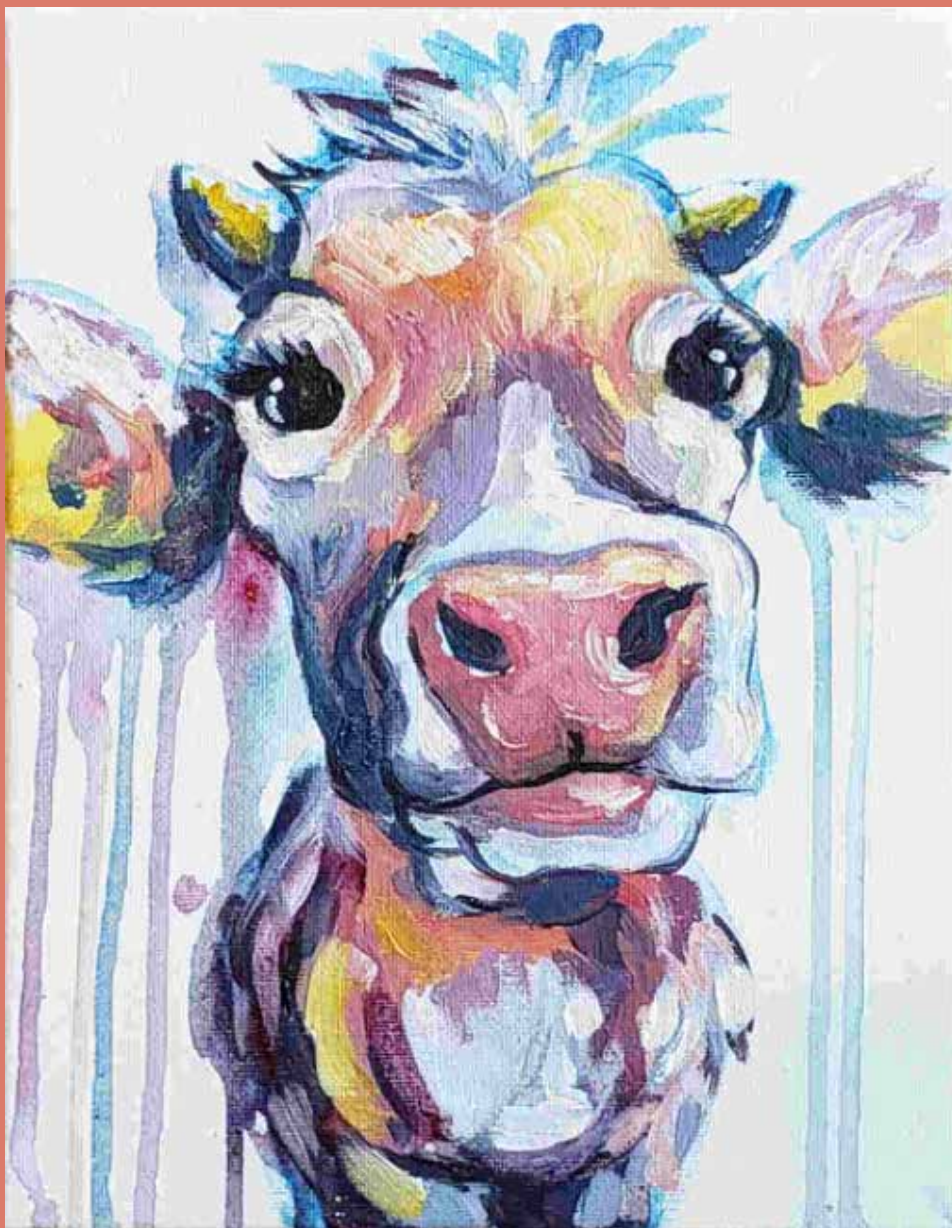


KALEIDOSCOPE

EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCE OF DISABILITY THROUGH LITERATURE AND THE FINE ARTS

Number 85

Summer/Fall Online 2022



THE PATH TO CONTENTMENT

"My Mother's Geranium" *by AnnaLee Wilson*

"Laura's Island" *by Evelyn Arvey*

"Naked Facebook Friday" *by Nancy Deyo*

Contents

◆ FEATURED ESSAY

My Mother's Geranium 4

AnnaLee Wilson

◆ FEATURED ART

Savoring Every Moment 32

Sandy Palmer

◆ CREATIVE NONFICTION

Just Counting 11

Marcia Pradzinski

Naked Facebook Friday 22

Nancy Deyo

Polio in War and Peace 28

Troy Reeves

Brianna's Story 39

Kirie Pedersen

◆ FICTION

Laura's Island 14

Evelyn Arvey

A Common Need 37

Sylvia Melvin

The Silence Between Us 44

Cristina Hartmann

Brendan 54

John William

Tommy 60

Kale Bandy

◆ PERSONAL ESSAY

They Say I Must Fight 52

Jen Eve Taylor

◆ POETRY

A Talk with My Brother
in His Illness 10

Doug Tanoury

They Came Apart 13

Dina S. Towbin

Handicap 13

Mary Wemple

Biography 21

Colleen Anderson

Poetry in Its Naked Form 51

Levi J. Mericle

◆ BOOK REVIEW

María Blanchard: Transcending
Disability through Shape
and Color 65

Sandra J. Lindow

◆ BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES 68



Alana Ciena Tillman, *Happy Cow*, 2019, acrylic on canvas,
9" x 12"

STAFF

PUBLISHER

Brian Thomas, President/CEO
United Disability Services

MANAGING EDITOR

Lisa Armstrong, M.A.

ART COORDINATOR

Sandy Palmer

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT

Amy Tubergen

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF EMERITUS

Darshan Perusek, Ph.D.
Gail Willmott, M.Ed.

HONORARY EDITOR

Phyllis Boerner

MANUSCRIPT REVIEW PANEL

Fiction Review

Mark Decker, Ph.D.
Bloomsburg University
Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania

Poetry Review

Sandra J. Lindow
University of Wisconsin-Stout
Menomonie, Wisconsin

Kaleidoscope, 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.



Kaleidoscope (ISSN 2329-5775)
is published online semiannually.
Copyright © 2022 Kaleidoscope Press
United Disability Services,
701 S. Main St., Akron, OH 44311-1019
(330) 762-9755 Phone
(330) 762-0912 Fax
email: kaleidoscope@udsakron.org
<http://www.kaleidoscopeonline.org>
kaleidoscopepodcast.podbean.com

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

We request credit for publication as follows:

Previously published by

*Kaleidoscope: Exploring
the Experience of Disability through
Literature and the Fine Arts* (include
issue number)

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

Submissions:

Email or online submissions preferred.

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

Funding support:

Grants from the **Lloyd L. and Louise K. Smith Foundation** and the **Kenneth L. Calhoun Charitable Trust** help support the publication of *Kaleidoscope*.

For more information on how you can help, visit us at KaleidoscopeOnline.org.

MY MOTHER'S GERANIUM

ANNALEE WILSON



Toward the end of her life, my mother kept a red geranium in a terra-cotta pot. Geranium is a common flowering plant with a mistaken identity. When the Dutch brought it from South Africa in the seventeenth century, horticulturists mistook it for one that grew wild in Europe. Botany was an imprecise science at the time, but like so many other assumptions about life, that idea stuck though it was, in fact, a *Pelargonium*. My mother's plant sat alone on her bedroom windowsill in her apartment in the Riverdale section of the Bronx.

Each morning before breakfast, a home health aide awoke to my mother's voice over a baby monitor and came straight to her room. She rolled up the window shades, toileted and washed my mother, then prepared and fed her breakfast.

My mother received five pills, which she washed down with lukewarm tea sipped through a straw. Afterwards, the aide worked the controls of the electric bed, raising the whole mattress, then the head, so she could help Mom smoke the first of six daily cigarettes. When she'd had enough nicotine, Mom mustered all the muscles she could to roll her head toward the window and gaze out. Except for the weather, the distant view to a public housing project in the East Bronx stayed the same. But not the geranium.

I visited my mother each Sunday. My first job was checking the geranium.

"It's got three big blossoms," I'd report, "and new buds about to burst."

“Pick off the dead flowers.”

“There aren’t any.”

“Yes,” she insisted, “I see brown.”

Mom was in her late seventies at the time, and resembled a quadriplegic after years of living with a disease that afflicted her and two of her sisters. Doctors in the 1930s examined her oldest sister and mistook her symptoms for muscular dystrophy, a label that stuck for all three women, though the diagnosis only partially fit. Nevertheless, her eyesight was sharp.

“The flower is still beautiful,” I said.

“Pinch it off. Get rid of it.” Her tone of voice made me bristle and threw me back to my childhood when she could still walk, but could not bend down.

“There’s lint on the carpet over there. Pick it up. Then we won’t need to vacuum so often.”

“There’s nothing there,” I’d say, scanning the aqua broadloom.

“I see it. Is something wrong with your eyes?”

Eventually I found a speck to remove, but I resented doing this. I was young and powerless to stand up to her. Now I was older and understood her need to be in control. Her body had been failing her for more than fifty years. Yet I still resented yielding to her wishes, even over a lowly geranium.

“If you don’t pick off the dead ones, new ones won’t bloom. Does it need water?”

“Yes. It’s bone dry.”

“When this geranium dies, so will I. Since I’m not ready, go in the kitchen and get the watering can.”

I knew where to find the watering can. I’d set up her apartment when I moved my parents back from Florida to the Bronx. I had been fetching it from under the kitchen sink for years. In my teens, when she was partially ambulatory, I had followed her explicit directions to lift and place each foot

as she “walked” up the wooden steps from the beach. I had made my bed and vacuumed using the exact movements she demanded. Now she was helpless. The balance of power had shifted to me, but it was too late for me to exercise it.

During my visits we sometimes played Boggle, a word game at which my mother excelled. She tried to interest me in honeymoon bridge, which she played using a card holder that my deceased father had devised from an empty plastic wrap carton slit down the middle. But Scrabble was her real love. I picked her tiles from the bag, then averted my eyes while I placed them on her rack flipping the tiles as she directed so she could read the letters.

“Move the second one from the left to the first position on the right,” she’d say. When it was her turn to make a word, I obediently followed instructions to lay her tiles on the board.

I was young and powerless to stand up to her.

No matter how many games we played, she always won, even when she played with my young daughter, an emerging reader at the time.

“I don’t wanna play with Grammie. Why do I have to?”

My mother loved her grandchild and was hurt when, after a quick kiss hello, Alice rushed out of the room to watch television.

“For godsakes, let her win once in a while. That’s what grandmas are for.”

“She’ll never learn to spell if I pretend to lose,” my mother said. Perhaps it was because she had been dealt a bad hand in life that she always played to win.

* * *

In my teens, I began questioning my mother about her young life: where she lived when her father died; what hap-

pened when her mother couldn't pay the rent and the family was evicted; if she had worried as a child that she would suffer from muscular dystrophy, like her sisters. Growing up, I lived in fear of inheriting the disease that struck only women in my mother's family. I never did. My older cousin, whose mother showed symptoms first, had been told that the disorder would skip a generation before appearing again. That didn't materialize either. The disease was a mystery that had us in its clutches.

My mother's answers to my questions had always been evasive, so I began asking what I thought were less painful questions. I yearned to create a coherent narrative. Who were we? Where had we come from? How was it that a terrible disease could infect and wreak havoc on one family without ever surfacing again?

One day I remembered a box of photos.

My father had retired early so my parents could settle in southern Florida where there was no snow, and they could enjoy an easier life while she still had some strength. As my father was cleaning out their attic to get ready for the move, he called me in distress.

I yearned to create a coherent narrative. Who were we? Where had we come from?

"Your mother is acting crazy," he cried. "'Throw everything out,' she says. 'Books. Furniture. Pictures. Clothing.'" My father was frantic.

My husband and I drove to their home in suburban New Jersey and managed to salvage family records, my dolls, and a box of memorabilia including a booklet with a red faux elephant hide cover and the words "Club Harlem. Atlantic City, New Jersey. Entertainment and Dancing." Inside was a souvenir photo of my parents on their honeymoon.

Dancing? When I thought of my mother and her now helpless condition, I couldn't imagine her jitterbugging with my father on a dance floor. But there were my newlywed parents holding hands across a table for two, their smiling faces turned toward the camera, my mother in full control of her body. My father has a shy grin on his pudgy face. He was a grocer's son and didn't get much exercise helping out behind the deli counter. From his moon-eyed look, I could

tell my dad adored his new wife, a slender doll in a short-sleeved white dress; her back curled gracefully toward her new husband. She wore her curly hair in a wispy feather cut, a style she always preferred. Her shapely arms reached across the table to pull him in. Was he wondering how this beautiful creature could want him?

There was no date on the souvenir photo, but I knew when it was taken. After my father died, among his papers I found my parents' marriage license. My mother had often said I was born exactly nine months after they were married on March 23, 1944. But the marriage license was dated June 23, 1944. She and my father had a shotgun wedding. I had laughed uproariously when she admitted this, but stopped when I realized her shame. For all the years of their marriage they had been celebrating a phony wedding date. I, too, am in the honeymoon picture. But at three months pregnant with me, my mother was not yet showing.

One day I arrived at my mother's apartment in Riverdale prepared to take notes. As I sat at her bedside giving her a smoke, I kept my notebook on my lap and my writing hand low, so she wouldn't notice what I was doing. My plan was to record everything, no matter what she told me, until I had enough information to piece together her life.

As she puffed on her cigarette, I recalled the photo inside the red cover.

"Ma. What did you and Dad do on your honeymoon?" She hardened her eyes and made a miniscule movement with her head as if to rid her brain of some memory.

"Your father was such a rube," she said, spitting out her words.

"What do you mean?" I asked. Was she referring to sexual intimacy? My father's social awkwardness? Was he a yokel coming to town for the first time? He might have been unsophisticated, but my father came from an intact family, where all three children graduated from college or business school. She came from a family of seven children whose ages spanned three generations. None of them finished high school. Her father died young, one brother disappeared so he didn't have to contribute wages to the family, and three of the four sisters suffered from a progressive debilitating illness.

"Smoke," she said, without answering my question. I raised the cigarette to her lips and tried again.

"Where did you stay in Atlantic City?"

"We took a cheap room for the week," she replied, but would say no more.

The mind wants to make a story about everything. And when she didn't have more to say, I filled in the rest. I needed a story to tell myself, a story to ground my life, and assure me that my mother's family had existed. That I had a background. A history. A continuous unbroken line from somewhere to here. One that muscular dystrophy, or whatever she had, could not destroy.

From her few words and knowing my father would have just begun a low-paying job as a substitute math teacher in Newark, I pictured a rundown Victorian guest house not unlike the ones our family summered in along the Jersey Shore. Their room might have had one bed, a double if they were lucky, a chest of drawers, and an iron-stained sink for handwashing and basic grooming. Everything—walls, ceiling, and furniture—would be slathered with cheap white paint, the dresser painted so many times that its drawers had to be rocked open. A shared bathroom—water closet and tub—would be on an upper floor. Showering would take place outdoors in wooden stalls where guests took turns washing the sand from the cracks and crevices of their bodies after coming from the beach. Everything—their clothing, shoes, the air in their room, their skin—would smell of seaweed and damp sand.

I imagined my parents' first night as people strolled by their window murmuring and laughing, voices muffled from the damp night air, Jersey voices with flat A's; Philadelphia voices with words like gas spoken as though they ended in "z," intimate and familiar, yet perfect strangers.

But these were my ideas, not hers. So I asked a few more questions, scrawling my mother's words in my notebook.

"What do you want to know this for?" she asked more than once.

"I don't know," I said gazing out her east window for an answer; my eyes drifting over the city housing project and to the windowsill, where her ever-present geranium quietly bloomed. "Just wondering what your life was like when you first got married."

* * *

During my visits, I checked her mail for bills to pay. I replenished her cash envelope. If need be, I hid a twenty in my deceased father's wardrobe. "In case," I said. From a pile on her bedside table, I pulled the public library's latest audio books catalogue, and marked those that interested her for ordering during the week. She couldn't hold the phone, but her aide would dial the number for her and lay the phone on her pillow beside her ear.

"AnnaLee, don't forget the geranium," she always called out before I left.

I resented the reminders. Hadn't I been tending to her needs for years? That she was still alive at eighty, ten years after my father died, was a testament to my abilities. But old habits are knitted into a person. As much as I couldn't let it go, she couldn't stop reminding me. Neither of us could control ourselves. She had been bedbound for so many years and was used to bossing people as if they were her hands. In this way, I continued to tend her geranium, and say, "I know, Ma," when she demanded I rub the leaves so she could enjoy the geranium oil.

"AnnaLee, don't forget the geranium," she always called out before I left.

I noticed that the soil in the terra-cotta pot had become rock solid. When I watered the geranium, an oxygen-starved slurry of mud sat on the surface and took an hour to be absorbed. A depression developed around the base of the emaciated stem. The nutrient-poor soil had left the geranium so stressed that it now had tiny anemic leaves. Yet, it never failed to bloom. Like my mother, its limbs had contorted into the shape of its disability. New growth only came from the head. The core was useless except to pull enough water and nutrients from its shriveling stems to push out another crown of flowers. By sheer will it lived.

One Sunday I brought fertilizer with me and began feeding the geranium. Within one week the plant was pushing out leaves in an effort to create a new armature. When a fresh limb sprouted, my mother became unhappy.

"I don't want leaves. I just want flowers."

She had so little power in her life that I thought she should at least have power over a plant, so I stopped feeding it. As its nature was to propagate itself, it went back to pushing out flowers.

The day my mother died my husband and I were awakened early by a phone call.

"Your mother is not responding," her morning aide, Ettie, said, enunciating each word.

"What do you mean not responding? Is she dead?"

"Come immediately. I only have fifteen minutes before I have to call my supervisor."

I should have been ready. During my usual visit the day before, I sensed something had changed when she refused to eat lobster, her favorite food. Yet I was unprepared for the call. When I hung up the phone I was aware of a stillness. A hollowness. A whiteness.

Though my mother had refused her dinner, I continued asking questions and noting her answers on my pad. When I asked what foods her mother cooked for the family, she ignored my question. Instead she reminded me about the scar on her back from a third degree burn. As a young girl she had leaned too close to a lit stove, when the family had no heat.

“What are you always doing in your lap? Are you writing something down?” she had asked, surprising me.

“I just want to remember what your life was like when you were a little girl.”

“Why would you want to remember that? Those were bad times,” she said, the furrow deepening between her eyebrows.

“Please, Ma.” I was desperate. It was more than just wanting her to keep talking. Her loss of appetite and a resignation in her voice warned me that she was at the end of her life. I wanted to make sense of her fragments of information, the half-remembered truths, the mistaken memories.

A short story I had written inspired by my mother was coming out—the first work of mine to get published. The fiction was a way for me to honor her life. I was dying to tell her, but I could not. She would have been horrified to know that she and the family disease had been the subject of my writing. I was proud of the upcoming publication, yet frightened. What if a family member read it and told her? I had changed names, but no one else could have written the story but me.

These were my thoughts that morning as my husband and I brushed our teeth, pulled on our clothes, and jumped into a taxi to our garage, three miles uptown from our apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. In no way would we make the drive up the West Side Highway, across the bridge to Riverdale, and find parking, all within fifteen minutes. We would worry about that later.

I used my key to unlock my mother’s apartment. In the living room sat two police officers, my mother’s aide, and two EMS workers.

“We did everything to save her,” one of the rescue workers said before I could remove my coat. “We even used the defibrillator to restart her heart. We were too late. She had passed.”

I nodded a thank-you to her and hid my horror as I gazed around my mother’s apartment. Every room, even the hall to her bedroom, had prominent DO NOT RESUSCITATE signs taped to the walls. My mind shot to what electric shock could do to a slack body in which voluntary muscles hadn’t functioned in years.

When I hung up the phone I was aware of a stillness. A hollowness. A whiteness.

We were there three hours. The police made reports. They looked around the apartment, asked questions, and expressed their condolences. A representative from the crematory arrived with more forms to fill out before preparing my mother for transport.

“Are you the only next of kin?” the officer asked as he was winding up.

“I have a sister, but I’m in charge of my mother’s care.”

“A sister?” the officer said, his interest growing. “Well in that case, I’ll need your keys.”

“What do you mean? How will I get in?”

“You’ll need a notarized affidavit from your sister giving you the right to enter without her.”

“She lives in Massachusetts,” I said. “I have my mother’s Power of Attorney.”

“Sorry, that’s invalid after a person dies.”

“But I’m the one who must clear out this apartment. The cable company will demand the cable box. Ettie and my mother’s other home healthcare aides have personal belongings here. I have been coming here for twenty years. I want to donate her wheelchair and electric bed. There’s food in the refrigerator.” I went on and on begging him to leave me my keys. He conferred with his partner, but in the end I had to surrender them.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “It’ll just be a few weeks before you can return.”

Half listening, I knew he was spinning a story to placate me, and I was already making my plans.

* * *

“Can I have a private moment with my mother before you take her?” I asked the funeral director when his men arrived with the transport.

“Of course, of course,” he said. “Take as long as you like.”

“Can I see her face?”

He solemnly folded back the sheet and left the room, closing the door behind him.

My mother might have been unable to move, but just yesterday she had been a force in this room.

When I was certain that I’d heard the door close with a click, I took a deep breath and went over to my mother.

Again, I was unprepared for the stillness, the hollowness, the unbearable emptiness. My mother might have been unable to move, but just yesterday she had been a force in this room. Now her mouth and eyes were closed. The muscles in her face had slackened, except for the indelible frown line between her eyebrows, a trait we shared. She was still fierce even in death. Dust gathered in puffs under the bed as if it had been there a long time. I had never noticed it. For so many years, my attention had gone only to my mother.

I took my usual chair by the bed. The window shades were raised to the morning sun. Out the window, the distant East Bronx still resembled a mass of bricked-up New York City projects. It was Monday and the excited voices of children wafted up as they scampered around in a nearby playground.

On the windowsill sat my mother’s gnarled geranium with its tiny struggling leaves and blazing red tips. Before leaving yesterday, I had pruned it, as instructed, to force yet another bloom from its broken body. And today, right on schedule, the geranium had cooperated.

I focused on my mother.

“Ma,” I said, feeling silly. “We need to talk.”

She didn’t say “Why?” with suspicion. She didn’t say, “What about?” She didn’t say, “We’re already talking.” She kept her eyes closed. For once she did not protest. She listened.

“I am going to go through your things. I want your wallet with your Medicare and Social Security cards. I need your debit card so I can withdraw the cash before the bank freezes your account. I need the \$100 I put in the envelope yesterday—also the ‘mad money’ I hid in Dad’s dresser after he died. Can you remind me where we hid your wedding rings? Most important, I need to find your apartment key so I can get back in here.”

I imagined my mother faintly nodding her head mustering whatever muscles she had left.

* * *

“Babe?” my husband called from behind the door. “Are you okay in there?”

“Gimme a few more minutes.”

“These guys have to talk to you before they leave. And they won’t leave before we do.”

“Just a few more minutes. But stay right there.”

I snapped out of my reverie and got to work. I grabbed one of my mother’s worn clutch purses, the kind you tuck under your arm. In the drawer my deceased father used for his socks I found and pocketed the extra set of keys, along with the \$20 in mad money. Rustling through my mother’s scarf drawer I located the cash envelope, slid out the bills, then stuffed them into my mother’s green wallet with her credit card, which also bore my name. Into the attached coin purse went my parents’ matching gold wedding bands, which were hiding under sweaters. I grabbed some of my mother’s silk scarves, and wound the orange and green one she loved around my neck. My mother’s medications sat on her bureau under the TV. I snapped open each bottle, dumped the pills into the cash envelope and crammed all this into the clutch. Finally, I grabbed a porcelain-framed photograph of my sister at four and me at six wearing matching homemade pinafores, standing on the sidewalk at Shonewetter’s rooming house down the Jersey Shore. This I held brazenly in my hand.

“OK,” I called to my husband, “I’m ready.” He opened the door.

* * *

As men from the funeral parlor slid my mother’s body onto the gurney, I spied her geranium holding out its flame,

bravely presenting my mother with one more riotous feather cut of red petals. I grabbed it from the windowsill.

“This geranium gave my mother joy. Can you cremate it with her?” I asked one of the guys and thrust it at him.

After a startled moment he said, “Yes. Absolutely.”

From the recesses of my memory, I picture my mother’s body covered in a white sheet with her plant on top. Dirt has spilled out. The red flower petals have fallen like splotches of blood. The vision is maudlin, and false. The truth is I took the plant from the windowsill, pinched off the oldest blossom, and handed over the pot. I’d like to think the funeral parlor honored my wishes, but just taking the misnamed *Pelargonium* from me and agreeing to cremate it with her was enough. Now perhaps I can write her story. ♦

DOUG TANOURY

A TALK WITH MY BROTHER IN HIS ILLNESS

Whenever my brother talks to me,
His voice always sounds distant and weak
As if he were shouting up at me
From the bottom of a deep well.

Each word from his mouth formed slowly
And deliberately with determination and
Intent and sailing on the air to my ear
Powered like a China Clipper by his breath.

He calls to me from far away, his voice
Wavering and cracking, “Heellloooo Doouuuggg!”
I am always touched by the great effort,
The heavy lifting and great strain.

Each phrase and sentence a construct,
A great edifice of meaning of his own making.
Each word a concrete block, each syllable a brick
Tapped into place by the trowel of his tongue.

There is something archetypically simple
And normal, or would you say ordinary,
In a most comforting way, about two brothers
Talking about nothing in particular.

So, talk to me a moment brother, let’s just
Shoot the shit for a minute, tell me all about
A movie you saw or what you ate for supper
Or why you call it supper and not dinner.

