KALEIDOSCOPE

EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCE OF DISABILITY THROUGH LITERATURE AND THE FINE ARTS

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SEASONS

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

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

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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

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A SEASON OF CHANGE, WRAPPED IN GRATITUDE

LISA ARMSTRONG

After more than forty-five remarkable years, United Disability Services (UDS) has made the difficult decision to bring the publication of *Kaleidoscope* magazine to a close. What began as a modest therapeutic project within our Vocational Services program, back when we were still known as United Cerebral Palsy of Akron, grew into something far greater than anyone could have imagined.

We will be forever grateful to all those who came before us, taking bold strides as the magazine evolved. Our heartfelt thanks go to our first editor and publication director, Carson W. Heiner, Jr.; editors-in-chief Dr. Darshan Perusek and Gail Willmott; publication director Phyllis Boerner; submission reviewers Dr. Mark Decker and Sandra Lindow; Sandy Palmer, our artistic coordinator, who brought warmth and depth to every artist's story; and editorial assistant Mickey Shiplett, who was the glue that held us together for many years before her retirement.

We also acknowledge so many others whose contributions helped shape *Kaleidoscope* into a highly respected publication like no other.

During my thirty years behind the scenes as managing editor, I felt truly humbled to work with these and so many other talented people to help bring this publication to life.

Kaleidoscope became a trailblazer, offering a powerful and artistic lens through which to explore the lived experience of disability. It transformed into an award-winning publication with a global reach, drawing in readers and contributors from around the world. Through its pages, it challenged stereotypes, rejected patronizing narratives, and offered a space where authentic voices could flourish. It launched the writing careers of emerging authors and illuminated the creative work of many artists whose talents might otherwise have remained unseen, bringing their stories out of the shadows.

This decision was not made lightly. Following the retirement of our longtime editor-in-chief, Gail Willmott, who generously volunteered her time and talent for many years, the magazine was left to a very small but dedicated team, all of whom balanced their work on *Kaleidoscope* with other responsibilities at UDS. The effort to sustain the magazine has become increasingly difficult, having an impact on other vital programs and services at UDS. Despite our best efforts, securing funding for additional support to ease this burden has proven elusive.

At the same time, innovative opportunities for expression continue to emerge. New platforms—such as self-publishing, podcasting, and performance art—have opened doors for individuals with disabilities to share their stories in fresh, dynamic ways. Many now seek to be recognized not for their disability, but for their talent, creativity, and voice. In this issue of *Kaleidoscope*, author Jeanine Eyre Bee explores this theme in her essay, “Papa was a Rollin’,” sharing her experience growing up with a dad who uses a wheelchair.

> “. . . Sometimes it feels like people see his accomplishments only through the lens of his

> disability. *Look at everything he's accomplished—all in a wheelchair!* When I think about it now, it seems so backward. Like, rather than try to make the world more accessible for him, people celebrate him for managing to exist in an inaccessible world."

We are also currently witnessing a rapidly shifting publishing landscape, especially with the dawn of artificial intelligence. AI is transforming how content is created, curated, and consumed, bringing both exciting possibilities and new challenges. These changes have further complicated the sustainability of traditional publishing models like ours.

In that light, we believe *Kaleidoscope* has fulfilled its original mission. It has helped change perceptions, sparked conversations, and touched thousands of lives. As we say goodbye, we recognize that the spirit of *Kaleidoscope* lives on in the countless stories it shared and the hearts it inspired.

We are deeply appreciative to every reader, writer, artist, and supporter who made this journey possible. We are especially thankful for the unwavering support from UDS and for its foresight in recognizing the value of this publication. As we reach the final chapter of *Kaleidoscope*, we take pride in knowing we've created something truly unforgettable.

As we bring this journey to a close, we offer you this final issue entitled "Seasons." Thank you for walking with us through each season. Your presence has been the soul of this publication.

May the spirit of these pages serve as a reminder that with every season's end comes the promise of a new beginning and the infinite possibilities yet to be created.

With tremendous gratitude,

Lisa Armstrong
Managing Editor

PAPA WAS A ROLLIN'

JEANINE EYRE BEE

The department store had multiple rows of bikes to choose from. My parents watched, their eyes shining with excitement as I walked around, stopping to touch a purple one or admire the flower-adorned basket on another. “Pick one!” they said. “Whichever one you want, and we’ll teach you how to ride a bike!” I’m sure there was a pink one with a bell. Maybe a little red tricycle that I sat on in the middle of the store. But before long, I found exactly the one I wanted. I ran to the end of the aisle and pulled myself up into the seat. “This one!” I shouted, and my parents rounded the corner to find their four-year-old daughter sitting in a tattered, brown, hospital-style wheelchair, the kind that sits in the back corner of the store for emergencies.

I’m sure they laughed. (They’ve always been quick to laugh.) I was too young to remember what was going through my mind at the time, to pinpoint exactly why I chose the wheelchair instead of a shiny new bicycle. But if I had to take a guess, I think it was because the wheelchair represented so much more potential than a simple bike.

Every day I saw my dad get around in his wheelchair. I rode on his lap. I stole away with it when he was napping. A wheelchair was a toy, a mode of transportation, a convenient resting place, sometimes the punchline of a family joke. It was a free pass to skip the line at theme parks and an accessory in the elaborate Halloween costumes my mom designed for my dad to wear.

In my four years of life experience, I’d only seen a bike do one thing: ride down the street. A wheelchair, on the other hand? A wheelchair was boundless.

* * *

I’ve never known what it’s like to have a dad who can walk. The wheelchair is a fixture in my dad’s life and in our family’s life. It’s our normal. Some dads are bald. Some only wear shorts. Mine uses a wheelchair. It wasn’t until fifth grade that I realized other people might see my dad differently.

I was in Mrs. Wexler’s class, packing up my backpack at the end of the day, when Aaron H. leaned over and half-whispered, “Can I ask you a question? One that maybe your dad might not like?”

I couldn’t see my own face, but I could feel the blush rising in my cheeks, unsure of what he could possibly say in this moment, unsure of the boy-girl dynamic as played out by eleven-year-olds, unsure about the slightly intimate tone as he leaned across the aisle to speak into my ear.

“Uh, I guess,” I said, my eyes darting back and forth between my backpack and the bottom half of his face.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to ask you out or anything," he assured me. He glanced around the room before leaning in even closer and, in a low voice, asking, "How did your dad end up in a wheelchair?"

"Oh!" I laughed a little, relieved to finally have a grasp on the social situation. "He was in a car accident when he was sixteen."

"OK," Aaron said, nodding a little. "Cool. I mean . . . it's not cool, but . . . you know."

"Yeah." I finished putting my things into my backpack then waved goodbye as the bell rang.

On the short walk home, I pondered the exchange; Aaron's tone had been so furtive, like he didn't want anyone to hear the conversation we were having. And why did he think that my dad wouldn't like his question? My dad talked about his accident all the time. Paraplegia isn't a condition you can hide from the general public, like eczema, or athlete's foot. I was used to hearing the story at church, or at the grocery store, or shouted back from the front seat of the car when one of us didn't want to put on a seat belt.

"I didn't wear a seat belt!" he'd yell, and my brother and I would roll our eyes as we pulled the shoulder strap across our bodies.

He even let me use his old X-rays as part of the display for my fifth-grade science project—a groundbreaking venture in which I hypothesized that skulls are important because they protect your brain. (This hypothesis was tested with a brain made out of pink Play-Doh and a heavy paperweight on a string. The results were very much pro-skull-having.)

At eleven years old, I knew my dad's disability changed the way he interacted with the world around him. I knew we always had to know where the elevator was, and we boarded airplanes first so he could transfer over to the skinny, aisle-sized wheelchair that would take him to his seat. But I'd never considered my dad's disability might change the way the world interacted with him. As capable and confident as my dad had always been, it never occurred to me his disability was something that should be whispered about. That the chair I saw as boundless was the same chair others saw as a curiosity. Or worse—a limitation.

* * *

Right after my dad's accident, he had to face an onslaught of well-wishers. Neighbors, friends, church members. Doctors. People who came through to express their sympathies. They patted his hands and wiped away tears of their own as they contemplated a young man's bright future, now tarnished by paraplegia. They thought they knew what his life would look like, narrow and confined. But my dad refused to be defined by their assumptions. "I don't like to let other people set boundaries for me," he'd later say. "I set my own boundaries. I get to decide what I do."

In the months and years after the accident, my dad learned to access an inaccessible world. He learned to balance on crutches and leg braces, resorting to the wheelchair only when necessary. By the time I was born, though, he was using the chair more often. Throughout my childhood, my dad switched back and forth between his crutches and his wheelchair. Finally, when I was about twelve, he decided it was easier for him to stay in his chair full time. But the decision didn't limit his mobility. My dad is incredibly self-sufficient. In college, he learned to scuba and joined a wheelchair basketball league. He traveled around the world, crutching his way through San Diego and Westminster Abbey and up the decaying stone steps of the Masada fortress in Israel. He can get his wheelchair in and out of the car on his own, carry babies on his lap, transfer into a speed boat and onto a jet ski. Sometimes he might ask for a push from one of my brothers to get across a bumpy lawn or up an especially steep hill. And when we were young, he'd occasionally hold on to the belt loop of our blue jeans and tell us to pull him down the sidewalk while he yelled "Giddy up!" But for the most part, he doesn't need anyone's help getting around.

Still, that doesn't stop people from trying to help him. Strangers and acquaintances approach him disability first, as if they must reckon with his wheelchair before they can understand him as a person. Usually they ask if he needs help, but occasionally, someone will take it upon themselves to intervene. Once, while my dad was carrying boxes on his lap, I saw a guy come up behind him and grab the handle on the back of his chair, pushing him as he made his way up a small incline. Like he was a sentient moving dolly or something. The change in momentum threatened to spill the boxes onto the ground. "Stop pushing me. Please stop pushing. *Stop pushing me!*" My dad had to shout before the man stepped away. It's intrusive and disconcerting to have someone you don't know put their hands on you without asking. It's also a matter of safety; my dad has an immense level of control over his body and balance, and an extra set of hands—more weight on the back of his chair—could slow him down at best. At worst, it could tip him onto the ground.

I think these people are generally well-intentioned. Only once have I seen someone deliberately use my dad's disability against him. We'd spent all day driving around Southern California, looking for a minivan that would work with my dad's non-folding, solid frame wheelchair. In one car, it fit in the trunk when we put the back seats down, but then there wasn't enough room in the car for the rest of the family. In another car, the chair fit in the back, but there was no sliding door on the driver's side, which meant my dad wouldn't be able to get his chair into the side of the car when he was by himself. After hours of searching, watching my mom try to puzzle my dad's chair into the back of a dozen different makes and models, we were all starting to lose hope. It was probably close to dinnertime when we finally found a car that fit the bill: a red Pontiac Montana minivan.

It was the fanciest car my brother and I had ever seen, with leather captain seats, separate temperature and radio controls for the back of the car, and sliding doors that closed with the push of a button. I leaned back in the captain seat and put my arms behind my head. *This must be what Hillary Duff's parents drive*. It was pure luxury. Also, it was the only car we'd been able to find that fit my dad's wheelchair in the trunk.

Just after my dad's accident, he adopted the motto, "When you have no alternatives, the decision is easy."

I wasn't really paying attention to the conversation between my parents and the sweaty, red-faced car salesman. But while my brother and I were rigorously testing the automatic sliding doors, their conversation started to get heated. Later I would learn that the salesman had been trying to take advantage of us, lying about the price and trying to manipulate my parents into taking a longer loan. At the time, though, all I knew was that we'd been car shopping all day. We were hungry and tired. We'd finally found the perfect car—the only car that would work for our family—and now, as the sun was starting to set, we followed my dad out of the car dealership while the salesman shouted after us, "You'll be sorry!"

I don't remember where we went next. Probably to McDonald's. I do remember feeling a little disappointed about not getting the car. But more than that, I remember feeling a righteous indignation at how we'd been treated at that dealership—even though I guess I wasn't actually totally clear about how we'd been treated in the dealership. Still, if my dad felt that he'd been wronged in some way, I had his back. That salesman could go kick rocks. We didn't need him or his stupid, awesome car.

My parents talked quietly while we ripped open our Happy Meal toys, then we all loaded up in our old brown van with its rattling engine and broken door. I expected us to limp home, to regroup and start the search all over again the next day. Instead, we drove back to the Pontiac dealership. The salesman smirked as we walked in.

Just after my dad's accident, he adopted the motto, "When you have no alternatives, the decision is easy." He never let his disability get in the way of living his life. He could do anything he set his mind to. But as he sat there in that glossy, air conditioned car dealership, arguing with the salesman over add-ons and loan terms, at that moment, I think he was wishing for an alternative.

* * *

As acquaintances became friends, they usually started to show more consideration for my dad's abilities. The first time someone saw him pop a wheelie to hop down a small flight of stairs, they might instinctively reach out to steady him; the fifteenth time, they'd just stand back and marvel at his tenacity. Somewhere in there, people migrated from being worried about my dad to finding him absolutely fascinating.

My dad is impressive in many ways. He's bilingual. He graduated cum laude with a bachelor's degree in accounting before earning a law degree from UCLA. He can balance accounts on one computer screen while watching *Downton Abbey* on another. But sometimes it feels like people see his accomplishments only through the lens of his disability. *Look at everything he's accomplished—and all in a wheelchair!* When I think about it now, it seems so backward. Like, rather than try to make the world more accessible for him, people celebrate him for managing to exist in an inaccessible world.

When I was a teenager, I overheard a conversation between my mom and my dad. Our church youth group had asked him to come speak about adversity. Overcoming obstacles and persevering through trials. "You know why they asked *me* to do this," he was saying.

We all knew why they asked him to do it.

My dad had been a quiet kid with a small group of friends—certainly not a homecoming-royalty-type. He'd been in the marching band. A basketball player because he was tall. A mediocre wrestler (at best). A junior senator. Immediately after the accident, though, my dad became a kind of celebrity. All the local newspapers wanted an interview with the miracle teen who was overcoming the odds. Kids he'd never met before came up to tell him how sorry they were about his newly acquired disability. About what an inspiration he was.

He couldn't stand it.

I was there when my dad spoke to the youth group. He tailored his message to his audience, focusing on prevailing through the kinds of trials and obstacles that all teenagers face in life. He acknowledged that life can be hard for everyone at different times and for different reasons, and he talked about using challenges as a springboard for growth. It was a nice message, but I think the youth leaders may have been a little disappointed when he didn't talk about his disability. *Now how will the teens learn to be grateful for their Xboxes and intact spinal cords?*

* * *

For all the assumptions that people make about my dad and about our family, I don't remember anyone ever asking me what it was like growing up with a dad who uses a wheelchair. If someone had, my answer probably would have depended on the day.

Sometimes my dad did some serious property damage. A wheelchair can't step gingerly around scattered Barbie dolls, Power Rangers, Lego bricks, and VHS tapes. If we left the living room covered in toys, Dad would steamroll his way through, leaving doll heads and cracked plastic in his wake.

On the other hand, my dad is a fantastic transportation device for infants and toddlers. We all took turns riding on his lap as soon as we had some head control. He would balance us on one leg as he rolled around the house, leaning our over-large heads against his chest. When we got a little bigger, we could also stand on his feet as he traveled over smooth ground—a loud, sticky Rolls-Royce hood ornament.

If you asked me on a day when my dad accidentally rolled over my toes, I'm sure I'd have a few negative things to say. (I don't know why having your toes rolled over by a wheelchair is so much worse than having your toes just stepped on with another foot.)

But if you asked me on a day when my dad drove me to the mall, I'd be sure to point out the benefits of handicapped accessible parking spots—affectionately referred to in our family as "Big Bottom Parking." (Just look at the icon.)

And, of course, I'd be remiss if I didn't mention our trips to Disneyland.

For all the assumptions that people make about my dad and about our family, I don't remember anyone ever asking me what it was like growing up with a dad who uses a wheelchair.

From the time I was eight years old, our family visited Disneyland about once a year. My dad loved going on the rides with my brother and me, and we loved it too—because it meant we didn't have to wait in line. We'd stroll in through the exit and clamber into Alice's caterpillar or Mr. Toad's old-timey cars, then wait for my dad to transfer out of his chair and maneuver himself into the proper seats. If the Haunted Mansion ride ever slows or stops while you are riding it, you can be sure it's because a person with disabilities is trying to get into or out of their "Doom Buggy." Riding the Jungle Cruise or Pirates of the Caribbean meant transferring from his wheelchair onto the damp dock, then lowering himself down into the boat. Peter Pan's Flight was the trickiest; in that ride, you sit in a magic flying pirate ship, which is suspended from a track in the ceiling. It was my favorite ride. But the transfer was difficult for my dad because the ship sat so much higher than the seat of his chair. Sometimes the sudden shift of his full body weight was enough to set the ship rocking, bumping it off the track and shutting the ride down for hours. I always held my breath as I sat in that fiberglass pirate ship, waiting to see if we were off to Neverland or back to the churro stand.

Skipping the lines was our normal. But at some point, I became aware that walking right to the front was something special that our family got to do. I couldn't have told you why we got to do it. I think maybe I thought that it was a kind of apology from the world. Like some kind of sympathetic offering from these major theme parks. "It really sucks that you can't walk. Here, why don't you skip the line since you got such a raw deal?" I don't know when I finally realized it's because the lines themselves are inaccessible.

By the time I was old enough to enjoy roller coasters, my dad had stopped going on the rides with us. Transferring had become too much of a hassle, and the metal rods in his back left him in pain after some of the more bumpy rides. It was about the same time that California Screamin' opened, the first Disney roller coaster to feature an inversion loop. I remember my dad pulling up to the edge of the pier that overlooks the beginning of the ride. He waved at my brother and me as our car inched into the ride's starting position. He saw our nervous and excited smiles, our hands gripping the handles of the over-the-shoulder restraints. Then, with no warning at all, the car launched forward, reaching the top speed of fifty-five miles per hour in only four seconds. I could just make out my dad's whoops of excitement over my own screams. When we got off the ride, wind-swept and wobbly-legged, our dad was laughing. "That looks like fun!" he said.

"I bet you could ride it," I said. "It's one of those steel roller coasters, and it doesn't really have sharp turns. It's a pretty smooth ride."

"Oh yeah? Maybe I'll try it sometime."

He never has. Thrill rides at amusement parks seem to be just another part of his life that he has decided to give up because of his disability.

At four years old, I saw my dad's chair as boundless. As I got older, though, I caught a glimpse of a more complicated story, one in which the same chair that gives my dad his mobility also limits his accessibility and changes the way the world sees him. Where, even though he doesn't let anyone else tell him what his boundaries are, he still sometimes has to accept boundaries other people don't.

There is no one-sentence answer to the question "What was it like?" It wasn't always hard. It wasn't always inspirational. It wasn't always fun. It wasn't always depressing. It was my childhood. It just was.

So I don't know what it was like to grow up with "a dad in a wheelchair." But I know what it was like to grow up with my dad. I know what it was like to have him stay up late to help me with my math homework while I groaned about how useless geometry was. I know what it was like to go see *Les Misérables* for the first time with him. I know what it was like to talk back to him and get in trouble for it. I know what it was like to hear him brag about what a groovy dancer he was before his accident. (Conveniently, there's no way for us to prove him wrong on this one.)

I think it would have been fun to ride California Screamin' with my dad, but I understand and respect his boundaries. And I've never seen him disappointed to miss out on anything. It almost feels like he's redirected his enthusiasm for these things to his children. Like he lives vicariously through us, but not in a way that claims our choices or directs our lives. Rather, it's always felt like our joys, thrills, and triumphs are shared, reflected back in our dad's exuberant shouts as we hang upside down in the air.◆

JAKE CANNINGTON

WINDOW OF HEALTH

Weeks of darkness.
It creeps up slowly, then overtakes me. Drowns out all sense until all that's left is touch. Pain.
In the darkness I forget the light. I forget how it glints off your eyes. I forget how it filters
through the unruly strands of your hair.
I lose my ability to see. I am blind. I feel more. Feel it all.
In the darkness I can't see the path. To move is a gamble. I could end up elsewhere,
Someplace I don't want to go.
So I sit. And wait. And eventually the light returns.
It is slow in returning. A spark through the darkness. Was it real? Did I imagine it?
I can't trust light after weeks of dark.
It peeks over the horizon. Dimmed by clouds and rain and tears.
But eventually, dawn arrives. The dark lingers long. Fighting the light. I still sit.
Til I see that glint in your eye. Your smile shining.
And I dare to trust my legs again. I dare to try the path.
But which way was I going weeks ago?
It doesn't matter. I am not the same person I was before the dark. Neither are you.
I hold your hand and we begin to walk.
It doesn't matter where we're going, as long as it's together.
The dark will return. It always does.
We'll sit together next time.
And wait out the night.

CARRIE FARRAR

SHAPES

Today, you asked me to be a circle
(even though I was a square)
so I became a circle.

Then, you asked me to be a triangle
so I cut myself in half to be a triangle.

After that, you wanted me to be a rectangle
so I stretched myself out to be a rectangle;
my sides hurt from the movement
but I did it anyway because you wanted it.

I became so many shapes that I didn't know which one I was anymore,
so I turned away from you and became the shape I wanted to be
and found that I was much more beautiful.

THE TREE HOUSE AND THE BLACKBIRD

SYLVIA TELFER

As his son catapulted from the Fiat, Angus stayed staring at the rambling house deep in Scotland's Campsie Hills. With his mother dying, he was now the owner, and shadows were gathering in his soul: shadows of long-ago folk, shadows of uneasy memories stuffed away for his childhood in this house with his parents and younger brother, Ethan, had been miserable.

"What shall we name our new house, Dad? Cameron Hall?" Bowen shouted.

He should tell Bowen he intended to sell, but squabbles between him and Ella, his wife, had already had too much of an adverse impact.