Let there be one more conversation between us,
Ordinary and mundane about pedestrian topics,
Brother to brother, send me a fleet of China Clippers
Laden and packed with meaning like rare spices.

JUST COUNTING

MARCIA PRADZINSKI

Spring break began and my son Adam and I slept late. I'd planned outings—the zoo, the museum, the park—but decided to spend the day just playing with and observing my son. He was six years old and didn't speak, which made it hard to determine what he knew. The school system had evaluated and declared my son developmentally delayed. I chose to ignore that label because it focused on his limitations. I watched for and encouraged his abilities by trying to do what Dr. McLone of Children's Memorial had suggested: "Don't think of Adam in terms of his limitations. Let him lead to show you what he can do."

No doctor or speech therapist ever said Adam wouldn't speak. So, we waited the way any parent of a growing child would. He went through pre-language milestones that usually lead to words. He cooed at two months, the expected age; he laughed a couple months later; he played with different sound syllables, arranging them in patterns that created a sonic phrase he vocalized. For example, I remember him repeating, "Ow-ba, ow-BA, OW-BAA," again and again, beginning with a soft tone that would build and increase to end in a crescendo resembling a demagogue's rant. Why didn't these developmental steps lead to words? No one could tell us.

This spring day was a typical three-bowls-of-oatmeal breakfast. Adam had finished his milk, without flinging the cup in his sleight-of-hand feint that often fooled my groggy-with-sleep brain, and was reaching for books on the kitchen island. Lucky me! I might actually get to clear last night's supper dishes and this morning's breakfast detritus from the counters and sink.

I pulled his three new books down. "Dad got you these when he worked in Milwaukee last week." I held up *Colors*; then *Numbers*; then *Alphabet*. "Your dad was at a class learning about new software for his job." Adam touched and eyed each book before choosing *Numbers*. He hummed in satisfaction. His hand stroked the cover several times as if smoothing out wrinkles before turning the pages.

Adam's fine motor skills were not that of the usual six-year-old, but he made up for it with instinctive and amazing compensation strategies such as his system for turning pages that stuck together: he curled three or four at the corners so they poked up then slipped several fingers between the pages. He often enlisted my hand and his father's as tools to reach things. In the future, he will cover both ears with his hands to block the overhead speaker blast at school; he has hyperacuity, a condition that made the PA system's vibrating, static voice almost unbearable.

The page with a picture of three half-peeled bananas caught Adam's eye—his favorite fruit. He reached for my hand to point at the picture. "Banana," I said. He smiled and fisted my index finger to point at the next banana. "And another banana." He aimed my finger at the third banana on the page and giggled when I yelped, "Oh no! Three *banaaaanas*," in a mock surprise tone that tickled him.

"Nnnnnh," he said pushing my fingers and hands to name the bananas again. This time I counted them: "One, two, three. Three bananas." Adam sighed. "You like bananas, don't you?" He repeated, "nnnnnh," but this time his tone showed mild irritation. He repeated "nnnnn," then added

an agitated “nnnnhguh,” to stress his point. “Okay,” I said, “we’ll do a recount. One, two, three bananas.” He sighed, beamed and settled down once I started adding up the fruit. Good guess on my part! I’d paid close attention to Adam’s vocal nuances and facial gestures from the time he was an infant. Those indicators often helped me guess what he was trying to “say.”

The counting routine didn’t finish with two or three rounds of bananas. Oh no! We went over and over and over the one-two-three banana cycle, with Adam showing no signs of boredom. Quite unlike me, who yawned while I tallied. He was so intrigued by what we were doing I didn’t have the heart to stop.

My mind wandered. I imagined what other kids were doing while Adam and I counted bananas. His former playdate pals were probably outside playing catch, tag, tetherball, or riding their bikes. We didn’t see them much anymore, other than in passing on the street. I imagined three-year-olds in downtown Chicago running, pointing at displays in store windows, their parents in tow; I imagined a four-year-old who’d taught herself to read sitting in a beanbag chair with a book of fairy tales while her five-year-old brother counted pens on his mother’s desk. Adam and I sat in the kitchen counting bananas, a learning activity most children did as toddlers.

On the following day, we graduated to eight dalmatians pictured in the book. Adam started using my finger to answer questions about the items. “Where’s banana three?” I might ask. He would grab my finger to single out the third banana. We did three bananas, four turtles, five parrots then skipped to eight dalmatians. The dogs stole his attention. We stayed on that page for a long while.

A dog was barking outside. A garbage truck chugged down the alleyway. A blue jay screeched at the same time raindrops pattered against the porch windows. The fridge was humming, and the teakettle was whistling to let me know the water was ready for tea. Not one of these sounds distracted Adam.

“That’s very good. What about five? Show me dalmatian five.” Adam’s hand jumped my finger over to the page that listed one, two, three and four, letting it hover while he studied the numbers. Then he flew my hand over to the adjoining page that numbered five, six, seven, eight and pushed my finger down hard on the number five and the fifth dalmatian.

He continued the game with occasional uncertainty when I named numbers over three, but after ten to fifteen minutes

more work he immediately found the numbers I asked for. Once he felt comfortable with all eight numbers, he progressed to nine then ten. That’s when he pushed my hand out of the way so he could point with his own fingers at the animals and numbers as he turned the pages. Adam was informing me that he understood what to do. “You can end the lesson now Mom,” he might have said if he could have, “and your hands are in my way.” Using four fingers to press down on the numbers I asked for continued awhile longer until it was time for lunch.

Later that day, when his father came home from work I said, “Pat, you want to see what Adam and I did today?” A smile lit Pat’s face as he kissed the top of Adam’s head then settled into a chair next to the high chair.

“Show me what you and Mom did, buddy?”

“Start him off by asking where a numbered animal is?”

“Okay. Can you show me the three turtles?” Adam turned to the requested page and sighed as he pressed four fingers onto a turtle’s back.

A few days later Pat and I sat next to Adam and took turns playing the counting game with him. “Show me seven,” I said and Adam pressed his index and middle finger down hard on the picture of the seventh dalmatian. After a few more rounds, Adam started to complain: “Nnnnnh,” he said, motioning with his hand wildly and pitching forward in his seat. “What, Adam? I don’t know what you want.” He looked back at his book and pushed his fingers down hard on the first dalmatian. So I said, “Right that’s one . . . one dalmatian dog.” But he protested again with a loud “nnnnh” and an “unnnnhguh” as he pushed his hand against my face. He wanted me to be quiet. When he wanted me to stop singing he did that. So I took his advice, became silent and observant.

Pat and I watched as Adam pressed his fingers on each of the eight dogs in consecutive order. His eyes tracked his fingers as he pointed to each numbered picture. Pat said, “I wonder if he’s saying the numbers inside his head.”

“You know, I bet he is,” I said. We both watched in amazement as our non-speaking six-year-old son continued counting the dalmatians in silence. All this occurred during the spring break holiday from school. We did get to the zoo and to Kohl’s Children’s Museum, but the best thing we did together on spring break was the new counting game, which helped me realize more of Adam’s abilities. Seeing him press his four small fingers on the animals in his book as he quietly counted was an accomplishment I savored. ♦

DINA S. TOWBIN

THEY CAME APART

I left them behind,
 My black high-heeled shoes,
 Well worn, they had served their purpose,
 Walking me through parties, graduations, and weddings.

But in the end, they came apart.
 While I stood at my sister's wedding waiting to dance,
 My shoes gave up the ghost.

The bottoms peeled away,
 Leaving me to trip over my own feet, like a clumsy toddler wearing her mom's shoes.
 I had to sit, unable to walk.

Somehow ironic given the bride shared the same fate
 but because of illness, not for a worn-out shoe.

I left the shoes behind, in Seattle, near the trash but not in it,
 Thinking some shoe fairy might rescue them and see them reborn.

MARY WEMPLE

HANDICAP

use the word
 as they do in horse racing
 it's the weight
 added
 to the one
 who is stronger
 than all the others

LAURA'S ISLAND

EVELYN ARVEY

It was Mitch who gave me the Island. He gave it to me on a damp and listless Thursday, a Thursday so hot that his body mostly refused to function, as happens to people with multiple sclerosis. He was miserable. Because he was miserable, so was I. The two of us slumped on our recliners, waiting for the afternoon to drag to its sorry end, waiting for me to muster enough energy to haul both of our pathetic selves to bed.

"Mmm," Mitch said, waving a *Neurology Today* at me, "Look at this. It's about that new MS drug."

He handed the magazine to me. The medicine was meant for the other, more common type of multiple sclerosis. The type Mitch didn't have.

"Did you read it?" he asked a minute later. "What are you looking at?"

"This." I held up the magazine, folding the magazine so only the glossy advertisement opposite the article showed.

"The island is pretty, isn't it?"

"Mmmm."

I stared at the image: a low-lying island, an atoll. A line of palm trees leaning over a strand of golden sand just wide enough for walking. Turquoise waters rippling in a wide lagoon. A fallen palm lying half-buried in sand and pebbles, the perfect place for me to sit and contemplate the breakers on the far side of the lagoon.

See? I was already picturing myself there.

A pharmaceutical advertisement was splashed across the sky of this idyllic place: *A New You! Try Our Herbal Drugs.*

Mitch interrupted my reverie. "We should go to bed. You turned on the air conditioner?"

Of course I'd turned on the air conditioner. Had I ever forgotten?

I took very good care of my husband. In a few minutes I would help him to bed, which was quite an undertaking: I'd grip his gait belt and help him from his easy chair and into his wheelchair. I'd help him from the wheelchair to the stair-lift and then into his upstairs wheelchair. I'd help him relieve himself. I'd make sure he took his handful of pills. I'd lift his legs onto our bed, and then I'd gently manipulate them, stretching his tight-as-piano-wire hamstrings while trying not to hurt him. Then I'd massage the knots out of his shoulders, his arms, his legs.

I'd do all of that, and more.

But not quite yet. I wanted to do something first.

I went up to our room and taped the picture to the wall beside the bed. *I just want something pretty to look at*, is what I would have told Mitch if he'd asked me what I was doing. *I want to fall asleep pretending I'm there on that island. Not here.*

On the other hand, maybe it was better if he didn't ask me what I was doing. There were things Mitch didn't need to know: I was so very tired. I was so very unhappy. Worse, I'd begun to realize I didn't like my life anymore and I felt guilty for even thinking that. It wasn't Mitch's fault that his disease had made him dependent on me. My life revolved around Mitch's illness, it had to, I was his caregiver.

It wasn't his fault. It wasn't.

I sighed; the picture I'd just taped to the wall wasn't straight, the right corner hung low. I un-stuck it, bent the paper forward to put another piece of tape on the back, and then I saw it: a handwritten note on the top right corner—*Laura asked for it three times, and she was heard.*

What was this?

A message scrawled in felt-tip marker on the back of my beautiful island?

This might be a good place to mention my name: Laura Wilson.

My name is Laura.

* * *

I stared at the picture of the island when I woke up the next morning, careful not to squirm because as soon as I moved my day belonged to Mitch. I lay on my side, studying the image I'd taped to the wall. I counted the trees: eighteen in the foreground, many more in the background. I took note of every color in the lagoon, the luscious blues, the impossible greens, the succulent turquoises.

My life revolved around Mitch's illness, it had to, I was his caregiver.

Such a beautiful place. If I were there, I would spend an entire day doing only what *I* wanted. How novel that would be, to do nothing at all! How long had it been since my time had been my own?

I want to go to there, to that island, I thought, yawning, still half asleep, eyes closing on their own. I really, really want to go there. I want to go to that island so bad.

* * *

And then, I did.

When I opened my eyes everything was different. My bedroom was gone. The hallway was gone. The window looking out on the Douglas fir was gone.

I reeled out of bed, yanking the covers with me. "Mitch! Mitch!" I shrieked, but he didn't answer because *he* was gone too.

The Island, I thought. I'm on the Island. This isn't possible!

I fell back to sit on the edge of the bed, clumps of sheets still gripped in my fists—my bed, minus my husband, was the only thing that had followed me to this place. I sat there, taking in my new surroundings, reminding myself to breathe. The air smelled exactly as

I'd imagined it would, of sunshine, of ocean, of warm growing things. I reached out and ran my fingertips over the woven matting that now covered the wall near the bed. The bumpy knobby texture and soft *rat-tat-tat* of my fingernails convinced me more than anything that something marvelous had just happened.

Except . . . maybe it hadn't.

It all seemed so very real, but what if it wasn't? I'd been desperately wishing for my dismal reality to be replaced by something better, something tropical, something where multiple sclerosis wouldn't be a part of my life. So . . . maybe I was hallucinating. It all looked so real, but maybe I'd tumbled into a powerful daydream?

I stared out of the window, taking in glimpses of glimmering ocean through the trees, following flickers of brightly-colored birds as they darted here and there, watching a green gecko with yellow toes scramble up a palm tree, and then down, and then up again. No daydream included geckos clambering in palm trees, or wallcoverings that left tiny bits of rattan under the fingernails, or the salty-tangy smell of the ocean.

This was no daydream. This was real.

I looked around. What had been my bedroom was now a one-room, light-filled cabin. My bed and a small bathroom with a half-open door were at one end, a kitchen and eating area in the middle, and a sitting area opening onto a covered lanai at the far end. Screened windows on all sides let in warm breezes and golden light.

In the same place where I'd taped the picture of the island was an image of my own home. I leaned forward. Written in the sky was another message: *Welcome! Tell No One. This place is for you alone.* In smaller writing, underneath: *Laura, you Already Know the Way Home.*

I stared at the picture, twisting the bed-sheets in my hands.

The picture was wrong. I didn't know the way home!

I looked away, anywhere but at the wall, and noticed things about the room I hadn't seen before: a coffee maker, a pair of yellow flip-flops beside the door.

Maybe I do know the way home. I took a deep breath and sat up straighter. *I got here by saying I wanted to be on the island. Maybe I just say I want to go home three times?* I gazed at the picture, knowing I was right. *Okay. I can do that. Only . . . only I can't tell Mitch where I've been.*

Which made me gasp.

Mitch!

I'd all but forgotten about him! Was he okay?

What kind of caregiver was I? Was Mitch lying in a broken heap on the floor because I'd stolen the bed out from under him? I had to go back home! I'd been on the Island for about five minutes; anything could have happened in those five minutes. I put my hands flat on my knees and stared at the image of my house.

I want to go home, I want to go home. I. Want. To. Go. HOME!

And I went home.

* * *

It was easy. I closed my eyes, and when I opened them, I was home. Mitch was

exactly as I'd left him, sprawled on his side of the bed, asleep.

How many times did I go to the Island that first day? Twenty times? Fifty? Like a ping-pong ball, I bounced back and forth, back and forth. No matter how long I lingered on the Island, only one second passed at home.

Mitch never noticed a thing.

**I looked up as a
brilliantly plumed,
long-tailed bird landed
in the tree next to
my lanai.**

Or maybe, he did.

"There's something about you . . ." Mitch said as we were eating breakfast. "You seem cheerful this morning."

"Do I?" I sliced a strawberry and slid the pieces into his bowl.

"It's nice."

He ate his cereal. I buttered my toast.

"Laura," he said after a while, "we need to start looking again. This time for real."

We needed to find a new place to live, a wheelchair-accessible place. The locations we'd already visited, the condos with cheap wooden paneling; the apartments that were even less accessible than our own house; the senior retirement complexes with roving old ladies and bingo nights—they made me wince, but Mitch was right. The house we'd lived in for twenty years was still functional for Mitch's needs, but only just barely. Soon, it wouldn't be.

"I guess so," I said. "Okay."

Mitch looked out the window, then sighed. "How about when it's not so hot out?"

"Next month, maybe."

"Next month."

We shared a look. It was the same thing we'd said four weeks ago.

All day long I stayed near Mitch and helped him with everything he needed until it was time to go to bed and I could go back to my beautiful little private Island that was most decidedly not wheelchair accessible.

* * *

Welcome, Laura, read the first page of a book called *Laura's Island Paradise* that I found in the cabin. *Make yourself at home. You will find your kitchen restocked every morning with fresh selections for your enjoyment.*

I looked up as a brilliantly plumed, long-tailed bird landed in the tree next to my lanai. It regarded me with a tilted head, as if it had never seen such a thing as a too-pale woman in a cotton sundress sitting on a deck chair with her feet up, sipping jasmine tea, nibbling on sliced fruits, and humming.

"Hi, you," I said.

The bird chattered.

Something moved at the base of one of the palm trees—a coconut crab? It was huge, as big as the pillow on my bed. I recognized it from my new book.

"Hi," I said.

The stalks on top of its head waggled.

You will be glad to know there are no mosquitos, rats, snakes, lionfish, jellyfish, or sharks on your Island nor in the surrounding waters.

"You won't bite me, then?" I asked the bird. It fluffed red and blue feathers and came closer. I plucked a grape from my fruit dish and set it on the far edge of the table.

The animals of your Island are tame and will leave if you clap your hands. None will enter your cabin uninvited.

The bird hopped closer.

"Are you tame?"

It chirped.

"You know what? Mitch would love you. He really would."

I had plans for this, my first full day: I would go exploring. I'd circumnavigate the Island on a network of trails, a hike that, according to the book, would take an hour or so. Afterwards, I'd find the location where the original photograph of the island had been taken. Perhaps I'd dip my toes in the ocean. Perhaps I'd sketch in the blank-paged notebook I'd found in the cabin.

Perhaps I'd start coming back to life.

Was this the reason for the Island's existence? For me to find happiness again?

A nice thought, but I was sure there was more. There had to be more.

The bird fluttered to the table. "Go on, take the grape," I said.

He made quick work of the grape. Just to see what would happen, I clapped my hands softly. He hopped backwards, then with a final chitter, he flew away. I knew he'd be back; he was my first friend on the Island.

I read the final words of the introduction.

Make this Island your own. Come as often as you like. Stay as long as you

need to, so that you may be a good caregiver to the one who needs you. May you and those you love be forever healed.

That last line? It may be the most beautiful thing I've ever read.

* * *

During the next few weeks I learned more things:

I found that small things tucked inside my bathrobe pocket, such as ginger candy or a packet of tea, would make the jump to the Island with me.

Stay as long as you need to, so that you may be a good caregiver to the one who needs you. May you and those you love be forever healed.

I learned that the Island animals would come to me for minor injuries, and I would try to help them by following the First Aid section of *Herbal Remedies*, the second book I found in the cabin.

I discovered that I enjoyed making simple poultices following directions in the book. I used the leaves and twigs of bushes that grew right outside my cabin, and I loved the way the concoctions infused the room with an earthy, spicy aroma as they bubbled on the stove.

I learned that I missed Mitch terribly, especially at night when I was alone in my little cabin in the palm trees. I learned that I never stopped feeling guilty for leaving him behind, for

cheating on him emotionally with this magical Island, for leaving him out of a huge part of my life.

Most of all, I learned that lounging on my lanai, walking the trails, playing with the wildlife was wonderful, but it wasn't enough. Where was my mission?

I needed a mission.

A mission would give me a reason to be on the Island, a reason for everything.

* * *

"No, really, you do seem different," said Mitch, peering sideways at me from the passenger seat of the car.

"Oh?"

"I can't put my finger on it, exactly. But you do."

Mitch and I were on our way to visit an assisted living place, but I had my doubts. How could we possibly live there? We were far too young to be sidelined in such a place. But if not there, where? How long could we manage in our house? How long could I manage without help?

No wonder I escaped to my Island every night.

"Mitch, um, let's play fantasy," I blurted. "Let's pretend you could do anything you wanted. What would you do?"

"Okay, fine. I could do anything? Hmm. Do I have MS?"

"No. No. Of course not."

He thought for a moment. At a red light, he turned to me. "Okay. If I wasn't messed up, if I wasn't like *this*, I'd own a bookshop. With wooden floors. With couches and a cat. Two cats! And a coffee shop." He pointed

to a café with blue awnings across the street. “It would look like that place over there.” He paused. “Hmmm. There are condos above those shops.”

The light changed and I drove on. “I didn’t know you wanted a bookstore, Mitch.”

“I guess I didn’t either.”

We drove in silence for a few blocks.

“How about you, Laura? What would you do if you could do anything?”

If I could do anything?

Anything?

The world slowed down. I made a choking sound.

“Laura?” Mitch asked, sounding worried. “What’s the matter?”

With a roaring sense of destiny, with my hands clenched white-knuckled on the steering wheel, I told him. “Mitch. Honey . . . I would . . . I would find a cure for you.”

“Good one,” he said, nodding.

I’d found my mission.

* * *

I was sitting cross-legged on the bed in my Island cabin with my animal friends, trying to figure out how to help Mitch, but my eyes kept wandering to the gray kitten that showed up that very morning, limping, whimpering, hungry. I gave him a bowl of cool water and fed him from my own breakfast of eggs and ham. Then I cleaned the angry wound on his front leg, wrapped it in the soft leaves of a pantan bush, gave him a few mashed-up oceanberries to combat infection, and made him a nice nest from two blankets and a pillow. *Herbal Remedies* had helpful advice for everything, it seemed.

Everything except for curing multiple sclerosis.

I opened *Laura’s Island* to the plant-identifying section, leafed through sketchbooks full of my own simple drawings of Island flora, re-read the chapter in *Herbal Remedies* on creating and testing poultices. I studied the notes I’d jotted down about my attempts to help my animal friends. I frowned. Why were the animals so prone to accidents? And so sickly?

I’d think about that later.

“Tell me. How would you make a cure for MS?”

“But what should I *do*?” I asked a gecko. He’d climbed up onto the bed and was sniffing at *Herbal Remedies*. “Tell me. How would you make a cure for MS?” I scratched the gecko under the chin, where he liked it best. “Mitch has primary progressive MS. His nerves are damaged. Are you listening? That’s why Mitch can’t walk. The axons that link the sections of his nerves are gone. What should I do?”

My Island friends had no answers for me. The bird I met on my first day flew down from the headboard to land at the gecko’s side, fluffing his feathers so that I could see the smaller blue ones underneath. The kitten batted at the gecko’s tail as it swished back and forth, a game they both seemed to enjoy. After a while, I clapped my hands and they dispersed, all except for the gray kitten. It was time to start reading *Herbal Remedies*.

For real this time.

I had a mission.

* * *

“You’re going to the library?” Mitch closed the pamphlet we’d been looking through. *Salmonberry Creek Residences*, it said on the glossy front cover. He shoved it so far across the table it nearly fell into my lap. “It’s been so long since I’ve checked out anything from the library,” he said with a voice so low I could barely hear his words. He looked out the window, at the drifting October clouds. “Help me to the bathroom?”

I pushed his wheelchair into the too-narrow bathroom, banging it on the door frame, giving him an unpleasant jolt. “Sorry, honey. We ought to get someone in here to widen it.”

“Later.”

“Later.” I put the brakes on his wheelchair. “Besides, we might be moving.”

“Moving. Right.”

“You know what?” I pulled down his pants and underwear. “We passed some nice-looking condos on the way to that assisted living place, remember? Above the place with the blue awning? We should look at those.”

“Sure. Fine.”

I helped him onto the toilet, both of us silent. As often as we’d done this awkward dance in the bathroom, we never got entirely comfortable with it. We never got comfortable discussing our impending move, either. Neither of us wanted to acknowledge that the hard work would necessarily fall mostly on me. I hadn’t even started going through our house to sort and clear the detritus of twenty years of marriage. I could barely bring myself to think about it.

That afternoon I checked out seven books. Most were about herbal healing,

but one was a history of the Civil War, a subject Mitch had been interested in before being diagnosed with MS. I had an idea: before going to the Island each night I'd read aloud to him. It would be a surprise we'd both enjoy. It would be nice.

We needed nice things in our lives.

* * *

I collected samples of every plant on the Island. I studied their life stages, I sketched leaves and stems and flowers, I dissected buds and collected seeds. I sat for hours, testing plant sap for inherent healing properties, as directed by *Herbal Remedies*.

I made myself an expert.

* * *

My fingers turned the palest green, and the color followed me back to the real world.

"You've been *gardening*? When do you have the time?" Mitch asked one morning as I helped him dress. He followed my hands as I pulled on his socks and smoothed out the toes, as I tugged his soft knit pants with the drawstring over ankles, knees, hips. Working in tandem, his arms slung around my shoulders and me clutching his gait belt, we transferred him from the bed into his wheelchair, and once again I was grateful for my sturdy frame, and for my height, and even for the fact that I was somewhat overweight. I tried to be careful, because what would Mitch do if I hurt my back? My knee nudged the Civil War book where it lay on the bedside table, reminding me that we were almost through the last chapter and it was time for me to find another book for us to share.

He loved reading time. We both did.

He was right, we'd been busy. Amazingly, there had been a unit available at

the place above the coffee shop with the blue awning, and—lucky us!—it was ADA compliant. There was an elevator. It had a roll-in shower. Mitch's wheelchair would fit in every space—no more crashing into door frames. There was nothing *wrong* with the condo. It was relatively new. It was in a decent area. There was a community garden out back. There was a restaurant—and a coffee shop—only steps away. How could we not take it?

But oh, that condo was small.

* * *

I cleared out the house with help from two college-aged boys my neighbor had recommended. It took three weeks. On the last day, I called for pizza after they left because I was so exhausted my bones hurt. Mitch told me he was useless. Utterly, completely, disgustingly useless. I said, "*Please* don't talk like that, honey, it's not true." Mitch said he was only telling it like it was, and *would I just shut up and let him be?*

I collected samples of every plant on the Island. I studied their life stages, I sketched leaves and stems and flowers, I dissected buds and collected seeds.