"Why did we never visit Gran? Why did she never visit us?" Bowen asked, leaning in through the driver's window.

He stepped out onto the familiar acorn-littered driveway.

"She went away for a while."

"I'm nine. She must have gone far away. Another country?"

"You might say that."

"Why isn't Mum with us?"

"Just gone away for a while."

"Must people go away?" Bowen sighed.

Later, he would tell Bowen about the possible divorce.

Bowen clapped his hands. "A forest beyond the garden! Let's explore!"

"Such excitement over trees. Spoken like a deprived Londoner. OK."

They walked toward the forest.

"A house up in that tree!" Bowen screamed.

Bowen ran to the tree's base, and stared at the lift, the ramps, and the walkway.

"Not like any picture of a tree house I've seen. So much mechanical equipment," Bowen gasped.

"It's a special tree house. This was your Uncle Ethan's tree house."

"Not yours?"

"I had other things."

"Why didn't Uncle Ethan use a rope ladder?"

It was still too painful for him to tell Bowen about Ethan. "Your uncle wasn't into Tarzan stuff."

"An enclosed swing. Was Uncle Ethan scared?"

"Fearless. Sometimes he slept alone in the tree house."

"Can we live here?"

"We'll talk about that, later."

"A school nearby?"

"Yes."

"Did you and Uncle Ethan go to it?"

"Ethan was schooled at home."

"Why?"

"Never liked to leave the house much."

"No pals? All my pals are school pals."

"For a few years, his best pal was a black boy, Grayson, who lived nearby."

"Cool. I've a black pal, too." Bowen looked thoughtful. "Did the pal move away?"

"Yes," Angus lied.

He had hoped for a swift assessment of the house, and a next-day back to London, but Bowen had fallen in love with the place. And he could not bring himself to tell Bowen an eleven-year-old Ethan had suffered from juvenile Huntington's disease that had damaged movement, thinking, and behavior, and that Grayson had kept away after Ethan had become aggressive.

Bowen was now ecstatic. "Look! A bridge to another tree!" Bowen frowned. "Sad Uncle Ethan had no pals. Still, he had you."

"He found a pal in a blackbird, and that's how the tree house came to be built. 'I want to fly like Woody!' he'd cry."

"How did he make pals with a blackbird?"

"One morning, Woody came in through his bedroom window, and Ethan fed it toast."

"Breakfast in bed?"

An opening, but still he could not tell Bowen the truth. As Bowen examined the tree house machinery, more memories surfaced.

"Can I have a rope ladder added?" Angus had asked his father.

"No! Ethan might be tempted to try it! The tree house is *his*!"

He had slunk away.

"Why does Dad never bother with me, Mum?" he had asked.

"Guilt. He focuses on Ethan because Ethan inherited the disease from him." He had heard her accuse his father. In that long-ago time, he had thought her a cruel and ignorant woman. Today, he saw her more as a frightened one.

"Is Ethan going to die, Mum?" he had asked.

"Maybe in ten years."

"Why didn't I inherit it?"

"Luck."

But Angus had not felt lucky, for in the fuss over Ethan, he had been ignored, and, when his father died of pneumonia, at the age of fifty, the house had been gloomier for his mother totally shut herself off.

Bowen interrupted his thoughts.

"Can I play in the tree house?"

"Let me check nothing's rotted."

All was sound. His father had ensured safety precautions, and the best equipment: ramps, an enclosed hoist seat, and a tall-sided walkway. At first, Ethan had been able to get up into the tree by himself, but, eventually he was in a wheelchair and needed assistance. Watching Ethan deteriorate had been agony.

He spotted a patch of sunflowers and knew they had grown from seeds provided for Woody, the blackbird. Stuff lived on in strange ways.

He was busy in the kitchen, when Bowen wandered in. "Why don't you explore the house?"

"Yes!" Bowen yelled, and ran off.

Finally, food was on the table. "Dinner's ready!" Angus yelled.

Bowen bolted in.

"Made a blackbird pal up in the tree house, but can't be Uncle Ethan's blackbird. It would have died, long ago."

His heart knotted. A descendant of Woody?

How envious he had been of Ethan and Woody. From the tree house, they had flown together into the blue, into freedom, and he had been caged in the house.

"Why didn't you tell me Uncle Ethan had been in a wheelchair? Did he fall? Is that why all the gadgets to get up into the tree house?"

"How do you know he was in a wheelchair?"

Bowen pushed a photo across the table. A smiling Ethan, aged about twelve, was in a wheelchair about to be hoisted into the lift seat. He did not have many memories of Ethan smiling.

Sadness was killing him. He and Ethan had been close, had carved their names on the oak that was to become the tree house, had encircled it with a Celtic knot, having only one thread spiral with no beginning or end. The knot had represented their eternal love for each other.

Horrifying that, after symptoms set in, Ethan had scratched out their names, and begun replacing them with random lines. Although he knew the disease had disturbed Ethan’s mind, he had been heartbroken. Months later, his father had also begun to show symptoms: trembling, muscle twitching, and speech slurring.

“What’s going wrong with Dad and Ethan?” he had asked his mother.

“A faulty gene that damages part of the brain.”

Bowen tapped his arm. “Why did you never inherit Uncle Ethan’s disease?”

“How do you know about it?”

Bowen thrust a diary across the table. “Found this in Uncle Ethan’s bedroom.”

Why had he not checked before letting Bowen explore? He had known his mother had kept Ethan’s room as a shrine, would have tossed nothing.

“I was lucky, Bowen, and don’t worry you’ll never get it.” Angus gently pushed the diary away. “Later.”

“Found a guitar in Uncle’s room.”

“Woody Guthrie, who had the disease, was Ethan’s hero. He was a legendary American guitar and harmonica folk singer.”

“That’s why Uncle named his blackbird Woody. Why was that man his hero?”

“Woody never gave up, and although he spent five years in a hospital in what he called ‘Wardy Forty,’ he played guitar and harmonica for other patients, and helped serve meals. Like Ethan, Woody had a special tree he called the ‘magicky tree.’”

Caged memories must be set free.

“Can a tree be magic?”

“Yes, The Guthries chose that name for a big tree outside Greystone Hospital. Woody’s children would play in it, when visiting.”

Bowen took his hand.

“Can I have the guitar?”

“Don’t see why not.”

After dinner, Bowen walked to the front door. “Going to the tree house.”

“It’s getting dark.”

“The tree house has electricity. Don’t you remember?”

When Bowen had gone, he read the diary. Caged memories must be set free. After some time, he laid the diary aside. He had been wrong about Ethan’s childhood being miserable. Ethan had written how well he had been protected, how much Woody, the blackbird, had loved him, and some garble about a tree alphabet. No mention of him.

His mobile phone rang. Ella, saying they should again be a family.

“I’m at the old house in Scotland. Bowen wants to live here. Do you?”

A soft “yes” came, and she hung up.

Angus heard the whir of the chair lift and looked out. He could dimly see Bowen walking across the grass to the house. He startled. Behind Bowen was the silhouette of a boy in a wheelchair. Shadows? The boy seemed to wave and then fade into the darkness. He and Ethan never had a proper goodbye. Had some wormhole opened up with the tree house back in use?

Bowen was beaming, and once he knew his mother was returning to them, would be even happier. He opened the diary. He could now face more of it.

Suddenly, he spotted a series of lines like the ones Ethan had scratched on the oak, and an explanation: each character of the tree alphabet was formed by a series of strokes and had to be read from bottom to top along a central line. A jolt, as he realized Ethan had merely been replacing their names in English with their names in the tree alphabet. Ethan’s speech had been, by that time, too slurred to be understood. All the years of pain that misunderstanding had caused vanished.

He read on. Three sets of something called kennings were separated into Past-Present-Future, or Land-Sea-Sky, and was a basis for divination. Sad Ethan had already known his future. But Ethan had had the sky.

Bowen entered. Angus patted the chair next to him.

“Uncle’s hands must have been shaking. I can hardly read this.”

“I know his handwriting. I’ll read out loud.”

A reed pen dropped out. Bowen pointed to a drawing of reeds with notes underneath.

“Your uncle’s saying reeds represent flutes and indicate the direction where you’ll find purpose in life’s journey.”

He sighed. Reeds also meant health and healing. Had Ethan once had hope he would be healed?

Bowen pointed. “Says here Uncle made reed pipes. Wonder where they are. Think Uncle copied Woody Guthrie? You know, the man who played harmonica. Isn’t that a reed wind instrument?”

“Sort of, but it’s bedtime for you, Bowen.”

“I can hear singing. It’s making me sleepy.”

“I don’t hear anything.”

When Bowen had gone, he was about to shelve the diary, when he spotted a drawing of Woody, the blackbird. Ethan had jotted beneath it: *Druids said three blackbirds sat and sang in the World Tree, and their singing put people into a sleep which enabled them to travel to the Otherworld.* Was sleeping Bowen now traveling?

Angus sat thinking. This house, with its tree house, would make Bowen’s childhood as enchanted as Ethan’s, for Ethan had been blessed with a house in a magicky tree, and a devoted blackbird.

The haunting sound of reed pipes came. Was it the wind blowing through the tall reeds by the stream’s edge? Or was it Ethan?

Maybe the shadow wave had not been a “goodbye” but a “hello.”♦

JANET ENGLE FRASE

AT THE CORNER OF WATER AND RIVER STREETS

a bridge over the river beckons on this hot August day.

An osprey flies over
fishing for breakfast,
while an eagle surveys
the morning from a treetop.

Groups of grebes swim
through thick algae and weeds
making mesmerizing patterns
that swirl in the current.

Cormorants dive to eat
then sit on a branch over the water,
stretching their long necks
and spreading their wings to dry.

A mallard is curled up
on a large rock lining the river,
patiently watching over a dead mate
floating in the green scum.

The trail beyond the bridge
winds through a meadow wonderland
of tall grasses sprinkled
with a rainbow of wildflowers.

Small white and yellow
butterflies flit among the flowers
and, if one looks carefully,
tiny blue damselflies sit on leaves.

A Monarch butterfly
weaves among the flowers
looking for nectar,
its beauty is eye-candy.

As I push my walker back over the bridge,
a woman asks, “How far did you go?”
I reply, “It’s not about how far, but what I experienced.”

FALLING FORWARD

ADAM B. PERRY

Living with a disability like blindness means you must accept that the world you enter anew each day is not functionally supportive of your success in the context of human design. It is, for the most part, physically confrontational and confusing. Your safety is not a priority in the grand scheme of things. Going blind is a dangerous marathon, a test of spirit, will, and sanity defined by harrowing moments of disaster both felt and narrowly avoided. I have survived some epic stumbling falls, concussive teeth-rattling face smashes, and close calls with clearly perilous consequences that left me breathless and terrified.

Fear of the immediate unknown fuses the internal recognition of a unique vulnerability to create a sixth sense of hyperattentive intuition. Painful lessons learned over the years have reset my internal chaos monitor to a finite subsonic dog whistle. You begin to just feel it coming and are always ready to react. I rarely fall anymore, I am in a constant state of alert and recovery. Going blind makes you pretty light on your feet. I am not saying I don't do the "mad man screaming at inanimate objects in public" routine every now and then or cuss out a fire hydrant for being in the wrong place and clearly attacking my kneecaps with intent to maim. It's all relative and even sighted people take a digger every now and then. Keep that in mind.

Being scared and figuring out how to deal with it is simply part and parcel to the acute alternativeness of the blind way of being. I do not have much time for disability daredevils who are constantly out proving to the world that they can do anything. I am glad that they exist, I guess, mostly so I do not have to spend time feeling guilty that I am not able to leap tall buildings in a single bound or traverse the Sahara upside down in a custom-built glider that navigates by pinging sonar off the sand. They are heroes and most certainly accomplish amazing things for which they deserve accolade and credit. But they are overachievers and the bar they set is neither realistic nor meaningful for the vast majority of folks facing and overcoming the fear of the simple act of living with a disability. Life is full of gold medalists and rock stars. Except that it really isn't if you think about it.

I have been scared on six continents. I got lost in Budapest once in the middle of the night trying to make my way to a concert hall down the Danube from the event venue for a world music conference I was attending. Somehow, I wound up standing on a narrow concrete island clearly not meant for people as three lanes of chaotic traffic hurtled by on either side. Cars were whizzing by with people screaming God knows what in Hungarian at me, unable to stop because the median I found was somehow nowhere near an intersection. I was momentarily frozen with a clear, spine-tingling fear that I had finally done it. *Here lies Adam, his blind booty stumbled into the middle of the Budapest 500, and he is now the hood ornament on a busted-out Fiat.*

But I had been lost before. I had been unsure of my bearings in hectic urban settings all over the world—Shanghai, Amsterdam, Istanbul, Boston (they drive like video-game maniacs there). This wasn't my first rodeo, so to speak, and I knew the key to getting myself out of this safe and intact. I stood perfectly still, closed my broken eyes, and shouted, "HOW THE HELL DID I GET HERE?"

That was it. I wasn't cursing the gods of blindness for bringing me to all of this. No, I meant, literally *how did I get here?* I began to retrace my path in my head. I recalled enough information—which side the traffic was on when I somehow crossed three lanes to get there. Where the noise from the cars in the perpendicular cross street was starting and stopping. What direction the wind was blowing and when it had been at my back and when it had been at my face. I gathered enough data to make an informed gut-call and carefully oriented myself in the direction I thought made sense and slowly but surely found my way back to a safer spot beside the road. I figured out I had gone diagonal for a bit when I thought I had been walking in a straight line and somehow, I managed to make it across three lanes of a mini freeway without getting killed. Luck is always part of the equation when you find yourself in survival mode. That's how the hell I got there. After I got my bearings back. I listened for the sound of boats floating on the current of the Danube not too far in the distance and made my way back to my original path and got to the venue in time to catch the last few shows. The rest of the conference and my time in Budapest were thankfully less eventful because I knew I could handle just about anything after that.

OK, so I know this story is not nearly as dramatic or awe-inspiring as if I had summited K2 hopping backward on one leg carrying two Sherpas on my back. But which situation is a person with blindness more likely to face? Blind folks must cross streets and navigate perilous hazards every single day. When you lose your sight the stew of sounds, touch, smells, hyper attentiveness, and gut memory become your eyes. The simple act of living becomes a game of educated guesses that could have disastrous results if you guess wrong. The fear of guessing wrong is ever-present, a crafty little devil whispering *you are so hosed* in your brain.

I have a mantra of sorts that I have developed over time to help me get through moments of fear and humiliation. As far as I can remember, save for the time I slipped on ice at a frozen Minneapolis bus stop, flew back on my butt and cracked the ulnar bone in my arm, when I stumble over something I cannot see I generally fall forward. When I am down, I find my way to my hands and knees, catch my breath, and make sure nothing is busted up too badly. Then I get up, brush off the dirt and the rubble, and set about my way—slightly farther forward than when I started. When I fall, I fall forward. I am farther along. Whatever tripped me up I will most likely never trip over again because I will always remember it was there and what it felt like to fall over it. Falling forward is how life is lived for all of us, with a special double meaning for those of us who get a different kind of lost along the way.♦

SEEKING SOLACE

SUSAN DUKE

When she was eight, Alice Henderson briefly held the world record for filling her mouth with marbles. Unfortunately, two months before *Guinness World Records 2005* went to print, a surly ten-year-old boy in North Dakota beat Alice's claim to fame by three 0.5-centimeter marbles. She cried foul, but the *GWR* wouldn't budge.

Alice's two older brothers devised other escapades for the plucky little girl and dared her to compete. That summer was eventful.

"Can you wear your roller skates for sixteen days? You can't take them off for nothing."

Alice eagerly agreed. It sounded easy and kind of fun until her two front teeth were chipped, and she required expensive orthodontia.

The dentist eyed her bruises and damaged teeth. With thoughts of summoning the authorities, he casually quizzed her.

"So, Alice. What happened here?"

Alice had shrugged. "I fell. I guess I shouldn't wear my skates in the shower with all that soap."

When his children stood before him, Mr. Henderson had angrily waved the orthodontist bill back and forth like a red cape in front of an avenging bull. His face had turned a deep crimson.

"It's not just the money." He had pointed at his sons. "You two stop this harebrained stunt garbage. Your sister could have been seriously hurt." He paused to breathe deeply and gain control. "I was almost arrested for child abuse!"

He then assigned punishments—chores that included painting the ugly trellis and railing on the front porch, cleaning out the garage, and washing his car. He forbid them from going to the local pool until July. Mrs. Henderson had appealed when he grounded them from riding their bikes.

"Tom, please. They will drive me crazy if all three hang around the house all day long."

It was while the boys were sorting through rusty coffee cans of old screws, nuts, and bolts on Dad's garage workbench that Jack concocted his grandest scheme to ensure Alice's place in history. He coached his younger siblings until both marveled at his brilliance.

"Al, all you have to do is jump off the garage roof onto the trampoline. Wear my old Batman cape, and spread your arms out. Ricky will be up on the ladder with the video cam." He had clapped his hands with glee. "It'll look like you're flying."

Alice had indeed hit the trampoline dead center, but here the plan failed. Instead of bouncing joyfully up and down, she shot like an air-to-surface missile across the backyard only to be stopped by Dad's barbecue grill.

Alice had revived in a hospital room, her right arm encased in a bright pink cast and her head aching from a concussion. All this could be borne, but what had distressed her was the sight of her mother quietly weeping in a chair next to her bed.

“Don’t cry, Mommy. I’m OK.”

Saturday night after all detritus from take-out pizza had been cleared, Mrs. Henderson retired to her room as she had done since Alice had come home from the hospital. It was as if the sight of Alice’s rosy cast resembled a beacon, an omen of doom.

The Henderson children had shifted uneasily in their chairs, waiting for Dad to excuse them from the table. They almost wished he would yell at them, punish them, even threaten them, anything but this quiet demeanor. His silence thickened the room’s tension.

He finished his beer, licked his lips, and stared at his sons and daughter. After he laid both meaty hands flat on the table’s surface, he sighed a long and tortuous sound. This man had arrested drunk drivers, helped rescue a car full of teens from the Tennessee River, and once shooed a family of black bears from a shopping mall. But his own children were impossible.

“Alice, you will begin third grade with a plaster cast on your arm. Think about that when kickball or softball teams are picked at recess. You’re not desirable now. You are what is called a ‘liability.’”

He had shaken his head. “And you two will return to junior high known as the two lunatic Henderson brothers.” He’d raised his hands palms out to forestall any protests or discussion. “I don’t know what that reputation will mean—good, bad, or ugly. What I do know is that my lieutenant informed me if I keep getting called to the phone and leaving work early, I can kiss any promotion to sergeant goodbye. I guess I’ll be a patrolman for another fifteen years, and every time I’m directing traffic in all kinds of weather, I’ll know I can’t afford to send any of you to college.”

Here came the part that cut Alice like a knife through soft butter.

“None of this matters to me as much as seeing how sad your mother is. She has put up with your nonsense because she loves you all. But I’m telling you, you three have worn her out. She doesn’t know from one day to another what stunt you’ll try next. Her nerves are shot.”

“What can we do, Dad?”

Mr. Henderson rose and looked at Jack, his eldest. “You can stop all this (blankety-blank) stupidity about world records. Show your mother some consideration.”

His eyes swept the trio. “Now, I’m going to try to convince Mom to come out to the living room to watch a boring movie with me, that tearjerker she picked up at the video store. You kids are grounded until further notice. Try not to get into trouble.”

* * *

To their parents’ amazement, all three flourished in the next twenty years.

Jack achieved a Ph.D. in environmental science from the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. He could often be found “forest bathing” in the Great Smoky Mountains—totally immersed in nature and its wonders.

Rick married a lovely, sensible girl who reined him in when his ideas bordered on the impractical. With two children and another on the way, the happy couple owned and operated a bed and breakfast in Chattanooga.

With her love of the written word and driving desire for adventure, Alice did the only thing she could do. She became a much sought after travel writer. She infused her heart and spirit into descriptions of places and experiences she enjoyed around the globe. Her magazine articles were highlighted by her listicles of dos and don’ts, must-sees, and glossy photographs artfully taken by a young man she’d met in a journalism class.

Their mutual affection had surfaced in Canada while on assignment for *Outpost*. When *Wanderlust*, a UK publication, sent them to produce a feature on homegrown Scottish music, Alice’s words and Jeff’s visuals made the drummers and pipers come alive. A *Conde Nast* editor once said Henderson and Johnson fostered more curiosity about the world than imaginable.

Hidden Compass, an online international journal, sent Alice and Jeff to Earthwatch, a project in Portugal’s Tagus Valley, to document the cultural transition of 7000-year-old hunters and gatherers into farmers. Sifting through the dirt one hot morning, Alice was startled by Jeff’s abrupt request.

“Marry me, Alice. I love you.”

She’d chuckled. “Only if we don’t have to settle down. That would probably kill me.”

Little did Alice realize how close she had come to predicting a tragic outcome that would seriously alter her life.

That fall the engaged couple joined an expedition to a rainforest sanctuary in Rio Grande, Puerto Rico, to document wild orchids. At night, they rested side by side in their tent planning fast-moving content saturated with colorful visuals. Wedding plans floated around the edges of their discussions with Jeff believing they would actually become man and wife.

The home-bound plane ride felt bumpy to Alice. She and Jeff kept their seatbelts fastened. An invisible pocket of clear-air turbulence wreaked havoc on those who did not. Passengers and crew were tossed haphazardly like rag dolls in an earthquake. Papers, maps, phones, laptops, and anything else not secured became lethal weapons.

As the pilot fought for control, Alice prayed. Somewhere over Georgia the plane fell from the sky.

Alice, Jeff, and others in the rear of the plane were spared the fiery storm up front as the plane broke apart. Alice couldn’t move but realized they both had survived. After Jeff assured himself Alice was conscious and talking coherently, he leaped down and limped toward the front section where he heard a baby screaming. Alice tried to call to him, but suddenly her world went black.

* * *

It seemed natural when Alice returned to her parents’ home to heal. All winter, Mrs. Henderson spent almost every waking moment caring for her daughter. When spring came to the mountains, Alice progressed steadily with her physical therapy, but dark thoughts teased her father’s serenity.

“Irene, I’m worried about Alice. She’s not acting right.” He rolled onto his back on his side of their queen bed and crossed his arms over his chest.

Mrs. Henderson softly laughed. “Oh, Tom. The time for worries is past. Look at her. She survived a plane crash, for heaven’s sake. Yes, it’s been a long, tough road, but our gutsy daughter has recovered. I’m so proud of her.”

He had patted his wife’s shoulder. “I am, too, honey. But she can’t just live in her high school bedroom the rest of her life. When I took her fishing at Norris Dam last weekend, she couldn’t wait to get home. It’s not like her.”

Irene Henderson knew her husband was right. But, darn it, she was drawn to this vulnerable side of her feral-like daughter. Alice needed her mother’s touch, the love and care only a mother could dispense.

Tom cleared his throat. “I talked to Jack. He’ll be here by supper. Let’s see what he thinks. OK?”

The silence stretched a bit until Irene swallowed. “OK.”

Jack didn’t come to face a battle without ammunition. He brought Jeff, who had plans of his own. In fact, in Alice’s opinion, the whole family had ganged up on her—Dad had bullied her, Mom had betrayed her, and her brother and her former fiancée had assumed she’d cave in to their pleas because they were convinced they were right.

So, it was with degrees of resentment, annoyance, and anxiety Alice found herself once again resting side by side in a tent with Jeff. Once this trip was over, she’d never again allow anyone to guilt her into doing something she didn’t wish to do.

“If you get uncomfortable, you can always unzip your sleeping bag a little. It’s pretty nice out tonight.”

“Jeff, please. If we must talk, let’s discuss what in the world we’re doing in Panther Creek State Park with a bunch of strangers.”

He sighed. “OK. As I explained, geocaching is a type of treasure hunt. We’re searching for stashes of objects while using maps and GPS devices. It’s kind of like using navigational skills. It’s all for fun.”

Passengers and crew were tossed haphazardly like rag dolls in an earthquake.

Alice groaned. “Fun. I’m out of practice. That six-year-old girl over there will probably make me look bad.”

Jeff chuckled. “Who cares? The best competition you can get just teaches you what you don’t know. We’ll stroll through the woods and enjoy nature. I registered online, so we’ll get the coordinates of hidden waterproof containers. Nothing is buried—just hidden. Find one, sign the log book, and collect the geocoin. Oh, I might take a few pictures. Don’t mind me. Once a photographer . . .”

Alice snaked her arm up and pulled the zipper tab a bit. She wondered how Jeff functioned with his severely impaired hands. A tear surprised her as it leaked down her face. She sniffed. All those months she’d been consumed with her pain and strenuous therapy, Jeff had been fighting demons of his own.

“Jeff, I’m sorry I . . .”

“You know what? Jack and I have communicated a lot. I couldn’t write or even text for a while, but we Skyped. Your brother is a great guy.”

“Did he talk about me?”

Jeff turned to look at Alice. “Of course, Muffin. We both love you.”

An awkward silence filled the tent. Muffin. No one had called her that for a long time. She smiled as she remembered Jeff relentlessly searching shops in Puerto Rico when she craved berry muffins.

In the moonlight, Alice stared at shortened and bent fingers that resembled melted wax. She kept her face blank, but her heart twisted.

Suddenly, Alice needed her arms unencumbered. She unzipped her Kelty Catina 30 sleeping bag down to her waist and took a deep breath. The clear, mountain air revived her spirits, giving her courage to face issues that lay between them.

“Jeff, I’m glad I passed out. If I had seen you reaching into that burning plane, I might have died right there.”

“Probably not the smartest thing I’ve ever done, but that screaming baby—I couldn’t stop.”

Alice bit her lower lip. “How are you doing now?”

Jeff held up his scarred forearms. In the moonlight, Alice stared at shortened and bent fingers that resembled melted wax. She kept her face blank, but her heart twisted.

“Don’t pity me, Alice. I got the mom and kid out. They’re fine now. I’m fine now. It’s funny, though. When I’m working, I devise ways to get around my ‘disability.’ It’s little things at home that frustrate me. Like I had to buy an electric toothbrush. Can’t use that out in the woods. Stuff like that.”

“At least you’re working. I’ve been hiding in my bedroom, letting Mom do everything.”

The two old friends talked the night away. As dawn peeked into their tent, Jeff yawned. He yearned to embrace Alice but worried his arms and hands might repulse her. A friendly voice solved that problem.

“Time to rise and shine, you two.”

Alice rubbed her eyes. “What is Jack doing here?”

“I heard that. I love the woods, Sis, even if someone left litter all over.”

All the geocachers were given biodegradable bags for collecting trash. Alice’s anger grew as she threw her bag into the back of Jack’s pickup to be disposed of later.

“How could anyone be so careless? Plastic plates and cups just tossed aside. All state parks have garbage receptacles. Right?”

“Yeah,” Jack said. “And the rangers maintain regular collections to discourage raccoons and bears from making bigger messes.”

Alice’s mood lightened considerably as she and the other geocachers ate breakfast and prepared to hunt for treasure boxes. Jeff grinned as she kept close to him. Her proximity felt good, just like old times.

On the second day, Alice found a box and allowed Jeff to photograph her as she discovered it. She noticed he slipped an odd device, a homemade prothesis on his right hand to facilitate easier maneuvering of his equipment.

He’s so clever. I miss that.

As the group gathered for lunch, Alice stepped out on a rocky ledge beside a bubbling creek. She inhaled oak, hickory, and pine as she hugged herself. She knew her right knee would throb tonight, but it didn’t matter. That knee would always bother her, but she could tolerate the inconvenience. Jeff endured much more every day without complaining.

She wondered if his feelings for her could grow again. Was it too late? Did he love her only like a sister? His shout interrupted her thoughts.

“Muffin! Can you come up here?”

She glanced at her knee and then up to see Jeff on a small hill.

Suck it up, girl.

She hurried to join him. “What is it, Jeff?”

“You tell me.” He pointed to a flat area of woodland floor down below. “What do you see?”

She gasped. “It looks like a circle of mushrooms. A perfect circle. Did someone plant them or what?”

They hurried down to the circle and were soon joined by others.

“Look what the pixies did, Mommy,” the little six-year-old said.

“She’s almost right,” Jack said. “This formation is called a fairy ring. It’s actually a natural figuration of mushrooms that developed a unique root system. Fairy rings are usually found in late summer or fall especially in wet areas. They can be small or quite huge.”

“Wow.” Alice imagined fairies dancing in a circle; she refocused as Jack continued.

“Different European countries have various legends about the pixie rings. Some say it’s bad luck to step in them. I’ve heard it’s wise to make a wish if you come upon one.”

Alice glanced around the clearing. Magical feelings filled the air. Could

Jeff be wishing the same thing she was? She grinned and slipped her arm around his waist. This special moment would stay with her for a long time.

"Thanks for bringing me geocaching, Jeff." She swept her free hand out to encompass the scenic panorama before them. Hickories and oaks stood at attention while something rustled in the brush. "Treasure hunting is fun, but the real treasure is all around us, isn't it?"

Encouraged by Alice's growing enthusiasm for the natural environment, Jeff gently moved an arm across her shoulders. When she didn't resist, his heart raced with hope and joy. He needed to be careful, though; Alice was like an injured bird just released from a cage. He didn't want to spook her after all these months apart. Maybe some of her bones were still mending as well as her broken spirit. She wasn't the wild child Jack had described from their youth.

Jeff nodded. "I agree, Muffin. There are a lot of beautiful vistas in this country, but nothing compares to the Great Smoky Mountains."

Alice surprised her friend by suddenly pivoting and kissing him on his nose. "Let's eat. I'm starved." The rest of the day flew by.

The pleasant weather continued as the campers gathered around their evening fire. A starry sky above the crackling campfire lent enchantment. Jeff tried to banish worst-case scenarios from his mind as he sat next to Alice. She seemed so much better, lighter in spirit. Communing with nature could do that to a person, even one who had been injured.

Jack checked in on the dynamic duo and the rest of the geocachers. He reminded them of a few state park rules concerning leaving the area pristine. He concluded with well wishes for safe travels tomorrow morning. He nodded to Jeff as if to say *our plan to get Alice out of her bedroom worked. The rest is up to you.*

Alice and Jeff once again settled side by side in their tent. Whereas the first night Alice had been rigid with anxiety, this evening she felt content and ready to explore some issues.

She seemed so much better, lighter in spirit.

"Jeff, how is your family? I mean, have they come to grips with your burns? Where are you living now?" Maybe this conversation was too invasive, but she needed to know.

Jeff blinked. He bore no resentment toward Alice's curiosity and was warmed by her sudden concern.

"Well, I've moved back into my apartment in Jacksboro. When I was initially discharged from the hospital, I stayed at a traumatic injury center in Knoxville. Boy, I saw some awful things there, but the treatment and the caretakers were superb. I have to say Dad surprised me, too. He lent his love and support, saw me through some rough times. Mom, not so much. She cried a lot, and that wasn't helpful. We're OK now, though."

Alice looked at the tent ceiling as she digested this information. "Hmmm. We both have wonderful families. I think Dad is waiting for me to make a move—get on with my life. He's even paid my rent all these months so I wouldn't lose my apartment. I love LaFollette. And I love that we all live within a few miles of each other."

They lay comfortably with each other and listened to the loons on a nearby lake. Alice had always loved night sounds signaling the end of the day, but since the plane crash, she had dreaded the nightmares that plagued her sleep.

Out here with Jeff, some fears had been soothed. She had worried the opposite might be true. Perhaps it was his steady in and out breathing as he slept, or just Mother Nature surrounding them. Oddly, she sensed an unease in her friend this night.

"Jeff, you seem restless. Just tell me what's on your mind. I know you and Jack plotted to get me out of the house. And, yes, I brought my notebook and have been making notes, just like the old days."

Jeff turned on his side to rest on his elbow and gaze at her. "Thinking about writing again, Alice?"

She continued to stare upward and pursed her lips. "I'd have to go freelance. I have no assignments or contracts anymore."

"Well, that's how you started years ago."

"Yeah." She rolled on her side to face him. "I can't get on a plane, Jeff. I'm not ready. I know you've been traveling, working. I'm glad for you. I don't want to interfere with your work schedule."

Jeff longed to hold Alice, to offer comfort. Instead, he nodded.

"It's OK, Muffin. In fact, *Travel and Leisure* wants this piece on geocaching. I've got the visuals if you've got the words. And, see, it was only a two-hour drive from where we live."

When she didn't respond, Jeff's words came in a rush. "*Outpost* and *Outside* frequently post possibilities. No flying. Just driving. There's marine biology and sights in Boothbay Harbor, Maine. We're talking historic lighthouses, fishing, staying at Spruce Point Inn. Ever investigate a maritime forest? We can go bird-watching at Kia Wok Island in North Carolina. Beaches, dunes, salt marshes. Lots of birds."

Alice laughed. “Slow down. It all sounds intriguing. Can I sleep on it and tell you in the morning?”

Jeff sighed. “Sure, Muffin.”

They both had much to ponder as evening shadows deepened. Alice wondered if she was ready to take on the responsibilities of submitting travel pieces to digital and print periodicals again. Could she bear rejections? She snorted softly and would have kicked herself if she wasn’t snuggled in a sleeping bag.

If I can jump off a garage roof, I can do anything.

Jeff’s dreams were filled with possibilities of loving and working with Alice again. His future happiness depended on her answer.

He didn’t have to wait. Alice poked him as dawn peeked into their tent.

“Morning. I’ve been thinking. Too bad there isn’t an assignment right here in Tennessee.”

Jeff swallowed. “Actually, I’d love to go to Blackberry Farm in Walland, Tennessee. We could learn how our Appalachian ancestors have foraged in the Smokies for centuries. A survival off the land kind of piece.”

Alice nodded. “Let’s try that. Can you set it up?”

Jeff smiled. “Henderson and Johnson. We’re back, Muffin.”

This could work. Start small and build from that. He didn’t realize he’d been holding his breath until he sighed with relief.

Alice sat up and ran her fingers through her auburn tangles, tossed her hair, and grinned mischievously.

“Besides, I love berries. Remember?”◆

DONNA WOJNAR DZURILLA

LIVING GRIEF

How
    am I
        supposed
                to do
                    this?

Your rough hands
cup my shoulders
you hold me
a step away
then kiss me.

I know
every assault
working steel
made
to your body.

Pockmarks on
the top of your
hands
from scalds
of wet metal

Flesh under
your right forearm
puckered
by a slice of
sheet metal

Inner left thigh
a leathery map of
scar tissue
week-in-the-hospital
deep burn

Knees shot.
You loved
to run.
Now thoughts
run from you.

It wasn’t enough
working metal
beat your body
now steel robs me
of your mind.

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BOILED FROM THE INSIDE OUT

CAL MCCARTHY

The experiment goes that if you place a frog in boiling water, it will hop out immediately. The frog recognizes the threat that heat poses to its well-being. But if you place the same frog in lukewarm water and slowly raise the heat, it will stay put, blissfully ignorant of the change even as it is cooked alive.

Don't ask me how this experiment came to be. Maybe a particularly sadistic group of scientists had too much free time on their hands. Or maybe they knew it would make a hell of an analogy.

* * *

By the time I was fourteen, I was convinced that life came with a certain amount of pain.

That's not a figure of speech. There was a relentless ache that coursed through my body.

I could never find a position, sitting or standing, that would relieve the pressure coursing through my spine. My jaw joints clicked and protested at the slightest exertion, sometimes locking wide open. My posture developed an incessant slouch that got me in trouble at school. Brand name pain medications became a crucial part of my balanced breakfast, and I kept a bottle in my backpack just in case of a particularly bad pain day.

It never occurred to me to tell anyone about this part of my life. Why would it? The pain had crept into my body so gradually over years and years—the dial on the stovetop turning ever so slowly—that I couldn't remember life without it. As far as I knew, it was a natural part of growing up.

I don't remember much about the day that illusion broke. I was chatting with my mother about some inconsequential topic when I opened my mouth slightly too wide and felt the joint lock itself into place. It must have looked like my face was frozen in mid yawn, or maybe a scream.

(My mom always comments on how shocked and afraid I looked at that moment; my retort is that it's hard to look any other way with your mouth stuck wide open. What I really felt was bored irritation.)

I resigned myself to counting down the seconds until my jaw decided to behave itself again. Then I locked eyes with my mom.

Her expression, mirroring my own wide eyes and mouth, displayed genuine shock. That shock was even more evident in her voice as she desperately probed into what was happening, what she could possibly do to help, despite my temporary inability to respond.

Oh, I must have thought, as a mute observer to her growing panic. *I guess this isn't normal.*

* * *

She held my hand through the many appointments to follow, as one medical specialist referred another, who referred another, who referred another. It was an exhausting scavenger hunt. No one seemed to have the complete answer to what was going on with my body, let alone how to fix it. And I still had yet to fully comprehend the seriousness of my situation.

Part of me just wanted to go back to suffering in silence. I was *managing* the bouts of betrayal coming from my body. I was *managing* the pain. I was *fine*.

The daisy chain of doctors eventually landed me in my first chiropractic appointment.

I shifted anxiously on the massage table in the room's center and eyed the colorful assortment of plants and landscape images, so utterly different from the sterilized decor in every other doctor's office I'd entered.

After a long wait, the chiropractor himself burst into the room. I was instantly overwhelmed. Loud Hawaiian shirt. Loud gestures. Loud voice. He sped through the small talk of a first appointment and, after a quick review of my sheet, dove right in.

I'm sure he talked me through his process. I'm less sure I absorbed any of it.

I was preoccupied with the spikes of pain as he jabbed at every pressure point from my head to my feet. My panic tripled as he cracked my neck with alarming speed, a performance which was followed by cracking my entire spine segment by segment. It was agonizing.

I reluctantly obeyed each instruction to flop over, or to contort my limbs this way or that, gritting my teeth the whole time. My mind bubbled with confusion. Was this supposed to relieve my pain as promised, or draw it out more?

When the chiropractor asked me to stand, I did so, wary of whatever new torture was to follow.

But when I pushed myself off the table and onto shaky legs, I couldn't believe what I found.

My body felt . . . good. It *never* felt good.

My slouch had disappeared, taking with it the pressure that usually coated my spine. And when I opened my mouth to express this, my jaw joints obeyed without their typical grinding and clicking.

This is what normal was *supposed* to feel like.

It had taken a lifetime for pain to assert itself as a constant companion, a hand turning the temperature dial bit by bit until I was boiling.

In the span of ten minutes, that chiropractor had reached over and taken my pan off the burner.

I couldn't give him enough praise. I left the office that day feeling like I, and my new body, could take on the world.

* * *

I wasn't prepared for the pain's inevitable return. My pan was on the burner once again.

And this time, I knew what baseline felt like. I was aware of every agonizing rise in the temperature.

* * *

It's been over ten years since my chronic pain journey took off. I still have the same constant discomfort ebbing through my body, but I've collected a few fancy abbreviations to explain my experience.

TMJ. EDS. POTS.

None of which have a fix-all cure—that would be too simple. It'll be chiropractors and specialists for the rest of my life.

Sometimes, I still wish I could go back to before the endless sprawl of appointments. I can no longer ignore the severity of the alarms blaring throughout my body; isn't it natural, then, to want to return to when those alarms seemed like nothing more than white noise? The frog, unaware of the gentle rise in temperature, must be content if it stays in its pot.

But ignorant or not, the frog is still cooking alive.

Just because I didn't have the words for it at fourteen didn't mean I wasn't suffering. After all, even then, painkillers were a necessary part of my daily routine. Would ignorance really be better, or is my appointment fatigue clouding my perception?

I have bad days now, days when the pain traversing my spine makes the most simple movements a challenge.

But thanks to actively seeking treatment, I have good days, too. Days when that same pain feels like a distant memory. Days when I'm not drowning in endless alarms. That's the important part.

If I'm going to be stuck in this proverbial pot of water, at least I can reset the heat every now and then.◆

VELVET DAGGERS

THOMAS SHORT

The driveway was packed, as it always was on Thanksgiving. Joy's house stood facing the bitter wind, surrounded by tall pine trees, its porch wrapped in strings of twinkling lights. Ariana stepped out of the car first, her breath rising in the cold as she glanced at the rows of familiar cars—her siblings were already inside, laughing and chatting over wine and appetizers. Lance emerged from the driver's side, adjusting his jacket, and circled to the back door where Bruce sat quietly, fiddling with a plush ball.

Ariana reached for the casserole dish in the seat next to Bruce, but Lance beat her to it, his fingers briefly brushing hers. "I've got it," he said. Ariana could see the tension building behind his eyes. She thought back to Easter, when Lance had spent the entire ride home in silence, his hands gripping the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles turned white. She had hoped today would be different, but the tightness in his jaw told her otherwise.

Bruce slid out of the car, his small frame swallowed by a too-big coat and fleece hat shaped like a tiger, long tassels hanging from the sides below his round cheeks still plump with baby fat. His eyes darted toward the porch lights—flapping his arms—excited by the flickering spectacle. He didn't move toward the house until Lance touched his shoulder, gently easing him along.

"Come on, buddy. Let's plaster on a fake smile and plow through this," Lance said, adjusting the strap of the backpack he always carried, stocked with Bruce's favorite snacks and toys. It was his lifeline, his way of ensuring Bruce felt safe and comfortable, no matter where they were.

Ariana shot him a glance. "Let's not start like that, please." But she knew Lance was right, this used to mean something different—warmth, laughter, the kind of holidays where her mother's smile reached her eyes. Now, they felt like a facade, masking the tension that had grown between them.

"I didn't mean it like that," he muttered. "I was just trying to . . . never mind."

Ariana's mother, Joy, greeted them at the door with a smile that went to her eyes, alcohol already hitting her face, the smell of roasting turkey, fresh baked bread, and cloves following her. "Here they are," she announced. The sound of football buzzed from the TV, where Ariana's father sat glued to the screen, content with a plate of food on his belly and a beer in his hand.

"Bruce, sweetie," Joy cooed, crouching to his level. "Don't you look so handsome today?" She brushed the tassel from his cheek and gave it a pinch.

Bruce didn't answer, his gaze glued on the too-early Christmas lights strung above, swaying back and forth. Joy straightened and turned to Ariana. "How's everything going? It must be so exhausting raising a child like him."

Ariana hid her gritted teeth behind a smile. "We're doing fine, Mom. Thanks."

"Good, good." Joy turned to Lance, the casserole dish still in his hands. "That goes in the kitchen. But I'd uncover it if I were you. Foil can leach into the food when it's heated," she said, pointing to the aluminum foil wrapped around it.

Lance didn't flinch, but Ariana saw a slight tightening in his jaw. He headed for the kitchen without a word, Bruce trailing behind him like a shadow.

The dining table was packed with Joy's signature holiday spread—several pies, fresh focaccia bread, and garlic mashed potatoes garnished with fresh rosemary. The conversation at the far end was already circling its usual drain. Joy held court, her volume increasing as she spoke about something she'd "read online," about vaccines, fluoride in the water, or the health benefits of colloidal silver. "You can't trust what anyone tells you." Ariana's sister nodded along politely, but it was clear she wasn't entirely engaged.

"You wouldn't believe what they're doing to these poor kids nowadays," Joy said, shaking her head. "The shots they're giving them—absolute poison. I read about a mother whose child completely changed after just one round of vaccines. It's heartbreaking."

Lance froze mid-step. Ariana placed a calming hand on his arm, but his muscles remained taut. She gave him a pleading look, then set about arranging the food on the counter.

"Mom," Ariana said softly, trying to steer the conversation. "Let's not do this today."