Mitch wasn't worthless, he *wasn't*, but I'd seen how miserable he was as he watched me and my helpers packing, labeling, carrying boxes. I turned away so he wouldn't see me cry. I went into the bathroom.

It wasn't his fault.

I didn't come out for fifteen minutes, even though I knew I'd left him stranded in the kitchen. I swabbed at my eyes with my T-shirt, hating myself for being upset when I didn't even have an excuse, not when compared to Mitch.

Or maybe, I did.

The paperwork for the condo was closing in three days and our house was going on the market soon after; that must be why I couldn't stop crying. Or maybe it was because my life was spiraling out of control, that I was on the brink of not being able to care for Mitch on my own.

What would happen then?

Deep down I knew that the worst of it was because I *still* hadn't found a cure for his MS. He was losing ground. How long until any cure I made didn't matter anymore?

* * *

So I worked even harder.

One evening on my habitual walk around the Island, I sprained my ankle on a root. As I limped home, I gathered herbs, choosing them from memory, amazed at the knowledge that I'd managed to amass. When I got to the cabin, I made a poultice—using a recipe from *Herbal Remedies*, but adding a touch of nerve-fern to encourage the tendon to heal and six spears of pulverized sawgrass for bruising—and spread it liberally on my ankle. It wasn't a total failure. The bruising and swelling went down, but the pain persisted for several more days.

Even so, it was encouraging. I wrote it down in my notebook.

* * *

Mitch and I moved into the condo.

He called himself the Master of Ceremonies. He directed every piece

of furniture, every box, every lamp and television and bookshelf, rolling himself around our new accessible home as if he'd built the place himself, wheeling circles in the entry to the bathroom, and looking—I couldn't keep my eyes off him—like he was enjoying himself.

After the movers left and we were alone again, he came up behind me. "Laura," he said, "I'm sorry I was such an ass the other day."

"It's okay."

"I was thinking. Maybe we should look for a caregiver for me, to help you out?"

I was smiling, but the tears flowed anyway.

* * *

On the Island, my animal friends were having a hard time. Every few days one or another would come to me for doctoring. It didn't take many poultices or ointments for me to realize that the Island must approve of my agenda and was helping me in its own way. One golden-tinged evening, after frolicking in the lagoon with my sea turtle friends, a yellow-toed gecko showed up on my lanai. The poor thing had a broken spine, I was certain of it from the way his hind legs dragged and his tail hung limp. I scooped him up carefully and placed him on the kitchen counter, and set about making a special targeted massage oil. I cooed to him as I rubbed it on, hoping he wasn't in too much pain, hoping that my ministrations would heal his nerves, axons, and all the rest.

The next morning, he flicked his tail at my sweet gray cat.

This was it. This was Mitch's cure.

* * *

"Let me rub your back, honey," I said to Mitch as soon as I was home. I sat down on the bed, clutching the small

tub of massage oil as if it were worth its weight in gold. Maybe it was. I'd brought it home from the Island in my bathrobe pocket. "I made a nice massage oil for you. With special herbs."

"Really?" Mitch gave me a dubious look. "Massage oil? Since when do you make massage oil?" He took a deep sniff. "It smells like that stuff you bought at the Farmers Market."

"It does?"

"Mmmm."

This was it. This was Mitch's cure.

I spread the fragrant oil on him, thicker than I had put it onto the gecko. Mitch was right, the oil did have a familiar smell, and I had to admit that the pale green tub looked just like the market-purchased one that had sat on my bedside table since last summer and was now missing. Coincidence. Pure coincidence. There *had* been an Island! I *had* made this massage oil! I traced the knobs of Mitch's backbone once, twice, three times, knowing from multiple MRIs that his MS was in his spine and not in his brain. I rubbed it in, my fingertips willing the healing herbs to pass through his skin and work their Island goodness on him. Because I *had* healed a yellow-toed gecko the same way. Because the gecko *had* run off into the palms as if he'd never been injured.

It had all been real. Right?

"That feels nice," Mitch said. "I feel better already."

* * *

After his special massage, we fell asleep for a short while, holding hands.

Which hadn't happened since, well, I didn't remember when. Maybe never.

"Hi," I said, lying next to him, watching him. The Island seemed far away, a dream almost, the cabin, the palm trees, the animals, all of it. "How do you feel?"

"Fine. That was the world's best massage you gave me." He sounded sleepy. "Laura. The shop below us. Right by the elevator. On the first floor . . ."

"Yes?"

"Get this. It's a bookshop." He squeezed my hand. "With wooden floors."

I sucked in my breath. "Is there a coffee stand inside?"

"There is."

"No joking. And a cat?"

"Two of them."

I thought for a moment. "Couches?"

"Soft leather ones."

"Is it accessible?"

"This whole building is accessible!" He picked up a lock of my hair, twirled it around his finger. "I bet we're going to spend half our waking hours in there. They'll love us."

"Or they'll hate us."

We laughed.

"Is it for sale?" I asked.

"Not yet."

"Not . . . yet," I repeated, still laughing. "Well. We can wait."

"We'll have a little money left over from the sale of the house," he said after a cozy silence, "I think we should buy a van with a wheelchair ramp."

“Yes! Good idea. And we’ll look into getting caregiver help, like you said.”

“I’d like to get a cat. A gray cat.”

“Me too!”

We lay on the bed, dreaming, planning, closer than we’d been in years. Had I cured him? Maybe. Maybe not. He seemed different, but maybe it was the effects of this new home, this new beginning, that we were feeling. My eyes landed on the picture of my beloved Island—I’d carefully removed it from our old bedroom and placed it on the wall of this room—and I realized it was different. The image was the same, but the caption had changed.

“What is it?” asked Mitch, lifting his head to look over my shoulder.

“Nothing.” I turned toward him again, snuggling closer, allowing myself a private little smile. The new ad copy had been written just for me: *Enjoy Your Life, it’s the Only One You’ve Got.*

Well. Maybe I would.

I didn’t need the Island anymore. I had everything I needed right here. ♦

Previously published in We Grew Tales (2019). Reprinted with permission of the author.

COLLEEN ANDERSON

BIOGRAPHY

Can my life be flattened
into a book
the memorable moments
high contrast black and white
not just scraped knees, a nosebleed
passing bullies whose taunts helped bind me
with more than skin?

Can my life really be thin as ink
applied in fine strokes to a veneer
that I will become?
Only tempestuous times
of lovers and loss
will place me onto a page.

When I am picked up
touched lightly and read
will you have any idea
of all those heartbeats
inconspicuous days spent living
moments of breaths indrawn
tasting the world
words said aloud
that are not written between the lines?

Previously published in Breath and Shadow (July 2021). Reprinted with permission of the author.

NAKED FACEBOOK FRIDAY

NANCY DEYO

Dr. Edsall peeks her head into the open doorway of the waiting room. “Nancy, Chris, great to see you both.”

I have been under a psychiatrist’s care before, but this time, the experience is not overshadowed by a physical health crisis. Fifteen years prior, a serious spine injury left me bedridden for a decade, recovering from failed surgeries, dependent on opioids, and taking an antipsychotic before finally weaning myself to a full recovery. For reasons I do not yet understand, my husband believes I am now in a crisis of a different sort.

This is my third session with Dr. Edsall. Chris is joining me for this visit. He is keenly aware of my ability to seem perfectly healthy when I am not, a situation we encountered more than once during my rocky recovery. We are here to discuss increasing the dosage of Abilify, which Dr. Edsall restarted after my first session. This increase is an adjustment that Chris desperately wants, and I do not. I feel fine. Also, I want to hang onto the exuberant feeling I am just discovering, that I am connected to the universe.

“Nancy,” Dr. Edsall begins, “how have you been feeling?”

My response is instantaneous and unfiltered. “Great. I’m really great.”

Chris gives me a penetrating look. It feels like he is policing me. His vigilance makes me edgy.

“Actually,” I say, making myself repeat the words that Chris and I negotiated earlier, “it’s been a hard few weeks for Chris and me.”

* * *

In retrospect, the first sign that something was amiss came in the form of an automated message from Facebook. The message popped up as I raced to “friend” hundreds of new people, literally as fast as my fingers could type.

Slow down, you are going too fast. We think you may not be real.

Whatever, I thought. I was obsessed with my goal: to get to 5,000 friends by the end of the day. A Friday, in fact. I had been a light Facebook user for years, and mostly, a voyeur. But during my decade-long convalescence, using social media had become one way to keep in touch with high school classmates, and after that, my younger grad school friends, who grew up with social media, sharing everything about their lives in a way that made me feel less lonely.

Something, however, had shifted inside me that morning as I stayed logged on all day, compulsively “friending” people.

I knew this sort of thing happened—was even programmed into a social media business built on making connections and monetizing the data that followed—but the more friends I amassed, the more I felt I needed. I had started that morning with 350 friends and was now on the verge of a miraculous feat, 4,500 friends, which I knew had to be a world record.

I felt so inspired and so productive, and so at home in my push to just *fit it all in*, that I had been running late for weeks. The fact that lateness was my pet peeve somehow did not strike me as paradoxical.

The acceptances came fast and furious; friends of friends of friends of friends from around the world, all wanting to be my friend! Then an explosion of likes, and welcoming messages. A rush of well-being coursed through my body, a feeling of floating on a higher plane. Suddenly I understood: Facebook was about more than connecting people. It was about *global love*.

I, alone, had discovered the secret of social media.

I glanced down at my watch. It was 3:30 p.m. Yikes. I had promised Chris that I would be packed, showered, and ready to go at 4:00 p.m. After a tumultuous week at work, my last I would later learn, and no sleep, Chris had made reservations for us to spend the weekend decompressing out of town. And yet, I was so close to my goal. I *had* to finish. And I could be ready in time if I really hustled.

* * *

I felt so inspired and so productive, and so at home in my push to just *fit it all in*, that I had been running late for weeks. The fact that lateness was my pet peeve somehow did not strike me as paradoxical.

Again, the automated warning:

Slow down, you are going too fast. We think you may not be real. Your account is at risk of being shut down.

Did Facebook somehow sense I was in trouble? It seems uncanny to me now that Facebook's algorithm detected my "abnormal" behavior, much less tried to discourage it.

Either way, I needed to let Facebook know that I was not a bot, and besides, I had my new epiphany to share. So, I crafted an enthusiastic email to a colleague who ran communications, offering a testimonial about what I saw as Facebook's compassionate mission: *enabling global love* in a hate-filled world. I proposed posting my testimonial and suggested that Mark Zuckerberg (my "friend" request to him pending) could then share my revelation with his millions of friends. It was a brilliant marketing move, sure to rocket Facebook into the stratosphere. Best of all, I would be along for the ride. I pressed send. As I did, Chris walked through the bedroom door and stopped dead in his tracks. I was stark naked on our bed, furiously typing on my laptop.

* * *

At age nineteen, I was a camp counselor in northern Michigan, madly in love with the tennis pro. What started out innocently enough became extreme: not needing food or sleep (I became anorexic), possessing boundless energy (I began long distance running), singing in a rock band (I cannot now, nor could I ever, sing), wearing skintight leather pants (I did look good in skintight leather pants), and insatiable lust (we were caught having sex in his cabin with kids running in and out). I can still remember that intense feeling of euphoria, a high that started in my brain and went down to my toes. I was fired from the gig, but I was never diagnosed. Instead, the anorexia consumed me, and I crashed by summer's end.

In short, my behavior had been off the charts before.

* * *

"Nancy," Dr. Edsall asks after we settle into her black leather chairs, "why was Chris surprised to find you naked in your own bedroom?"

Part of me is relieved that this is her question, rather than digging into my admittedly peculiar Facebook activity, which I do not yet see as connected.

Chris jumps in before I can respond.

“Nancy,” he says with some exasperation, “is uncomfortable being naked, even in her own presence, much less in mine.”

This much is true; I have always been modest, even self-conscious, to the core. I put on a towel before I step out of the shower. I get dressed without looking in the mirror. As Chris talks, I can feel my face getting hot. So, I stretch the truth to defend myself.

I squirm in my chair, not sure it is wise to let him have the last word.

“I had just gotten out of the shower,” I say quietly, “and was sending a quick email before I got dressed.”

Why do Chris and Dr. Edsall need to know that I had been naked all day?

The last thing I want is more Abilify. I am already lamenting the start of its dampening effect on my mind and body, not to mention the weight gain, a side effect that the recovering anorexic in me hates almost as much as the brain fog.

“Come on, girl,” Chris says emphatically, using his most heartfelt nickname for me, which feels like a trick. “In thirty-three years of marriage I’ve never seen you work naked.”

I squirm in my chair, not sure it is wise to let him have the last word.

* * *

Chris has never used social media. He thinks it is a waste of time at best and addicting at worst. I did not think then that my attachment to social media was unhealthy, but after I boasted to him about both my thousands of new friends and my Facebook epiphany, he made me promise to stay off the platform. He even took my laptop and cell phone with him the following week on a business trip to New Jersey. I was off the grid and none too happy about it. Chris was treating

me like a child, and I didn’t need another father, much less a policeman holding my technology hostage. How was I going to connect with the outside world, how would I reach my people?

In retrospect, Chris was acting in my best interests. He couldn’t dispense the additional drugs I may have needed, but he could remove the technology temptation, and in so doing, limit my own vulnerability, to suspect feel-good epiphanies, but also, to the web of third-party apps, pornographic images, and random marriage proposals from new Facebook friends, not to mention the message-hidden identity thefts, into which I had fallen prey. I liken his action now to a sponsor taking liquor bottles out of an alcoholic’s home, and maybe also, hiding the keys to keep the addict from getting behind the wheel. Still, at the time, I felt like he was trying to control me, I did not like it, and I did not want him to win.

I was frantic much of the day until I realized we had an old iPad down in the basement. Convinced that Chris would access my email and social media accounts to keep me on the straight and narrow, I changed all of my passwords before I got down to work. Eyes glued to my iPad, I breathed a sigh of relief, certain that the blue light and scrolling activity would calm my frazzled nerves. As the sun dropped below the Golden Gate Bridge, unnoticed, I selected an unread LinkedIn email.

Send LinkedIn invitations to your entire Facebook contact list with the press of a button.

My curiosity was piqued. My LinkedIn network was roughly the size of my original Facebook friend base prior to the big acquisition drive. What harm could come from merging these worlds? The mere thought of thousands of new contacts triggered a burst of soothing dopamine. I was online again and making progress. And I wasn’t breaking my promise to Chris. This was LinkedIn, not Facebook: professional networking, fully justifiable for someone between jobs.

* * *

Mark, the text to my personal trainer read at 6:45 a.m. the next morning, I’m going to be 5-10 mins late for our 7:00 a.m. session. Late night.

No problem, Mark replied, see you when you get here.

Strung out from pulling my all-nighter on LinkedIn, I was ever more fixated on expanding my network. I had upgraded to LinkedIn Premium, which enabled a tenfold increase in my professional contacts. All puffed up, I made my way

into higher and higher echelons of power. This was even better than making new Facebook friends. I was building social capital by the minute.

As I readied to finally head to the gym, my fingers flew across the keys.

Thx for acceptnig my invitationn n n. Youand i needa a a conversation.

?? was the reply from a Silicon Valley venture capitalist I had wanted to meet for years.

I slowed myself down and typed with more intention.

Sorry, typing too fast. My iPad couldn't keep up.

My new LinkedIn contact went radio silent. My stomach rolled. I didn't like feeling this way: loose, out of control, and anyway, why wouldn't he write back?

I had to try to salvage the situation.

But now I was seriously late.

Mark, I texted, I'll be there at 7:30 a.m. Not feeling great.

Okay, but you better not blow me off.

I sent five more messages in rapid succession to the venture capitalist, who "unlinked" me later that morning. For the first time in six years of weekly sessions, I missed my workout with Mark.

* * *

"Nancy has been keeping things from me," Chris tells Dr. Edsall near the end of the session. "It feels like she's lying."

"That is *not* true," I blurted, my blood pressure rising. "I did not lie to you. I promised to stay off Facebook."

"Come on, Nance," Chris says, clearly frustrated but still on top of the facts, "you're off Facebook, but you go on a LinkedIn rampage. Not to mention setting up accounts on Twitter and Instagram. But you don't share this with me. I have to find out from your best friend."

Chris and I never used to fight, not even in private. Now we are arguing in front of Dr. Edsall and Chris is on the offensive. I counterattack.

"Yeah," I strike back at him, "because you asked Kathleen to rat me out."

He is unfazed.

"Kathleen and I are worried about you."

I try to keep a poker face, but the grimace, like my speech, is uncontrollable.

In a final psychiatric clincher, the words "grandiose," "pressured speech," "oversharing," and "argumentative" shoot out of him in rapid fire.

Dr. Edsall looks calmly at us both. I pray she is on my side, but I know how convincing Chris can be when he makes an argument.

"I understand that things have been strained between you two," she begins. "Chris, is there anything else you wanted to share?"

Chris always comes to a meeting prepared, as do I. But I am unprepared for the barrage that follows. I cringe as he describes the additional shifts in my behavior: the weird food combinations I now eat (peanut butter and sriracha on crackers was my "go to" snack), the fact that I have changed all of the car radio stations from soft rock to techno-pop (goodbye KFOG, hello the now-defunct WiLD), the use of hair conditioner on my body instead of soap (I was convinced the conditioner would moisturize my dehydrated body), the Amazon charges for downloading hundreds of eBooks (including *Love the One You're With* and *Good in Bed*) onto my Kindle, and the lack of filter between my brain and mouth (I told a black cashier that I could "tame" her wiry hair). In a final psychiatric clincher, the words "grandiose," "pressured speech," "oversharing," and "argumentative" shoot out of him in rapid fire.

* * *

Writing upside down and back to front, in a script only I could decipher, was the best way to keep the book I was writing private. While Chris had never read my journal without permission, I did feel exposed to his increasing scrutiny of my everyday behaviors and took what felt like justifiably evasive actions. His various confiscations were

not going to slow me down, and he certainly didn't get to edit my freaking book. So, I filled up one journal and then another, consumed by the need to *get my story out*. It calmed me to write, in much the same way that iPad scrolling reduced my anxiety.

My famous cousin, the renowned economist and adviser to the UN Secretary General, would write the forward; a brilliant move, I thought, linking my star to his. I would pitch a well-known literary agent in New York who exclusively represented women authors, and also send the first chapter to a former colleague who was now a Random House executive. The writing flowed out of me like a river that had risen well past its banks, and I saw that I clearly had the connections to get it published. I didn't understand why writers had such a hard time getting their work out into the world. But, then again, publishing, like anything else, was all about who one knew.

I was feeling fabulous—sharp, exhilarated, productive, creative—and no longer spinning out of control. My brain and body balanced, I was in sync with the universe. Dr. Edsall would later describe this energized, in-between state as “hypomanic,” which from my layman's point-of-view meant I could experience the good parts of mania without the bad.

The silence that hung in the air loomed as large as the distance between us.

If Chris still thought I was in trouble, I had, or would have fairly soon, a best-selling book, with thousands (upon thousands) of social media contacts to make a virtuous circle of sales, promotion, and validation.

I told Chris that I was *going* to write my book, advise a venture philanthropy firm, teach at an Ivy League school, and speak at TEDWomen. All in the coming year. I had set up a range of meetings with powerbrokers in each segment of my new “portfolio life.” It was all part of my grand plan, which I now called my “Grand Plan,” and I was fixated on making it happen.

* * *

It is curious, looking back, that for all the speed and acuity with which my analytic brain was making connections and

blazing a path forward, I could not see how my behavior was out-of-the-norm, and even, plainly outlandish.

“This isn't who you are,” Chris told me in one of his plaintive attempts to yoke me to some sense of reality. “Yes, the girl I married is smart and ambitious. But she is humble and vulnerable, too.” He paused. “And right now, you are neither of those things.”

“I take that as an insult,” I shot back. “Why would I want to be either of those things?”

“Well,” he said, picking his words carefully, “because they make you . . . you.”

“Fuck you,” I snapped, and stormed out of the room.

* * *

Chris started sleeping in the guest bedroom: his choice, not mine. He said he no longer knew who I was. For the first time in thirty-three years of marriage, we argued long and hard. We said hateful things that we regretted. I told him that he was controlling. He said I needed to be managed. As our relationship faltered, I figured the less he knew about any of my activities the better. I was determined to live a bigger life. I was executing the Grand Plan. Shortly before my third visit to Dr. Edsall, I was certain Chris was going to leave me, and to be honest, I could see a path without him. If Chris could not understand what I now understood, about how the world worked and my place at the top of it, why let him slow me down?

Chris slammed the bedroom door one night after a particularly nasty exchange. It stung, but I was resolute. The silence that hung in the air loomed as large as the distance between us. For the first time, I understood how once-happy couples ended up divorced.

After a few minutes, I heard a light knock on the door.

“I'd like to try this again,” Chris said quietly, and climbed into bed next to me.

* * *

Is there really an unmedicated version of me that is the “real Nancy,” and if so, is it Chris' version of me—belligerent, grandiose, and unfiltered—or is it the version I experienced in my head during those weeks leading up to my third session with Dr. Edsall—confident, connected, and fearless?

I tell myself that the “real” me is all of those things, wrapped up in a complicated package. I have since learned

from Dr. Edsall that I am bipolar, a condition which typically manifests in much younger people. Unmedicated, my condition rapidly escalates into mania, and I act in ways that more closely resemble the person Chris described. I take risks that endanger myself and others: befriending online strangers, falling asleep at the wheel, crashing my car, and exchanging personal information with random Uber drivers because we liked the same books and music.

My medicated present is filled with shame and embarrassment for my manic behavior. I replay the scenes over and over in my head, hoping the endings of each moment will change. I will not send the second, fourth, or sixth LinkedIn clarification to the venture capitalist. I will not stop random strangers on the street in a moment of déjà vu, claiming I knew them in a past life. I will not lie to the police officer, accusing the other driver of veering into my lane after I fall asleep and sideswipe his car. Like any person recovering from herself, I know that there are no do-overs in life. I can only look toward the future and try to be a better person, an understanding I can only come to, ironically enough, looking back.

I did not live that bigger life and I still haven't written my book.

At the end of my third session, Dr. Edsall prescribed a higher dose of Abilify, and my brain began the slow process of regulating to the drug increase, which meant experiencing a slowdown that, in retrospect, saved my life. Chris and I found our way back to each other, at roughly the same pace. I ate well, started sleeping and exercising again, stopped wasting so much money and time on passing fancies, and for the first time since my spine injury, I felt fully in control of my mind and body, for better and for worse.

Dr. Edsall and I spoke recently about my diagnosis. I was surprised to learn that after my third visit she was neither convinced I was bipolar, nor that I was in the middle of a manic episode. She told me that I presented as energetic, enthusiastic, and generally stable. My Grand Plan seemed big, but was within the bounds of reason. It was Chris' longitudinal perspective that convinced her my behavior was off the charts, despite being within the normal bell curve for many people. And that range of acceptable behaviors continues to puzzle me. I wonder what would have happened if Chris had not joined me for that fateful session. In my heart of hearts, I know Chris was right, but part of me would have loved to have experienced that unbridled joy for just a while longer, though I know it goes hand-in-hand with the crash that was racing toward me.

For two years, I have been off social media entirely. I now realize how it enables vulnerable people to engage in risky,

even dangerous behavior. I do not experience FOMO. It turns out that Facebook friends are not the secret to global love, nor are LinkedIn contacts the key to social capital, book publishing, or the apex of any pyramid, at least not for me. I have an abundance of love and connection in my life. I communicate with most of my friends in person.

Dr. Edsall still oversees my care with a compassionate clinician's eye. While I am long past the acute phase and we chat like old friends, she asks about sleep, stress, life changes, and always, how the medication is working. Chris no longer participates in our sessions, but my care requires constant vigilance, and reminds me that wellness is a process.

Often, I wrestle with the decision of whether to taper the Abilify or to stop taking it entirely. But as tantalizing as mania is for its highs, when I can think clearly about the trade-offs, I choose a stable, medicated, albeit less thrilling life, with all of its benefits. If I wanted to live drug-free, I would be living a life that does not include Chris, and that is a trade-off I am unwilling to even consider. At least some part of love requires compromise, a road that I know runs in two directions. I am forever grateful that Chris did not leave me. In return, every morning and again every night, I recommit to love, and reach for my meds. ♦

First published in bioStories www.biostories.com (March 2022). Reprinted with permission of the author.

POLIO IN WAR AND PEACE

TROY REEVES

In the summer of 1943, two months shy of my fourth birthday, I contracted polio.

Our family lived in a five-room frame house on Chestnut Street in Gainesville, a small Texas town surrounded by rich farmland, only ten miles south of Oklahoma. My father worked for the Lone Star Gas Company, digging trenches and laying pipe. My mother, like most married women at that time, was a housewife. My brother, Don, was a third-grader at Benjamin Franklin Elementary School. There was an army camp, Camp Howze, just outside the city limits, and, since housing for married couples was scarce, my parents rented a room to Sergeant Max Gallant and his wife, Judy, from Brooklyn, New York. We all shared the kitchen and one bathroom. In the evenings the grown-ups would sit on the front porch to smoke and talk, and my brother and I would listen to the Gallants tell about Times Square, skyscrapers, subways, and the amazing Automat, where you could stick a dime into a slot, lift a little door, and take out a piece of cherry pie.

But, there were other folk from faraway places.

One spring morning, I sat on our front steps and watched German prisoners of war, who were interned at Camp Howze, shoveling hot asphalt into potholes on the street in front of our house. They were guarded by two soldiers with machine guns slung from their shoulders and were wearing baggy white overalls with POW printed in big black letters on the back. I knew they were the enemy, but when one of them looked at me and waved, I waved back. Suddenly I heard my mom scream “Get in here!” as she jerked me inside, slammed the screen door, and dropped the hook into the latch.