Joy tilted her head, feigning innocence. "I'm just saying, Ariana, you must see it at work all the time. It's not normal what's happening to these kids."

"It's not about that," Ariana said, avoiding eye contact. "Let's just focus on Thanksgiving, OK?"

Joy pressed her lips together, but it was clear she wasn't done. "You're the one who has to live with the consequences, after all. I'm just happy I raised you right."

Dinner was no better. Bruce sat at the far corner of the table, picking at the turkey Lance chopped for him into uniform cubes. Lance positioned himself between Bruce and Joy, his protective instincts like a barrier. Bruce pushed the turkey around his plate, his nose wrinkling at the unfamiliar texture. Lance reached into his backpack and pulled out a bag of crackers, the ones Bruce always ate.

Joy raised an eyebrow, "You're not going to let him eat *that* at the table, are you?"

Lance nodded. "He's a picky eater."

"He'll never learn to try new things if you keep coddling him."

The meal stretched long, the conversation twisting in circles until one of Ariana's nephews asked how her new job was going.

"Going great. I mean, it is cold and flu season, so it's busier than normal, but I really enjoy the work."

"I can't imagine how hard it must be," Joy interjected, her fork hovering over her plate. "Doing such an important job while raising a child like Bruce—it's a lot. But you're strong. And you, Lance, you must have your hands full being a stay-at-home dad."

Lance swallowed hard. "Bruce is fine. He's happy. That's what matters."

"But is he?" Joy asked, her tone all too sweet. "You know, I read about a diet that's supposed to fix children with these types of . . . challenges. It might be something worth looking into. I could share a few links with you if you'd like?"

"Mom," Ariana said, sharpening her tone. "Bruce isn't a problem that needs fixing."

Joy raised her hands in mock surrender. "I'm only trying to help."

Lance set his knife down slowly. "Maybe the best way to help is to stop talking about things you don't understand."

"Well, someone has to think about what's best for Bruce. Don't bite *my* head off. It's not easy being a parent, but I suppose you're doing your best," Joy replied.

The table fell silent. Ariana glared at Lance, desperately trying to say *stop* with her eyes.

“Hey! Who’s ready for pie,” Ariana’s sister said breaking the silence with a clap.

“I need to get some fresh air,” Lance said and took Bruce outside.

Ariana’s chest tightened as she watched Lance walk away. She hated how Joy’s words always seemed to wedge themselves between them, how every family gathering felt like a battle she couldn’t win. She took a deep breath, the smell of cloves and rosemary grounding her, before following Lance outside.

She found him in the backyard with Bruce, who was humming softly to himself, tracing patterns on the frosty deck railing. Lance leaned against the railing, staring out into the dark, his hands shoved deep into his pockets.

“I’m sorry,” he said when she stepped beside him. “I shouldn’t have said anything.”

Ariana shook her head. “No. You were right.”

“She doesn’t listen,” Lance said. “And it’s like . . . it’s like she blames you. Like she thinks we did something wrong.”

Ariana looked at Bruce, still humming. He was calm, content in his own world, the lights from the house flickering in his blue eyes.

“She doesn’t know him,” Ariana said. “Not really, and she might not ever.”

“I don’t think she deserves to,” Lance said, glancing at her. “But he doesn’t care about any of this.”

Ariana eked out a smile. “Not one bit.”

They watched Bruce for a while longer, the night settling around them. The tension of the day lingered, but in that moment, they found a small measure of peace—not in the resolution of arguments or the approval of others, but in the quiet, unshakable contentment of their son. He didn’t care who was winning or who was right, and he’d never feel the sting of harsh words or grown-up grudges. In the grip of a hostile world, he remained unscathed.♦

LIVING AT THE PACE OF PAIN

KATHRYN M. BOWMAN JOHNSON

What is time?

Once, it was a schedule: wake at 5:30, work by eight, home again by six. I lived by alarm clocks and appointment cards, scribbled calendars, and to-do lists. I filled the days to the brim and then kept going. Time felt like something I could manage—if I just worked hard enough. I measured my worth by how much I could carry.

Now, time feels different.

I still wake early. I still go to bed early. But everything in between moves more slowly. I don't track the hours like I used to. I let the day shape itself around what my body can handle. Some days, I can do more. Other days, almost nothing. I move at the pace of pain now.

After I was diagnosed with fibromyalgia and degenerative disc disease, I kept pushing. I could feel the edges of my future shrinking, the way life was changing whether I was ready or not. I made lists. I filled my calendar. I told myself if I stayed busy, maybe I could outrun it.

But pain doesn't care about your plans. It doesn't wait for you to be ready. It shows up anyway—and when it does, it doesn't just slow you down. It stops you.

Still, I pushed. I said yes when I meant no. I ignored the flares. Smiled through the tears. Told myself I could hold it all together a little longer.

Eventually, I stopped fighting. I had to. Pain doesn't negotiate. I began to learn how to live inside of it instead.

Most days now, I sit at my computer and write. I think. I try to untangle what I've lost, and what I'm still holding. Even when my body refuses to move, I try to keep my spirit moving. Some days that's enough.

I still feel guilty. For not doing more. For not bringing in money. For the clutter in the corners or the meals that come from a box. For the friendships that faded when I couldn't keep up. The world may judge me, but truthfully—I judge myself more.

I remember who I used to be. I was the one who showed up for everyone. The one who always said, "I've got it," even when I didn't.

Now, I've learned to put myself first—not out of selfishness, but survival. If I don't honor my limits, no one else will.

Time has softened. Slowed. It no longer demands so much.

I sit on the porch and listen to the birds. Their songs feel layered now, like something I hadn't noticed until I finally slowed down enough to hear them. I watch the wind move through the trees. Sometimes I close my eyes just to feel the air on my face. I let the sun warm my knees while my great-grandson Michael draws beside me, tongue between his teeth, crayons scattered everywhere. Sometimes all I do is breathe. And sometimes, being there—truly there—is everything I can give.

And maybe that's enough.

I'm still learning to quiet the voice inside that insists I should be doing more. That I should try harder. Be better. Heal faster.

But I am trying. Just not in the ways the world keeps score.

The world moves fast. It praises efficiency and hustle. There isn't much grace for slow days, or for people like me who can't bounce back the way we used to.

So I've learned to tell time differently.

I count the hush of morning light. The way Michael grins at me over cereal. The effort it takes to wash my hair and not need to rest right after. The small satisfaction of writing something true. The sound of wind chimes and Michael's laugh. The quiet knowledge that I am still here. Still trying.

I watch the grass grow and call it good. Because it is.♦

ROWAN TATE

THE BODY AS A WEATHER SYSTEM

I wake into skin that has turned to fog. The windows
steam with breath. Maybe mine. Maybe

a body of mine still sleeping in another house. I want
to know my photons and I want them to know me.

I try to stand and the floor tilts like a question. Gravity
is a decision I haven't made yet, laws of nature in soft refusal.

I remember patterns of history in my joints. Some part of me
is already evaporating. I rain inward.

Look inside. Nothing blooms but the mold in the corners. My shadow
leaves early, dragging my migraine behind it like a child.

Somewhere, a siren cries for a body to rescue. Somewhere
the forecast changes its mind. I touch my forehead

to the cool tile of time and wait for it to pass. My fingers ache
with barometric prophecy. I kneel. I split. I pour.

MY DEAF MONTH

GENEVIEVE BETTS

"How's your hearing?" My surgeon booms as he enters the check-up room. I think to myself, *What hearing?* but respond less grumpily, "I still can't really hear." One month earlier, my surgeon sliced into the back of my left ear, my only hearing ear, and removed a cholesteatoma, a tumor that grew behind my eardrum and made my already precarious hearing worse. I knew further hearing loss was a possible result of the surgery—I had to sign a Mount Everest amount of paperwork saying so—but if the tumor was going to continue to destroy my inner ear, erode all those horse- and iron work-related bones, what choice did I actually have?

* * *

Post-surgery, it makes sense that I can't hear well. My surgeon has jammed my ear with cotton plugs and surgical packing. The bandage cupping my ear resembles half of a white plastic bra wrapped around my head and looks like a drunken prank from a 1980s Brat Pack movie. And yet, when the day comes for my doctor to finally remove my bandages and all that packing—a day I have been awaiting with the anxiety and excitement of a patient lifting a hand mirror to a freshly unbandaged rhinoplasty—I still can't really hear. He seems doubtful that I am as deaf as I claim to be and attempts to assure me: "Your hearing will likely improve in the coming weeks. Give it some time."

* * *

As a professor, I wonder how I will continue teaching in my current state. The spring semester begins and I enter my first classroom, sweat already circling my armpits. "Let's go around the room and introduce ourselves," I say . . . or whisper . . . or shout. I desperately scan students' faces for a clue, but like the first day of every semester, their faces contain only the usual self-aware insecurity, dread of the unknown, and just general fear of speaking aloud. One by one, each student shares their name, pronouns, and something interesting about themselves. In lieu of hearing them, I am forced to read their lips. Did Angelique just say that she "enjoys mountain climbing" or "employs a ton of lima beans"? I understand their self-conscious brew of first-day emotions more than they know.

* * *

Before my next day of teaching, I receive a hearing aid for my right ear, an ear I have never heard out of before. My audiologist orders me the lobster of all hearing aids, and in fact, it comes in the color *champagne*, so I'm hopeful of the results. She fits it into my outer ear and then engages my ten-year-old son in conversation to test it out. "What did you do at school today?" I can kind of "hear" his answers. Sound enters my ear canal and taps against my previously useless ear drum, an ear drum I have always imagined as a tattered pirate flag—the hole where years ago, a cannonball tore through it, leaving the ragged edges fluttering in strong breezes. My brain is immediately confused. I tune in once again to hear my son joke, “I don’t know if I want my mom to hear again. She’ll catch me being bad.”

* * *

Three days later, I’m back at work and feeling like I will in fact be able to continue teaching, though I still struggle to hear my students and my hearing aid is rubbing a spot of my outer ear so raw it bleeds. I walk into the liberal arts office with something that vaguely resembles hope for the future when a colleague engages me in conversation. “Hey Genevieve! I talked to Trish about the grant and she’s . . .” Mid-sentence all sound stops. I look at his mouth and his lips are still moving. Did my hearing aid give out? Did something in my already-so-broken ear break all the way? But in lipreading, I can see that he is not making actual words. I ask a “What?” that I still regret and he takes this as his cue to laugh and say, “Just joking.” I spend the next week crafting a report to HR in my mind that I never send. Every time I play the moment back in my head, it more closely resembles one of the skits in the microaggressions video we are required to watch each semester. We become the plastic actors speaking lines meant to entertain that only make us groan.

* * *

The Association of Writers & Writing Programs conference in Kansas City is coming up. I have not gone before but have always planned to. The impetus this year is that my second collection of poetry has just come out and my press has a table at the bookfair. I register for the conference and email after email about accommodations deluge my inbox. “We are happy to offer CART services to ensure that you fully enjoy all AWP has to offer . . .” I google CART services and learn that it stands for Communication Access Realtime Translation, pore over the schedule, and just barely meet the deadline. I receive a response promising CART services for all the events on my schedule and get back to the important work of googling “best vegetarian BBQ in Kansas City.” Images of jackfruit swimming in a pool of tangy sauce swirl in my imagination.

* * *

Another follow-up with my surgeon. Again he asks how my hearing is and again I say not at all great. It’s impossible to ignore the very visible concern on his face. I have been coming to terms with the idea of my severe hearing loss as permanent, but this reaction seems to solidify the fact. “Let’s see what’s going on in there,” he says. As he roots around the terrain of my inner ear, I tell him that the ear drops he prescribed last visit have been making my hearing worse. He reaches a tool into my ear canal and hooks something in there that doesn’t want to budge. His continued tugs release pressure and cause a wet *thwack* to resound against my brain. Out comes an unnoticed-until-ear-drops-enlarged-it surgical sponge. It feels like he’s just pulled a wet pillowcase full of gravel out of my ear and lo, sound floods my once-hearing ear. The hearing isn’t perfect, but I can hear out of one ear again.

* * *

I arrive at AWP only a week later. I stand in front of the ADA booth, hearing aid in—I promised my audiologist I would still wear it to keep the nerve alive—wondering if I should follow-up with CART services now that I have regained some of my hearing. I go for it. I’ve already gone through the trouble of setting it up, so why not? The people at the desk assure me that yes, CART services are available, and no, I don’t need to do anything else, but oddly, the events I attend do not seem to have any kind of accommodations. Because I can hear for the most part, I don’t worry too much about it, that is until I’m sitting in front of a woman eating chips. Every time she reaches into the bag of Ruffles, my hearing aid crackles. Each crunch of crispy potato chip is a clap of lightning. I struggle to hear a woman on the panel speak. “It’s . . . *crack* . . . to uplift queer voices in the . . . *crack* . . . world and classroom . . .” I email the accessibility organizers again on the spot, typing “I’m confused. We’re two days into the conference and I was told there would be accommodations . . .”

Three days later, I’m back at work and feeling like I will in fact be able to continue teaching, though I still struggle to hear my students . . .

* * *

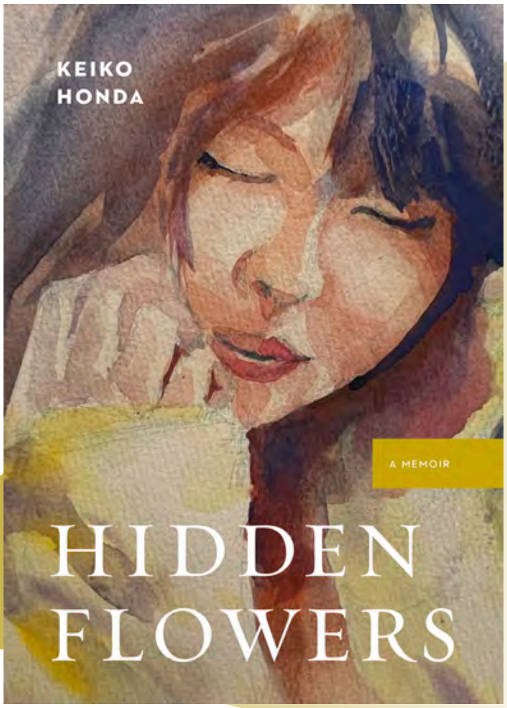
It’s the last day of the conference. I wake up to the following email: “CART and ASL services are only available upon request. Due to limited resources in the area, the conference is unable to provide those services for all events where they might not be needed. If you would like these services during the final day and they are still available, please stop by the ADA help desk. We do ask folks to request these in advance if possible, so we can't guarantee that day-of requests can be accommodated.” Humorously, it is connected to the long email thread where I had made all of my requests for services in advance. Fury wells up inside of me, but I simply respond, “I did request them ahead of time, was assured they’d be at all my events, and did check in at the ADA help desk. I’m not sure what else I could have possibly done.” Post-shower, there is no immediate response. I sigh and head downstairs for a mediocre hotel breakfast of microwaved egg pucks and coffee so weak it might be decaf.

* * *

I visit the ADA table yet again. The same woman is here, and oddly, it not only appears that she recognizes me, she lets out a friendly, “Genevieve!” Has she been expecting me to come back this whole time? I’m mad, but on what my husband laughingly calls my “best behavior.” I tell her about the email I received this morning. She says, “Unfortunately, we have some people answering that email that don’t know what they’re doing.” Cool. My fury builds again, but again, I keep calm. She eagerly hands me a color-coded schedule, a teal Post-it note with my name in thick black permanent marker stuck to the front, that offers me instructions on how to access CART services. Is this what was supposed to happen on day one? From this point on, I can read what presenters are saying on my phone. It’s an effective solution, one that’s better for note-taking purposes for sure, though my fellow attendees seem to think I’m playing Wordle instead of listening and occasionally shoot me dirty looks.

* * *

Two days later, I’m finally back home, thoughts of barbecue jackfruit still on my mind. I reflect on my temporary deafness. Of course my hearing is still terrible, but with some of it returning to me like a kite just broken enough to never fly the same way again, who am I to complain? I nudge my hearing aid in discomfort and think back to that feeling of acceptance I came close to attaining. I know it will come in handy for the future, when I will most likely go completely and permanently deaf. I know now that I will be able to face it, that in fact, I’m actually more prepared for it. In the meantime, however, I will half-smile and shrug when I walk down the sidewalk with my husband and he asks, “What side should I be on?” I will laugh inwardly when a colleague asks if I always wear my long hair down to hide my hearing aid and wonder if the way that question makes me feel, that I should be ashamed of having a hearing aid, is a microaggression. At my desk, I log in for work and open that ridiculous HR video, vowing to pay closer attention this time.♦



Editor's note:

Keiko Honda is a Japanese-Canadian mother, scientist, writer, community organizer, and painter who holds a Ph.D. in international community health from New York University. Her life took a sudden turn when she contracted a rare autoimmune disease at forty years old and soon required the use of a wheelchair. After the diagnosis, she decided to focus on building community, artistic expression, and self-discovery. Honda moved to Vancouver in 2009 and began hosting artist salons. In 2014 she was awarded the City of Vancouver Remarkable Women Award. She went on to become the founder of the Vancouver Arts Colloquium Society which encourages community members to make art and provides them with opportunities to create, mentored by professional artists, thereby building community where everyone can be a co-creator. She received the King Charles III Coronation Medal in 2025, which recognized her commitment to the Vancouver area. Her new memoir Hidden Flowers (Heritage House, 2025) is available now and is a follow up to her debut memoir Accidental Blooms (Caitlin Press, 2023).

As an artist, she embraces many forms of creative expression. In her new memoir, vignettes are woven with images of her artwork giving an added dimension to the evolution of this woman. We hope you will enjoy these excerpts from her book, as well as some images of her artwork as we highlight a few of the ways she shares her artistry. - SP

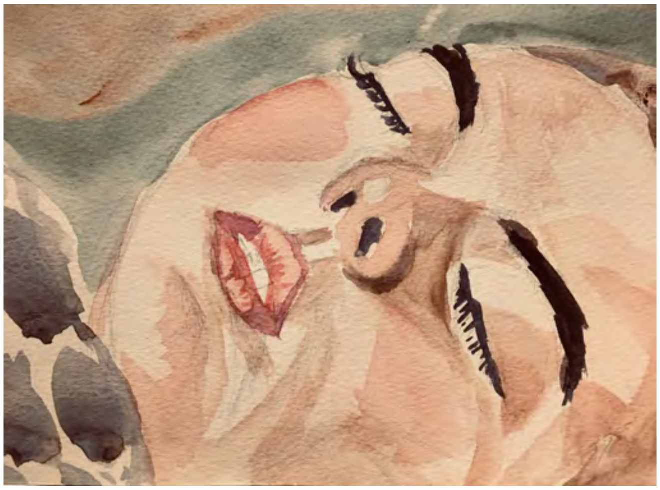
HIDDEN FLOWERS

KEIKO HONDA

On August 29, 2023, I find myself on a journey to Toronto, accompanying Maya as she launches her university adventure. It has been fourteen years since we first arrived in Vancouver from New York, when Maya was just a four-year-old child. And though I have never been to Toronto, returning to the East Coast evokes nostalgic feelings. I gaze out of the porthole window, pressing my face gently against the glass at the world below, but all I can see are thousands of mountain peaks and ridges. The majestic white clouds drift across the vast horizon, and as I watch them, I am filled with wonder at the limitless possibilities that lie ahead for Maya.

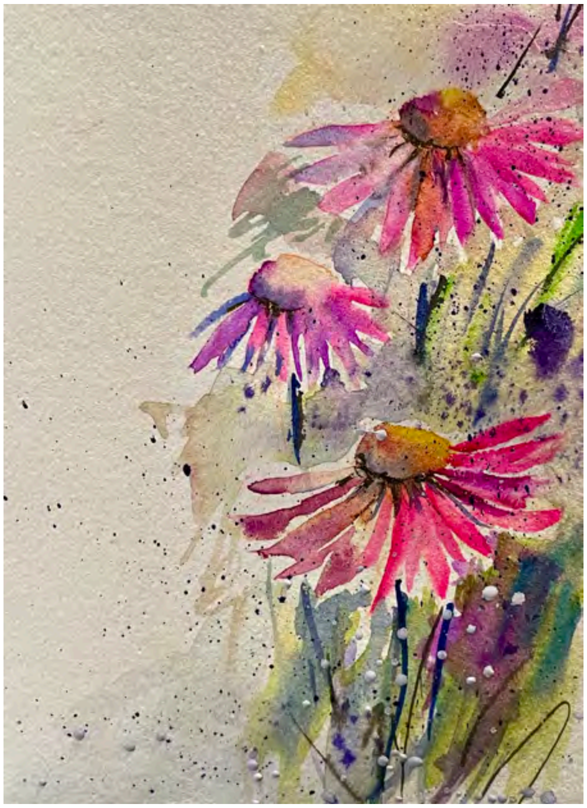
It is a red-eye flight, and Maya drifts off to sleep beside me, wrapped snugly in the airline blanket. When is the last time I have seen her sleeping so peacefully so close to me? As she sleeps, the years seem to melt away, and I see the infant she once was. As I gaze at her serene and innocent face, I long to freeze this tender moment. I grab my travel journal and start sketching her sleeping form, trying to capture the charm of her distinctive button nose and long, elegant eyelashes. As I sketch, my love for her surges, a powerful current connecting me to the child she once was, and to the woman she will become. Suddenly, Pumpkin, my faithful feline companion, left at home, crosses my mind. I miss her dearly. Yet, knowing my neighbor is checking on her daily brings a sense of comfort. Somehow, I feel Pumpkin is rooting for me on this important mission.

Glancing at the airplane monitor, I see we still have another three hours to go. I am determined to hit the ground running upon landing in Toronto, and so I opt to grab some rest. I wake to the gentle clinking of dishes and the murmur of voices. The flight attendant is distributing menus and oshibori—those wonderfully refreshing, hot, moist towels, a thoughtful touch borrowed from Japanese tradition. Kudos to Air Canada! For breakfast, I choose a cheese omelet and fruit salad; Maya orders the pancakes with fresh cream and berries. Despite the early hour, we are hungry.



Keiko Honda, *She is Still the Same*, 2020, watercolor, 11” x 8”

No matter how old she becomes, her sleeping face will always remind me of her babyhood. I could gaze at it forever. I remember how, when I was a teenager, my mother said the same thing about me. Only a mother truly understands.



Keiko Honda, *Awaiting the White Dew*, 2023, watercolor, 4” x 6”

September, and the echinacea still thrives in my front yard, a vibrant splash of pink until the first frost claims its beauty.

* * *

After breakfast, I continue to doodle in my journal; but this time, I begin listing ideas for my next project—perhaps a sequel to my debut memoir.

I write at the top of the page: Developing my Mind by Connecting the Dots. And then I jot down:
- empty nest
- aching body, 55 years old
- seeking hope
- transitioning from personal to collective success
- what I find inspiring
- the greeting of: “Hello, Toronto!”
- grieving my beloved late uncle, Tetsuro
- new and unknown relationships
- to date or not to date
- generational divides
- silent connections
- the writer as an identity

For a moment, I imagine observing myself from above. Here I sit on a plane bound for an unfamiliar destination, where a too-brief goodbye will mark the beginning of the post-Maya era—now a blank canvas. I am cultivating hope and energy within myself and using my journal as a guide. Perhaps it is my way of grappling with the impending sorrow, or perhaps a way of fending off the waves of change that are sure to come. I recall a Buddhist monk on YouTube saying that we are continuously born and reborn with each passing moment. That, I believe is the essence of it—life as a constant unfolding, a perpetual cycle of change and renewal. The ever-changing shapes of the clouds outside my porthole seem to mirror my own fleeting thoughts.

I close my journal and stow it, preparing to descend and to immerse myself in Toronto.

* * *

I’m getting ready to teach Social Artistry through Co-creation at SFU 55+ for the fourth time, and this makes me think back on how far I’ve come. The previous term had been a turning point for me; I had poured all my energy and passion into the sessions and had finally begun to understand what applied learning is all about. Now, while reviewing and updating the teaching materials, I constantly consider the students' perspectives. My own evolving inquires, often quite personal, and my broadening interests encourage me to explore the subject matter more comprehensively.

* * *

In studying co-creation, some key questions inevitably arise: How can we nurture recognition of individual creativity

Keiko Honda, *Untitled,* 2021, watercolor, 8" x 11"
(Not included in *Hidden Flowers*.)

while still fostering collective synergy and avoiding harmful dynamics? How can we create a space that encourages both freedom of expression and respectful dialogue, nurturing trust and unity among participants? These questions deal with issues such as the pressure to conform, the erosion of personal agency, and the emergence of cynicism, withdrawal, and confusion. They are more challenging if our experience of co-creation is limited.

* * *

On a quiet autumn afternoon after Maya's departure, I welcome the solitude of my empty house. I keenly observe the movements of my body: my weary eyes, my stiff neck, my resilient shoulders, my atrophied spinal muscles, my still flexible pelvis, and my chilly toes. I am struck by my body's smooth, almost choreographed movements, like a Calder mobile that floats and turns with the slightest touch.

What will I explore in this new phase? Will I continue to blossom? As I sit, a stillness creeps in, a warning against stagnation. I must embrace movement. I dance with time, resisting and accepting. I chase fleeting moments through writing; yet time won't wait; it is indifferent to my desires. The elusive key, I suspect, lies in the delicate art of balancing these opposing forces within me.

Lately, I've been experiencing persistent tension, mostly concentrated in my back. I see this as a warning sign that I am falling back into workaholic patterns and ignoring my body's signals.

* * *

In the past I've experimented with various adaptive exercise options, such as enrolling in online wheelchair yoga and stretching classes and visiting the iCord gym, a facility dedicated to advancing research on exercise and physical activity for people with spinal cord injuries. However, the only endeavor that has endured is my use of a standing desk at home, and even this I only use a few times a week.

Keiko Honda, *Untitled,* 2022, watercolor, 4" x 6"
(Not included in *Hidden Flowers*.)

I realize I need to find my own wheelchair dance. At home, I begin with simple movements, gently swaying my torso, grounding myself in the moment. Slowly, I'm adding more movements—a twist of the shoulders, a lift of an arm. It's becoming more than just movement; it's becoming my dance.

* * *

I reflect on the insights I gained from my interactions with both Maya and Micah [her boyfriend] this winter. Despite the differences in the dynamics of these two significant relationships, a fundamental value resonates strongly: trust, and the simple joy of placing that trust. What more could I ask for on New Year's Day?

The next day, Maya and Micah join me for dinner. I organize an experiment for them. I aim to evoke the surprising joy of co-creation in these young lovebirds. My maternal instinct spurs me to give them a space to relax and to engage something new. After a lively meal, we migrate to a room I've prepared with a large blank canvas, acrylic paints, and


Keiko Honda, *Awaiting*, 2024, watercolor, 12” x 9”


Keiko Honda Photo credit: Anton Fernando

On my desk, a scatter of paint tubes lies in wait, anticipating the touch of my brushes. They seem almost eager. I imagine them whispering to each other, "When will she begin?"

brushes. We brainstorm a theme for the new year. Micah, being a native Chinese, shares a proverb that translates to: “Dispel the clouds and see the sun.”

We all appreciate his insight, envisioning the sun as a symbol of truth and clarity for the year ahead. Their idea is to draw the sun at the center and freely explore with colors. I play Maya’s favorite background music—Studio Ghibli’s piano tunes—and quietly observe the magic unfolding. I savor each moment as, for the first time, these two bright university students collaborate in a visual medium, sharing their thoughts and emotions through art.

I watch them submerge in the moment, and I happily note the sparkle in Maya’s eyes. She is still my child, of course, but she has also blossomed into a beautiful woman. After some painterly progress, I suggest they switch positions, each to continue the other’s painting: “Try harmonizing your collaborative work despite your distinct styles!” This poses the question I have often pondered in my own work: How can I authentically express myself while embracing the authenticity of others?

I observe their brushstrokes more attentively. Maya’s strokes morph to emulate his style and she continues in the empty spaces of his painting. Meanwhile, by looking from different angles, Micah inflects the given shapes, then truncates his strokes to dots, blending multiple colors in a new technique, superimposing them over Maya’s compositions. Their approaches are distinctly different. “Oh no! Please don’t change my clouds!” Maya exclaims, worried he might paint over them entirely. He reassures her he won’t. His dotted strokes render a three-dimensional effect with vibrant colors, maintaining the exact shape of Maya’s clouds. Maya is surprised. “Wow! I like it!”

I experience a revelation as I witness their unexpected and beautiful co-creation: they value not just the outcome but the process. As they swap positions to continue each other’s paintings, I observe how their attentiveness heightens. This reaffirms my belief that effective community co-creation demands careful observation and an openness to other perspectives, factors that aren’t as apparent when people work individually.

After completing their artwork, they sign their names, write the Chinese proverb that provided the work, then date it. We hang the work in my entrance hall. The radiant yellow sun now graces my view, serving as a reminder of precious memories and New Year’s resolutions.◆

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TO BE SEEN

SARAH RALSTON

The world is bright and full of color that I cannot see, for I am all but a shadow. There is noise and laughter and faces full of smiles. I watch it all from afar, my stomach full of moths.

I take a tentative step toward a particularly fun-looking group, hoping to join in. But unlike their blue skies and sunshine, my world is dark and gray, and it follows my every move. The cheerful faces turn sour as I draw near, and they scatter once they notice me coming, my darkness scaring them all away.

Sometimes, I like to make the shadows dance and try to tell stories using the blank walls as my notepad. Occasionally, children will clap or laugh while their parents quickly usher them away with deep frowns and wary eyes. Their departure makes the sky rumble, and tears drop one by one onto the ground, the air turning cold.

Nobody likes it when I'm loud. They don't like the thump, thump, thumps along their stairs or the roar of thunder in their ears. Some complain of headaches, while others quake under their bedcovers, a torch in hand to repel my darkness.

I didn't even know I was being loud! I want to tell them, but I'm not sure anyone would listen if I did.

I get scared and angry, too, I want to yell.

But because the way I express myself is not the same way everyone else does, I am "scary" or a "troublemaker."

Sometimes, I get so happy that I want to spin, and the wind spins with me. Or I get so angry that the doors slam and the windows break.

And instead of kindness or sympathy, people cry, run, and scream.

But then the sun will smile, and my moon will shine with it. I dance, sing, and race to embrace the sun, basking in its warmth. Instead of joining in on my fun, however, the people below grow furious as the day transforms into night.

Wanting desperately to be like them, I stick some stars to the blackness surrounding me, hoping to shine like the rest.

Sadly, it doesn't last, and the stars fall. People make wishes on their dying embers, shutting their eyes tight as they put all their hopes and dreams into those tiny little lights.

No one notices me.

Why would they? I am invisible—just another shadow on the wall.

I go home, carrying with me the tears of the clouds above.

I watch the bright, happy faces and bustling traffic as the long days become cozy nights. My darkness grows as I pass through the crowds, quiet as the soft breeze drifting through the too-green trees.

Living among the birds, plants, and sunshine, I walk along the shadowy path, alone and watching.

Always watching.

I am simply an observer in this chaotic zoo of odd behaviors and strange mating rituals that I can never seem to get quite right, no matter how much I study or practice. I watch this rainbow of colors integrate so seamlessly while rushing past my shadowy figure, as though I am something to fear and ignore.

All of them are enveloped in some complex game I have never had the pleasure of being a part of. Everyone has a part to play, and mine must be to watch. To watch and learn and wait, wait for my darkness to fade and my colors to appear.

Yet it never fades, for I am the dark, and they the light. Both live together under the same sky but never align. They never speak, never touch, lest it anger the people.

Why?

Why? Why?

I tell my stories, and I share their emotions. I even manage not to get too close so they don't catch a chill.

It is as I wallow that I catch sight of someone, someone different from the rest. They are all alone, standing on a bridge, a flicker of stardust in their heart. They, too, are dark and filled with shadow.

Curious, I make my way over and unlike all the others, this person doesn't scream or shout or try to run away.

No.

No, this person looks up and smiles through salty tears.

Their stardust glows a little brighter at my presence before dimming once more.

My heart catches in my throat, and slowly, so slowly, I reach out to take their hand.

Dark and dark envelop and the sputtering of stardust slides from their heart, traveling down their arm to intertwine with our clasped hands.

There is a flash like lightning, and I close my eyes. Suddenly, I am engulfed in a warmth I have only ever dreamed of.

Alight with hope, I open my eyes to find myself wrapped up in one of the tightest embraces I have ever felt.

Carefully, I pull us both from the ledge and onto safer ground. The stranger is no longer a shadow; they are sparkling and bright as the sun.

They thank me and take a step back. It is then I notice that my sky is no longer dark and gray as it has always been but full of color. Looking down, I gasp to see that my hands, too, are sparkling.

The stranger takes my hand in theirs. "Thank you for seeing me," they say, voice thick with unshed tears. "I didn't think anyone could."

I nod and give their hand a gentle squeeze. "I thought the same," I say, my voice soft as silk. "But maybe we were looking for the wrong people. Maybe we should have been looking for other shadows instead of trying to join the sun."

The stranger appears thoughtful for a moment and hums. "Now we can be both," they say, drying their tears.

Beaming, we head for the road, talking all the way. And my heart bursts open at the feeling of being seen, heard, and understood as something other than just another shadow, another blemish on an otherwise perfectly blue day.

Together, we walk as neither shadow nor light but something in between—something all our own. We are no longer cast out to observe and learn to be a color we are not. Instead, we revel in sharing our newfound starlight with other shadows, watching in delight as their darkness fades and their stardust booms.

The others may not understand or accept why we stand a little too close to one another or share our stories through shadows, but we understand and accept each other, and for us, that is all that matters.♦

DON'T BE EMBARRASSED

MARC LITTMAN

My adult son, who has autism, embarrasses me. Sid talks to everyone in public though I tell him please wait until someone first talks to you then explain you have autism before you start peppering strangers with questions about how many siblings they have. I cringed when Sid intruded on a gruff senior absently munching a burger at a hamburger joint and asked him about his day. I apologized and started leading Sid away, but the old man beckoned us to sit. “It’s been two days since anyone said a word to me. Thought I had turned into a ghost.”♦

WHERE ARE MY FEET?

MARY ANN MCSWEENY

Judy's son didn't want a wake or funeral, so she's celebrating his life, beginning to end, without a body, without ashes. She wants some kind of ceremony, and his kids—her grandchildren—need one too. For these first days after his death, feisty, warmhearted Judy, a friend from a support group I've attended for ten years, is focused on knowing her son's not suffering any more. That's worth celebrating.

Judy's best friend Bea, another support group steady, a woman of deliberate speech who seems comfortable in her aging body, does the phone invitations. "The memorial is next Wednesday, five to nine at the Grove," she says.

"Of course I'll come," I answer. "Thank you for letting me know."

It won't be too much. The Grove Restaurant isn't far. A friend once took me to the all-you-can-eat brunch there, a complete waste of money because my stomach shrivels to the size of a pine nut when I eat in public. A ten-minute drive. Finish work, have a snack, change my clothes. Show up a little after five, express my condolences, give Judy a chance to tell me whatever she needs to. Listening is my service to the bereaved, and there are lots of them, family, friends, random people I meet on one of my short neighborhood walks or when I dare to go to the grocery store, people talk and I listen, let them tell me all the details that have turned their regular day-to-day life into a tragedy, over and over if they need to. It takes all the prayer in me to hear them, to stay in the moment, to remember the details so that I really understand at least a tiny bit of what they're suffering, these sisters and brothers who walk the messy human path with me.

And then I'll leave my sympathy card for Judy and come home by six o'clock at the latest. Maybe take a walk after. Maybe up to the chapel. And maybe fall asleep when I go to bed.

Bea calls again the next day. "It's a dinner. Judy's having a dinner, and she needs to know how many people are coming."

"Ohh." Now I'm racing back and forth inside that head of mine. *The food, what kind of food, make a decision, she's waiting. Eat with all those people? No, no, I can't . . . Where are my feet, where are my feet, where are my feet?*

"How generous," I say, "but I won't stay for dinner. I hadn't planned to stay for the whole time anyway."

"Me, either," she confides.

There are people who do, though. They come at the beginning of a wake or visitation, and they find a seat and they stay. They show up for each other, a solid, comforting presence, a reminder that no one has to be alone with death, and grief, and loss.

Once I did that for a friend. It was a beautiful June day and I sat on a chair in an arctic, air-conditioned viewing parlor that smelled like flower-saturated death. For two hours I watched my friend greet people I didn't know, and even some *she* didn't know. I sat like I was glued to that plastic padded chair, my arms crossed over my chest to keep me warm and safe, my legs curled around each other to hide my blue toes and goose bumps. When there was a lull in visitors, she'd come over and I'd be there, and she'd tell me the stories she'd heard about her irrecoverable, alcoholic father. Generous things, surprisingly kind things he'd done that she had never known about, and how his hopeless example—in and out of rehab, never able to maintain sobriety—inspired a number of people to join Alcoholics Anonymous. I had never met her father except that one time when he was dying in the hospital, yellow against the white sheets, so all the stories were a surprise to me, and the AA stories got me thinking about how you matter, everyone matters, that you really do have a purpose, even when you're not well, even when people can't tell you're not well and judge you because of how you live.

A blue fine-tip Sharpie marks the calendar. *Judy. Grove. 5-9*. The blue stands out among the September birthdays I've starred in red. Its unwinking stare unnerves me, reminding me of an ordeal I have to face.

Wednesday arrives. There's no commute with my work-from-home job, so when I'm done at three o'clock, I make a snack—tea, cookies, and strawberries—and take up my book, a much-read Agatha Christie, *The Mystery of the Blue Train*, not one of her favorites, she said in her autobiography. But I love it because of its early twentieth century setting in the south of France, not far from where I lived when I managed to spend a year abroad during college. My favorite part is the end when Hercule Poirot talks about the train of life. He says to trust it because it is *le Bon Dieu* who is driving it. I cling to that image and hope God is driving this train I'm on.

From my closet, I pull out my silk skirt, the same skirt I wore at my father's funeral on a May day that was more like July. The skirt is almost gray, but has a tinge of purple, my father's favorite color, subdued but not too mournful. With it, I wear the same pale pink top, the same black sandals, and I carry the same black sweater I wore then. It was a good outfit that day—I didn't feel ugly or fat in it—so I figure it's all right to repeat it. No one who's going to be at this memorial was at his funeral. No one will know this is my hot-weather funeral outfit.

Having forgotten to buy a sympathy card, I have instead lit a candle for Judy's son and written out a card to let her know. There's a special book in my living room where I list the names of the people for whom I light candles and the dates I light them. Sometimes I put a note next to the name: "R.I.P.," or "complete healing," or "safe surgery." When I look back through the book, I can't always remember who the people are. When people I know or don't know tell me about some horrible thing that's going on in their life, I say, "I'll light a candle for you," and they look happier. It's a good prayer, I think, when I can let it go even to the point of forgetting who and what I prayed for.

I feel like the anchor line to my car is stretching a little too far and might fray to the point of snapping.

With the candle card safely tucked into my black leather shoulder bag, I drive to the Grove with its huge banquet hall addition. There's a parking space not too close to the door and not too far away, and I make sure the car is facing out, so I won't have to back up when I leave. A number of people from my support group drive up, and I'm relieved I won't have to walk in alone.

When I lock the car, I place my hand on its roof to reassure it I'll be back—and myself that it'll be waiting—and join the others, all women as it turns out. Everyone greets me pleasantly but not effusively. I immediately dim my smile's welcome. Maybe it's inappropriate to smile at a time like this. Or maybe they're stifled because they know it's really a funeral, not a gathering of friends, not a celebration at all. Maybe they're nervous because it's death and who ever really feels comfortable with death? I'm not even thinking about Judy's son, whom I never met, I'm thinking *I'm glad I'm not going in there alone* and *let's get going so I can go back home*. But they're slow, and finally I just start moving toward the door to the banquet hall, like the head cow leading the girls at milking time.

We trail into a foyer that's empty except for a big, shiny, wood veneer reception desk. It looks lonely but hopeful, like they're anticipating the placement of more furnishings as the addition pays for itself. The foyer narrows into an echoing tunnel of a corridor, which eventually takes a sharp left and disappears from view. There's no one to ask where to go, so we head in the direction of that bend in the corridor. It's cold in here and I shrug into my sweater as I walk. There are doors on the right, gaps in the wall like cave entrances. One leads to a bar. I peek in. There's a young woman bartender and one customer, a lanky man perched on a stool. He's in black and staring into the mirror behind the bar. I look away so he won't catch me intruding on what I assume is his mourning.

We take that sharp left turn and are out of sight of the entrance. When I look back, I see only the wall. I feel like the anchor line to my car is stretching a little too far and might fray to the point of snapping. I clutch my purse to my side.

The corridor leads to a wide area where a table holds urns for coffee and tea, a stack of china cups and saucers, spoons, white cloth napkins, milk, lemon, sugar, and pink and blue packets of sugar substitutes. There are murmurs of pleasure from the other women, but I am looking through glass double doors that lead to a more than spacious banquet room. The late afternoon sun streams through a wall of windows. Stepping through the doors, I stumble a bit from vertigo as I go from the dim hallway into that bright room.

A row of round tables runs the length of the wall to the right. Many of the seats are already filled with faces I know, familiar features but now blending into each other so that what I'm looking at is a single entity with multiple bodies, eyes, noses, and lips, some with crooked lipstick, some sipping from a cup.

Judy is at the far end of this crowd, dainty, brave, and elegant in a little black dress. She stands alone next to a display of photographs. I make my way to her. The women I came in with follow me. Some of the seated people speak, and I nod and smile, but I can't really hear them. My goal is to get to Judy.

Judy hugs me, hugs everyone in this new group of arrivals. We make a semi-circle around her and the photos. She assumes the role of lecturer and points out a picture of her son. He is burly and solid, not at all how I had pictured him, a casualty of relentless cancer. There are photos of her grandchildren, too. She explains who everyone is and relates anecdotes, like the one about the Guns N' Roses concert her son took his kids to before he became too sick to do anything. Although she sparkles with pleasure at our attention, she seems very brittle. I wonder when she will shatter—and if she will ever be whole again.

Everyone presses closer to see the photos, to exclaim and ask Judy for details. I'm getting edgy at being in this cluster of kindly women. I pull at my sweater. I feel like I'm growing. I melt away from them and look for a basket where I can leave my candle card. The long buffet table that runs almost the whole length of the window wall is covered with pristine white tablecloths, perfectly draped, pointed edges precisely overlapped. Chafing dishes are already in place. It's intimidating, this reminder of food I won't be eating, like I'm a fraud, a hit-and-run friend to the grieving.

There is no place on the table for a collection of sympathy cards.

Now I'm on a mission. I head back toward the coffee and tea table and am met by another group of friends coming in to pay their respects. "Hi, how are you? Good to see you," I say. But now they are the ones who have their sights set on Judy and no one stops to chat. Outside the double doors by the coffee and tea table, I look in vain for a designated place to deposit sympathy cards. I step back into the banquet room, catch my balance when the vertigo hits, and notice the room seems to have grown. The tables to my right are still filled with good-hearted people, but in front of me are acres and acres of empty tables.

One, two, three, four, five, six tables, and one, two, three, four rows, and eight, no, ten chairs at each, twenty-four times ten is two hundred forty and no one is sitting there. No one is sitting there. *No one is sitting there. No one is . . . Where are my feet, where are my feet, where are my feet?*

It's intimidating, this reminder of food I won't be eating, like I'm a fraud, a hit-and-run friend to the grieving.