We neighborhood kids thought about the war all the time. We played “Japs ’n’ Germans,” drawing broomsticks to see who would be Americans and who would be the enemy. The Americans always won our battles, mainly because the older kids somehow managed to end up with the longer straws. My brother kept us posted on how our

troops were doing by pointing to lines he drew on a big map on the wall over his bed. His model planes—Hellcats, Spitfires, Thunderbolts—hung on strings taped to the ceiling wallpaper. On Saturdays we dragged a Radio Flyer wagon up and down the sidewalk, knocking on doors, collecting “vital materials”—magazines, tin cans, even bacon grease—for the war effort. Sergeant Gallant gave us bronze army lapel buttons, which we proudly wore on our shirt collars. America was at war. It was a great time to be a kid.

Until I got polio.

One July morning, after taking my dad to work, my mom asked me to raise my right arm so she could dust my armpit with talcum powder. I said, “I can’t.” Since I was a bit of a trickster, my mom thought I was teasing. She asked me again, and I again replied, “I can’t.” My mom lifted my right arm, held it high, and let go. My arm dropped, plopping against my side. She told me to walk. I walked, dragging my suddenly heavy right leg across the linoleum kitchen

floor. Thirty minutes later we were in the office of our family physician, Dr. Whidden.

Dr. Whidden whipped down the mercury in a glass thermometer and stuck it under my tongue, waited three minutes, then pulled it out and cocked his head back to take the reading through the bottom of his bifocals. He told me to open my mouth wide and stuck a thin wooden tongue depressor far back into my mouth, and, taking a pin light from his lapel pocket, looked down my throat. He put the cold head of a stethoscope on my chest and told me to take two deep breaths. He looked at me and said, "Troy, walk across the room." He watched intently, then, leaning back in his oak swivel chair, his cigarette holder clinched between his teeth—President Roosevelt style—turned to my mother and said, "Roxie, Troy has polio." He picked up his phone and called Texas Children's Hospital in Dallas, thirty miles away.

Although my memories of the hospital quarantine ward are vague, I can still see boys on wheelchairs racing in the aisle between rows of beds and boys yelling "Bang!" as they shot at each other with black wooden pistols—since metal toys were rare during the war. My orders were to lie still, perfectly still, on my back to keep the disease from moving up my spine toward my brain. A radio was on most of the day, loud enough for us to listen to "Terry and the Pirates," "Sky King," "Hop Harrigan," and other favorite programs. When, late every afternoon, at the end of a daily news broadcast, the station played "The Star-Spangled Banner," those who could, stood to their feet or

My orders were to lie still, perfectly still, on my back to keep the disease from moving up my spine toward my brain.

sat up in bed and saluted a large American flag hanging from the ceiling. One vivid memory was a loud explosion, followed by a snake-like hiss, when somebody dropped a Coca-Cola bottle on the concrete floor. I also remember my mother sitting on my bed, reading Mother Goose rhymes. The hospital admissions director had informed her she could not enter the ward, much less stay with me. There were no beds. She might contract polio.

Years later, my mother told me that she looked at that doctor, who had pictures of a young woman and two small children on his desk, and asked, "If that was your baby boy, what would you do?" She added, with a smile, "He was a smart man. He had degrees all over his wall. But he didn't have an answer for that." For the next four weeks, she slept on an army cot at the foot of my bed. She did not contract polio; she died twelve years ago at age ninety-five, still spry and alert, still able to beat me, game after game, at Texas 42 dominoes. Why did my mother stay with me? Why did that learned man acquiesce? For the answer I defer to French philosopher Blaise Pascal: "The

heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing."

After quarantine, I was transferred to Scottish Rite Hospital for Crippled Children—before the days of mandatory euphemisms—also in Dallas. The treatment at Scottish Rite was heat and massage, a therapy developed by Sister Elizabeth Kenny, an Australian army nurse who was convinced, despite resistance from the medical establishment (She was only a nurse, not a doctor!) that diseased muscles should be manipulated and stimulated, rather than immobilized in plaster casts. Heat consisted of olive army blankets that were cut into strips and patches, immersed in boiling water, taken out with tongs, shaken and wrung out, then applied to arms and legs, which were vigorously massaged. My right arm and leg were draped with them day after day. I do not know the general effectiveness of the treatment. I do know that I regained full use of my right leg, and I do know that, to this day, I cannot stand the smell of wet wool.

After discharge from Scottish Rite, I was sent home. I could walk, but still could not raise my right arm, which dangled at my side. In the first grade at Robert E. Lee Elementary School, I discovered I could sling or, using my good left arm, lift my right arm onto my desk, grip a pencil in my hand, and practice cursive writing by nudging my right hand with my left hand and by using my fingers to crawl my hand crab-like, left-to-right, across my Big Chief writing tablet.

Over time, my right arm began to atrophy and separate from my shoulder

to such an extent that I could fit my left index finger between the long bone in my arm and my shoulder blade. To counter this development, the doctors at Scottish Rite fitted me with an aluminum and leather brace that buckled across my chest and rested on my hips. An extension kept my arm elevated and pressed against my shoulder. When I outgrew the brace, I wore my arm in a sling. The doctors planned surgery, but were waiting until my arm had time to grow, in the event the operation further damaged nerves and muscles.

My memories of a month in the boys' surgical ward at Scottish Rite in the summer of 1954 are vivid. We yelled to pals in distant beds, watched the World Series and *I Love Lucy* on TV, tossed softballs from bed to bed, swapped comic books and paperbacks, and pressed our lips to wet-licked palms to create the sound of robust flatulence. We had fun, but there was enough pain to go around. One boy, whose cast-enclosed legs were crossed over one another, howled from the agony of cramping. A kid named Tom, one of three non-polio cases, went to surgery one morning and came back in the afternoon with his left leg amputated above the knee, the stump wrapped in a bloody bandage. When doctors on their rounds asked him how he was doing, he would say, "I'm doing okay," but at night, after lights-out, Tom would pull his sheet over his face and sob until he wept us all asleep.

On Saturday nights, both boys' and girls' wards went to an auditorium to watch a full-length movie and cartoons. I shall never forget seeing a pretty girl walking on crutches in front of me, her left leg on the floor, her withered right leg swinging back and forth from under her hospital gown, three or four inches above the floor. The most painful thing, however, was that parents were allowed—in those days—to visit only once a week, on Sunday, from two o'clock to four o'clock in the afternoon.

Invariably, I would begin to cry when the hour hand on the clock crept toward four. As I would learn years later, the suffering of a child is the suffering of a parent in spades.

The protocol for surgery was to fit us with plaster casts, saw the casts off prior to surgery, and put the casts back on after surgery. I was rolled down a long ramp to the basement room where casts were applied. A nurse wrapped rolls and rolls of heavy gauze around my chest, arm, and shoulder, then brushed on thick plaster. She positioned a short wooden pole between my right hip and right arm, while a young doctor used a large metal protractor to measure the angle at which my right arm would be positioned—for the rest of my life. The day before surgery, the cast had to be sawed off, a prospect that terrified me. But an elderly, soft-spoken African-American gentleman approached me with a hand-held electric circular saw, turned it on, and passed it across the palm of his hand. "See, son, it doesn't cut you. It just cuts the plaster." He then sawed through the plaster, dividing the cast into halves.

The next morning, surgeons performed a shoulder fusion, which consisted of nailing my long upper arm bone to my shoulder blade, creating one inseparable unit, enabling me to use my back muscles to raise and lower my right arm. Three days after surgery, I was back on my feet, walking around the ward carrying fifteen pounds of plaster everywhere I went. I would wear that cast for the next three months. Of the eighteen boys in the ward, I was the only one who could move about without crutches or a wheelchair. Some were so encased in plaster that they could be moved only if rolled on gurneys. I was fortunate. Blessed. But, blessings often come with responsibilities . . .

One morning, Jeff, the boy in the bed next to me, used his bedpan. It stank. I

picked up the bedpan, took it to our big bathroom, flushed its contents down the toilet, washed it under the faucet of a stainless steel sink, and added it to a stack of clean pans. Before I knew it, I had a job. Bedpans!

Ironically, this seemingly denigrating task earned me great respect from my

As I would learn years later, the suffering of a child is the suffering of a parent in spades.

mates, particularly after I began to aid and abet a subterfuge. My first day in the ward, Ralph, a long-term occupant encased in a cast that covered him from shoulder to knees, like an old-fashioned man's bathing suit, waved me over and said, "When they ask you if you've had a BM, the answer is 'Yes, ma'am,' always 'Yes, ma'am.'" He told me that if you went two days without a BM, a nurse with a look of determination in her eyes would march toward you hoisting a large rubber bag to which would be attached a long rubber hose with a black plastic nozzle at the end of the tube. He then provided a graphic description of a procedure that included the words "where the sun don't shine." By unanimous consent the boys elected to yell "Bedpan!," whereupon I would fetch the pan, even if it were empty, and tote it to the bathroom, sometimes turning my face away in disgust. Had I been able to use my right hand, I would have pinched my nose between my fingers. Our scheme worked perfectly for more than a week, until a hefty senior nurse imposed herself between me and the bathroom door, peered into an empty bedpan, and relieved me of my duties.

Although parents could visit only on Sundays, there were other people who came to see us during the week—the blessed volunteers. In the afternoon after my morning surgery, I felt the worst pain I had ever experienced in my life. A nurse gave me a tiny codeine pill, which barely eased the pain. That evening a Boy Scout leader held a meeting in our ward. He paused by my bed and, seeing I had my pillow pressed over my face, said, “Hurts pretty bad, Scout?”

“Feels like somebody hit my shoulder with a sledgehammer,” I whispered.

He slipped a blue and gold Scout neckerchief around my neck, gently shook my left hand, and set a copy of *The Scout Field Book* on my chest. That volunteer's name was Charles S. West. I know because, sixty-five years later, I still have that inscribed book on a shelf in my study. And, shortly after Sunday dinner, a man and wife—country folk—came to our ward to conduct a worship service. They read Bible verses, prayed for us, and played the same scratchy record every week: “I’d rather have Jesus than silver and gold. I’d rather have Jesus than riches untold.

I’d rather have Jesus than houses and lands. I’d rather be led by His nail-pierced hands.” I still love that old hymn.

The surgeons at Scottish Rite did a good job; my right arm is still nailed to my right shoulder. I can raise my right arm as high as my face. Since I have no ball-and-socket shoulder joint, I cannot turn my arm over or reach behind my back. I have a slight limp. My right arm is about half the size of my left arm and about three inches shorter, yet I am aware that my challenges are minor compared to the challenges faced by other survivors, a fact from which I take no solace.

So many children had polio that it was often called infantile paralysis. A few died, but most of us grew up and had families of our own. We learned how to make the best of our imperfect bodies in an imperfect world. We did not expect the world to adapt to us. We adapted. We appreciated help and accommodation, but we expected to be accepted, not on the basis of our disability, but on the basis of our ability. By and large, we refused to live our lives as victims,

with all the bitterness, blame, self-pity, and anger that victimhood entails. Most of us believed in God and believed that He had a purpose for our lives. We pursued challenging careers in skilled trades, business, medicine, law, sports, education, entertainment, and the arts. We became notorious overachievers. We drew inspiration and courage from famous public figures like the gifted actress Mia Farrow, who spent months in an iron lung; the violin virtuoso Itzhak Perlman, who plays seated because his legs were affected; the Olympic gold medalist Wilma Rudolph, who sprinted to victory after being told she’d never walk again; and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who, from a wheelchair, led our country through the Great Depression and a world war.

Though there are many illnesses—physical, mental, spiritual—far worse than polio, polio was bad enough. But we were, and are, survivors. Resolute. Enduring. Strong. Thankful. Polio attacked our arms and legs, sometimes even our lungs, but it did not reach our hearts. ♦

Call for submissions

KALEIDOSCOPE

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 submit online at kaleidoscopeonline.org.

SAVORING EVERY MOMENT

SANDY PALMER



Alana Ciena Tillman, *Grape Harvest*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 16" x 20"

"Some people may say painting with my mouth is a remarkable talent, however, I want to be known for the quality of my artwork rather than how I created it."

- Alana Ciena Tillman

Just north of San Francisco lies picturesque Sonoma County, lauded for its food, wine, and idyllic landscapes. With towering redwoods, sprawling vineyards, and rugged coastline, the area is ripe with inspiration for artist Alana Ciena Tillman who embraces every bit of it in her life and work. This delightful artist enthusiastically shares her passion for art, food, and the region with her community. As the founder of ArtXcursion, a sip and paint company, she helps patrons discover their "creative destination," as she leads them on a journey of color and composition while igniting their imagination. Pair that with some wine, great food, a large dose of fun, and everyone leaves her events feeling "nourished artistically and physically."

When patrons learn their instructor is also a nationally-recognized mouth painter, some of their eyes widen and jaws drop.

Tillman was raised in an environment that nurtured creativity and promoted independence. Three girls were born to her innovative parents. She has an older sister and a twin. All three are creative. "My mom is very crafty, my dad is an architect and also plays harmonica so we had a lot of open jam sessions at home growing up, and we were always into food. That environment fostered exploration." Cooking. Creating. Music. Family. Fun. While she and her twin played with dolls, just like many little girls do, they also



Alana Ciena Tillman, *Pink Peony*, 2016, acrylic on canvas board, 9" x 12"

pretended they ran creative businesses—and now, many years later, they both do!

The artist was born with arthrogryposis, a condition that causes joint contracture in two or more areas of the body, and has never been able to use her arms or hands (her shoulder and elbow joints are essentially fixed in place, bent at the elbow), but her parents didn't treat her with kid gloves. She learned early that she would have to figure out how to get things done on her own, which has benefited her throughout her life. The pandemic, with nationwide shut-down orders, had an impact on her business but she says, "I'm always figuring out how to do things in new ways so

I automatically have the ability to pivot. When we couldn't have gatherings, I started putting together pre-drawn art kits with everything you need to complete your piece—instructions and materials—and that's what helped us stay relevant on social media and let people know we were still around and kicking."

As a child she would see her dad working on plans for buildings and she would swipe one of his graphite pencils, sit on the floor beside him with some paper, and try to replicate what he was working on. While other kids were learning to write, she was, too. The only difference was that she held the pencil in her mouth instead of her hand. "When I

was in preschool and kindergarten, I had a lot of surgeries. To get through those scary times I would draw to escape. My parents realized early on I had an interest in art and they were supportive.”

When you’re young, being different is hard when you yearn for acceptance from your peers. You want to fit in, not stand out. Tillman learned at a young age that art could be a bridge to help her make connections with other kids. “When you’re in grade school and your peers don’t understand you or are scared about your situation, they can be cruel at times. I used art as a buffer. I would draw and kids would kind of be in awe and it would break down those barriers.” The other kids quickly realized she was just as capable as they were, she just had to do things a different way.

Even now, as an adult, the biggest hurdle she faces is “not being taken seriously. People see a shell, the outer appearance, and don’t realize you are a person who can bring something to the table.” She is ambitious and determined, so it doesn’t take long after meeting her to know she definitely has a lot to bring to the table. She has cultivated relationships with local farmers, artisans, and bakers because she wants her unique business to connect people with the abundance in their own backyards. “Since we live in such a food-rich community, very farm-to-table, painting themes and food pairings at our events change as the seasons change, and we’re proud of that. This business wouldn’t be possible without our collaborations with these amazing local people who come together and make this work. It is so much fun.” Since food brings people together, delicious food and drinks compliment the painting theme, whether it is a specialized charcuterie creation or specific items on a menu. These joint ventures with local wineries and other stunning, scenic venues are only a part of what sets her business apart from typical follow-along painting classes. At her events, patrons have multiple options to choose from and they receive individualized instruction as they work, not to mention learning about color theory and texture as she shares her passion for her craft with them.

Tillman studied art in high school, earned an associate’s degree in fine arts and liberal science, and began promoting her art. “I hosted art shows in Sonoma County and briefly worked for an art gallery as a curator’s assistant, which was a neat experience to see the business side of the art world.” In 2012 she learned about MFPA (Mouth & Foot Painting Artists), contacted them, and after a six-month vetting process, became an MFPA artist earning a monthly scholarship for her work. “They are a life-changing organization. Once they came along, I finally had the ability to buy art materials, pursue my interest in workshops, and received encouragement to continue going out into my community to be



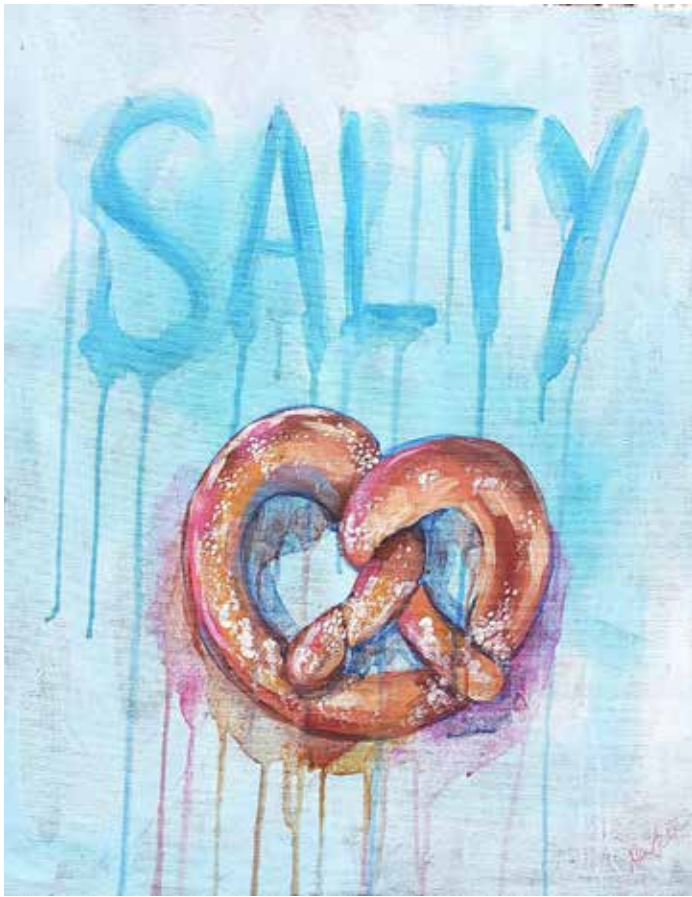
Tillman works with a student at an ArtXcursion event



ArtXcursion journeys begin with elegant work spaces like this, at incredible venues, elevating the paint and sip experience for each patron



Alana Ciena Tillman, *Farmers Market*, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 16" x 20"



Alana Ciena Tillman, *Salty*, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 16" x 20"

seen.” Blessed with an effervescent personality and infectious smile, it is easy to see why she is the MFPA spokesperson for the west coast and has participated in numerous art shows and interviews, including features on *Inside Edition* and *CBS Sunday Morning*. Having garnered experience and confidence, coupled with her passion for food and community, she launched ArtXcursion in 2018.

“Bob Ross said, ‘I think there’s an artist hidden at the bottom of every single one of us,’ and that’s so true. I meet some of these people at ArtXcursion events and they are so apprehensive and nervous, but at the end of the session they leave with a huge smile on their face, proud of what they’ve accomplished. Taking steps to create something, with all the tools in front of you, can produce some really neat results. Every person’s style is different, from the way they hold the brush to the way they create different strokes.”

She describes her personal painting style as “abstract impressionistic.” Usually painting with acrylics, she waters the paint down so the texture is similar to watercolors. “I use a lot of layers of transparency. Certain areas of my work will be detailed and then fade out. The drips are a street art influ-



Alana Ciena Tillman, *The Yellow House*, 2015, acrylic on gallery-wrapped canvas, 11" x 14"

ence I adopted when I was in college.” At home she has an open floor plan and an area of her living room is designated for painting. Occasionally, with large pieces, she places the canvas on the floor, sits on a stool, and paints with a brush held by her toes.

While most of her time is spent running the business and working on commissions, she hopes to carve out more time in the future to create her own personal pieces. She is also working on raising funds for her own studio.

Tillman is a talented entrepreneur, artist, and connoisseur of good food and wine who wears many hats—planning content for social media, doing inventory, checking orders, drawing designs on canvases for kits, cultivating relationships/collaborations, and handling the many day-to-day operations of a creative business. “I love event planning

and I'm always thinking of new themes and ways to connect with the community." She also loves her family and spending time with them. "We are so close to the ocean and rivers. There's a really great oyster company about twenty minutes away, so a fun weekend activity is to drive out there and get a bag of oysters with the family and eat them on the beach." This gregarious artist who enjoyed jam sessions growing up, surrounded by family, has created a colorful life where she can savor all of the goodness that art, food, creativity, and connection have to offer as she shares her passion with the world. To learn more about her visit alanaciena.com. If you are in the Sonoma County area, consider attending an ArtXcursion public event or book a private party. To find out about upcoming events, follow @artxcursion on Instagram. ♦



Artist Alana Ciena Tillman at work



Alana Ciena Tillman, *Bumblebee*, 2016, acrylic on gallery-wrapped canvas, 10" x 10"



Alana Ciena Tillman, *Spring Rabbit*, 2015, acrylic on canvas board, 8" x 10"

A COMMON NEED

SYLVIA MELVIN

My name is Sam and I'm a seventy-eight-year-old victim of theft. None of my material belongings are missing, but my self-esteem, usefulness, and genuine enjoyment of life no longer exist. Since there is no individual I can point to as the offender, I've decided it's a generation of men and women with their technological instruments glued to their eyes and ears while sprinting from one activity to another.

My son reminds me, "Dad, you're better off in the retirement home with folks your own age. My job takes me out of town so much, I'm not any company for you." If I'm lucky, I see Jack once a month.

I can always depend upon boredom. Day after day, I fill empty hours with nothing of consequence. Despite a tremor, my hands are still productive. They can hold a chisel or a saw. Cabinet making was my trade. Mass production and inferior quality stripped me of my usefulness. Now I feed ducks at the pond and watch children play in the park.

Not long ago, I saw a young boy huddled against a tree. His body shook as tears streamed down his cheeks and puddled on the ground. Curious, I walked to him and said, "Hi, my name's Sam. Can I help?"

He raised his head just enough to reveal a swollen cheek. Taken back by the sight of his injury, I inquired, "How did that happen?"

Fear gripped the boy and he clung to the tree.

"It's okay, son. I see your airplane's wing is damaged."

A weak mutter from the boy explained. "It's my fault. The big boys were playing baseball and I got in the way. The bat hit me and I fell on my airplane. It's broken and won't fly."

"Maybe I can fix it. Come sit on a bench and let me look."

One hand wiped away a tear. "Gee, mister, do you think you could?"

I studied the wing then said, "I live in that building over by the pine trees and I have glue that is sure to do the trick. But first, you haven't told me your name." I waited.

"Tommy. I'm seven."

"Good to meet you, Tommy. Now let's get this plane to fly."

After a successful repair job, Tommy's smile dispelled any more tears.

"I wish it was as easy to fix that shiner you have as it was to glue that wing back on. Probably should have Mom put ice on it."

Suddenly I saw a startled look on the boy's face and he bounded for the door. "Gotta go, Sam. Thanks for fixing my plane. Maybe I'll see you in the park another day."

Before I could say, “I’d like that,” he fled.

* * *

The thought of a frail, sobbing child clinging to a tree stole my sleep and I saw dawn filtering through the window blinds. *Would he return to the park today?* My curiosity grew until I could no longer stay in my room, but ventured over to the pond with its squawking mallards waiting for their morning popcorn. My eyes surveyed the children on the playground equipment, but there was no sign of Tommy. All week I looked for him. Each day I returned with a deflated heart, but by the weekend my spirit rose as I recalled Jack made plans to visit Saturday.

Whistling a tune, I walked to the lobby to wait for him. An hour passed—no Jack. After another thirty minutes, a receptionist brought the news. “Sam, your son called. He won’t be here today.”

I felt my shoulders sag and the muscles in my face droop as she continued, “Tell my father I had business in Chicago that can’t wait. I’ll see him soon.”

With watering eyes, I sought my sanctuary. No sooner had I reached the park bench when a child’s voice called my name. “Sam, it’s me, Tommy.” In seconds, he came running, panting for breath. This time there were no tears or a swollen eye, but a cast covering his arm. A chill sent alarm through my body, but I kept my voice calm.

“Hello, I’ve missed you.”

“I fell off my bike and had to go to the hospital.”

“Tell me how it happened.”

“I don’t want to talk about it. Let’s make some boats and sail them in the pond.”

“Great idea. Look around for some bark and twigs. I see a paper cup by the trash can.”

For the remainder of the afternoon, we fashioned sailing vessels, ate ice cream, and watched the other children on the play equipment. As we laughed and talked, I felt our generational differences dwindle. We talked about school,

sports, and animals. His questions and curiosity revealed an intelligent mind.

Over the ensuing weeks, our bond of friendship grew. Tommy was a warm, loving child, but the moment I asked about his family life, a change came over him. He’d withdraw in a cowering fashion leaving the question unanswered. Sometimes he disappeared for days. My concern for this boy left me feeling uneasy.

It was during one of these low periods when fate turned my life in a new direction. Miss Walters, a social worker, asked me to volunteer at a shelter for children who were abused. At first I was reluctant but my heart ached as I looked around the room and saw those who suffered at the hands of an angry parent. An inner feeling urged me to share my woodworking skills with the boys and girls making birdhouses, toy cars, and games.

One day, while painting the rungs of a miniature chair, I looked up to see Miss Walters coming toward me. Holding her hand was a blond, freckle-faced boy I recognized.

“Sam, I have a new friend I want you to meet.”

My heart gave a leap. “We’re old friends, Miss Walters.”

Without hesitation, Tommy threw his arms around my neck and sobbed until my shirt felt damp with his tears. Everything fell into place—the previous accidents, the made-up stories, and the strange coolness when I asked the wrong questions. Tommy hid his abused life well.

“It’s over, son,” I pulled back and tilted his chin so we were face-to-face. “Tommy, you and I are surrounded with people who love us. Not long ago I felt nobody cared what happened to me either. But I know better now. Do you have the courage to trust us?”

Beneath the physical scars, I saw hope in the smile on his innocent face. At that moment, I knew his need and mine would always be entwined in an everlasting bond of friendship. ♦

Previously published in Mobius (2018) and The Gem (2018). Reprinted with the permission of the author.

BRIANNA'S STORY

KIRIE PEDERSEN

During a routine surgical procedure, my oxygen was cut off for an unknown period of time. I suffered an acquired brain injury, or ABI. The first night, the doctors warned my husband and parents that if I did awaken, I would have the mentality of a five-year-old. When I walked into the hospital, I was five feet, nine inches, and weighed one hundred and thirty pounds. I was a musician, mother, and teacher. When I emerged from an eight-week coma, I weighed ninety pounds. I couldn't see or move. My arms and legs spasmed endlessly.

The doctors were wrong about one thing, though. When I woke up, I didn't have the mentality of a five-year-old. I lacked the capacities of my three-year-old son.

In the final weeks of the coma, I was somewhat aware of what was going on around me. My mother or husband would say something, and in my mind, I would answer. I could not understand why they didn't respond. I didn't know how to move the words from my brain to my mouth. It was as if the switch that governs speech was broken. In contrast, my hearing was exaggerated.

As if my nerves resided outside my body, sounds pounded on me. Because my startle response was also damaged, if someone slammed my hospital room door, I jumped out of my skin.

As the coma continued to lighten, my senses grew even more intense. The room smelled brisk and pink, diluted blood scrubbed with antiseptic. It tasted lonely and rancid. When my husband, Dale, and my son, Sam, visited, the air seemed to shift. The nurses said I smiled, and my blood pressure went up a few points, and that when they left, I cried.

When I first returned to actual consciousness, I thought I'd been hit by a truck, or that I'd fallen over a cliff. My fingers and hands felt as if they were tied closed, and pain rotated through my body. During the coma, I was fed through a stomach tube. When it was removed, I no longer knew how to swallow. I had to learn everything from scratch. The neurologist told the nurses to place a radio near my head. The music calmed me, they said. Later, it seemed as if the NPR hosts were my friends. I knew their names and voices and what time each came on. I learned

about everything from plankton and kayaks to war and space travel.

While in a coma, Dale sat by my bed begging me to wake up. He took leave from his job and spent hours holding my hand and talking to me. He thought I would yawn and stretch and look around, the perfect princess he convinced himself I'd been before. In the first week, doctors used the term "persistent vegetative state." At that point, Dale refused to believe them. He would use his considerable will to awaken me.

When I first woke up, Dale was beside himself with joy. "I told you," he told the staff. Like Dale, I also believed I would fully recover. All I had to do was apply myself to speech, physical, and occupational therapy, and Dale and Sam and I would resume our previous lives. Only gradually did we face the reality that recovery is a slow and tedious slog. When this dawned on Dale, he was stunned. "You're not the woman I married," he said. After I was released to go home, Dale refused to sleep in the same room as I did.

That was the lowest place of my life.

When I first emerged from the coma, it was as if I'd been encased in a cast for two months. When the nurses tried to move my limbs, it caused unbearable pain. Someone created a film montage of the before and after of Brianna Wood. Before, I'm playing flute in my band. I'm gazing at Dale on our wedding day. I'm holding my newborn son. After I woke, my half-open eyes stare sightlessly. I'm slumped in bed or strapped into a wheelchair. My limbs flail and flop. My speech is slurred. When I try to feed myself, yellow goop flies across the room.

Would you want me? I wasn't even sure I did. At different times, Dale and I both felt suicidal, but couldn't contemplate that further loss for our child. The first night, when it was thought I would not survive, Dale brought Sam to say goodbye. Later, my mother told me Sam emerged white as a ghost. "I don't want to see my mommy until she's better," he said.

I remain grateful for the night nurse who massaged my shoulders, sang, and told me it was good to cry. "Your eyes have been dry too long," she said. I'm grateful for the neurologist who spoke as if I could understand. "You have left frontal damage," he explained. He told the aide to turn my bed to face the doorway. That simple act was my salvation, because that's how the hospital's newly-hired physiatrist, a doctor of physical medicine and rehabilitation, discovered me. Dr. Lee walked into my room, introduced herself, and thought she noted some kind of response. The neurologist authorized her to initiate therapy. At that point, I was just making guttural noises. Dr. Lee developed a yes-no system to start, and within weeks I spoke a few garbled words. With continued therapy, within two more weeks, I spoke in grammatically-correct sentences that more or less made sense. Once I could articulate, Dr. Lee asked what my goal was. "To walk." I said. "By the end of this year, I want to be walking." Some had hinted that this would never happen, but Dr. Lee nodded.

"I believe you," she said. "Let's get you into the gym."

Under Dr. Lee's care, I learned to turn my body in bed and eventually to shift myself into the wheelchair. In the gym, I started out crawling on all fours. I learned to swallow and then to chew and to hold a specially-designed cup and fork. It took six months before I could brush my own teeth, and then only if someone else applied the paste.

The therapists were my buddies and cheerleaders. These unsung heroes urged me along.

When Dr. Lee authorized my first two-hour pass, my mother took me out for lunch to a small local café. When she edged the wheelchair through the entrance, the room went silent. Then a low murmur arose. "What are they saying?" I asked.

"They're saying, 'Look at that lovely girl,'" my mother said.

Knowledge of how damaged I was came to me in bits. I asked Dale and my mother to read me medical reports and witness testimony, but they refused. They thought the information would hurt me. Later, my friend Huda read me everything. She respected my right to know.

When I was unconscious, I had so many guests the nurses rationed visits. The first night, my parents, husband, and son were each allowed one minute to say goodbye. Because Huda worked at the hospital, she visited me on her own. After I emerged from the coma, visits trickled off, in part because Dr. Lee wanted my energy directed toward rehabilitation.

The rehab team was more accustomed to working with patients recovering from heart attacks or strokes. At twenty-seven, I was a third the age of most patients in rehab. The therapists were my buddies and cheerleaders. These unsung heroes urged me along. All around me, I'd hear laughter and weeping, and I contributed my share. During my eight months in the hospital and as an outpatient afterwards, rehab was where the laying on of hands remained sacred and essential.

Eight months after my surgery, I was discharged to Dale's care. I could not walk. I could barely stand. "She's more than a survivor," Dr. Lee said at my discharge meeting. "It wouldn't surprise me if she fully recovered."

While I was in the coma, Huda visited me every day on her breaks. In the final part of the coma, I sensed when it was daylight, and when the light disappeared, I knew it was night. The day I woke up, Huda was wearing a bright red jacket I'd always loved. Although I couldn't see, I sensed her presence. Huda said, "Get up, I'm bored sitting around here. Let's go out!" She says I turned in her direction. My eyes felt as if salt had been poured into them, and Huda asked the nurse for drops. My lips were dry, and she rubbed in salve.

Huda went out to the nurses' station. "Brianna's back," she said.

The hardest part was being separated from my son. The promise of returning home to him made me fight to keep going. I did not know then I would never mother my child again. Yes, I will always be Sam's mother, but I could no longer care for him as I had before. Before my accident, for Sam's birthdays, I organized big picnics. We rented a beach house and had a bonfire. Guests walked along the beach, clustered in the lodge, or around the fire to make music. I hope some part of Sam remembers those times. After my injury, Sam regressed. Previously an outgoing and cheerful child who did well in preschool, he cried, threw tantrums, or

withdrew. I had loved being a mama. I lived my dream life with my husband and child. Dale and Sam and I were a family.

And then we weren't.

As the hospitalized months dragged on, Dale took out some of his frustration on the staff. "I want my wife back," he told them. Although those tending to me in the Intensive Care Unit and then on other floors hadn't caused my injuries, Dale, who had lost control of everything in his life, tried to take control of my care. "Make her better," he told the doctors, the nurses, the aides scrubbing the sink, and the therapists. "We had the best marriage in the world."

As all couples do, Dale and I believed we were together forever. "We're a team," Dale always told me. "I'm your best friend, and you're mine." But Dale married a different girl, and she would never return. After she assumed my rehabilitation, Dr. Lee told Dale that after a major injury like mine, eight of ten marriages fail. "Not ours," Dale said. "I don't give up on my vows that easily."

It's hard to explain, but inside, I was always myself. My body didn't work as it had before, and I had to relearn everything from scratch, but inside, nothing changed. I was still there, but Dale no longer saw me.

In dreams, I always saw myself walking. Get up. Fall down. Get up, fall down. In rehab, learning to fall is one of the big lessons. It bothered me to be fed, bathed, and cared for, but I always believed I would get well. I never had a single doubt about that.

"The only thing we can do is make her comfortable," a doctor told Dale early on. "Let her live out her life as best as is possible. Luckily, she doesn't have the ability to comprehend what happened to her." My belief that I would recover caused some experts to label me delusional. My conviction that I'd walk showed how badly my brain was damaged. Any logical person would see

life held no hope for someone like me. To them, I was blind, would never walk again, never be attractive, and should just be warehoused. I did not have a realistic understanding of my disabilities, they said. I was grateful for my chair and relied on it for years, but I never dreamed of staying there. But if I had, I would have made that work too.

People sometimes ridicule me in public, but rarely. It happened more at first, when I was freshly discharged. Children would call out on the street, and once this happened, Sam never wanted to be seen with me again. I believe Dale came to feel the same way. "If you think I'm going to spend my life pushing this chair around," he once muttered, "you are sadly deluded." Occasionally, people crash into me on the sidewalk. Other times they veer widely around me. Some say a hearty hello. Others avert their eyes. Sometimes I hear, "What happened to that poor woman? Does she have a disease?" I don't like having to explain myself. But if they ask, I say I suffered a medical accident.

In dreams, I always saw myself walking. Get up. Fall down. Get up, fall down.

In the early years, people used sign language or gestured around me, or they talked in front of me as if, because my vision was impaired, so was my hearing. When Huda or my mother took me into shops, salespeople waved shirts back and forth. I would explain that I needed to feel the item, to have it described. "If you hold it still, I can see it," I'd explain. Even now, some assume that because I walk with difficulty, or hold onto someone's hand or arm, I cannot communicate, or that my slightly slurred speech means I am mentally incapacitated.

Although I love to travel, and an airport is one place I'll use a chair, I am happiest in my own home. I attend community events, concerts, and theatre, but not often. If I sit too long, my legs go to sleep. I like dining out, but always go early, before the rush.

Dale tried to do the right thing, but he just couldn't. I don't blame him. Not everyone is cut out to be a healer. Few understand the pressures on family when someone gets hurt or sick. It overwhelms the best of us. Friends and family may murmur sympathy, but then they often vanish, as if the injury or illness were contagious. We expect those who care for the ill or injured to be saints. The families, the secondary patients, are lost and forgotten. They may present a bold face to the outside world, but alone, they can lose patience. They are terrified. They don't know what is going to happen with their own job, which they are often expected to maintain in full professionalism, as if nothing's wrong at home. No matter what they say, employers don't want you thinking about what's going on at home or making calls. Your loved one's illness or accident is better kept to yourself. People you've known your entire life, seen, or talked with almost every day, disappear. They use expressions like "move on," or "closure."

For me, a person with a brain injury, there is no closure. Initially, it's about surviving the hour or day. Some do not survive. Suicide is far too common.

After Dr. Lee, the next big miracle was finally finding an ophthalmologist who solved my vision issue. "You're not blind," he said. "Visually impaired. But not blind." He created lenses that allow me to read ingredients on a label. Even now, though, if someone nods or shakes their head, I can't see subtle movement. And I still can't handle stress or exhaustion. It will always require will to order my arms and legs to do what I want, and my tongue to obey my brain. If I get excited, my words still garble. My brain is alive; it was alive from the moment I woke up, and pathways start-

ed to reconnect, as Dr. Lee explained at the time. It was just that the rest of me had to be retrained. When I first stand, my legs are stiff. I have to orient myself in the direction I want to go. I mentally order my legs to perform, like obedience training a pet. "Move! Move! Forward, march!" And I always thank them, "Good, legs!" I've tried all kinds of devices and shoes to keep me from falling, and I'm lucky to live in a time where something new is invented every second. I've been the beneficiary of that. Being positive mentally was a big part of my recovery and remains so now. Learning to walk resulted in many falls, and when I was teaching myself to walk and later to ride my bicycle, sometimes I had to lie in a ditch until someone showed up to pull me out. But unless I tried a thousand times, I would never have walked.

After my marriage fell apart and I moved back into my childhood home, my mother became my legal guardian. Eventually, I went to court to request control of my settlement, which required a year while I proved myself competent. Until then, my mother may not have managed every penny as well as could be hoped, but I hold no resentments whatsoever. As some advised them to do, my parents could have dropped me at a care center and visited on holidays, or not at all. For a time, I became their child again, and also, in a sense, their employer. They never made a big deal of it, and neither did I. After I petitioned Superior Court to be released from the restrictive guardianship imposed while I was still in the hospital, my attorney suggested I sue my parents and the court-appointed guardian ad litem who was supposed to oversee them. At this stage in my life, I didn't need another lawsuit. I just wanted to control my own precious life. After a period of discomfort, my parents and I regained our previous closeness without the distraction of finances thrown into the mix.

Those first years, when I was still mostly in the chair, it was the little things

that helped. I wore every kind of shoe in every color and shape. When people asked what I wanted for a present, I told them my shoe size. Once I started walking, though, I only wore serviceable shoes that won't cause me to trip or fall. I do wish someone made prettier shoes for people like me.

I have grieved my injuries and losing the ability to raise my son, and I will always grieve that, but I am also determined to thrive.

Besides audio books, Braille and later my laptop, yoga and deep tissue massage also proved turning points in my recovery. Twice weekly, in my home, I receive two hours of deep tissue massage with a licensed therapist. A yoga teacher who is also a licensed physical therapist came to my home to observe me in daily activities. She designed a simple series of exercises. I practice them daily because they help with balance, strength, flexibility, and calmness. She visits every month or two to make sure I'm practicing correctly, and to add exercises if I'm having a specific issue.

Every brain injury is different. I have grieved my injuries and losing the ability to raise my son, and I will always grieve that, but I am also determined to thrive. From where I was at the beginning, I consider myself 95% restored. I'm grateful for those who stuck with me, and for those who love me still.

Except for family and close friends, nobody in my life now knows I was a musician. I long ago sold my flute and gave away my music. Most know how much I love my son because I have pictures of him everywhere, although I

don't see him as often as I would like. If not for my son, I wouldn't have been able to get well. I prefer not to talk about the flute, but I brag about my child, because loving him brought me back to life. I wish I could have raised him. The outgoing laughing child waving at me as I left for the hospital that day never regained his cheerful child self. After the first year when he acted out and regressed, we found teachers and counselors to help rather than punish. Sam grew to be a somewhat guarded child and now, as a young man, he remains silent and watchful.

Tests of my cognition began shortly after I regained consciousness. The tests were read aloud, and often the hospital psychologist could not understand my responses because my speech was only about 60% intelligible. Imagine being in pain and taking a test with both arms tied behind your back, a blindfold, with a handkerchief stuck in your mouth. When I sued to regain control over my life and the court ordered me to be retested, I learned how far I'd come. The brain has neuroplasticity, the neurologist explained.

Brain injuries tend to happen out of nowhere, and nothing prepares anyone for when they strike. The latest statistics are that women are seven times more likely to be abandoned by a spouse when they have the caregiving needs that I did. Dale tried, but ultimately, he couldn't take it. I was devastated, and yet I understood. He suffered depression and guilt. *Why did I let her have that surgery? Why couldn't it have been me?* The secondary patients need tender loving care as much or more than the patient, but it can be difficult for them to accept even if it's available or offered. This is particularly so for men. Dale was repeatedly offered therapy while I was still an inpatient and after, but he tried it and dropped out. He felt he should be able to figure out everything on his own.

After our marriage broke up and I returned to my childhood home, I cried

my eyes out. Clearing away the past, whether one wants to or not, can eventually make way for a new life, and a new life was what I wanted. For me, brain injury support groups helped, as did volunteer work.

I also started dating again. While in outpatient rehabilitation, I dated a man in my brain-injury group. It was embarrassing to be taken to a date by parents, but it was good practice. Later, as my skills and independence increased, I joined social groups to be around non-injured people. Huda took me out dancing. Charles was a blind date, and the friend who set it up did not tell him of my injury. He claimed never to notice. "It's you I love," he said when I wanted to explain. After we moved in together, he remodeled his house so there were no sharp corners. Charles supports me in everything I do and seeks out ways to help me have a wonderful life, but if someone asks about my injury, he goes for a walk or works in our yard.

If anything happened to Charles, I'd be fine in a group living situation. My friends say they'd take care of me and drive me places, but I didn't like having

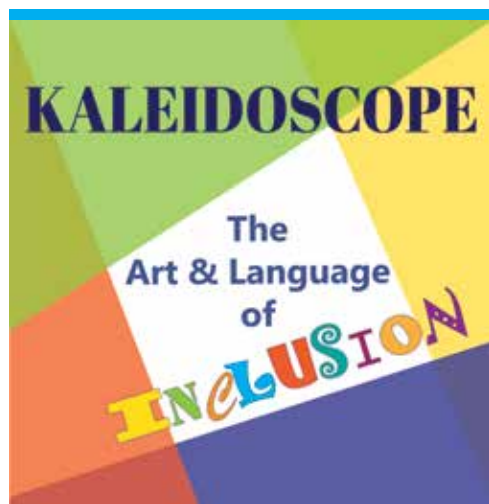
people do things for me in the beginning, and I don't want it now. Without the daily intimacy of the life I share with Charles, I'd want to live around other people.

When I lived with my parents, I spent too much time alone in my room listening to music or books. My parents and friends became accustomed to how I spoke, and I became lazy. Charles and I talk all the time, and it keeps me sharp and forces me to enunciate. As with walking, speech will always be something that requires my attention. At first, I disliked using the phone because not everyone could understand me. Now, unless I'm excited or tired, I speak almost as clearly as anyone.

On that operating table, I died. I had no pulse, heartbeat, or blood pressure. My skin was dusky, and my pupils dilated. Over the span of a two-hour procedure, my life changed, and then it changed again. Now, every day, Charles looks at me as if I am a miracle, and my neurologist verifies that I am. My startle response suppression will never work. An unexpected shout or sneeze still makes me jump out of my skin. Around

our little cottage, on our quiet street, the sounds are mostly wind and the chittering of birds. At night, embraced by softness and sky and trees, I float in grace. In storms, rain and wind tear against the walls and windows. In the distance, white water rises on the sea. On calm spring evenings, the sunset is turquoise and pink, purple and green. Hummingbirds, juncos, and finches flock to our feeder. When I sit outside near our garden, I hear the tiny pond Charles designed, as if a fish is sucking the surface from underneath. When the mergansers migrate at dusk to wherever they spend the night, seven or eight in a group, they hug the shoreline, dipping in and up like elegant chords. I walk along the deck to see them once again, but they outpace me. The dark slide of their bodies etches in, up, in, up, and then vanishes. Over time, I have become my dream self. I am the woman who not only walks but flies. ♦

Names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.



Kaleidoscope podcast hits the airwaves!

The publication has come a long way since 1979, when the first issue of the magazine was printed and copied in-house at United Disability Services. Forty-three years later, UDS is still committed to the mission of *Kaleidoscope* and making it accessible to a greater audience. Thanks to a grant from PNC, we have launched a podcast that will lift the words from its pages and bring them to life in a meaningful and modern way. The audio podcast will include insightful and thought-provoking interviews, readings of work published in the magazine (often read by authors), an exploration of the arts, and discussions about issues that are important to our readers and contributors. We are excited about this venture and hope that you'll tune in to each episode. To listen now, go to:

<https://kaleidoscopepodcast.podbean.com>

THE SILENCE BETWEEN US

CRISTINA HARTMANN

It was New Year's Eve 1981 when I understood that everything had changed. Charlie and I crowded around the television in our living room, which had been turned low so our three-year-old Kathleen could sleep. Charlie put his arm around me and raised his glass: "It'll be a great year, Julia. For all of us."

We clinked our glasses, wanting the words to come true. The muted countdown began as Dick Clark's face bobbed merrily across the screen. The glittery ball dropped, and we drank to new beginnings in contented silence.

Loud pops sounded outside, and I almost dropped my drink. A hoarse cry followed: "1982! Long live Ronald Reagan!"

Charlie swore. "It's that idiot down the street with his fire-crackers. I'll set him straight. Go check on Kath."

But I was already on my way, the sparkling wine's sharp carbonation still on my tongue. The house had thin walls, and Kathleen needed her rest after spending over a month in and out of the hospital. Rapidly advancing meningitis, that was what the doctors called it. I called it hell, standing by as doctors and nurses fought to cool my daughter's fever. I opened the door, expecting a scowling toddler on the verge of a tantrum. What I found was my daughter fast asleep.

The night-light illuminated her serene but sallow face, her thick eyelashes resting on her cheeks. It was as if the fire-crackers had never happened. I whispered her name. No movement. I spoke louder and stepped forward. Her eyelids fluttered open, giving me my disgruntled toddler. I wondered if I had imagined it all.

When I told Charlie what happened, he replied in his low and soothing voice. "The doctors said something about temporary side effects. Let's wait and see."

I watched her for weeks afterward, waiting for traces of the old Kathleen: signs of the girl who snuck into my makeup drawer and turned her face into an abstract painting of eye-shadow and lipstick, the girl who hurled herself at me when I came home from the law firm. That girl never came. The new Kathleen quietly watched the world with turtle eyes and clutched the walls as if everything had gone topsy-turvy.

When Kathleen was stacking blocks one evening, I clapped my hands and called her name. Several times, louder each time. As my calls crescendoed, she pulled out a block and sent the tower tumbling all over the floor. She never turned around.

I called the doctor the next morning.

* * *

It took weeks to schedule an appointment with the audiologist, and I took off yet more time from work. Ms. Yates, a young woman in a shapeless suit, met us at reception. "Kathleen Lambert. Meningitis. Possible hearing loss," she said, not looking up from her papers.

"The doctors said it was temporary," Charlie said.

"It can be permanent," she replied, and Charlie blinked.

Kathleen buried her face into my leg as we stood in the waiting room, her fingers digging into my thigh. This place looked and smelled like the hospital with its white-fluorescent glare and disinfectant stink.

Ms. Yates led us into the dimly-lit sound booth and instructed us to keep Kathleen occupied. Kathleen knew something was wrong and nudged her Barbies half-heartedly. Ms. Yates began to shake a rattle, the jingle filling the small space. Kathleen didn't look up. Another, louder this time. Kathleen tilted her head but didn't turn. Deep creases bracketed Ms. Yates' mouth.

Even though I had known the words were coming, my mind went blank. Empty. Nothing.

"We'll know for sure soon," Ms. Yates said. "You'll hear some sounds. Please don't react."

I bent down for the game that was no game at all. No amount of smiles and Barbie-waving got Kathleen to play with me. Charlie sat down and performed his magic—tweaked Kathleen's nose, which made her relax. I stood to let them play and braced myself for the real test.

Ms. Yates appeared as a faceless silhouette in the tinted window to the adjoining room. The noise began. The speakers emitted thin whistles, and I forced myself to stay still. Bursts of atonal sounds continued, descending in pitch until I could think of nothing else. I looked at Kathleen. She was walking her Barbie, untouched by the racket.

It was only then that I understood sound's expansiveness. It filled every nook and cranny of our lives like a gas in a vessel. It followed us everywhere, from the alarm clock's blare in the morning to the buzz of traffic on the way to work to the lights clicking off at night. It carried words from mouth

to ear. It was inescapable, inexorable, and all-consuming, except if you couldn't hear it. What happened if you were barricaded from something so elemental?

The notes continued in their mad descent, and it finally happened. Kathleen turned to me, her eyes wide and questioning. She had heard something. The world of sound wasn't entirely beyond her.

When the test came to its merciful end, Ms. Yates entered with a grim look. "Your daughter failed the hearing test. She has approximately 60 to 80-decibel hearing loss, which is in the severe range."

Even though I had known the words were coming, my mind went blank. Empty. Nothing.

"S—She's deaf?" Charlie said.

I said the first thing to come to mind: "There must be something we can do."

Ms. Yates met my eyes for the first time and shifted uncomfortably. "Well, you'll get her fitted for hearing aids. A lot depends on how well she does with them. Otherwise, there's a school for the deaf a few hours away."

No, I wanted to tell her. I had almost lost Kathleen once when the fever sent her into a coma for three days. I wouldn't lose her this time.

* * *

The next month became a cacophony. Kathleen shrieking during the hearing aid fitting. Charlie's mother sobbing at the news, and our neighbors declaring that they'd pray for Kathleen. Arcane phrases—auditory-oral, manually-coded English, cued speech—invading our lives. Charlie's loud silences. The litany of questions that kept me awake at night. How would Kathleen order at a restaurant? How would she go to school or get a job? What would become of her in this noisy world?

A woman named Elena Spillman silenced these questions. She came highly recommended by parents who called her

a miracle worker. Short blond hair framed her serious and competent face as she shook my hand with a commanding grip.