A waitress is going into what must be a kitchen. I cross to the swinging door and wait, wait, wait. When she finally emerges, I accost her. "Excuse me, is there somewhere to leave a card?" I say. She gawks at me. "A sympathy card? People here have cards for Judy. Is there a basket or a table?"

She has been hooked into my mission, and I won't let her go until there is somewhere for me to leave that candle card. She pops back into the kitchen and comes out with a bread basket. "Is this OK?" she says.

"Is there a table to put it on?"

She looks around vaguely. "I don't know."

I stare at her.

"Let me ask." She heads out into the corridor, and I dog her footsteps. We go back down the hallway to the bar. The lanky man who had been looking in the mirror is gone. The waitress says to the bartender, "Is there a table we can use?"

"For cards," I say. I reach into my purse and pull out the candle card. It's a bit crumpled.

The bartender gestures at one of the tall tables dotting the room. They have small tops and must be for those who prefer to stand while they drink. "One of these?"

"Perfect," I approve.

The waitress lets out a tiny sigh of relief and puts the bread basket on one of the tables.

“We can’t leave it in here,” I say. “It has to be accessible. People have to know where it is.”

She exchanges a look with the bartender, who nods and then nods again to the door. The waitress picks up the table and basket and I follow her. She places them by the door of the bar and looks at me. I shake my head no. She carries them to the glass double doors and positions them across from the coffee and tea table. “Yes,” I say. “Yes, that’s perfect. Thank you so much.” She disappears while I place the creased candle card in the basket on the tabletop.

I reenter the banquet room, dip with the vertigo, practice custody of the eyes to keep myself safe from the undulating field of empty tables, and approach one of the populated tables.

Gracie pats the chair next to her. “Have a seat?”

I feel like I’ve started to swell again. “No, no, I found a place to put sympathy cards.”

Immediately the women at the table snap open their bags and pull out smooth ivory or white envelopes with neat inscriptions. “I’ll show you,” I say. Gracie and a couple of others gather up everyone’s cards and follow me. They slip the cards on top of my candle card, and then turn toward the coffee and tea. I stand stiff and slightly hunched, wondering how I can get out of there.

“Tea?” Gracie says to me.

“No, no, I told Bea I couldn’t stay for dinner.”

“Oh, really? It looks like there’s plenty.”

Now I feel like I’m swelling even more. “I have too many food allergies.”

“Not even a little salad?” She is so sweet and sincere, but I am taking on Hulk-like proportions.

“No, no, I can’t.”

“Well, will you stay for a while with us anyway?”

“I have to go,” I say. She looks at me, puzzled. We haven’t been there long at all.

I feel I owe her something for her kindness. “I’m not comfortable here.” It bursts out, and I have no idea how loud I am, but she nods and pats my arm, her eyes filled with absolving pity. She knows. She knows I am just a few minutes away from imploding, exploding, screaming, running in circles, gibbering. Here is too big. Here is too many people, too many tables, too many chairs, too many lemon wedges, and teaspoons, and packets of sugar, and pink and blue packets of sugar substitute.

Here is not home.

Turning, I go down the corridor. My silk skirt swishes back and forth, back and forth, slapping the calves of my legs. People are coming in. I acknowledge them but I move fast, past that shiny veneer desk and out into the baking parking lot. Remembering to look left and right, I walk double-time to my car. Inside, the snugness and silence of the little Toyota wrap around me. *Where are my feet . . . where are my feet . . . where are my feet?*

I stay there for a few more minutes and then start the car. After my usual prayer for safe driving, I click on the CD of Matthew’s gospel, and drive home listening to the Sermon on the Mount in Spanish: *Bienaventurados . . . Bienaventurados . . . Bienaventurados . . . Blessed are they . . . Blessed are they . . . Blessed are they . . .*◆

TARA LABOVICH

SAFETY PLAN

i have storybook dreamed
of this place for so long. now,
the plane is rumbling on the tarmac.

now, i am not traveling to ask the ocean
if i really want to die.

back then i thought someplace beautiful
could save me. perhaps it's true—
love sitting easier on the tongue

with water in the air. living coming
closer with roots in wet earth.
i have written this landscape already

in my dreams.
soon, the land will write me.
but now, i travel to ask

the redwoods: how much joy
is already written
in my bones?

KIRK LAWSON

WE WALK

I remember our shoulders brushed wispy pine needles
as we leapt over hemlock roots, moss tufts pointing the way.
Timpani of a felled oak, a woodpecker's percussive rhythm.
Harmonized sounds of the Saunderskill Creek as waters danced
down rock slides, beckoning us to journey onward.

Then your accident.
With our woods forever off-limits to you I lose my bearings.
Cannot or will not experience such wonder alone. Won't allow myself
to witness this natural raw power once shared hand-in-hand
as if through the lens of Ansel Adams, both of us so tiny, gob-smacked.

You nearly die—survive with disabling
loss of touch and sensation over most of your body.
Unable to walk and your wheelchair unable to navigate the woods
I choose to deny myself what is forever lost to you.
Can't feel pleasure where you have lost feeling.

Afraid I might turn to find you on hands and knees
to examine slime molds or dangle a jelly red newt as if to eat
inhale a torn wintergreen leaf's bright scent
study a Jack-in-the-Pulpit's green and pink champagne flute stem
to realize these are but trace shadows.

Yet you gently urge me to wander again, making it
not just okay, but important. I come to understand that
denial and abstinence are not measures of devotion.
Though our love grew thick in the forest, it has deepened beyond.
To overcome my fear of facing the woods, we adopt a dog.

Leo and I hike each day. He leaps and lurches, jars me into here
and now we watch, listen, and bring adventure back to you.
Photos capture essence, video adds dimension.
You recall the joy of being barefoot by the sauna to step on cool granite,
plunge naked into a stunning chill, reborn, as if yesterday.

I light up in your eyes, am warmed by your heart
as I recount and you re-live
and together we walk.

PLUM

GREGORY SMITH

I grew up in the Dark Ages for people with disabilities. We were often looked upon as second-class citizens, burdens to society. Hard to believe but, not so long ago, if families couldn't cope or were ashamed to have a child with a disability, they could send that child away to an "institution." It sounds preposterous now, but back in my day, it happened.

Even the grade school I attended was thought of as a "handicapped school" or a "school for crippled children." Nowadays such terms would be considered outdated, inappropriate, and patronizing. Back then, it was considered "normal" to call a person with a disability "crippled."

I spent the first eight years of my education in a special school for disabled children in nearby Norristown, Pennsylvania. Back in the '60s, they didn't integrate the physically challenged with able-bodied students. I attended a school which was accessible with ramps and everything on one floor. Most buildings everywhere else were far from accessible, with stairs a major obstacle to overcome. When I was growing up much of the world was not accessible to someone with a disability. The one place where I had freedom of mobility was school.

I rode to school each day by taxi with three other disabled kids in my area. There was Timmy, Donnie, and Sy, all with various challenges, all different ages and limitations. They were my best friends. An older jovial guy with white hair named Joe drove the cab every day and kept us laughing. I hardly knew my grandparents, so Joe was like my surrogate grandfather. He helped me in and out of the cab every morning and afternoon. It was a big deal that I trusted him to lift me. Only Dad or Mom ever lifted me until Joe came along.

Our daily cab ride consisted of noisy trips full of stories and laughter, a time to bond with friends who could relate to what it was like to have a disability. We had the same classes and tried to do the same recreational things as other kids. We had arguments but never teased each other about our differences. We could verbally spar about various subjects but we *never* mentioned disability. We didn't want others to judge us by the way we looked, so why should we judge each other?

Timmy was my closest friend. Tim was a little older than the rest of us. He had an infectious laugh, which ticked off the others. Tim was always happy, remarkable for a kid with a double whammy of cerebral palsy and epilepsy. It was a challenge for him to walk, shuffling along, braces on his legs, walking in a slow but steady sideways gait. He experienced unpredictable, violent seizures which could occur at any moment.

Donnie, on the other hand, was always sad, trying unsuccessfully to cope with his illness, annoyed by Tim's perpetual joy. Donnie was hard to understand because of his speech impediment, the result of his muscular dystrophy.

Sy didn't say much. The term "autism" didn't exist back then. People referred to Sy as "slow." Terrible how we were labeled. To us, we weren't different—the rest of the world was.

When he was angry (which was practically all the time), Donnie would pick a fight with someone in the cab, usually Sy. Timmy was there to break it up. They would argue about the most stupid things, like who was the better ball player, Mickey Mantle or Willie Mays. Our "discussions" sometimes led to loud shouting or even threats. It was all talk. Joe, the ultimate boss, would tell everyone to "calm down or else you'll have to walk to school!" (That wasn't going to happen.) Most of the time everyone would be back to normal by the time we reached school. And there was no ratting on each other once we got home. What happened in the cab, stayed in the cab. At home we were merely thought of as "handicapped kids." In the cab, we were like everyone else.

I had a crush on our pretty, red-haired, second-grade teacher until I found out (to my horror) that she was expecting a baby. I looked forward to school, more than most kids my age, because of my crush on Miss Bunning. She was so kind and sweet, with green eyes and long red hair. Being in "the family way" as we nicely called it back then, didn't really affect me until she left to have her baby. The substitute just wasn't Miss Bunning (who, to my double horror, shortly became a Mrs.). All was forgiven when she returned a few weeks later, and even brought the baby in to visit one day. We all agreed that the baby could stay and share our teacher with us.

My taxicab buddies ate lunch together. Lunch was a really big deal. Talking about what we had for lunch was almost as important as eating the actual food. If someone had carrot sticks or celery in their lunch, they were deemed the loser that day, and were either made fun of or sympathized with, depending on our mood.

"Geez, applesauce again!" Timmy would lament, checking his lunchbox.

"What the heck is wrong with your mother?" Donnie would lecture. "I've got my mom trained. So does Smith. He never has applesauce."

I had a Flintstones lunch box and thermos. Peanut butter and jelly or bologna sandwiches (with a dab of yellow mustard), with a pickle on the side, a Tastykake for dessert (usually chocolate cupcakes), and a small bag of Fritos—that was my daily lunch. My mom knew better than to sneak a piece of fruit in my lunch box, no matter how hard she tried.

It was a sign that someone had died when we wheeled into class and found flowers on a classmate's desk. We were used to our friends dying young. Saying so long to my school friends overnight or over the weekend wasn't like saying "See you tomorrow" or "See you Monday," because it was conceivable that we wouldn't see each other ever again. Other than this occasional sad occurrence, my early school days were not much out of the ordinary, considering the circumstances.

* * *

I met hundreds of kids during my eight years of attending school in person. There was one kid who stood out in my mind above all others. His name was Robert Garlick. I remember how he always wore suspenders; and he was *purple*.

I didn't know what the term "cyanosis" meant back then. His skin was a dark shade of purple, as if his entire body—fingers, arms, face, neck—was badly bruised. He had red hair, which seemed brighter because of his purple skin. His eyes seemed to glow.

Robert was just like any other kid our age. Sadly, the color of his skin was like a bullseye. This was the '60s, when minorities, especially African Americans, were desperately fighting for their rights, so we were aware of prejudice, to be singled out for the color of your skin. But discriminated against because you had *purple* skin was a new one on all of us.

Funny, we all had some sort of challenge in life. We knew what it was like to be stared at, to be made fun of, to feel different. Yet, many of my disabled classmates shunned Robert, merely because he looked so different. We knew the color of his skin was due to a physical disorder. We knew he couldn't help being purple just like we couldn't help being lame, or blind, or deaf, yet Robert had a tough time making friends.

Maybe it was the social worker in me, even way back then as an eight-year-old, but I hung with Robert a great deal. We ate lunch together, which was big for a kid with a disability. The socialization, being part of a group, to be accepted by your peers was pivotal to our self-esteem. Later in life I thought of Robert whenever I ate lunch alone at work, just because no one wanted to share a table with me.

I remember the first day of school in fifth grade and the first time I saw Robert. When the gorgeous Mrs.

Bunning asked the kids to introduce themselves in class that first day, everyone stared at Robert, who was sitting in the back row. We kept staring, even after Robert spoke. We couldn't believe it.

Instantly, even though I stared too, I felt bad. I didn't like it when people stared at me in public. I could only imagine how Robert felt. I felt ashamed, like I should know better.

In the lunchroom I saw Robert eating lunch alone at the end of the table. My heart went out to him. He looked so lonely, so sad, silently eating a sandwich, eyes down.

"Where are you going, Smith?" Donnie asked.

"I'm going to invite him to eat lunch with us," I replied, starting to wheel away.

"Oh, no . . . not the kid who looks like a plum!" Timmy said.

"It's bad enough we have to look at him in class," Donnie griped.

"Why don't you stop," I protested. "He can't help it."

"Maybe you can just stay down there with him," Donnie suggested.

"Maybe I will!" I answered defiantly. That was bold on my part, because we *always* ate lunch together as a group, and, to be honest, I was afraid of Donnie, especially his acid tongue.

I wheeled across the table from Robert, asking if I could eat lunch with him. I'll always remember the surprised look on his face. He couldn't say "yes" fast enough.

I was just as curious as anyone, so I couldn't help but ask why he was purple.

"I'm not positive myself," he said quietly. "They say it's something to do with my blood not having enough oxygen. You're awfully inquisitive. What are you, writing a book?"

Robert asked me this question in a sarcastic manner but, as naïve as I was, I gave him a straight answer: "Not just yet. I *do* want to be a writer someday."

Robert let out a little chuckle, amused by my innocence. "Maybe you'll write a story about me someday?" he joked. "What about you? Why are you in a chair?"

I told him about my bone problems. Our physical problems had nothing to do with our friendship. We never needed to talk about our afflictions again.

I was just as curious as anyone, so I couldn't help but ask why he was purple.

"You're alright, know that?" he said, in between bites of his turkey sandwich, "My name is Robert."

"Yeah, I know . . . from class," I replied, introducing myself. I thought how terrible it was for my buddies to refer to this kid as "Plum." He seemed like a good kid.

"I'm used to the names," Robert said, like he was reading my mind. "I don't mind. I've gotten used to the names and the stares."

I noticed Robert admiring my Flintstones lunch box and thermos. His sandwich was wrapped in wax paper, just like mine. But, instead of a lunch box, he carried his food in a brown paper bag. I could tell he felt kind of bad about that.

"Don't worry," I said, "it's what's on the inside that counts."

For a kid my age, that was pretty profound, although I didn't really think of it that way back then. It just came out that way.

* * *

From then on Robert was like a big brother to me at school. I never forgot his kindness and how happy he always was. He never complained or moaned "why me?" He was bigger than most kids in our class. Since I was the smallest, that arrangement seemed to work out fine. I was teased by Donnie in the cab every day on the way home from school about having lunch with "Plum" as he continued to call Robert. Man, if I didn't have brittle bones and could reach into the back seat I would've punched him in the face, disability or no disability. But there had to be a reason why Donnie was always cruel to others; poor kid just couldn't cope with his *own* sadness, so we cut him some slack.

Robert moved closer to my desk in class after Susie Turnbull, the girl who always wore butterscotch plaid skirts, complained that Donnie was cheating one day when we were taking a test. Susie was smart; Donnie admitted in the cab that he was looking at her answers. So, Robert moved up closer to the blackboard while Susie moved to the back row, away from Donnie.

Sometimes Robert would be on my kickball team during recess, but lunch was our time to talk. We never bought the food in the cafeteria: I tried it once and the rice pudding made me throw up at the table, while Robert always referred to the creamed chipped beef as "shoe leather," equivalent to dreaded hospital food, another topic we could both relate to.

I recall how happy I was when my parents met Robert, the friend I was always talking about at home. They attended a Christmas pageant we held at school. A few of my classmates were in the play, a few were in the musical part of the extravaganza, including yours truly. I did a duet with Robert, performing a medley of “Here Comes Santa Claus” and “Up on The Rooftop.” We weren’t bad; I remember the audience in our auditorium gave us a nice ovation. Robert sang his part like Elvis: snarling lips, swiveling hips and all.

* * *

Robert wasn’t in school the week before Christmas. I thought nothing of it. We missed school all the time because of one ailment or another. Donnie noticed me alone at the end of the table that week, but he never asked me to join them, and I felt funny about returning to their lunch group. Looking back on it, I couldn’t understand why I allowed such petty, stupid stuff to bother me. I just told myself that I would hold down the fort . . . or the end of the table . . . until Robert returned.

* * *

Christmas break always went too fast. Soon we were back at school, dragging ourselves out of the cab after a fun ride talking about what we got for Christmas. When I rolled into class that January morning, all chipper and happy, and saw the dreaded bouquet of flowers on Robert’s desk, I cried, right there in class.

Grade school taught me much more than arithmetic or spelling; it was my first experience with other children with disabilities outside of the hospital. It was my first experience making friends, a lasting example of some sort of normalcy in my life. Among hundreds of other kids with “special needs,” I didn’t feel out of place. We weren’t judged by our limitations; we were praised for our abilities. This felt “normal” to me, even among children who were deemed by society to be “crippled.”

Life in school was structured with outsiders who felt much like family. They were children and teachers who could relate, not only to the daily challenges we shared, but to the triumphs and joys of childhood. It struck me as ironic: we were thought of as “different” by the rest of the world, yet we thought of the rest of the world outside of school as “different.”

Those early years in school also were my first experience with death. It never got any easier after that. Knowing a classmate passed away, someone like Robert, someone we saw every day and got to know, someone we cared about, became almost casual because it happened so frequently. In time, that particular kid was usually forgotten. But because death touched our class so often during grade school, it matured us beyond our tender years. It could easily happen to any one of us. In that way, dying wasn’t as frightening or mysterious to us. Knowing death so well made us appreciate life even more.

* * *

That first day back Timmy asked if I wanted to join their group at lunch again. No hard feelings. Life was too short to hold a grudge. Even Donnie had a kind word. I opened my lunch box and took out the thermos. Chocolate milk, like usual. There was my bologna sandwich, with extra yellow mustard and the crust cut off the bread, just as I liked it. A dill pickle was wrapped separately. A pack of chocolate cupcakes and a small bag of Fritos completed my lunch.

Then I noticed another item under a stray napkin. I picked up the napkin and noticed the surprise: it was the most perfectly round and juicy purple plum I had ever seen.

“Fruit?” Donnie yelled. “Boy, your mother messed up again! You *never* bring fruit for lunch.”

“Thank you, Robert,” I whispered under my breath, my eyes moist with tears. “I won’t forget you either.”♦

The Blessing of Pain

Rachel Carrington

For close to twenty years I worked full time as a legal assistant. My days were filled with deadlines, last minute emergencies, and long hours. In my world, there was no slowing down because there simply wasn't time.

While working, I relished my weekends, and I crammed so much into forty-eight hours before the whirlwind started again. I thought I was living the American dream, but every muscle in my body stayed in knots. I battled panic attacks, unrelenting migraines, and realistic nightmares where I'd wake up in a sweat, wondering if I'd missed a deadline that would cripple a client's case.

There were days filled with anxiety over the outcome of a trial. Tendrils of fear clung to me after finalizing a case. I constantly worried that I might make a mistake. Still, I never considered another job or line of work.

Until I was involved in a car accident that left me in debilitating pain. That changed everything. It robbed me of some of my independence and took away what I considered my security blanket. I could no longer work full time, and the busyness of my days had dissipated into nothingness.

At first, I didn't know how I was going to survive. Without my job, I didn't know who I was. My identity was gone, and in its place was a disability I couldn't escape—a disability that became as much a part of me as my former career.

As days gave way to weeks, and I realized I was not going to be able to overcome the agony or will it away, I knew I had two choices. I could learn to live with it or continue to fight against it and be miserable. If I spent my time focused on what I'd lost and how my body was no longer my own, I don't know that I would have survived these last twenty-plus years.

Pain forced me to seek ways to distract myself from its unyielding clutches. Escape became my new full-time job, and once I let go of the arduous search for a cure that wasn't coming, I tackled it like a case heading for trial.

During my search, I discovered a love of painting, the joy of completing a jigsaw puzzle, and the laughs from watching classic comedies I never took the time to watch before. I wrote through the pain and prayed through it. I rediscovered my love of singing and the joy in something as simple as solving a crossword puzzle.

Because my physical activities were restricted, I took online classes, read more, and connected with my friends in a deeper way. Simply sitting on a porch swing at dusk sharing stories became something to look forward to. The slower pace revealed the world to me in ways I'd never seen when I was too busy living my life to appreciate it. The things I never had time for became the things I enjoyed the most.

Now, taking a picture of a bird outside my window brings as much pleasure as meeting a deadline. And laughing is as much medicine as the muscle relaxers I won't take. I don't sit in courtrooms anymore or worry about the next deadline.

Instead, I listen to music, read, contemplate the next story I'll write, and remember that life is still good. And because I know it can change in an instant, I don't take a minute for granted. I laugh every day. I create. I grow. I learn, but most of all, I live. I'm not sure if I would have learned these lessons any other way.♦

Elizabeth Iannaci

Second Sight

Listen. I don't know if the future is set
in stone. Intractable. Unrelenting,
moving forward inevitably. It may be
as immutable as the moon, who, despite

her inconstant face, is locked in the gravity
of her dance, in continual revolution,
unable to alter course. The dilemma is:
if you had a window to tomorrow's light

seen clearly (or even hazy) in a crystal ball,
would that dictate or hinder the direction
of your step? Could that harbinger
or warning of the yet-to-come, serve

as more than Mom's predictions:
If you marry him it won't last (it didn't).
You'll be sorry (I wasn't). Or the classic
You'll miss me when I'm gone (I do).

When I was 18, a stranger read
my cards—each heart, spade, club,
diamond pointing to a possible
by & by or unknown someone:

You are a money card, surrounded
by lots of money! though she never
foretold who the money would
belong to. She predicted, *Soon,*

you'll find a King, thereby crowning
every boy I met for a year. Arguably,
I did find a king. Or didn't. Go ahead,
look into a crystal ball. Perhaps

you'll only see upside-down images
of what's in the room, or glean
an inkling of whatever origami
animal the future may fold into.