When I asked her what we should do, she smiled. “Kathleen is such a bright girl,” she said in the clear and precise way of those specializing in the spoken word. “She can learn to use her residual hearing and reach her full potential in the hearing world.” Her face softened. “It’ll take work, but it’ll be worth it.” She slid her business card across the desk.

She gave me a manual that broke everything down into daily lesson plans. All I needed to do was help Kathleen speak and listen again, and everything would be all right. I studied the manual. Memorized it. *Treat your child like they are normal. Talk to them often, and make sure they can see your lips. Do not gesture.*

Words poured out of me. “Good morning Kathleen,” I said, enunciating each syllable. “You have Cheerios for breakfast! Mommy is leaving for work, and she loves you.”

All I needed to do was help Kathleen speak and listen again, and everything would be all right.

Charlie grumbled after each drill. “Kath hates this. She closes her eyes and shakes her head. Maybe we should try the sign language thing.”

I tried to explain how Kathleen needed a strong voice in this noisy world, a voice people understood and respected. My grandfather, who read philosophical treatises in his native Polish, could barely speak English. Shopkeepers cheated him and supervisors overlooked him at the factory, all because they only saw a “dumb Polack.” When my mother complained of chest pains in her soft and demure voice, nobody listened. She died a week later of a heart attack at fifty-four. I had to raise my voice to be heard by a roomful of men. If Kathleen used sign language, a soundless language, nobody would hear her.

Upon entering kindergarten, Kathleen had regained her speech, but it remained foggy and nearly unintelligible. I spent mornings chasing her to place the aids into her ear, which she promptly yanked out. Grocery shopping became a nightmare full of spectacular tantrums full of flailing limbs and the whorls of her ear molds popping out. People stared and whispered. Elena Spillman reassured me after each session: “She’ll get better once she finds her voice.”

Two years passed, and Kathleen hadn’t found her voice yet. I often found her playing by herself after school, her knees bleeding from being pushed down.

* * *

It was a brisk March morning in 1985 when I took my seat at the meeting about the broadcasting rule changes. The previous night had been a difficult one, with Kathleen squirming away during the drills. Two colleagues started whispering as I stifled a yawn. I wondered if they had been repeating the rumors about how my work had slipped. (There had only been that minor mishap with the previous month’s filing.) Bill Halpern, the telecom group’s head, told his favorite joke: What’s a smart blond? A figment of your imagination. He glanced at my dark blond hair and waited for everyone to laugh. Everyone did, except a mild-mannered lawyer (whose daughter wanted to follow in his footsteps) and me. I gazed down the table lined by men and tried to remember why I was there.

When I graduated from law school, I pictured my future: I would get hired by a white-shoe law firm, do excellent work, and burst through the glass ceiling. Sitting behind a desk in my skirt suit, I would show everyone that women could succeed at work, except that neither Bill Halpern nor Gloria Steinem needed me as much as Kathleen did. They could hire someone else, and Kathleen couldn’t hire another mother.

Bill Halpern sighed when I handed in my notice. “Figures,” he muttered. I avoided looking at my diplomas and books as I packed up my office.

“Are you sure about this?” Charlie asked that night, his eyes worried.

“Of course I am,” I said. “I’ll go back once everything’s settled.”

He slid his arm around me. “I’ll hold down the fort until then.”

His arm fell away as I stood. I didn’t want him to see the tears in my eyes.

Instead of *The Federal Register*, I pored over textbooks on speech articulation. My suits collected dust as I dressed as if every day were the weekend. My professional women’s luncheons became lonely meals in a kitchen full of dirty dishes, waiting for Kathleen to come home.

Each afternoon, Kathleen watched me with familiar wariness as I retrieved the microphone. I told both of us that it was worth it.

“Ball,” I said into the microphone’s silver web.

“Baw,” she replied.

“No, *ball*.”

I had to remind myself often of a better tomorrow, remembering the weekly lumbar punctures after Kathleen woke up from her coma. The doctor asked me to hold her down. “Anesthetics will contaminate the sample, and we need to know if the infection’s back.” His eyes flickered from Charlie to me. “You don’t look like the falling-apart type.” The smell of disinfectant made me dizzy as I grasped my daughter’s soft arms. The more Kathleen screamed, the tighter I held her, and the faster Charlie paced in the corridor. Once it was all over, Kathleen stared up at me with accusing eyes: *You hurt me*.

I wanted to tell her that I did it out of love. She needed these spinal taps, and I had to do what was right. I had to look beyond today’s pain to give her a better future. How do you explain to a child that doing what is right for tomorrow can feel wrong today?

The tomorrow finally came when Kathleen conquered the word. It was monotone but crisp and clear. *Ball*.

“You did it!” I said before sweeping her into a hug.

Kathleen’s eyes widened before an uncertain smile spread on her face. After that, she beamed whenever she mastered a word, a dimple indenting her left cheek. I thought that I would always understand her, but I was wrong.

* * *

My memory has reduced the following decade into a few impressions. Kathleen biting down on straws to practice her S’s, leaving piles of teeth-marked straws on the table. Charlie’s worn face as he opened the front door, home from his new sales director job. Kathleen’s fidgeting as we practiced our sounds.

I remember one more thing: the 1988 protests at Gallaudet, that Deaf university in Washington, D.C. Tom Brokaw’s calm voice told us how the board of trustees had chosen a hearing person over two Deaf candidates for the school presidency, outraging the students. They were not children, the students said, and should be led by their own. Their campus was a charming oasis of grassy knolls dotted with neat buildings, cordoned off from the surrounding neighborhood full of decaying buildings. The protestors took to the streets with their flying hands and DEAF PRESIDENT NOW placards; I wanted this for them—a small space to call their own.

“Isn’t that wonderful?” I said to Charlie.

Kathleen appeared in the doorway, tall for a ten-year-old, immediately mesmerized by the moving images on the television. Her fingers fluttered as if she was imitating what she saw.

I said it was past her bedtime, and her face shifted to her mulish look. Kathleen’s stubbornness still bubbled up from time to time. At the grocery store when she wanted sugar cookies. At the kitchen table when she didn’t like green beans. And that night.

“You could’ve let her watch,” Charlie said after I got back from tucking in Kathleen.

“It’s late.”

**Once it was all over, Kathleen
stared up at me with accusing eyes:
You hurt me.**

I was pleased when the students got their president. The thing was, I wanted more than gated-off manicured lawns for Kathleen. I wanted the world.

It’s hard work giving your child everything, and Charlie got the fun parts. He heard Kathleen’s breathless laughter after surprising her with glass figurines from his sales trips. He taught her how to ride her bicycle. Most of all, he had their Sunday ritual, dressing up in black and gold of Charlie’s beloved Pittsburgh Steelers during football season. They sat down in the living room to watch heavily padded men collide in that absurd game they loved so much. Whenever the coach’s silent directives appeared on-screen, Charlie asked Kathleen what they were saying.

Kathleen predicted patterns with an oracle’s precision, and Charlie laughed in that full-bellied way that he used to do with me. “That’s my girl!” he said, and Kathleen beamed.

No, I wanted to tell him, that was *my* girl.

* * *

I thought everything would settle down when Kathleen grew into her clear, albeit hesitant, voice. I invoked the law to make sure the teachers faced her in class. It worked: she spent all night studying and got good grades. Sometimes

friends would come over, filling the living room with girlish giggles, with Kathleen's chuckle following like a delayed punctuation mark. When her friends stopped visiting toward the end of middle school, Kathleen said that they talked too much on the phone.

"Maybe I can talk to their mothers," I said.

She rolled her eyes. "It doesn't work that way. You can't make people be your friend." She was at that awkward age.

Things smoothed out when she discovered running. Her knees stopped bouncing, and her fingers stopped twitching. It was as if running burned off all of her excess energy. Serenity replaced the tension on her face, tension I hadn't known was there. Sometimes I would watch her as she trained with the team. Each stride took her further away from the others until she became a distant dot trailed by a gaggle of runners.

Her hearing aids always lay curled up on her dresser when she ran. She told me that they were uncomfortable.

Kathleen flew past everyone on the track, placing at state meets and qualifying for nationals by her sophomore year. "She has potential," her coaches told me. Elena Spillman declared that Kathleen didn't need the sessions anymore, that she was on track. I began to search job listings.

And then Charlie broke my heart during Kathleen's junior year.

He had been acting strangely for weeks, either snapping at me or bringing me flowers. He took out the trash without being asked and reached for me at night with a new urgency. The fool that I was, I thought things were getting better.

"I have something to tell you," Charlie said late one night, clutching my hands.

Companies were shedding employees left and right these days, so I patted his hand. "It'll be all right," I told him. I already had a few interviews lined up.

He had to say it twice before it sank in. "I was with another woman."

I thought I knew what I would do in such moments: slap him hard and sashay away, palm stinging with righteous anger. Instead, I let him hold my cold hands as I thought back to his toast at our wedding: "Julia makes me want to be better, and I make her want to be worse. It works out pretty good." As I remained frozen in place, the story unfolded in bursts and gasps. It was only once, and it was a horrible mistake. He got tipsy on cheap Cabernet during a

conference in New Orleans and ended up in a hotel room with a colleague. "God, I love you and Kath. Please forgive me," he said and bowed his head. I noticed his bald spot for the first time—shiny pink skin peeking past strands of graying hair.

Somehow my *no* became a *maybe*, and we went into counseling. He talked more there than he had in years, confessing his sins to a cardigan-loving woman who nodded sympathetically to his every word. "It's my fault. If I had taken Kath to the hospital earlier," he said, "none of this would have happened. Julia wouldn't have quit. I wouldn't have taken that shit job." Now he was ready to fix things.

"Not by cheating," I said.

Hypnotized by the poetic tilt of their movements, it took me a moment to realize I was staring.

The therapist gave me a patronizing smile. "Let's focus on more constructive comments. Communicating takes work."

I stared out of the window into the parking lot and wondered if Charlie had nibbled that woman's ear the way he used to nibble mine. I had somehow become a cliché torn from a dog-eared manual for a midlife crisis—a spurned housewife with a sagging jawline.

When Kathleen's coach suggested the Deaflympics try-outs, I agreed immediately. It would give Kathleen a taste of international competition, and I could escape Charlie's hangdog face.

We saw them upon arrival. Crowds of young people gesturing, their movements mesmerizing in their grace and nimbleness. Their faces lit up with animation, their emotions on full display. Their bodies swayed in the rhythm of their language. What must it be like, I wondered, to express oneself so freely? Hypnotized by the poetic tilt of their movements, it took me a moment to realize I was staring. I averted my gaze.

As I ushered her toward registration, Kathleen said, "Everyone here knows sign language." I assured her that there were others like her, and there were.

She came in 17th in the 3000 and 13th in the 1500, her times slow and the other runners' fast.

"I'm sorry," she said, almost in tears.

I told her that I loved her no matter what. She felt warm against me, and I remembered how I held her as a child, except now she towered over me.

After checking out, I found her studying the others from a distance. "This seems so easy for them."

"Oh, sweetie, but their lives aren't easy," I told her, sadness sweeping over me. The noisy world wouldn't listen to them, wouldn't make room for them, no matter how graceful their language was. "You're lucky with your beautiful voice. You have so many more opportunities."

"I don't feel lucky," she sighed, and I hugged her. Her poor performance had put her in a mood.

Charlie moved out a week later. "I screwed up. At least I

"Sometimes I don't know where I belong," she said soon after.

admit it," he said to me as Kathleen watched from the porch with wet cheeks.

"Some mistakes are too big to fix," I replied as he slammed the trunk of his car.

I interviewed at a few firms with a résumé full of volunteer work and an ancient associate position. A partner, a petite woman with stylish glasses, had one of those simpering smiles: "I admire what you did for your daughter, Mrs. Lambert. What a tragedy! I'll see what we can do." The best she could do was a part-time legal secretary position.

Elena Spillman got me a job as a parent liaison for an oral correspondence program. It didn't pay much, but at least nobody saw me as a tragedy. They saw a good mother.

* * *

Kathleen's senior year arrived, along with a fat envelope from the University of Arizona offering a generous track scholarship. Kathleen fingered the papers, her expression troubled. She had blossomed that year, going out with friends—from another school, she had said—every weekend and coming home with cheeks flushed with excitement. I told her that she'd make new friends, and this opportunity was too good to pass up.

"Sometimes I don't know where I belong," she said soon after. I held her cheek and told her that I felt that same way sometimes, too.

I left several messages with the athletic department. It was what I told all of her teachers: Kathleen had a hearing impairment, but she spoke and lipread well. All they needed to do is look at her as they spoke. The assistant yawned and promised to pass it along.

My skin was still warm from the Tucson sun when we entered the icy air-conditioned office for preseason training. Kathleen looked every inch the gazelle with her long limbs and sun-roasted cheeks—a woman to be reckoned with. I had never been prouder.

Coach Hewitt was a bow-legged woman with salt-and-pepper hair pulled into a severe ponytail. How such a woman became a coach of a top-tier track team, I will never know. Coach Hewitt tucked in her chin and mumbled, "Lambert. Middle distance, needs work on her kicks."

My daughter blinked and shifted in that nervous way of hers.

I cleared my throat. "As I mentioned in my messages, Kathleen is hearing-impaired." My daughter was so much more than that detestable term.

Kathleen straightened. "Please look at me when you speak. I can read lips." Her voice faltered toward the end.

Coach Hewitt sighed. "This is the last thing I need."

My daughter's turtle eyes absorbed the words so clearly outlined on Coach Hewitt's lips. Before I could say anything, the nasty woman had scribbled down Kathleen's practice drills: twice as many 800-meter runs than the others. When I told Coach Hewitt that I would go to the pro-vost, she replied with, "Who's winning the trophies?"

I told Kathleen we would fight this injustice. She responded with a wan smile that made me curse the small-minded woman who refused to bend. I gathered paperwork when we got home, but I had to take care of Kathleen first.

I had a solution a week later and tapped Kathleen's hand after dinner. "Honey, I found a spot for you at St. Maria's. It'll let you train and study as I deal with the university."

She fiddled with her shirt. "I . . . I'm going . . . going to Gallaudet."

"What?"

Her voice wavered. “D—Dad signed everything.”

“Your father has nothing to do with this, and remember your D’s, Kathleen. You have a spot in St. Maria’s.”

She must’ve not understood what I said because her hands started to move purposefully as if the gestures meant something important. The words that came out of her mouth were muffled and thick.

She had learned some sign language at the tryouts, and those “new friends” had been other Deaf teenagers. “I’m still bad at sign,” she blushed, “but I understand so much.” There was also a boy telling her how she would be happier at Gallaudet and how they had their own culture there. Her voice slipped into the murkiness of her childhood, and I could no longer bear to listen.

“Kathleen!” I grabbed her hand. “You don’t need that school.”

Her dark eyes filled with tears. “Oh, Mom, I do. I don’t understand half of what’s happening.”

“You did well at school. You understand me. And those football games!”

Her thumbs made this odd zig-zag motion. “I work so hard. I—It’s like a puzzle. When you know what you’re looking for, you can fit them together. But if you don’t know, then nothing makes sense. I’m tired of looking for the pieces.”

**Then she stood tall and powerful
with tear-streaked cheeks. Her
fingers moved through the air in
odd yet elegant swoops.**

All these hours we spent in the kitchen with the blinds drawn, my mouth numb from the drills. The piles of chewed-up straws sacrificed for her S’s. Her pleased look when she finally mastered *Pennsylvania*. My moth-eaten suits that smelled like failure. All these conversations with Charlie and old friends where I had nothing to talk about except Kathleen. All of that had been for what?

An idea struck me. I hadn’t suggested the operation because I didn’t want Kathleen in the hospital. Now it seemed necessary. “We’ll get you a cochlear implant.”

She raised her chin, and her palm slid over her fist, a gesture somehow simultaneously gentle and threatening. “Enough. I’m going.”

The Kathleen who stood before me was a tall young woman wrapped in lean muscle with fierce eyes. She was the picture of boldness, but I could sense the little girl underneath—the little girl on the hospital bed who needed protection. Someone had to think about tomorrow, the noisy world that didn’t listen to anyone unless they screamed.

“This is a mistake, Kathleen. You’re wasting your potential.”

Kathleen’s face crumpled, and I thought the outburst was over. Then she stood tall and powerful with tear-streaked cheeks. Her fingers moved through the air in odd yet elegant swoops. I tried to look it up in the dictionary but never found the translation. Just like that, she turned around and walked away.

As her car roared away outside, I pressed my hands into my lap to stop myself from chasing her and telling her it was all right. Just to see the dimple on her cheek. Someone had to think of a better tomorrow, just as I had all these years before in that hospital room. She would understand the importance of her voice in the world saturated in sound, so I waited.

But she never came back.

* * *

She graduated from Gallaudet with a degree in education and became a teacher at a Deaf school. She married a Deaf man who came from a Deaf family. I didn’t understand why for the longest time.

* * *

Kathleen and her family came yesterday for their holiday visit. Their eight-year-old Jeanette burst into the living room, her shrieks filling the small space. Kathleen’s husband Dan watched us as I showed Jeanette old photographs, his eyes full of judgment. I knew what he called me—an oralist, an audist, an abusive mother—and wanted to tell him that I never mistreated Kathleen. I wanted her to have the world. How wrong could that be? But he wouldn’t listen.

“Jeanette has a new game to show you,” Kathleen said to me, her voice imprecise and thick. A strange look flickered across her face, and I wondered whether she hated speaking or if she understood what I had been trying to do. I was now a relic—bilingualism and biculturalism is en vogue now, the

two worlds and languages under one roof. I thought that I had to choose.

Half an hour later, my body reminded me of the years spent in high heels. My hips ached, and my shoes were too tight. My retirement a few months ago had given me time to notice how my body had slowed down. Exhaustion settled into my bones, and I sank back against the wooden chair. Age forces you to pause and watch the world and its hubbub.

They seemed to have forgotten about me and lapsed into signing without sound, their hands twisting in the air. Dan moved with surprising grace for such a large man, his meaty hands nimble and deft. Jeanette's thin limbs swept through the air with dramatic flourishes. Kathleen didn't have Dan's grandeur or Jeanette's showmanship, but there was an authority in her movements. She pointed at Dan, eyebrow arched in a gentle rebuke. Dan tilted his head with a rueful smile, conceding whatever point she had made. She turned to Jeanette, and a few finger flits turned the girl's pout into a smile. Kathleen's face had the placidity that I had seen all these years ago when she ran, and I understood why she stopped competing. She didn't need it anymore.

The more I watched, the clearer the words became, and I could almost hear them. Dan's booming voice that rose to the rafters, a voice meant for churches and auditoriums. Jeanette's high-octane chatter, so much like what came out of her mouth. Most of all, I heard Kathleen's calm and confident voice that made students stop and think. This voice was nothing like the unsteady one that I heard with my ears. I had never stopped to listen to this version. I eased further back into my chair and watched. ♦

LEVI J. MERICLE

POETRY IN ITS NAKED FORM

This is why I'm dying

to be heard, to be memorable.
I handwrite poetry-Post-it-Notes
and stick them to different parts of my body.

Haikus to my legs
Sonnets to my arms
and a ballad to my torso.

I stick an elegy to my forehead
an epigram to my lips
and a limerick to my tongue.

The contrast of what is and what will never be
is beginning to piss me off.

This is why I'm dying.

I lie here, naked.
Just my words on top of me.

Because when I go,
I will go on my own terms.
I will go smothered in my own words.

Covered in poetic form.

I confirm, my body is giving out.
But I'm not giving up, rather
I'm giving in.

Today may not be the day I die.
But when I do, I will die with poetry next to me.

I'm okay with death.
But what I'm not okay with, is dying without beauty.
Dying without remembrance.

My life it may confine me
but these words may help define me.

This is why I'm dying.

THEY SAY I MUST FIGHT

JEN EVE TAYLOR

I must fight, they tell me.

Take up a sword and banish the cells within my face that decided to rapidly divide. This task is given to me, and me only. Doctors, treatments, surgeries seem to be less important.

I must always, no matter what, keep a smile on my face. Never admit I'm scared, and above all, refuse to listen to, accept, or prepare for my reality. They call it "being positive." Blindly, intensely positive. Toxically positive. They demand it.

I am immediately dubbed one of the "brave ones." One of those people who, due to a cancer diagnosis, is thrust onto a pedestal, taken out of normal human experience and regular levels of suffering—I am superhuman, the *type* of person who is specifically able to handle this. They couldn't do it, they say, but apparently, I am ready for it.

"I was born ready" is a phrase I've used many times in my life. When being asked if I'm ready to go onstage, or if I'm ready to start playing the next song in a set, or if I'm ready to board my flight . . .

But not for cancer. No one is ready for that.

I can't just be a regular thirty-three-year-old who is terrified, with her cancer coming back a mere two years after it

was first cut out, leaving her with limited options, and without an upper jaw, teeth, cheekbone, and eye . . .

No, that wouldn't be enough.

I look *so good*, they need to tell me, as I wink through a broken face and wonder what point they're trying to make. They don't want to hear that I struggle with the state I've been left in. I must be bursting with gratitude, constantly.

"Don't be silly," they tell me, "you look fine."

Fine. As if being impacted by losing half your face is such a silly little thing.

Though when I say I didn't cry on that first day, they won't believe me. That day when I sat by myself in a room in the hospital way above London, taking pictures of the skyline while I waited for the dental specialist to come and tell me *it's cancer*.

"You must have been in shock," they say. Because surely, any "normal" person would cry. That's what happens in movies. They don't understand when I say I immediately accepted it, that I was relieved there was a plan, that I trusted the experts, and that tears don't necessarily come. Not then, anyway.

They come later over unexpected things like a pen running out, a broken plate, or a crisp packet.

I must:

- a) BE strong!
- b) KEEP strong!!
- c) STAY strong!!!
- d) All the above.

It doesn't seem to matter that I crave compassionate understanding and support, not constant requests for hardness.

And my illness should be referred to only as a *journey*. That nice, safe word. Puts a positive spin on it. Talk less of how ill and weak the bright red and yellow chemicals (pumped into me twenty-four hours a day, five days a week) made me. No, cancer is just a warm and fuzzy process of personal change and development. Just like reading a self-help book. A really long self-help book that attacks every cell in your body, treatment hopefully curing you quicker than it's killing you, and then requires bits of you be cut out.

Because after that day when I am handed the word *cancer*, I am expected to inspire. To show the true resilience of human nature. To show that I am living my life despite this terrible thing. Despite my deformed face.

If she can do it, so can you, so get up and stop making excuses!

I cannot simply be a person who has cancer, who accepts the treatment in the hope I'll be one of the lucky ones who lives, I must be a:

- a) Cancer FIGHTER!
- b) Cancer WARRIOR!
- c) Cancer SUFFERER!
- d) Cancer SURVIVOR!
- e) All the above, all at once.

Forever defined by those pesky rapidly dividing cells.

And I'm not allowed to be exhausted by it all.

And now, that my time may be shortened, with my mortality thrust in front of me, I must quit that soul-destroying job and all things that don't serve me and *live for the moment!*
Follow my dreams!

For I have somehow floated above the earthly shackles of living costs and London rent, and *life is short!*

(I did quit the job to travel, though, life is bloody short.)

For a while, they deemed me "all better"—back to normal as if nothing happened, expected to work five days a week, no worries. Expected to move on. Never exhausted, never overwhelmed, and certainly never with PTSD following me around, or anxiety telling me that any pain is the cancer coming back.

But it wasn't anxiety because that pain really was the cancer coming back.

And when I die, if I die from this, they will paint me as a loser. The loser of a battle I was never part of, a fight I was never in, a war that was just my life. My life that I tried to live as compassionately and gently as possible. And I dread this moment perhaps the most, when my legacy is reduced to being spoken about in terms of blame, like there was something more I could have done. There wasn't. There isn't. I am doing all I can. ♦

BRENDAN

JOHN WILLIAM

It's an hour before we can see the Sunoco station and the moment we can, Brendan is sure to point it out to me. The line to the pump goes back for miles on the Palisades Parkway and will no doubt stretch further as the day goes on. We lose what feels like half a day idling here, the city within our sights but out of our reach.

"You should've gotten gas on Thursday," Brendan says, eyes glued ahead. "The line wouldn't have been as long."

"The line would be long no matter what day it is."

"I don't think you planned ahead."

He was right, and it irked the shit out of me.

When the mandate to ration gas was put into effect, Brendan got a piece of poster board and made a calendar that identified the days each of us could go, as he had memorized all of our license plates long ago.

"Hannah, if you need gas you can get it today," he'd say. "But if you try to

get gas tomorrow, you won't be able to, you'll have to wait until Thursday or Saturday."

Today was Saturday, so it was my day. I should've gotten the damn gas on Tuesday or Thursday when the lines wouldn't have been as long, but I didn't.

This is our fault, I think. We gave Brendan language, taught him to be routine-oriented and how to regulate himself so he could survive in this world. Now we were showing just how disorganized and chaotic our lives could be when the structure we've implemented disappears.

"We could've gone to the Marathon in Montvale," he adds. "That probably wouldn't have had such a long line."

"How's school, bub?" I ask, tired of hearing about the damn line at the gas station.

"I don't like my aide. She's a real B-I-T-C-H."

"How come?"

"Her voice hurts my ears."

"Does she have a high-pitch voice?"

"Yes, she does. It's like when Kiki screams." Kiki is our four-year-old diva of a cousin.

Rare is it for him to speak ill of others, but he doesn't mince words. I also expect that no one has bothered to ask him why he doesn't like her or consider that maybe her voice is the problem and not that he has "an issue with discipline."