PASSENGER

JOSHUA WALKER

I've never owned a key that fit an ignition.
But I've known cars the way people know footsteps,
the soft cough of an old exhaust,
the way a blinker clicks too fast,
the tires whispering up the driveway
just before they pull in.
Every ride I've ever had came with a sound I memorized
like a hymn I wasn't allowed to sing.
I wait on curbs.
Under flickering porch lights.
In break rooms with locked doors.
I always know the color of the car.
I never know the ETA.

When I was thirteen, I told my mom I wanted to drive.
She didn't say no.
She said, "Let's not worry about that yet."
She drove me to school every morning,
never once making me feel like cargo.
I think I became a poet in that passenger seat,
watching life roll past in pieces I couldn't touch.

At nineteen, a cousin offered me a car.
A green sedan, peeling paint, one good speaker.
"If you get your license in the next two years, it's yours."
I thanked her. I meant it.
I tried. God, I tried.
But the wheel felt like a weapon.
Merging into traffic was like walking into gunfire.
Once, I stalled out on a side street,
hands locked, lungs evaporated.
The car idled fine.
I did not.
She sold it two years later.
We never mentioned it again.

I've been to weddings, funerals, first dates, breakups—
always in the passenger seat.
Sometimes next to someone I loved.
Sometimes behind a Craigslist stranger
who smelled like cinnamon gum and desperation.
"You still don't drive?" they ask.
Always the same pause
like they're trying to decide if I'm irresponsible or tragic.
I smile.
"Just never got around to it."
That's the kind of lie that hurts less to hear.

Once, I missed a job interview because my ride's kid got sick.
I said I had an emergency.
They didn't ask questions.
I knew there wouldn't be a second chance.
I wasn't angry.
Just tired.
Like standing at the dock
watching the last boat slip off the horizon,
realizing you never even packed.

Sometimes I imagine driving.
Not the mechanics—not the turn signal or the blind spot.

Just the feeling:
hands steady on the wheel,
windows down,
some song I've chosen.
No one waiting.
No one watching.
No one making space.
I never stay in that daydream long.
Too bright. Too close to cruel.

The people I love—
God bless them—
they've never made me feel small.
They ask,
"Need a ride?"
and I say yes,
and the world moves again.
Within reason, I can get anywhere I need to be.
Even most places I want to be.
But I know what it costs.
I know the weight of being carried.

Last week, my sister picked me up from the dentist.
She didn't say much.
The sun was low.
The road hummed.
She glanced over once and said,
"You ever regret not trying again?"
I thought about lying.
I thought about saying I still might.
Instead, I looked out at the highway
and said,
"Sometimes.
But not today."

I've never driven.
But I've spent a lifetime watching the world pass
from the passenger side.
That has to count for something.◆

PARASITE

SYDNEY MELOCOWSKY

Synonyms. Likeness. Parallels. Patterns. I have a thing for sameness. For finding validity in connection. There is a saying that enforces the phenomenon: “strength in numbers.” If an action or behavior is unique to a single person, the word “unique” contains subtext: *weird*. If those actions and behaviors are shared among a group, the traits are no longer “unique” in that *special* sort of way, but valid. Like-minded beings gravitate toward each other and create a neurological enclave; a legitimate group in which unique traits are nullified by the commonality of them.

Common. Usual. *Normal*.

I have a thing for normal. For trying to define it, replicate it, contain it and sprinkle it over myself like fairy dust. A glittering, glistening bottle of pulverized magic that can transform me from a girl who falls to a girl who flies. I want to fly. I want to lift myself from my nest of bedsheets. I want to soar into public spaces like girls who drink in pubs or people who pull up their trousers and go to that new Thai place *for the fun of it*.

I want to want those things.

I want to live in a world where words and objects and sounds and dinner are one collective of vague, quiet experiences. No sounds of background conversation, frantic, like shrieking rats, clawing their way into the belly of my brain. To escape the crowdedness of a busy dining room, the only place the noises can go and be heard is in. Deeper.

All the whispers, laughter, and agony trapped in a restaurant at seven p.m. overlap in a cacophony of stimulation. They all vie for my focus. They all yearn for the padded walls of cerebral tissue where they can be absorbed and processed, where they can be safe.

I want to live without the nausea of a spinning street—the sun, shop lamps, window glass reflections, and uneven dimensions of stone tiles cracked under tourists’ feet. I swallow and the images sit in my stomach to churn, endlessly.

I’m tired of adopting precise language. It vilifies random sensations. It makes the abstract feel too real. Too close.

I use vocabulary to contain, organize, and process the unfamiliar—but I often overthink. I obsess over the way I feel. It makes me identify fatigue and dissociation as more nefarious things.

I notice too much. I fear too much.

I want to forget sensations the way strangers forget faces on the street. People can pass each other by and become amorphous.

What a wonderful thing, to be amorphous. Shapeless, vague, unstructured, uncontrolled. So unremarkable. It can be a privilege to be invisible, to be ordinary.

When I was younger, a preteen, I had a habit of twitching. And huffing. And blinking hard in beat-like intervals until a particular impulse was soothed and subsided. I couldn’t define exactly what the impulse was. I didn’t have the vocabulary to give it a body and legitimize it.

The sensation found shape under my skin and used my muscles as vessels to express itself. *Ticks*, my mother called these manifestations. Actually, she called them *tics*, but I was a kid and only had context for the vampiric creature with legs that kicked out from their victims. My tongue tangled around the parasitic term. I felt the leg of the letter "k" tickle the back of my throat. I imagined the word embedding itself somewhere dark inside me and multiplying. Real ticks, the arachnids, can't reproduce while on hosts. But mine could.

Every week, I developed a new repeated behavior. My dad called me "bunny rabbit" after he noticed one of them; I would scrunch my nose and twitch my left nostril like a rabbit detecting a smell.

"I don't call you that to embarrass you," he clarified, "it's cute." He took a step toward me from the side, put his arm around my shoulders, squeezed, then kissed the top of my head.

I didn't understand why he felt the need to bring up his name for me. I never even considered my actions as perceptible to other people. I especially never considered them embarrassing.

But I was wrong; people noticed. At least my mom did, and she suspected others might too. What was with all the semi-voluntary sounds and movements? When did her daughter develop these odd behaviors? Surely they could be conditioned out of existence.

Out of love and paranoia, my mom was determined to help me contain these tics.

"It's OK, Syd." She walked me over to the bathrooms in a quiet corner of the coffee shop, past the condiment area and trash can overflowing with balled-up napkins, and reassured me. "It just looks a little weird, but *you're* not *weird* and we can work on making the twitches go away together."

I hugged her and felt a heat in my stomach. It rose up my esophagus and caused my lips to tremble as it exited my body. I began to cry. I couldn't articulate why, but I felt a sort of shame then—someone else's shame.

I was always described in the adult world as a *pleasure*. I felt a sort of purpose in the praise. I wanted to keep it that way, to always make the people who knew more than me happy in my obedience. But now, without even intending to, I had faltered. I had done something *bad* without knowing how. I could only translate the tone of my mother's voice and the rigidness of her lips. The taut lines expressed a disappointment she couldn't speak.

No, that's not right—my mother was never disappointed with me. She was disappointed with herself.

She blamed herself for subjecting me and my quirks to a public eye, an eye whose judgment could harm me. I blamed myself for having *quirks* that she and that public entity deemed worthy of judgment. She and the adult world knew more than I did. I trusted her face when she saw me rhythmic blinking and articulated through an awkward mimic that my impulses were *unnatural*.

It did look unnatural, but, also, it looked unnatural on my mom's face because it was.

"Syd." Her voice grabbed me and thrust my body under the interrogation of a thousand imaginary stage lights beating down.

I didn't have to look up, see my mom's eyes mirroring my twitch to know I was failing. I had been caught. But I did look up. I always looked and studied her face imitating mine. On her, the movements felt exaggerated and wrought with artificial force. I wanted to look away, to stop my heart from twisting and clenching, and dissipate into the empty space that moved around us—beyond us. I wanted to become nothing.

Instead, my body felt itself taking up too much space.

The refrigerators lining the shop walls blurred into a flicker of white light behind me. An employee with a headset dropped utensils in a white paper bag. He called out a number that I only heard as a faint slur of syllables. A high-pitched ring whirred somewhere in my ears before permeating the shop. I looked down and counted three green tiles in a diagonal line to the door. My vision marbled and for a moment, I felt my senses forget themselves. Sound and sight spliced into one hazy sensation.

I met my mother's eyes. I watched her face transform and mimic mine. It was an appropriation of a skin under which invisible insects' wings beat. The undetectable creatures crawled, fluttering my eyelids and wrinkling my nose with their liveliness. I was wonderful and weird and ashamed.

My mom was never intentionally cruel. She was careful. Hypervigilant. She knew the particular privileges of adapting invisibility. She wore the bags under her eyes with discretion and remained mechanically productive in public.

She too had things that made her *tick*: un-ticked checklists, sudden changes in routine she didn't have time to accommodate, the fear of arriving at an appointment on time instead of early. She often had to leave the house when my time-blind sister had a work shift that day. Otherwise, every passing minute announced itself to my mother either by leaving her with something, a pair of unsteady hands, or by taking her patient and encouraging smile away. A loss of control was something she wore.

Luckily, my mother had a way of managing the every day in meticulously organized, mental compartments. She kept these thoughts and impulses hidden away behind agreeable nods and an affirmative attitude.

“Everything has a place,” she would always remind me.

Sometimes she was referencing the boxes of scarves she couldn’t find when her boyfriend would move them from the places she expected them to be. In these instances, the assertion that *everything has a place* ballooned with panic and frantic movements up and down flights of stairs in a desperate attempt to restore everything back where she believed it to belong.

Other times though, she imbued the words with a softer subtext.

She would lean in over the island in our kitchen, remove her glasses (always pushing them slightly farther away from the edge than they needed to be in case a pair of canine paws were to try and swipe them), and tell me how proud she was of me. So what, I thought *differently* than other girls my age? So did she and everything ended up fine. She would pause and add the exception of one of our dogs who was “definitely half-goat.” Then her words would dissolve into a chuckle and she’d move around the side of the island to embrace me.

“Be less.”
I felt the words and a room full of eyes penetrate my skin.

I wanted so badly for my place to be among the amorphous, invisible people: people who were able to live their lives and do so mostly unnoticed. I watched them, often without consciously doing so, almost on impulse. I studied the way they spoke. I replicated the feminine inflection of voices that bounced off countertops and engaged other, invisible people in idle conversation. Their words never hesitated or forgot their purpose. These people could think and blink and speak and connect with their world without premeditation. I mirrored their behaviors:

> Portray a degree of insincerity—sarcasm! No, wait, it’s nonchalance—when replying to an invitation to “go out,” because it’s no big deal and part of a weekly routine. I took note. Add sporadic verbal fillers when listening to someone tell a story to demonstrate interest and continued listening. Bonus tip: pair this with a nod and don’t forget to change facial expressions when their tone changes. Remember: don’t focus too much on the sound of these instructions that you don’t hear what the person is saying. Remember to ask them questions about themselves but if you forget, you’re not supposed to remember that you forgot—move on and remember that they aren’t thinking about the list of cues and unwritten rules you missed . . . they definitely aren’t and you’re definitely not still thinking about it in your car after.

I walked into public spaces with the private knowledge that I didn’t belong. Their native language was foreign to me and all I could do was contort my tongue and pretend to speak theirs. It didn’t matter who other people saw or what they heard when they spoke to me; I knew I was a fraud. Acting as though I wasn’t acting was *unnatural* for me, no matter how impulsive the need to do it felt.

When I was in my sophomore year of pursuing my bachelor’s degree, my professor gave me brilliant literary advice: “You never want your readers to feel confused.” She was right; confused readers become tired and lose interest. I didn’t portray anything but agreement then, but I bit my lip to keep it from trembling.

Why did I always have to be confused then? I didn’t ever ask and part of me knew I wasn’t supposed to. It wasn’t anyone’s job to accommodate me, especially when I didn’t have the vocabulary to name and legitimize my confusion. It just swirled in my body—an abstract, amorphous thing unrestricted by the confines of definition.

Each year, a new professor reaffirmed that woman’s statement in different words. My favorite was the reminder to “make your writing accessible.” *Accessible*. The word hissed at me. I tried rearranging its sounds in my head to immobilize it. Instead, excess letters fell away and the remainder addressed me: *b-e l-e-s-s*. “Be less.” I felt the words and a room full of eyes penetrate my skin. I remained in my chair, jaw tight and aching with a growing ball of something bitter filling my cheeks. I sat there, imagining myself bleeding out, the red and smell of rust staining the carpet. I imagined everyone remaining in their seats, just watching without expression, waiting for me to speak. I imagined my entrails uncoiling onto the desk and my professor bringing her pen to a page and reminding me, “put that back in,” without looking up from the ink.

There was always subtext no one else seemed able to read. It was legible to me though and coincidentally read as though addressed to me. With every new phrasing of the idea that my work needed to be less complicated, I developed a new way to hear that *I* was too complicated. That my narrative, the way in which I experienced the world and attempted to communicate it to an audience who might connect with me, was *weird*. Worse: it was *wrong*.

The best version of my writing was simplified. The best version of me was simplified. The best version of my writing was the writing I’d written after gauging how other people expected me to write. The best version of me wasn’t me at all.

These thoughts encircled me and turned the air around my head into something loud and noxious. I covered my ears with my hands and curled my chin toward my chest. I became as small as possible.

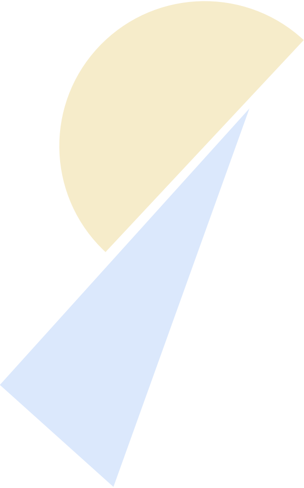
The acceptable version of me was a mask.♦

MAYA KLAUBER

FULL DISCLOSURE

“i like my body when it is with your body.
It is so quite new a thing. Muscles better
and nerves more” – e.e. cummings

But I’ve also hated my body when it’s beside
your perfect body—mountain range shoulders
spanning miles. Two sturdy legs that could carry
you anywhere. I wish I could feel your equal always,
but illness steals so much. Side effects of side effects
have me here with bald spots and bloat (a face that
doesn’t feel like my own), as you say: *nobody compares*.
How could they? Would you believe me if I said that
I’m finally starting to hear you? But try to understand
why it’s *quite so new a thing*—to be loved this
completely. *Muscles better and nerves more.*



RICHARD ERIC JOHNSON

LOSS OF HEARING A GAIN

It started after
big Nam explosion

grew through years
of what did you say

repeat again please
I cannot hear you

incredible lyrics
important metaphors

lost into sounds
melodic harmonious

I feel the music
write poetry

ORCHIDS BESIDE MY BATHTUB

KARA LAYMON

My mom bought me a bouquet of lilies when I got my period for the first time. I was in a lot of pain the whole week, but everyone said it couldn't actually be as bad as I made it sound. I took ibuprofen like chocolate, slept with a heating pad pressed against my body, and told myself that I was just getting used to the feeling of being a woman.

I didn't understand because none of my friends had symptoms like mine. They just got tired or really wanted to eat an entire buffet of food.

One time, while I was lying on the floor in a Walmart aisle, a lady squatted next to me. I couldn't get up. She asked what was wrong. I was too tired to make up a socially acceptable lie, "I'm on my period." I told her.

"Mine were that bad as a teenager and I can't have kids now. You should get that checked out."

I thought to myself that you shouldn't tell people things like that when they're already going through it, but I just nodded once. I wanted her to leave.

She knelt next to me, "Do you need me to call anyone?"

I shook my head.

We were in the flower aisle. She looked at one of the shelves that was full of orchids. "Those ones look like evil little faces." I could tell she was hesitant to leave me, but when I didn't respond she stood up and walked away.

It kept getting worse. By the time I was seventeen, I could barely sit, stand, or move during that time of the month without screaming in pain. "Cramping is normal," they said. Eventually, one doctor told me, "You might have endometriosis. It's not something we treat when you're young though."

I googled it. I might have a hard time having kids. It could get bad enough that I would have to have a hysterectomy. Then I couldn't have kids at all. I could die. Nobody seemed to take these things very seriously.

* * *

My best friend in my senior year of college was obsessed with daffodils. She wanted them in her graduation shoot. The afternoon before her photo session, she got home from work and I told her I had a surprise for her. We drove an hour to this field I'd found in a library book where she could pick wildflowers to her heart's content.

I was supposed to help her. That was my plan. Instead, I convinced her to go off on her own. We could cover more ground that way, I said. I spent thirty minutes on my knees throwing up into a patch of coneflowers. I hadn't even gotten my period yet, but I knew it must be about a week away. That's when the vomiting started.

I finally managed to clamber to my feet, chew a stick of gum, grab some flowers, and drive us home as if nothing happened.

* * *

I had three boyfriends before one of them bought me flowers. I married him. A week before our wedding we sat together on his couch eating leftover pizza.

“Are you sure you don’t mind that I can’t have kids?” I asked him.

“We’ve already talked about this, and you have a ring on your finger don’t you?”

I sighed. That didn’t feel like an answer to my question. “Yes, but wouldn’t you rather have someone who wasn’t messed up?”

“You don’t even know that you can’t have kids.”

“They told me it would be unlikely.”

“Unlikely doesn’t mean impossible.” He put his plate down and looked at me.

“You still haven’t answered my question,” I said.

“No, I don’t mind that you can’t have kids.”

I fidgeted with my bracelet. I didn’t say anything in response. I just kept thinking that he had to care. I had seen all of these videos on social media about how women are just supposed to have kids and when they can’t then they aren’t as deserving of love and stuff.

That’s a really stupid sentiment. I just expected people to have stupid sentiments I guess. I have some.

* * *

I sat in the grass with my pregnant sister-in-law making daisy flower crowns. I asked her if she thought it was cruel of me to try to have a child when the odds were higher that I’d miscarry because of my medical condition.

Her hands froze and one of the daisies slipped from her fingers.

“Sorry,” I said.

“No. It’s fine,” she sort of smiled at me and I noticed her hand move to her stomach. She took a deep breath, “I think you’d make a great mother, and no matter what you decide I’ll be here for you through it all.”

“Thanks,” I stared at the daisy that had fallen back to the ground.

* * *

The day I found out I was pregnant I came home from work to sunflower petals scattered across our front hallway. My husband stood there grinning.

I smiled back. “What’s this?”

“Sunflower petals—they symbolize happiness.”

I rolled my eyes. “Dork.” I couldn’t stop smiling.

We stayed up until one in the morning brainstorming names. I showed him how I had a list in my notes on my phone that I had been keeping since I was twelve. We laughed. Thank goodness I had not been responsible for naming a baby as a preteen.

“What about Emily if it’s a girl?” he asked while we were making dinner.

“I knew an Emily in middle school. She bullied me for years.”

“OK . . . so not Emily then.”

“What about Keagan if it’s a boy?” I said through a mouthful of toothpaste in the bathroom later.

“Absolutely not. Never going to happen.”

“I thought I really had something there!” I yelled over the sink water.

“Nope,” he responded, “Just nope.”

We went on like that for hours until we decided that we couldn’t name our baby when we hadn’t even seen the kid yet. We’d use pet names until we could see our baby’s little face. Our baby.

* * *

My ob-gyn’s name was Dr Lily. I had been seeing her for years, and to be honest, I wasn’t a huge fan, but there wasn’t much I could do about it. I asked her every single time I went in for a checkup if there was anything I needed to be worried about. She told me no each time.

“Are you sure though?” I’d ask.

“I’m sure. You’re pregnant. The hard part is over.” Then she’d laugh and look at the grotesque pictures on the walls depicting women giving birth. I didn’t laugh.

I drove home from each appointment clutching the reel of five black and white pictures of my baby between my hands and the steering wheel. I couldn’t put them down.

* * *

When I went into labor four weeks early I was put in a blue flowery hospital gown. I don’t remember anything from this part very well. I think I cried the whole time, and my husband started calling our little girl by a real name—not just peanut or squirt or baby.

* * *

“I brought you these,” my sister-in-law said when we got home. She handed me a pot of orchids.

“Oh thanks,” I took them from her.

“How are you feeling?” she looked at me oddly.

“I’m fine,” I said and smiled at her.

“Good . . . well, I guess we’ll get going then,” she replied. I hadn’t even noticed her husband and their two-year-old running around in our front yard.

* * *

The orchids sat beside my bathtub staring at me with their evil little faces. I wish I could remember who pointed that out to me the first time. I wondered if that person was as depressed as I am . . . if I even am depressed. Hopeless people tend to look at the world and see hopeless things. Evil faces in flowers are hopeless. That word barely makes sense—hopeless. I was not trying to say that I hope *less*, I was trying to say that I am without hope. Unhopeful perhaps. I didn’t have the energy to google whether that is a word or not.

Besides I might have dropped my phone into the water and then I would have to play that super obnoxious sound on YouTube that’s supposed to get liquid out. I don’t think that works, but the video has lots of likes. And if I just let it sit in the water—drowning—then I would have to buy a new phone. We don’t have the money for a new phone. I lost our last new thing and I still had to pay the whole hospital bill.

The flowers looked thirsty. They drooped and shriveled and did things that flowers typically do when they are in need of water. I am a bad mother to my plants. I never remember to do something as simple as dropping a couple of ice cubes into the soil.

The water I was sitting in had gone cold. They said I was anemic. I lost a lot of blood. It is conditional. It won’t last.

The orchids sat beside my bathtub staring at me with their evil little faces.