"I'm sorry buddy-boy," I say, recognizing this is a serious problem for him. "That must not be a lot of fun to deal with."

"No, it is not."

"So what did you get in trouble for?"

"I keep losing her."

"What do you mean?"

"Between classes. I walk super fast and so I lose her. I know I'm not supposed

to say mean things about people but she's so loud. She's always saying, 'I got a bum knee, Brendan. *Slow down.*' But I don't slow down because I don't want her following me, so I got in trouble."

I laugh at this even though he never finds the humor in it, and I'm "not supposed to laugh." What they don't seem to realize is that laughing is what got me through those years when it was really hard, when all I wanted to do was cry.

When we reach the pump, he reminds me, "This is New Jersey. You don't have to get out. The man will pump your gas for you."

"I know, bub."

He watches the numbers tick upward, commentating all the while about how it would've been cheaper at this station or that, quoting prices and referencing how the wait time was shorter at the such-and-such when he went with Dad on what he referred to as "his day."

When I got home Monday night, Mom mentioned that Brendan had escalated a lot in the past couple of weeks, even more than around Thanksgiving when he had a mini-meltdown because I wasn't coming home. If it wasn't the gas prices or which day we could go get gas, it was when the snow would get here. If it wasn't the snow, it was, "What day of the recovery is it?" If it wasn't the day of the recovery, it was the end of the Mayan fucking calendar. If it wasn't the Mayan calendar, it was, "Is Hannah coming home for Christmas or is she going to be with Derek?"

I wasn't going to allow myself to feel guilty about having Thanksgiving with my boyfriend's family, even if it meant for Brendan a sixteen-year tradition was broken. Now that I was home, he seemed to have forgotten all about it.

. . . laughing is what got me through those years when it was really hard, when all I wanted to do was cry.

The pump comes to a halt with a clunk that echoes through my car.

"\$42.56," Brendan says. "He'll get it up to \$43. You'll see."

The attendant pulls the lever two more times, covers the tank and hands my card back to me. I turn the engine and we jump onto the approach for the lower level of the bridge.

"What time will we be at St. Mark's?"

"I don't know. You can enter the address into Waze to find out."

He punches the information into my phone and then tells me that we'll be there at 9:34 a.m. I also remind him that he doesn't need to tell me every turn we need to make, just to turn the volume up.

Ever since Hurricane Sandy hit, he'd been looking for a way to help those in need. That was how we were able to curtail his anxiety about everything that was happening—give Brendan a task. I researched it and, with his approval, signed us up to volunteer at the church, knowing I would be home for winter break.

All week long he was anxious about the twenty-first and what would happen to Earth. I hadn't seen him like this in some time. It was a big step backward after all the progress he'd made in the last two years. Dad seemed more haggard than I could remember, and one morning after Brendan was picked up for school, I came downstairs to find Mom crying over the dishes. For the first time, I realized that they were older.

I played the role of the distractor—the extra time away from home had been a blessing in the long run. Brendan and I ran errands, bundled up and went on walks, played video games, and talked ad nauseam about our plans to volunteer at the church.

Yesterday was the twenty-first and it came and went without any fanfare. He woke up this morning having forgotten he was worried about the world ending for the past month.

"What did they say they're going to have us do?" he asked.

"Do you remember? We talked about it."

"Folding laundry."

“You sure you’re up for that?”

“Yes. We fold laundry in Life Skills.”

That was all he would say on the subject—not whether it was something he was interested in doing or not. I guess we would find out together.

I veer onto Harlem River Drive. A gray day stretches as far as the eye can see. Brendan stares out the window as sad little raindrops zigzag along the glass before flying onto the roadway.

“What time are you going to call Derek?” he asks out of the blue.

“I don’t know. I told him we’d talk later.”

“After St. Mark’s?”

“Yes, after St. Mark’s.”

“You didn’t set a time?”

He couldn’t comprehend this, given that whenever we would FaceTime each other for the past three years while I was at Lehigh, we always had a set day and time.

“I’ll just call him whenever we get back from St. Mark’s,” I say.

“Did you show him your hair yet?”

“I showed him last night.”

“What did he say?”

Two nights before, Brendan and I had been watching *V for Vendetta* and he made some crack about how Natalie Portman looked like a boy. I had to enlighten him about the fact that some women choose to have short hair. When he asked me if I’d ever have short hair, and I told him I would, and he asked me, “When?” I said, “Now.” I didn’t think I was going to commit to getting my hair cut, but that’s what happened. We took his clippers and did it in the bathroom. When Mom and Dad came home they freaked, thinking he’d at-

tacked me in my sleep or something. But, whatever, I was in need of a change. Besides it turned out surprisingly well—a testament to how much Brendan’s OT has paid off.

“He was really surprised, but I think he likes it,” I said.

“You can tell?”

“Yeah, I can tell.”

“He’s still coming on December 27 and staying until January 4?”

“Yes. Do you want me to put it on your calendar?”

“Sure.”

It was unusual for him to ask, but it was prelude for the even more bizarre comment he made next:

“I like Derek.”

“But . . . ?” I ask.

“Huh?”

“But, what?”

“I said, ‘I like Derek.’”

“Yeah but anytime you say that there’s usually a *but*. ‘I like Keith *but* his front teeth are awfully crooked. I like Greg *but* his voice is kind of annoying.’ What’s the *but* about Derek?”

“I like Derek. That’s it,” he says. “You need to relax.”

That was one of those statements we used to say to him all the time, just like, “you need to sit still,” or, “you need to be quiet.” We would say that to him when he was at his least relaxed, as if it was a reasonable request. It was a monumental demand to place on a child, much less a child with autism. His mind and body were hardwired by a different manufacturer, and so statements like “control your body” were

drilled into his head to get him acclimated to our expectations. But knowing what was expected of him and actually doing it were two very different things. It took a lot of learning for us to get to where we are now. And now, years after the fact, our words were coming back to haunt us.

A gray day stretches as far as the eye can see.

That aforementioned lack of a filter had caused problems for me on a number of occasions. Chief among them was two years ago when I came home for Thanksgiving with a three-month-old smoking habit. That was during the Keith years when I spent weeknights in his rehearsal space and weekends going to see him play shows. By the time I came home I was going through a pack of American Spirits every two days. I spent the first day back sitting and talking to my parents, but not before spraying my clothes with body spray, rinsing my mouth, and brushing my teeth to mask the smell. I had designated times when I could sneak a cigarette. Then I walked Brendan, on his way to the fridge to pour himself a glass of orange juice.

“Bren,” Mom said, “Say ‘hi’ to your sister.”

He poked his head out of the fridge, took a long look at me with his nose scrunched up, leaned into me, took a whiff, and said point blank, “You need to quit smoking. Smoking’s bad for you, you know.”

A lot of shouting ensued and continued throughout the weekend, but I no longer felt the need to hide my habit. Two months later I quit smoking and at the end of the semester, I quit Keith too. Both were necessary for my well-being.

We head through the toll plaza at the
RFK Bridge.

“There’s a pothole coming up in a thou-
sand feet but it doesn’t say which lane,
so be careful,” he says, studying Waze.

“I’ll be on the lookout.”

“I just don’t want you to hit it.”

“I know, bub. I appreciate you.”

“We’re also getting there at 9:32 a.m.
now.”

“Hey, I managed to shave two minutes
off. Pretty good, right?”

“You’re speeding,” he says. “You
should probably slow down so you
don’t get a ticket.”

Silly me, for a second I thought he
was paying me a compliment. Some-
times he could be a real stickler for
the rules—that is, unless it came to
staying with his aide between classes.
But I knew he meant well. Few people
cared about others more than my little
brother. He just had a funny way of
showing it.

We arrive at the church at 9:29 a.m.
A large cloth banner hanging on the
wrought-iron gate reading “Occupy
Sandy” served as our visual cue.

“You ready?” I ask.

“Oh yeah,” he says, getting out of the
car and then making sure I know that
yes, I can park on this side of the street
because it’s Saturday.

* * *

The night hopping—as we came to call
it—started when Brendan was five. He
would flop around on the bed, pull his
sheets off and throw them around the
room. Then he would start hopping. It
went *boom-BOOM*.

His method was to take two steps for-
ward, hop once on the balls of his feet

in order to gain some height, then come
crashing down with full force. It reso-
nated in the floorboards and the walls,
in the china downstairs and the light
fixtures over our heads. We felt it in our
marrow.

*Boom-BOOM . . . boom-BOOM . . .
boom-BOOM . . .*

He was trying to regulate himself, try-
ing to quiet the unrest he felt in his
body. I see that now, but when I was
nine years old, I saw only my own
agony.

I felt no pain, no hurt, no hatred, nothing.

The night hopping reached its zenith
in May of 2000, right as the warmth
was returning to our lives. There was
a two-night stretch when I had gotten
five hours of sleep total. On night three,
I lay in bed and stared at the ceiling,
my nerves so frayed that a jolt of terror
surged through me each and every time
he hit the floor. Tears streamed down
my face in a torrent but I didn’t have
the strength to make a sound.

*Boom-BOOM . . . boom-BOOM . . .
boom-BOOM . . .*

Resentment began to glow brighter and
brighter with each passing moment. I
felt the only way to get the point across
was to go into his room, grab him by
the shoulders, and scream into his
round little face, “Stop jumping! Stop
it, right now! Don’t you see I just want
to sleep and you won’t let me and it’s
killing me? You’re killing me!”

Instead, I went down the hall to Mom
and Dad’s room. When I opened the
door, they both stirred right away. They
hadn’t been sleeping either.

“Hannah?” I heard Dad say.

“Daddy . . .” I said, and my voice
broke.

They both sat up in bed and I went to
them, collapsing in their laps. I felt
their loving hands on me; one of them
stroking my hair while the other wiped
the tears from my cheek. All the while,
the *boom-BOOMing* continued to reso-
nate through the house.

“Come on baby, let’s go for a walk,”
Dad said, and he scooped me up in his
arms and we went out of the room.

I don’t remember where in the house he
carried me or how he managed to carry
me for so long. For the past year or so,
I was living in a cold new world where
I was “too big” to be carried anymore.
What that meant, I realize now, was
that I was too tall, even for him. But
when he picked me up that night, he
made me feel weightless. He glided
through the house with me cradled in
his arms, as if I’d been momentarily
returned to infancy. I buried my face in
his warm, flannel-clad shoulder until I
was all cried out.

At some point, he spoke into my ear,
“You don’t ever have to go through
this on your own, Hannah. We’ll get
through this together, your brother,
too.”

I lifted my head up just enough to see
that we were standing in front of the
bay window in the living room, illumi-
nated by the moonlight. Whether I was
worn down from all the crying or com-
forted by his words, a sense of calm
fell over me for the first time in three
days. I felt no pain, no hurt, no hatred,
nothing.

That my dad included Brendan in that
notion of “getting through this to-
gether” was key to my understanding of
how we would survive as a family—a
seed planted in my weary mind. We
were going to hold him accountable,
but it was going to take all of us work-
ing together for the rest of our lives to
manage this situation.

I didn't even remember falling asleep. When I woke up the next morning I was on the couch, now with the sunlight pouring in through the bay window. The house was so calm I forgot where I was. I checked the clock and saw that it was 9:40 a.m. Then I remembered it was Thursday. I knew right away they had let me sleep in.

I crept upstairs and peeked into Brendan's room, as the door was already cracked. He, too, was still asleep, though he was balled up in child's pose at the end of his bed, uncovered with his mouth wide open.

He looked so peaceful, and in that moment the spite I'd felt a few hours earlier was stifled by an overwhelming sense of empathy.

Poor baby boy, I thought. I'm sorry for having these thoughts toward you. I can't imagine what you're going through. I'll do the best I can to help you.

It took an emergency meeting with his teacher and the child study team and another two months of trial and error before they found a viable solution for the time being. Then we had to teach Brendan that whenever he felt deregulated to go down to the family room where we had set up a springboard for him and jump it out until he felt like he was ready to go back to bed. This helped to squash those *boom-BOOM* nights and soon after, they even weaned him off the springboard. Eventually the hopping was all but done.

I wish I could say it became easier from there but that wasn't the case. There was still the occasional meltdown in the cereal aisle, the disassembly of one of my dolls or electronics, and early morning wake-up calls. And so my feelings toward him continued to seesaw, just as they had after the hopping.

Dealing with all of that emotional whiplash at such a young age was what sparked a wild streak in me that lasted

a couple of years. By the time I was accepted into Lehigh, I wanted nothing more than to get away from all of it. But when I did, I realized how this life had given me structure too, to the point that I didn't know how to live without it. Mom, Dad, Brendan, and I were all woven into the same fabric, keeping each other safe and warm.

I remember the first night I laid awake in my dorm room and I thought to myself, *it's too damn quiet in here.*

* * *

Mom pours the hot chocolate into the cup, sprinkles a handful of mini marshmallows on top, and sprays it with a dollop of whipped cream.

"Good?" Mom asks.

"Good," he says. Then he takes a sip and scalds his tongue, grimaces.

"You know the consequences bub, we've talked about this."

He pivots and heads upstairs and Mom rolls her eyes. I continue to blow on my cup, knowing it'll be at least another five minutes before I can take a sip.

"How did it go at the church?" she asks.

"It went really well. He folded and sorted clothes for two solid hours."

"He used to hate folding."

"He used to hate sitting still."

She sniffs as if to suggest a laugh, her eyes far away, as if she is watching a ten-year-old movie that still resonates with her the way it did when she first saw it.

"He takes a lot of pride in helping others, even if it means doing the job no one else wants to do," I add.

"I'll never forget when Mrs. Barnes said, 'He's just one of those kids who's not going to have any awareness of his peers.' I told her, 'He's eight. Teach him how to have awareness.'"

She spoke from a wounded place—a place that felt nearer than it should have. Some injuries we never recover from, I think we just learn to live with the pain.

"I swear I need to double my grocery budget because of this kid," she says to an empty space in the fridge. "He ate a whole meatloaf last week. And I don't even know where it goes. He only grows up, not out."

"Anyway, I'll send you the pictures I took today. I got some good ones."

"That would be great. I can send them to his school."

She spoke from a wounded place—a place that felt nearer than it should have.

I finish my hot chocolate and announce that I'm going for a walk. Right away she emerges from her hunched over position in the fridge, takes hold of me and hugs me tight. It was abrupt and firm and made me want to remind her I will be back, but I don't. I just hug her back.

Then she holds me in front of her as if to examine me, her hands on my shoulders.

"You know, you have been taking care of everyone around you for as long as I've known you, especially your brother. You're like the moon kiddo—you change the tide. I just hope you take

the time to recognize all that you do for others.”

There was a long gap where there had been few hugs—those selfish teenage years when disagreement was our business, back when business was booming. There had been piercings and boyfriends and other attention-seeking actions and the subsequent shouting that came with the baggage like a side order of fries. I remember on a number of occasions, she would say, “I don’t need this right now.” But it was exactly what we needed to happen to get to this moment. It was a reminder that what made life more difficult at the time made us who we are today, helped us foster a functional relationship.

“Be sure to go down to the A&P and check out your brother’s memorial he made with his class,” she said. “It was his idea.”

I wrap my scarf around my neck, pull my jacket on, and head out the front door. The spitting rain that marked our ride to Brooklyn had long dissipated but the sky was still a lifeless shade. Snow was coming—Brendan told me as much.

Before heading down the front walk, I turn and look up to find him framed in his bedroom window. His face is illuminated by the TV screen and he’s holding a Wii nunchuck. Suddenly he hops a single, little hop as he has no doubt won a race or defeated an opponent. Then he comes to an abrupt halt, as if keeping himself in check.

I chuckle then head out on my walk.

My mind is steeped in thoughts of Derek. I put a lot of stock in the fact that Brendan said he likes Derek, not because I live and die by the edict of a sixteen-year-old boy, but because he sees things the rest of us don’t.

During the year Keith and I were together, I always wondered why

Brendan wouldn’t look him in the eye and would act so cold to him. I was certain it wasn’t just Keith’s “crooked teeth” or the fact that I started smoking when we were together. For me, it was more of a slow reveal, like when I was singing in the car one time and he asked, “How can someone who’s so tone deaf be so into music?” Or the time when he cursed me out in front of our friends when I was offered the chance to sell merch for another band. When I left him, I left a lot of my worst habits behind for good.

Derek is different though—I could see that when I first set eyes on him. He is an unapologetic dork, something he wasn’t afraid to let me know the night I met him, when he showed off his wide array of dad moves on the dance floor. But he is also present when I need him to be, like last weekend when I was having a hard time. Even though I had my last final on Monday morning, we stayed up all night just talking in my bed. It was the most normal I’d felt in a couple of days. He didn’t brush aside my craziness or change the conversation when it got too real for him. And he certainly didn’t judge me when I decided to chop all of my hair off one night. In fact, he tells me he loves it.

I walk over the old footbridge, step out of the woods and into the barren parking lot of the old A&P. I make my way toward the ramshackle entrance and peek through the window to see a small lake forming on the floor near the entrance, right where the Chiclets dispenser used to be. The whole joint has been picked bone dry; the gutted interior of the dilapidated supermarket echoes the feeling outside of it.

Then I look down at what my mom suggested I go see: On the bench out front, against the wasted, industrial backdrop, is a bundle of brightly-colored stuffed animals, an assortment of flowers, handwritten cards, and extinguished tea lights, neatly arranged like a Hallmark store display cabinet.

Above it on the dirty glass was a banner that read, Alexander Day School Stands With Newtown. I recognized his signature right away, scribbled an inch below the message.

Brendan had never been to Newtown, Connecticut. In fact, I wasn’t even sure he could grasp what took place there. But Brendan, who at one point was “never going to have any awareness of his peers,” has a very acute awareness of all people, whether he knows them or not. He is aware of people who have lost their homes to a hurricane and parents who have lost their children to gun violence. When all I wanted to do was freeze up and spend the weekend in bed thinking about how tragic it all is, Brendan would say things like, “Well, we should do something for the families of those kids, right?”

That, I think, is the result of all the work we’ve done.

As I stand here in the cold gray, I see all the brightness that my brother has to offer this world. I see the work he has done to make it a little bit better for everyone else. The sodden stuffed animals and withered flowers might not survive another day but all that positive energy will linger as long as we’re willing to hold onto it.

I turn on my heels and head back home.

I’ll call Derek and inform him that he’s received the seal of approval from Brendan. I’ll confirm he’s coming to visit after Christmas and through New Year’s. Then, when I get off the phone, I’ll be sure to put the dates on Brendan’s calendar. ♦

Previously published in Wordgathering (September 2020). Reprinted with permission of the author.

TOMMY

KALE BANDY

I splash the water, white pillows of suds shattering into little islands in my own ocean. My mother grabs my hands and kisses them whispering for me to keep still. Her voice flies past my eyes like wind that plucks the seeds from white dandelions in spring. I don't hear her words, but I know the way quiet feels.

I try to tell my hands to listen to her, but they twist inward and shake like they're withering. They feel like they're going to sink into my arms. The feeling travels up toward my heart, and I'm scared my heart will wither, too. I stop trying to stay still and shake harder to get the feeling out. My weird voice moans and Mother shushes me like wind again.

She wipes her wrinkled forehead with the back of her wrist and some of her long brown curls get wet. The sponge in her hand drips on her jeans. The blot turns into a dark shape that looks like one of my islands. She has islands, too.

I reach for the sponge to tell her that we're the same. She reaches toward me instead and wipes my face with the warm, scratchy foam. The warmth runs down my cheek and onto my neck

where it pauses like it's deciding which side of me to run down. It chooses my back, and I arch in pleasure and laugh. The little drop is so friendly, and I want to hold it and whisper to it that it is my friend.

I reach over my shoulder for the drop, but it's too fast and disappears into my ocean. I've lost it now. I can never tell it that it's my friend, and my eyes fill with rivers of salty drops. Mother sees and hums her lullaby to me. She rubs my back with the sponge, releasing more drops. So many falling into my ocean. Are they okay there? Are they happy? How can I know when I never got the chance to whisper to them?

"Dry! Dry them!" I shout, but it's not what I want to say. I want to say, *Catch them, Mother. Try to catch them!* My tongue doesn't listen to me except when I whisper, but people can't hear my whisper voice.

Mother doesn't understand and thinks I want to leave my ocean. She tries to help me out of the water, but I don't want to leave. She lifts me by the armpits, and I fight to stay by kicking my feet. She's not strong enough to lift me by herself anymore. I'm too big even

though I'm smaller than most of the kids at school.

"Tommy!" She sets me back down as gently as she can, but the plastic sea floor is too hard and my bottom hurts now. Frustrated, she pulls the plug by my feet and all the drops swirl in a water tornado. I try to put my hand over it, but it spins anyway.

"Dry them!" I scream again, knowing that she won't understand.

"Tommy, stop!" Her voice is red, sinking into the water. It's hot like the sun after I've sat outside for too long. My wrists twist again, and I hug myself the best I can, whispering, *Stop being bad. You're being bad. Mother doesn't know about the drops. She can't know.* My feet kick faster, the ocean peaks over the white walls I'm sitting in and splashes all over my mother's bare feet. Her rolled up jeans darken in spots that were protected before she stood up.

"Can't we get through one bath without this happening?" Her eyes are closed, voice shaking. She's holding back tears, and she thinks I don't understand. But I know how bad I am. I wish I wasn't bad. I wish I could listen all the time.

The last of the water drips down the drain, and I whisper *goodbye*. The islands have crashed together and in their place a little white mountain leans against the side of the tub. I imagine myself climbing the mountain, but the bubbles are popping and I keep falling back to the bottom.

Mother's chin sits against her chest as she holds her hands on her hips. She takes a deep breath and grabs a towel off the door to her right. I stand up slowly, legs shaking as I balance myself on the slippery sea floor. I see myself momentarily in the mirror before she covers my head with a towel and wraps me up tight. I see how my hair is sticking out at different angles, spotted with white bubbles that hadn't been rinsed. My scalp tingles with pain like the air around me is pulling at the misplaced hairs. I paw at my head to stop the pain. It has to be flat. Mother's hands are in the way, and I try to rip them off me as my weird voice yells at her.

She fights to dry me as I flail and hit and whisper, *I'm sorry, Mother*. She throws the towel off me angrily and yells back though I only see the edges of her words. My hands are in my hair patting it down until I feel the pain in my scalp sink down through my feet into the floor. Straight. Flat. Same. Painless. But Mother doesn't know how it hurts. Neither does the man on the phone. He thinks I should look like him.

He comes once a month with a piece of paper that he gives to Mother and pats me on the head. When he tries to talk to me, his voice looks thin like a twig. By the time I see it break, he leaves. Mother always sits at the table and watches him tell me the same stories.

"You look like your mom, Tommy. Except your eyes. Those are mine."

They're mine, I whisper back. *I look like me*. He doesn't know. He thinks that everyone looks like someone else. He doesn't see. He looks with his eyes too much—*people can only be felt*. Mother feels like wind in spring. The man feels like dust clouds. Sometimes I can't breathe, and my weird voice makes the dust cloud swirl away. Then Mother sings her lullaby.

Mother feels like wind in spring. The man feels like dust clouds.

I've been sitting, watching TV for an hour when I stop thinking about the man. I don't remember sleeping or how I got to the TV room, but now I'm there. Seconds sometimes don't listen to the way the clock moves. *Tick. Tick. Tick*. Sometimes the seconds stop for days. These are the days when I'm really bad. I'm caught in a loop until the seconds catch up all at once. Other times they get ahead of themselves and I feel like I'm flying. I don't know if I'm good or bad on those days, but I don't argue with my body when I'm flying. I flew all night. *Tick*.

"Paul, I know it's a little early, but I could really use some extra help this month. Tommy needs new clothes. He's a growing boy, what do you expect?" Mother is talking to the man again.

My favorite commercial comes on and I hear myself laughing at the duck that talks. No matter what he does, he says the same thing over and over. I repeat him every time and savor the familiar word on my usually heavy tongue. When I say it, a shiver runs down my back, and I can focus better on everything.

The little table in front of me has my favorite books all over it: *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, *The Cat in the Hat*, and *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*. The couch I sit on is light brown and slick because I spill my juice a lot. Mother's chair is black—slick too—and always has the footrest popped up. The lights in the kitchen flicker so fast my eyes hurt when I stare too long, but Mother doesn't seem to notice. Her hand is over her eyes while she talks to the man.

My commercial ends, but I still say the word, louder and louder. It travels around the room—blue when it bounces off the ceiling from the first syllable and orange when it bounces back at me during the hard-tasting second syllable. The colors and the sounds lift me off the couch, and I stand to chase the word while I yell it. *Bounce. Bounce. Bounce*. It wants me to jump. Mother says no jumping inside, but the word wants me to jump and bounce all around. The call from my own mouth turns into jumping, and I'm flying again.

I'm up high now, jumping off the ceiling and the walls and through the window out to the sky. I close my eyes and jump and jump and jump. Up, up, up. Shouting louder. A spark ignites at the base of my back and light travels up my spine and out the top of my head. The

world is open to whatever I want, and all I have to do is jump.

“Would you shut him up?” I hear the shout through the phone like the voice is right next to me.

“Tommy! Please, no jumping inside!” Her voice is broken glass, shattered by the man’s voice on the other side of the phone. He has reached through and ripped through her like a tornado. He rips me out of the sky, and my feet crunch against the ground as Mother grabs my hands. I try to get back to the sky, but I don’t remember how to jump that high. I cry out and grab my head. Crash landing.

A bird lands on the windowsill and twitters. He doesn’t have to jump to fly all the way up here. He’s friends with the wind, and with open wings, he drifts upward without a second thought. I imagine looking down at the ground from the other side of the window and see cars the size of toys and trees that look like broccoli. I flap my arms to tell my mother that I want to fly like the bird.