Five. That number started running around my head a lot. I’m not obsessive-compulsive. I don’t think I am. I never have been. I started getting those weird thoughts people talk about, but doesn’t everyone at some point? I manage it. Five. I counted in my head, and I wished that I sounded less crazy even to myself, but I didn’t. One. Two. Three. Four. Five.

You know that song that talks about walking 500 miles? That’s a nice song. I only know the one part though—the same part everyone knows. I wonder how that makes the artists feel? They have this super cool song they probably see as their baby but then everyone only sings one part and it’s just the catchy part that repeats over and over.

I had to be at work the next day for the first time in weeks. I had time off planned almost as soon as I found out I was pregnant. I usually have meetings on Mondays, but I can’t remember if they got moved to Wednesdays. I don’t want to check. If I miss it then at least now I have plausible deniability . . . sort of . . . or something.

The drain doesn’t close all the way so the bathtub is slowly emptying and every now and then I realize there’s a kind of loud gurgling sound as the water is trickling away but I’ve tuned it out. I wonder how many things like that we tune out.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. I. Am. Losing. My. Mind.

My husband knocks on the door to check on me. “Are you OK?”

I told him that I was. I heard him sigh. “I made you dinner.”

“Thanks,” I said.

We both knew I would not eat it.

I’m really a pretty “normal” person most of the time. It’s just the past bit I’d been like *this*. I used to be normal. I worked. I went to work every day, and I would go to work every day again. People would say “I’m sorry for your loss,” and I would follow the script. I would say, “Thank you. It’s getting easier.” It’s not like I have one of those debilitating illnesses where I can’t function anymore. It’s just that most days I came home and stared at my flowers while I was in the bathtub and let the water turn cold and drain out and the flowers made faces at me like they know I’m a bad mother to them too and I wondered if that means that there is really nothing to love in life at all but I know that isn’t true because there has to be something but what was supposed to be my something was not in the crib outside the door where she’s supposed to be.

* * *

The flowers by my daughter’s grave are her favorite color. At least, they were supposed to be. I held her for five minutes while the nurses hovered over me both waiting for her to die and trying to keep her alive. Her favorite color was blue. That was the first thing she saw. It was the color of my hospital gown.

It was the color I had painted her room. Everyone told me not to paint a little girl’s room blue because girls are supposed to be pink. It would confuse people. I told them she was my baby being born into my house and I would paint her room the color I wanted it to be.

Now they offer to come help me gather all the blue things and put them in storage. They think it would be easier for me if I didn’t have to walk by the blue room every day in the morning, but if they take all of her things away what will I have left of her?

I have to remember her. My brother tells me that’s my grief and guilt talking—that it’s OK to pack up her room and put her things away. He says I could even burn them if I needed to process more. He’s seen people do that in movies. I’ve seen people kill their brothers in the movies. I’ve seen people get to keep their babies in movies.

I bend down and replace the flowers. I do not cry. It is dark outside. I have just gotten off work. I used to be scared that someone would sneak up on me in the dark, tackle me, and kill me or something else like that.

Before I leave I brush the name engraved on the stone, *Hope*.◆

LITTLE BUDS

ANGELA KASUMOVA

A Japanese maple tree stands firmly in the snow-covered ground, its trunk surrounded by a circle of rocks. Solid branches reach outward and upward toward the cloudless blue sky. The bark is grayish-brown and smooth.

Some branches are thick and strong, unmoved by the winter wind. Other branches appear as if they are about to snap, thin twigs quivering, particularly the ones higher up. Crumpled remnants of last year's leaves speckle the thinnest branches.

Seven is too young to be suspended from school for an accident, you think as you drive—view obscured—to an 8:00 a.m. hearing at the principal's office. The windshield is checkered with snowflakes frozen to the glass. Slowly, they melt, little rivulets streaming downward.

"Is the goal to punish or support our child," you ask when the hearing wraps up.

"Both," the principal replies.

You know it isn't both, just as you know that a month from now little buds will appear on the Japanese maple.

Heading home, you remember all of the times you asked for support—for yourself, for your children—and never got it. You think of your sweet seven-year-old at home making a Pokémon stuffy using paper towels, markers, tape, and filling. You know you will remind him he is loved, that he is good. And just as the yellow finches will flutter between the freshly sprouted purple-red leaves in three months' time, he too will grow, roots firmly planted, toward who he is meant to be.♦

AUDIBLE ABSENCE

OLIVIA FREEL

His alarm doesn't ring; it rumbles. It was hard to accept after the countless restless mornings, but it was just my brother's way of waking up—a vibrating alarm clock pressed against his bed, rattling not only his mattress, but also the walls. It never actually wakes *him* up, but it does wake *me* up. Every morning, I groggily shake him while he blinks up at me like it's the first time he's ever read "good morning," on my lips.

For my brother, sound is often something he feels rather than hears, a presence that moves through his body in ways I can never truly understand. But in the spaces where sound fades—behind masks, in crowded hallways, under the weight of his long hair in an effort to conceal his hearing aids—he tries his best to navigate a world built for ears that don't need help listening. We don't realize how sound has the power to connect, to warn, to comfort—but its absence carves out a silence that isolates. A silence that turns every missed word into a barrier and every quiet moment into a world apart.

Without his hearing aids, all of the world and its aspects became a muffled blur. In crowded rooms, he focuses on mouths, trying to piece together words from their movement alone. But there are moments of escape when he plays his favorite rap songs, closing his eyes and letting the heavy bass flood through him—songs he feels more than hears. Still, the reminders of his differences are constant. He hates how his long hair had to double as a shield, hiding his hearing aids from those who couldn't help but wonder what they were. Even small things stung—like the way silence swallows him whole when he goes swimming, leaving him adrift in a world without sound. Or the way he hesitates before asking for spare batteries, his fingers curling around the dead ones in his pocket, afraid of being an inconvenience, of the sighs and eye rolls that made him wish he didn't have these concerns.

But nothing frustrates him more than conversations slipping away before he can catch them.

"*What?*" he'd ask for the third time, after missing a word or two trying to piece together what was being said.

"*Never mind*," they'd sigh, waving him off.

His least favorite phrase—*never mind*. A door slamming shut, like whatever was said wasn't worth the effort of repeating to *him*. It was a reminder that patience wears thin and people didn't want to build a bridge between their world and the isolation of his. He struggles asking people to speak up, to slow down, but what hurts is when they give up instead of understanding he didn't *want* to do this, to be this far behind in conversation and connection.

Sound has a way of making him feel both connected and cut off, present and apart.

His tiny orange battery stickers are everywhere—under the kitchen table, stuck to his sweatpants, even clinging to the bottom of my sock after a long day at school. Each one is proof of the quiet work behind his difficulty hearing, the adjustments and maintenance that most people never think about while simple conversations turn into complex puzzles for him.

We would fight about bringing his FM system to school, a little microphone clipped to the teacher's collar, transmitting their voice straight into his hearing aids. It was a spotlight that followed him in a silent room, setting him apart before he even had a chance to speak. Through his hearing aids, he'd hear their muffled sighs, the frustrated rattle of buttons, the low, annoyed muttering as they fumbled with static and settings and couldn't figure out how to work "the damn thing." It was supposed to help him, but instead, it just reminded him—and everyone else—that he needed help to do what everyone else didn't think twice about as his silence is heavier than our noise.

Sound is not only what we hear, but also what we choose to share. Silence can isolate him, a *never mind* can be heavier than any noise. To see how he holds on to those who keep him in the present rather than dismissing him from the conversation shows how the connections he forms are not through sound itself, but through a willingness to be heard. The lack of sound can be a bridge, but silence does not have to be a wall.♦

Dixie L. Partridge

INTO THIS DUSK

for A, still grieving
the loss of your daughter, by suicide

once more   go down to the river
where we've stood in all seasons

faint lappings   the sound of solace
blue herons nesting in reeds
like a healing

try for stillness

winged insects will stitch the surface
a silver tremor in twilight

the waters will be flat
over steep undertow
moving on   moving on swiftly
without seeming to

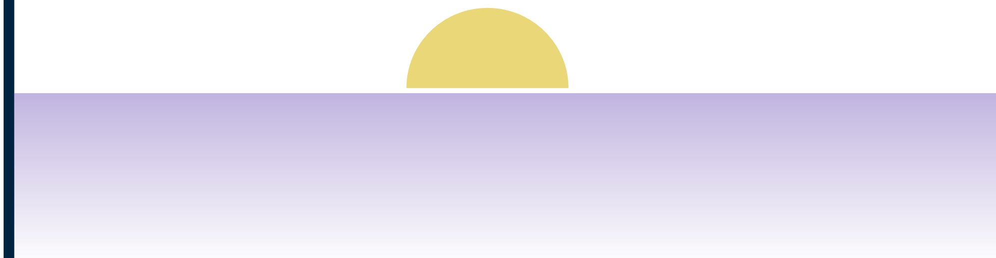
the familiar grammar of birds
soon will fall silent
to a deep sanctum of sky

the only sounds left will be bruised
and coming from inside you

stand and wait
as purpling waters let go
a last moan of light

let the rising halo moon
soften the dark

let evening come



SHANAN BALLAM

WALKING BAREFOOT AFTER THE STROKE

To regain function and feeling
I’m supposed to expose

myself to new sensations
and tell myself out loud

to remind my brain.
So I walk barefoot in the grass

and say: *cool grass, soft grass,*
prickly grass

as I concentrate
on not catching my toe.

I’m slow now—
so slow

I notice a tiny white moth dabbing
the lawn then dissolving.

Black medic dots the grass
with little yellow flowers.

I crush a mint leaf between
my fingers, inhale and say *pungent*.

I break off a few sharp spruce needles,
rub them, smell and say *spicy*.

Pale yellow willow leaves
litter the lawn

as I stand in the center
beneath the poplar that towers

over me, both of us washed
in rose-gold light.

DANAH SLADE

DEFYING PHYSIQUES

A tree so stooped over it’s almost on the ground,
we marvel at the artistry of it.

Though divert our attention,
from the people around us
who feel the pull of gravity;

ignore
their defying physiques—

the stories where
stillness
can be ever moving.

Shanan Ballam is the poet laureate for Logan City, Utah. She is the author of two full-length poetry collections: *Pretty Marrow* and *Inside the Animal: The Collected Red Riding Hood Poems*. Her work has recently appeared in *North American Review*, *Worthgathering*, and *Sugar House Review*. Ballam survived a massive stroke in January 2022 that paralyzed her entire right side and robbed her of speech. A speech therapist encouraged her to observe and describe her surroundings. "So I would go on walks outside and pay close attention to what I saw, record it in my journal, and transcribe it into a poem."

Jeanine Eyre Bee is a multi-genre writer fiction editor for *Wayfare* magazine. She lives in Highland, Utah, and received her B.A. in English from Brigham Young University. Her work has appeared in *Fourth Genre*, *Dialogue*, and *Inscape*, among others. She says, "writing helps me better understand myself and the world around me. And I love the feeling of creating something new in the world. I believe in the importance of community and that one of the best ways to build community is to tell and listen to stories."

Genevieve Betts lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and is an assistant professor at Santa Fe Community College. She earned her M.F.A. from Arizona State University and is the author of two poetry collections: *A New Kind of Tongue* (FlowerSong Press, 2023) and *An Unwalled City* (Prolific Press, 2015). Her work has appeared in *Dunes Review*, *Unleash Lit*, and *Black Lily*, among others. "Without my hearing aid my disability is invisible, and I can 'pass' as hearing, but with any visible indication of my hearing loss, those around me act differently." She writes because she wants to share her unique perspective with others.

Jake Cannington is a librarian and writer with an M.F.A. in creative writing from Wilkes University. He lives in Crofton, Maryland and his work has appeared in *Entrails* magazine and *River & South Review*, among others. Following a diagnosis of Crohn's disease he says, "I decided to write poetry and fiction to get more representation out there for people. The more people see chronic illnesses normalized in media the more they will understand our experiences."

Rachel Carrington is a freelance writer and published author living in Summerville, South Carolina. Her work has appeared in *Rooted in Rights* and *The New York Times*, and she has contributed to freelance writing websites—Writers Weekly and Funds for Writers. A spinal injury led her to look at the world differently and "to focus more on what I can do than what I can't do." She describes herself as "a child of God, writing instructor, video editor, and lover of coffee and all things creative."

Susan Duke of East Peoria, Illinois, is a retired teacher who "lives a fairly simple life" in the Midwest and is grateful for each day. She received her M.A. from Bradley University and her work has been published in *Mobius: The Journal of Social Change*, *Thema*, and *Last Line Literary Journal*, among others. Duke says, "I nourish my soul with the printed word by reading and writing. The whole process is an integral part of my being." She has a son with autism and her teaching career focused on children with disabilities and their families.

Donna Wojnar Dzurilla is a writer, poet, visual artist, sculptor, scholar, and an activist living in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She earned her M.F.A. from Carlow University and her work has appeared in *The Gulf Tower Forecasts Rain: Pittsburgh Poems*, *The Anthology of Appalachian Writers: Ann Pancake Volume XVI*, and *North Coast Voices 2025*. "I became ill in 2024 and my disability has allowed me the time and space to explore poetry. I believe it is most important to be kind, selfless, and self-aware, that all things can be achieved with perseverance, and that love always triumphs over hate."

Carrie Farrar is an emerging writer living in Woodland Hills, California. "Living with autism means I experience the world with heightened sensitivity and unconventional patterns of thought, which often become strengths in my writing. I experience the world with an intensity that can be both overwhelming and beautiful. Writing helps me make sense of that complexity, turning vulnerability into expression."

Janet Engle Frase is a retired nurse and recent widow, after sixty-two years of marriage. She lives in Appleton, Wisconsin, and has three children, nine grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren who continually amaze her. "I am interested in writing about disabilities and, hopefully, educating people about them."

Olivia Freel lives in Duxbury, Massachusetts, and recently earned a degree in writing, editing, and publishing from Emmanual College. Observing the impact disability has had on her brother has changed her perception of what it means to be heard. "I am a girl who loves nothing more than to laugh with those I love and to find joy in small moments. I am relentlessly curious, passionate about traveling, and utilizing every second I can to understand and grow as a person with those around me."

Elizabeth Iannaci is a widely published SoCal poet whose work has appeared in *Women in a Golden State*, *San Diego Poetry Annual*, and *Hole in the Head Review*, among others. She earned her poetry M.F.A. from Vermont College of Fine Arts and her latest chapbook is *The Virgin Turtle Light Show: Spring, 1968* (Latitude 34 Press). "A poet I admire once told me it was imperative that I write about what I see, what I don't see, and the way I experience the world because no one else sees the way I do. With most people that would be a metaphor. With me it's literal. I have retinitis pigmentosa."

Kathryn M. Bowman Johnson is a writer living in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, who explores "the intersections of memory, disability, and caregiving." Her work has appeared in *Brevity Blog*, *Dorothy Parker's Ashes*, and *InFlow Magazine*. While disability has slowed her down, she says, "in that slowing I've learned to pay closer attention—to moments, to gestures, to the small details that hold entire stories."

Richard Eric Johnson lives and writes poetry in Arlington, Virginia. The author of five full-length poetry collections, his poetry has appeared in numerous online and print journals, and he is a Pushcart Prize nominee. Following his military service and college, he enjoyed a career as a public servant and is now very happily retired. He says, "I've had an addictive passion for poetry since the age of five when my grandfather sat me on his knee and read aloud, and very dramatically, the works of Longfellow and Whitman."

Angela Kasumova is a writer living in Andover, Massachusetts, with her husband and their two neurodiverse children. Motherhood reignited her love of writing after working for more than a decade in education/mental health. Her work has appeared in *The Bluebird Word* and *The NightWriter Review*. Referring to her two boys she says, "Advocating for them continuously deepens my understanding and appreciation of humanity." She enjoys reading, drinking tea, traveling, and observing nature.

Maya Klauber is a visual artist and writer living in New York City. Her work has been published in *Columbia Journal*, *Intima: A Journal of Narrative Medicine*, and *Bellevue Literary Review*, among others. Living with chronic illness since childhood, she says, "There is often a sense of isolation that can accompany the experience of illness and/or disability. I write to tell my story and to connect with others."

Tara Labovich is an author and university lecturer of English and creative writing in Iowa. Their multi-genre creative work can be found in journals such as *Salt Hill Journal*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Brevity Blog*, among others. Their writing is nominated for Best of the Net (2025, 2026). Disability is the lens through which Lalbovich finds both beauty and meaning in life. "It is also the space I have learned most about understanding and curiosity. Writing has taught me how to embrace joy, to find balance between struggle and delight."

Kirk Lawson is a retired healthcare administrator living in Accord, New York, who earned his M.B.A. from Columbia Business School. His work has appeared in *Discretionary Love*, *Months to Years*, and *Thorn & Bloom Magazine*, among others. He says, "Writing helps me process my life and get closer to the question, 'Who am I?'" His husband of forty years has quadriplegia, following an accident five years ago. They have journeyed far and near together, sharing a wonderful life.

Kara Laymon is a writer, storyteller, and university student living in Richland, Indiana. She hopes her writing brings to light the often invisible struggles of those who rarely feel seen. Her work has appeared in *Portals* and *Adore Art Magazine*. "I lost a lot of things that were very important to me when I became sick. I believe that words and language can bring people together and heal brokenness."

Marc Littman has a son with autism and serves on the board of a nonprofit in Los Angeles that serves adults with developmental disabilities. He says, "I am a vehicle powered by words to drive home a message: there is a road for all to succeed. If I can use my writing to galvanize society to be more accepting, I will have accomplished much." He has had many short stories published in various magazines and anthologies.

Cal McCarthy is a copy editor currently pursuing a master's degree in book publishing from Portland State University. Their work has been published in *Silk Road Review: A Literary Crossroads* and *Journal of Homosexuality*. Living in Portland, Oregon, with two cats (and an occasional foster) they love "experiencing all sides of the creative process, from editing to writing to daydreaming. I hope others feel seen in my words, as I have in countless stories."

Mary Ann McSweeny of Medway, Massachusetts, is a writer and educator who writes to explore the mystery of being alive and to forge a connection between herself and the reader. Her work has appeared in a variety of online and print journals including *Liguorian*, *DoveTales*, *The MacGuffin*, and *The Baltimore Review*, among others. "Disability is teaching me compassion for the whole person—what is visible to others and what is not. Compassion is a key theme in my work."

Sydney Melocowsky is a writer from the New England region who plans to pursue her Ph.D. soon. Her work has appeared in *Fast Fallen Women* and *Fast Famous Women*. She says, “My neurodivergence is not merely a major theme in my work, but the voice of it. My disability is unmasked in my writing and the way people respond to it often reveals the strange way certain audiences both admire the neurodivergent mind and beg us to suppress it.” She believes in the power of empathy, rhetoric, and a good cup of tea.

Dixie L. Partridge grew up in Wyoming, lived most of her adult life along the Columbia River and now calls Utah home. Her poetry has appeared in *Poetry Magazine*, *The Georgia Review*, and *Southern Poetry Review*, among others. She received the Eileen Barnes Award for her book *Watermark* (Saturday Press, 1991). She has been a caregiver for fourteen years to a spouse with early onset Alzheimer’s disease and has published dozens of poems about caregiving.

Adam B. Perry of Minneapolis, Minnesota, is a writer who believes his blindness journey is proof that people with disabilities are living full, meaningful lives. He explores how the physical, emotional, and spiritual expressions of his condition have informed his view of disability. “It is a testimony that disability is an alternative life experience filled with challenge and reward in the search for grace and purpose.”

Sarah Ralston is an emerging author from Victoria, Australia. Despite an autism diagnosis, learning difficulties, and trouble fitting in during her school years, she excelled in English and her passion for reading and writing were born. “My life dream is to own a hobby farm and continue to develop my writing. I’m a self-taught writer with an interest in fantasy and magic.”

Thomas Short lives in the Mojave Desert, which inspires most of his writing. He is a father, Marine veteran, and regular at Yale Writers’ Workshop. “I have been raising a nonverbal autistic son for over a decade. He has shown me there is so much more to this world than we know and someone without a voice can be so happy. I want to be his voice to the world.” His work has appeared in *Half and One* and *Free Spirit*, among others.

Danah Slade is a poet and interdisciplinary artist based in Adelaide, Australia. Her writing often weaves together reflections on the natural world and the complexities of the human experience. Her poems have appeared in *Australian Poetry Journal*, *Beyond Queer Words*, and *StylusLit*. As someone who lives with chronic illness she says, “I have this dangerous hope that maybe if I let the illness write through my words, it won’t write through my body.”

Gregory Smith of Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, is a retired medical social worker. He is the author of thirty-five short stories, twenty-two of which have been published. Living with osteogenesis imperfecta type three has influenced his work a great deal, especially when writing about characters that have disabilities.

Rowan Tate is a self-described “Romanian creative and curator of beauty.” Her writing has appeared in *The Stinging Fly*, *Josephine Quarterly*, *Meniscus Literary Journal*, and Stanford University’s *Mantis*, among others. Tate says, “I explore dimensionality and flux in language, using structure, rhythm, and sound to reflect human shifts in place and identity. My work examines fragility and endurance.”

Sylvia Telfer lives in South Lanarkshire, Scotland, and is an international award-winning poet and short story writer. Recent awards include the King’s English Society Poetry Competition (June 2025) and *Bacopa Literary Review’*s Free Verse Poetry Award (2022). As someone who lives with agoraphobia, she says, “I love creating with words. With scant personal control in the world, I can envision through writing some sort of order relative to my beliefs.”

Joshua Walker of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, is a father, son, and poet who is “just trying to make sense of a senseless world.” His work has appeared in *Potomac Review*, *South Florida Poetry Journal*, *Solarpunk Magazine*, and *Libre*. He has schizoaffective disorder and says, “understanding myself and the world around me is at the core of my work.”

Keiko Honda, *Untitled*, 2019, watercolor, 8" x 11"

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