“Yes, I see the bird. Is that why you’re so upset?” Her glass voice lies all over the floor in the kitchen by the phone. I can barely hear her, so I flap harder. I don’t trust my voice to say anything, but I think if I flap harder she will understand. She is small in the corner of my eye, and I see her little head wave around and disappear as she stands up.

TAP. TAP. TAP. The sound is like thunder, and I watch the bird fly away. *No, Mother. No! Don’t scare him away! I want him to teach me to fly!*

“Fly, bird! Fly away!” I say instead because these are the words my tongue chooses. I flap harder, but all is lost.

“Honey. Look at me. Look at me.” Mother bends down to look me in the eye. I flap twice more. “Look here!” I try. I really try. But when I look at her eyes, I can’t see her voice. Her lips

move, and the words bounce away. I don’t have time to smell them or feel them on my skin. I can’t see the color of the words because the green in her eyes fills the room. I look away when her lips stop moving.

“Fly, bird!” I say again.

“Tommy, did you hear anything I just said?” She touches my chin and turns my head back to her.

“Hear anything you just said,” I repeat the words to feel their meaning. I look over her head, trying to focus.

“Yes. Just give me five more minutes to talk to your father.” The broken pieces of her voice reform into a solid sheet of glass. “Then we can go to the park.”

I try to get back to the sky, but I don’t remember how to jump that high.

The green of her eyes turns into the green of her words. She kisses my forehead and stands up again.

“Five minutes. I’m okay,” I say to let her know I understand. The familiar phrase feels good on my tongue, so I say it again. “I’m okay.” She smiles and walks back to the phone where the dust cloud voice waits.

“Sorry,” she sighs, picking up the phone. “You’d think after ten years I’d know a little more about what I’m doing with him.” I was being bad again. I jumped inside. I sit down as my knees buckle from the grief that falls out of my mother’s mouth and onto my shoulders. She doesn’t sound like broken glass, but the wind in her voice quivers like it does when lightning strikes.

I can’t move for half an hour.

When Mother calls my name to leave and I don’t move, she sits next to me quietly waiting for me to respond. She will wait until I stand up on my own, but after ten minutes, she walks back into the kitchen with steps that sink into our carpet farther than usual. None of my limbs will react when I tell them to, and I watch as Mother sits back at the table, hunched with her nose hovering over papers and eyes drooping. After a few minutes, I notice her shuffle the papers and sigh as she sits back in the chair; the air around her swirls with each sigh like residue from the dust cloud voice has seeped through the phone and into our kitchen.

The memory of the voice clogs the air between Mother and me, and I want to cough. When she sighs again, the particles race toward me, and I close my eyes, unable to escape the leftover words: *Would you shut him up?* I cough and shut my eyes. Mother looks over at me, alert to the change. When I open my eyes, I can feel my arms and legs again and wave at the air in front of me. The words scatter and I try to focus on the word I want to say. Just one word. I look to Mother and cup my eyes to block everything but her face.

“Park?” I say and I feel the euphoria of success race around my skull like a hamster on a wheel. I smile so wide my face hurts, but I say, “Park!” again because I have said what I meant and my weird voice didn’t take over for once. I put my hands down and run to Mother who laughs like my friends, the birds. I tuck my head under her chin and say “park” over and over. She doesn’t tell me to stop and grabs my hand to lead me out the door.

The hallway is stained like the man on the phone’s teeth: brown and reaching toward the floor as if being bound to the ground is the most desirable place to be. I reach up and feel Mother’s hair wind around my fingertips. Soft like

my pillow but light like the air I want to fly on. Gently she grabs my hand again and glues it to her side. I know she doesn't want me to touch her hair, but I need a little bit longer. My left hand reaches across my chest and into the air again. My mother's left hand clenches my right as I stroke her head as gently as I can.

"Might as well. Not like I'm trying to impress anyone," I hear her say to herself. My face laughs and a part of my brain revels in the joy of each brush, but the other part begs my hand to stop and leave Mother alone. By the time we reach the elevator, my arm falls. Thankfully, the urge ran its course quickly this time. I breathe relief until the elevator doors open.

The box is red on the inside, and the rust breaking through the paint makes the walls look like blood. My knees buckle because I'm afraid of being crushed by the blood, but I know I need to go down. If I fell down the stairs, Mother would be upset at me because she couldn't carry me. I've gotten too big for that.

Mother grabs one of my hands with one of hers and blocks the door with the other. I slump, fighting her, but I want to follow her. Inside me, I feel a jolt through my heart like someone has dropped me. I look up at Mother and her eyes look blurry. Am I losing my sight now too? Her face is clear, and her hair is still brown like chocolate and curly like air. Her voice comes out in spurts like wind through a car window. A water drop lands on my face. I see now. Someone drops me again.

I will my legs to move, but they just kick out at the floor without grabbing it. Mother pulls harder begging me just by my name.

"Tommy. Tommy. Tommy."

Mother. Mother. Mother. I say in my whisper voice. I try again.

"Ma," I get out and a different kind of jolt runs through my chest: like butterflies in a tornado. I pop up, and in my moment of control, I spin into the elevator and close my eyes. Mother follows and hits the button that flies us somewhere else. We fly down, and my stomach leaps around the box. I want to grab it back and open my eyes. The blood rushes me, and I yell in fear.

My knees buckle because I'm afraid of being crushed by the blood . . .

Mother pulls me into a hug and kisses my forehead. She hums my lullaby and I feel my stomach drop back into its proper place. I keep my eyes closed until Mother whispers my name and leads me out of the elevator. I see the street through the glass windows and a line of trees that say to me, *Tommy! Come play!* They can hear my whisper voice when I say, *I will! I'm going to the park!* Their leaves sway like a smile and I smile back with my arms in the air.

Mother directs me through the doors and hails a cab. Soon we're on our way to the park, and I feel the wind tunnel from window to window and put my hands into the stream. The colors of nature swirl around my fingers and brush my mother's hair back from her face. They like her eyes, and the green jumps out to greet them. They dance away together to talk to the trees on the street.

She stares at me; her eyes are still blurry like by the elevator. She brushes my face and kisses me again.

"My good boy," she mutters, and I don't understand. I'm bad.

I smile without knowing it right away, and she thinks I understand. The colors feel right on my fingers.

The cabbie looks back in the mirror; he looks like Mother's hair, but his eyes look like dark clouds, rolling with the threat of rain. His eyebrows wrinkle together; he watches my fingers twirl with the wind.

"He okay, ma'am?" he says loudly. His voice collides with the colors like a trumpet's blare. The two explode with each other, filling the back seat like a firework has just gone off.

"I'm okay. I'm okay!" I laugh, wanting to say, *Your voice is beautiful!* But the two mean the same thing to me.

He shakes his head, and my mother puts an arm around me.

When we arrive at the park, we get out of the cab, and I want to run. Mother holds my hand and gives some money to the cabbie. He thanks us and turns back to his wheel, but I remember his voice and yell something unintelligible. He looks at me surprised and waits for me to say something else. I put my hands around my eyes and look into his swirling gray eyes.

"Beautiful," I say finally, and the man's mouth opens just for a second. His eyes clear, and I see his voice rattling around in his chest like he wants to talk.

"You're . . . you're okay, kid," he finally says and nods. I take my hands from my eyes and smile before turning toward the playground. I run ahead, and Mother calls after me. I look back to see her wave at the cabbie and turn to chase me. She's smiling. Behind her I see the cabbie hang his arm out his window. He's watching me, and the corner of his mouth lifts toward calm eyes. He shakes his head and drives away.

Mother catches me and grabs my hand. Her grip is tight, but I feel the last

specks from the dust cloud voice fly away. We reach the playground where kids yell and chase each other. I want to join them and tug on Mother. She kneels down as I pull and laugh toward the kids. She leans close to my face and talks into my right ear. I can't hear her at first, so I step back and look at her voice. The wind takes her voice and repeats her words to me.

"I'll be watching from that bench right there," she says pointing to the wooden seat in front of us. "Have fun, but be careful." She kisses my forehead one more time and lets me fly.

I run to the playground with my hands feeling the wind dancing around them. The kids' voices mix with the gusts and lift me up. For a moment, I don't know where I'm going until I see the trees all around me. I see my mother on the other side of the playground still sitting on the bench. She waves, and I wave back. My raised hand catches the newest breeze, and around I go.

Spin, spin, spin. The green whirls in my vision, veins in their leafy vessels standing out like spider webs connecting shoot to branch and branch to trunk. One living organism connected to another. And as I spin I imagine myself weaving into the webs of life all across nature, just another shoot from a branch.

I laugh, cackling with a sound that drifts around me like it doesn't belong to me at all, but instead it belongs to the trees. They say, *We are your friends, Tommy. Always your friends.*

The sun sticks out between my friends, and beams of light cover my body in heat. Heat. *Heat. Light.* Pain. The beams strike my eyes like poles shooting into the ground. I kick myself as I try to stop spinning and fall into the grass, eyes watering from the intruding particles.

Mother sees and rushes over and tries to talk to me, but her words are garbled

and drowned out by the squeaking swing to my left and the yelling kids on the slide. *CREAK. CREAK.*

"Go down already!" a little blond girl yells at a smaller brunette boy. He's watching me, mouth open, as my mother tries to get me up. I've stopped crying, but I can't remember how to move my legs.

CREAK.

His eyes are wide and blue. I can see the little specks of green in them, too, even though he's far away. So far away. I want to be closer.

And then I am. I forget the sun and my mother and the little blond girl and the slide. I want to be closer to the boy. Maybe he will be my friend too. Like the trees.

"Tommy, are you okay? Would you please come back here?" Mother tries to say as I rush toward the slide. I hear her, but my legs carry me to the big yellow tube anyway. I laugh again and wave at the little boy. He sort of waves back, but his eyes grow wide and he looks away. I meet him at the bottom of the slide, but he runs away.

I want to say, *Wait for me!* but all I can get out is, "Me! Me!"

"Tommy!" She's getting angry now. I turn around, but I can't look straight at her. Her hair blows in the wind, and her locks look like little brown snakes, twisting and curling. I know they aren't, but I can't help but get a little scared. I back up against the slide and hit the tube over and over and over.

She bends down next to me, but before she can say anything my weird voice comes out. I don't know what I'm saying, I just wail in the voice that's mine but isn't. Everything that escapes my lips sounds like I'm chewing on marbles.

CREAK.

I hit the slide harder and wail a little louder, giving up on words and making incoherent shout sounds.

"Sweetie, shush shush shush. It's okay," she coos, knowing something is wrong. She never knows what is wrong, just that there is something. I want to tell her that the swing is too loud and that her hair looks like snakes, but every time I have the words, they fly away like birds when I chase them. I cover my ears instead and close my eyes and wail for what feels like hours.

And in the darkness of my mind I hear the echo of my mother's lullaby.

*Hush my child, all is well.
Right now is just a scary spell.
I'll be here to hold your hand
And with you, I will always stand.*

*Hush my special child
The world is not so wild.
I'll be here to kiss your face
And fear will leave without a trace.*

I open my eyes slowly as she strokes my hair and my wail fades away. I want to say, *I'm sorry, Mother, I'm so sorry for running away and yelling and hitting the slide. I'm sorry for getting scared and making you worry. I'm sorry, I was just scared. I love you, I love you, I love you. Don't leave me here. Keep trying. Don't give up on me.*

But all I get out is, "Love. Love."♦



MARÍA BLANCHARD: TRANSCENDING DISABILITY THROUGH SHAPE AND COLOR

SANDRA J. LINDOW

*Review of Woman with a Fan: On María Blanchard,
by Diane Kendig, Shanti Arts Publishing, 2021*

Poet, teacher, and translator, Diane Kendig first discovered María Blanchard in 1989 when reading Federico García Lorca's eulogy to Blanchard. Kendig, who had previously written about Frida Kahlo, was immediately drawn to Blanchard's work. *Woman with a Fan* is a collection of eighteen poems and three essays that explore Blanchard's life, loves, and artistic approach, all of which were influenced by her disability.

Blanchard was an early Cubist painter and proto feminist whose depictions of women and children are subtle revelations of the dynamics of privilege and

ableism. A contemporary and friend of Pablo Picasso, Diego Rivera and Juan Gris, Blanchard was born in Spain in 1881, studied at the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando in Madrid, won a grant to study in Paris in 1909 and, except for a brief time during WWI, lived in Paris for most of her life. Although demand for her work increased during the 1920s, her themes became darker, as if colored by despair, but still maintained a luminous spiritual empathy for her subjects. She died in relative obscurity in 1932. Later a "rehistorian" actually attempted to erase her cultural influence by covering her signature with paint and writing

"Juan Gris" on top. Kendig explores this in her poem "Restoration": "María Blanchard" . . . "not erased but blot-ted out, / daubed over, screwed under" (14).

Kendig's insightful poems and essays explore how Blanchard's disability and gender hindered her career despite her obvious brilliance as an artist and as a teacher. Kendig's poems also reflect Blanchard's artistic process. Blanchard was famous for reconceptualizing her earlier paintings, providing three different versions of *Woman with a Fan*, what she called going "further with the same subject" (28). Likewise,

Kendig offers three different responses to “Woman with a Fan.” In “Behave Yourself—Joan of Arc” she also recreates the feeling of cubism in the way she places words on the page:

Everyone going all abstract the cubist view opening onto
 rhomboids cones cubes phonemes graphemes designate
 Which is to say form form form
 separating separating act of separation
 properties from their objects

Woman with a Fan, Blanchard’s most famous work, is a remarkable piece, layered with paint using a pallet knife, in a way that resembles stained glass. Kendig uses Blanchard’s gold fan as a metaphor for women’s power: “waves made by women everywhere” and “a line that unfolds to a staircase, / a keystone that spread into an arch—central, womanly” (13).

Blanchard’s understanding of social obstacles came early. She was born with *osteogenesis imperfecta* or brittle bone disease, called kyphosis, a multi-symptomatic disease that causes curvature of the spine, hunching, short stature, pain, and difficulty walking. Although blessed with a beautiful face and hands, her short neck and bent body made her the object of negative attention. At the time, superstitious individuals would press their lottery tickets to her body for luck, a dehumanizing practice. “Resolution” begins:

Strangers touched their lottery ticket
 to her back, trapped her in their thicket
 of folk lore truck that she would bring them luck—
 And she? She could like it or lick it? (32)

Although they shared a studio for a time, the “handsome and witty” Rivera, a notorious womanizer, did not find her sexually attractive (32). Blanchard babysat for his children.

Eventually Blanchard distanced herself from Rivera:

separated too from Rivera and his ravings
 his all too solid fleshy needy flat-backed women
 and his fleshy heirs she’d baby sat (25)

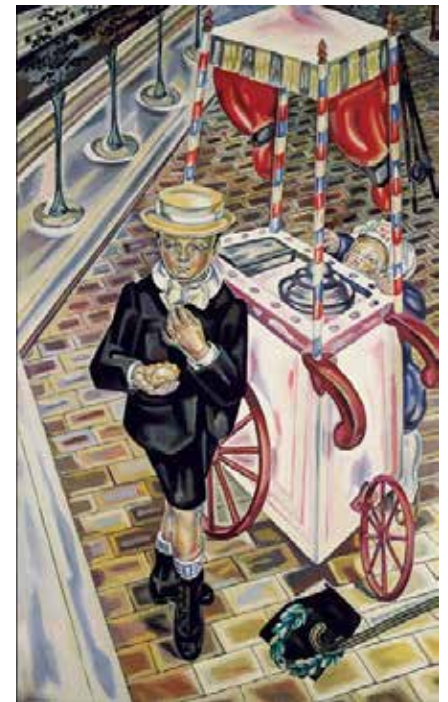
But despite apparent unrequited love, she insisted on artistic independence, allowing life’s fundamental unfairness to drive her work. “Resolution” concludes:

painting through, painting through, leaving
 behind what didn’t feed her seething
 need to make her art, these images of her heart
 rendered visible for us through her grieving. (32)

Blanchard’s “seething” continued to drive her painting throughout the twenties. In “The Ice Cream Cart,” 1925, a privileged boy stands holding ice cream in a

fluted cup oblivious, “blasé, / used to such awards, such treatment and treats” (27), while his disabled little sister struggles to reach high enough to get a treat for herself, “barely able to stretch / to hold the ledge of the cart” (27). The girl’s cane lies on the ground beside the cart.

Blanchard’s Cubist “*bodegon*” still life paintings are also subtle reflections on the role of women in society. In *Seated Woman*, 1917, and *Still Life with Red Lamp*, 1916-1918, the female subjects are erased, invisible, showing only the suggestion of women’s lives and work, despite their essential contribution to society. In *Seated Woman*, the subject sits at a table, possibly holding a menu. *Still Life with Red Lamp*, suggests a woman bending over a sewing machine or possibly a microscope.



Maria Blanchard, *The Ice Cream Cart*, 1923

It is worth noting that Marie Curie won the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 1911.

In “Speaking of Maria Blanchard,” Kendig draws material from tributes written by Blanchard’s contemporaries (Lorca and others) after her death:

Her work occupied a superior place in contemporary art.

Her powerful painting, made of mysticism
and passionate love of her profession
will remain as one of the most significant
and authentic of our epoch.

Her life as a recluse in illness, on the other hand,
contributed to her unique development
and the sharpness of the most beautiful
intelligence of her time. (37)

Overall, this is a collection to read and reread for its insight into the life of a woman who suffered to create, was clearly ahead of her time, had a profound influence on the Cubist Movement, but was nearly erased from history by individuals who hoped to profit by overpainting her signature and using the name of a more famous male contemporary. Kendig should be applauded for her part in rescuing Blanchard from obscurity. To see more of Blanchard’s art, go to www.wikiart.org/en/maria-blanchard. Diane Kendig can be found at her website: www.dianekendig.com. ♦



Maria Blanchard, *Seated Woman*, 1917



Maria Blanchard, *Still Life with Red Lamp*, 1916-1918

Colleen Anderson's poetry has been nominated twice for an Aurora Award and won second place in Crucible and Balticon contests. Her work has appeared in *Shadow Atlas* (2021), *Shelter of Daylight* (2021), and *Terse* (2021), among many others. *I Dreamed a World*, a collection of her poetry about fairy tales, myths, and witches, was published this year by LVP Publications. She lives in British Columbia, Canada, and enjoys writing, exploring, and reading.

Evelyn Arvey is an enthusiastic writer and artist who lives in Seattle, Washington, with her husband and six cats. Her novel *Inn on the Edge*, published under the pseudonym Gail Bridges, was an EPIC Award finalist (2015). Her short stories have been published in *Pentimento* (2016), *Stealing Time* (2012), and *Pedestal Magazine* (2012). She says, "I write because I have so many stories I want to share. I am an artist because I cannot see any other way of being."

Kale Bandy lives in Ohio and has a bachelor's degree in creative writing from Asbury University. His story "Piper" was published online in *The Furious Gazelle* (2017). "If my words can teach someone to be a little more human, a little more kind to someone else, then I can't risk keeping them to myself. It's all about love, and if I can encourage someone to love a character different from them, maybe they'll be able to love someone real who looks similar to the character they fell in love with."

Nancy Deyo is a writer, board vice president of Tomorrow's Women, and committed to women's leadership and social justice. Her work has appeared in *bioStories* (March 2022) and *The Vault* (March 2021). She lives in New Mexico and enjoys hiking, biking, skiing, yoga, and playing the cello. She does not identify as a bipolar person, a label given by her psychiatrist, and says, "I write for others, to help destigmatize mental illness and humanize those who are suffering by sharing my own stories."

Cristina Hartmann is a Brazilian-American DeafBlind writer living in Pennsylvania with her longtime partner. Her fiction has been published in *The MacGuffin* (2022), *Peatsmoke* (April 2021), and is forthcoming in *In Between Spaces: An Anthology of Disabled Writers* (November 2022). She says, "I love stories and believe in their power to change our perspective. My stories focus on relationships and identities through the disability and immigrant experiences."

Sandra J. Lindow is a semi-retired teacher and editor. She has nine poetry collections. Her most recent is *Chasing Wild Grief* (Kelsey Books, 2021). She is also book review coeditor of the SpecPo Blog. Her scholarly book, *Nnedi Okorafor: Windseeker's Guide to Magic, Morality and the Future* (McFarland), will be published in the fall of 2022. Recent awards include the 2018 Blei Award for Poetry and the 2020 Muse Prize for poetry. Her disabilities are post-traumatic stress disorder from childhood abuse and post breast cancer lymphedema. Lindow says, "These issues have driven my poetry as well as my scholarly criticism."

Sylvia Melvin is a retired elementary school teacher. She grew up in Canada, married an American, and now lives in Florida where she is a founding member of the Panhandle Writers Guild. Her work has appeared in *The Gem* (July 2018), *Harris Farmer's Almanac* (September 2019), and *The Secret Place* (December 2020). "Writing gives me an opportunity to share my feelings and life experiences with readers."

Levi J. Mericle won first place in an international songwriting competition and his publication credits include *Journal of Artistic Creation & Literary Research* (2018), *Elephant Journal* (2019), *Mystery Tribune* (2019), and *The Scrib Arts Journal* (Fall 2020). "I am a queer writer from a small town whose passions include writing, reading, photography, and going to garage sales." Daily activities are often a challenge, but he says, "When I have my good health days, writing seems to be my only redemption from my ill life."

Kirie Pedersen's writing has appeared in *Under the Sun* (August 2017), *Still Points Arts Quarterly* (Fall 2017), *PANK* (October 2021), *Emry's Journal* (September 2016), and *Quiddity*, among others, and has been nominated for Pushcarts and other awards. Her story "Getting a Life—Coming of Age with Killers" was selected as Notable in Best American Essays 2018.

Sandy Palmer is a child of deaf adults (CODA) and a freelance artist who works with a variety of media. She contributes to *Kaleidoscope* as the writer of artist profiles, having joined the staff as art coordinator in 2002. Palmer is the full-time graphic design specialist at United Disability Services.

Marcia Pradzinski, a retired university instructor, is the author of two poetry collections, *Left Behind* and *As One Day Slips Out of the Shoe of Another*. Her poetry and memoir excerpts have appeared or are forthcoming in print and online venues. Born with spina bifida, her son used a wheelchair, was nonverbal, and taught her and her husband about the joy of living. “I’m writing a memoir about raising my son in order to bear witness to the love, laughter, and lessons he brought to our family.”

Troy Reeves is a retired English professor who, due to the effects of polio, focused on academics when he was young and later received his doctorate from the University of Kansas. His poetry has been published in *Sojourners* (2017), *Anglican Theological Review* (2018), and *Dappled Things* (2018), among others. He lives in Missouri with his wife and they enjoy swimming in Table Rock Lake, walking Ozark trails, reading, playing ping-pong, and participating in church activities.

Doug Tanoury was raised by grandparents who were immigrants and never really mastered English. This is why he believes he became a poet, “mastering the language on their behalf.” His poetry has been published in *Writer’s Digest* (1980), *Pif* (1998), *Denver Quarterly* (2003), and *Blue Masque* (2022). The poem in this issue is special to him because it is about his brother who has a degenerative disease similar to amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS).

Jen Eve Taylor was born in Australia and now resides in London where she enjoys writing, recording music, working on her novel, and tackling the ups and down of life on her blog. Her essays have been published in *The Unwritten* (January 2022) and *Author Magazine* (February 2022). “I hope my words make people think about the way we approach each other, the outdated language that society uses, and the clichés we fall back on, which put so much pressure on those who are struggling.”

Dina S. Towbin lives in New York where she is president of her own international consulting firm. She is also an award-winning writer and member of the Lima Tertulia Writers Group. “I write children’s stories and haiku, promote the voices of diverse actors and writers on my website, and am working on a memoir and a murder mystery.” Her younger sister, Jessie, has amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) and the poem in this issue was written after her wedding in 2019, “when the disease was evident but not omnipotent.”

Mary Wemple is a writer, visual artist, and creator/coordinator of Words & Art, a reading series and workshop series inspired by the art in Houston, Texas, where she lives. Her poetry has appeared in *Equinox* (July 2021), *Right Hand Pointing* (September 2020), and *Enchantment of the Ordinary* (2018), among others. She says, “I write because I need a place to sort my thoughts. I see each poem as a puzzle to solve.” The poem published in this issue is dedicated to her friend who uses a wheelchair.

John William is a disability studies scholar, author, and essayist living in New Jersey. His work appeared in *Wordgathering* (2020). “My disability has become a more integral part of my writing than ever before. On one hand, I feel the best work stems from an artist who is willing to be most vulnerable . . . oftentimes that can be the most painful to create . . . On the other hand, I use my neurodiversity to write about what I am most passionate about. I have found, as a result, that writing give me more joy.”

AnnaLee Wilson is a writer and the CEO of Kaeser & Wilson Design. Her writing has appeared in anthologies, lit publications, and periodicals including *Psychoanalytic Perspectives* (2012), *Storied Dishes* (2010), and *This is the Way We Say Goodbye* (2011). Her memoir-in-progress received a Wertheim Room Study Grant from the New York Public Library and she cohosts the library’s One Page Poetry Circle. “I write because I want to explore relationships and uncover truth.” She is a wife, mother, and sister who enjoys tending her garden in New York City.



Alana Ciena Tillman, *Berry Branch*, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 16" x 20"



Alana Ciena Tillman, *Pet Portrait*, 2018, acrylic on gallery-wrapped canvas, 12" x 12"

Partial funding for the publication
of *Kaleidoscope* provided by:
Lloyd L. and Louise K. Smith Foundation
Kenneth L. Calhoun Charitable Trust