

From Scientist to Stroke Survivor

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Excerpt from Part I: Overture

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

That is, until the girl reckoned with her totalizing unanchoring. Suddenly, she failed to locate her entire right side. The once watertight GPS system between her brain and her body was breached. “Mom, is my right side on the bed? Where is my right side? Can you see it? Is it there?” Her interrogatories gushed forth, the questions colliding into each other breathlessly as her terror mounted. Her throat constricted around syllables. Her body plan felt remapped to an uncharted terrain relative to before. This was the after—the other side of wherever she had been, an elsewhere perpendicular to everything that framed her frameworks of time, space, herself, and truth—she would not, could not, ever forget. It jolted her like a harrowing nightmare, a plot twist crafted in a science fiction workshop.

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

The sliver of a blessing inherent in this type of tragedy is the utter uncertainty, the absence of medical prognosis as to what may unfold in subsequent months and years. Sometimes, the

unknown is what rescues. She is disoriented in her body. Everything the girl learned in Harvard's evolutionary biology lecture halls capsized internally. She felt herself in a state of decay, as if she was a radioactive isotope leaking out of the lattice that held her universe up. Just as quickly as we enter the womb of the world, we can be pushed out, evaporated out of our current mentality and woken to hollow shells of ourselves.

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

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

Medical mishaps were part and parcel of what it meant to live in the girl's "before" body. Since age eight, hypermobility endowed her joints with too many degrees of freedom. She was always a step away from a kneecap or an arm dislocating. But the incidents she overcame with physical therapy were transitory. They did not etch themselves onto the pedestal of who she

was and never jeopardized her potential. Now, for the first time, future and hope forsook her. An exotic vernacular of subtext—the semiotics of grimaces, winces, gasps, and glazed eyes—replaced vocabulary, too frictionless and blunt to express her baleful umbrage, her immanence in silence that left her mute. She felt unexpectedly atomized, cleared out of herself, by a tsunami.

She firmly shut and opened her eyelids while whispering prayers to a Judaic God she abandoned decades ago when her genetic connective tissue disorder, Ehlers-Danlos syndrome (EDS), set in. In vain, she hoped that she was still in a daze from a cocktail of ketamine and propofol, that reality would kick in and the bilateral symmetry of the body she possessed prior to the doctor's near-fatal blunder would be restored. But there was no exit. There was no backpedaling into the person she was only three hours before. The physician who performed the procedure swiftly emerged by her bedside. He looked too debonair in his bespoke suit and necktie, as though he were ready for a party or a date in the direct aftermath of what would be his greatest medical malfeasance. Did he know? Did she?

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

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

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

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

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

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

stitches, or even of Band-Aid, removal.

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

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

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

She noticed she had to use the restroom. How does one sit up with half a body? For that matter, how does one do anything with half a body? The girl is still coming to terms with all of this. She is, almost two years later, asking the same question. She continues to receive silence in return. She is

learning to dwell inside these questions. She no longer feels compelled to meet questions with prompt answers, as she did in Harvard math and genetics classrooms just a few months prior to her surgery.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She capitulated to it all—to the body that was no

longer hers, to the soul that may be in partial flight to another habitat, to the presence and absence of everything she felt and could not feel. She let herself melt into the car's to-and-fro as traffic hissed and wheezed them to the emergency room at a Manhattan hospital. She could sense herself unspooling. The edges of the world were pressing in on her on all sides as her body was manhandled onto a gurney and into the scanner that would bracket and barb the rest of her life.

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

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

But there is one moment, or rather, a string of moments, that shine through the cracks in her mind, a light radiating the nightmarish black clouding that time. Her mother is in a chair beside her and cradles her daughter's left hand, the sole hand she can feel. The girl knows she is

a planet and a half from alright. She does not need to hear it to know it. While the girl comes unglued, her unity with her mother is unbreakable, firmly tethered to something that surpasses her downtrodden body, that supersedes anything and everything on Earth. The girl will soon concede that no knowledge nor education will pull her through this bleak quicksand, that her one true constant in this world is the woman looking back at her and smiling through tears.

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

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

However, I was not alone. My parents became abiding pillars of steel. I knew and felt their unflinching allegiance prior to this tragedy but had never tested and measured the extraordinary lengths to which they would go to be with me during this trying course. They modify reality to every extent possible as it uncorks before me so I can withstand the suffering that never stops. Instead of changing my name to Grace, I opted to find the grace in still being Elly. A year later, I

decided that the doctor who maimed me plundered enough. I am still fighting an uphill battle and refuse to give up on life because of their refusal to give up on me.

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

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

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

dislocated overhead. I spend outrageously up to 40% of a day eyeing and babysitting my limbs, an ongoing dynamic of *Where's Waldo?*

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

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

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

My survival could not occur in seclusion, because the modern world had, gallingly, not been overturned by my stroke. A significant portion of me, at age twenty-nine, is grateful for that fact—for the tablet on which I now make words meet, participate in online yoga classes, and listen to poetry. Technology is the vehicle through which I evacuate my body and enter the safety net of belonging. Yet, the cost is unrelenting. Before, I

was a twenty-seven-year-old sometimes inept in distinguishing left from right. Now, I am an expert in that regard. In this *after*, I stuttered over who I was and desired to renew my lease on the girl who slaved with alacrity over her GPA and mistook empirical formulas for planetary gears. I thought I could calculate my way into a presaged future consisting of boyfriends, a nuclear family of my own, a scientific career, and a myriad of sacrosanct trivial experiences discharged of instantaneous hardships that prodded me out of my familiar. Who are you when all of your defining attributes are erased, save for in the biting stretch of memory? Life torn at its seams. Meaning seemed to decode its way out of my creation. I was amorphous, my right limbs adrift in translation of my trespassed nervous system.

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

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

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

I undertake the massive architectural project of my body each day by staring my way into a

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

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

I must reflect on the small but mighty graces that accompany my apocalypse. The hushed humming through my right interior—I yearn to know you, darling right side—you and I are torn asunder, but undeniably alive in this aftermath. An about-face of consciousness is taking hold, prompting me to quit my deluded post in the Grand Central Terminal of my brain and to

practice listening intently to my body. I am a process, unfinished and unfinishable. We all are. I hope this impresses upon you how incalculably precious you are, irrespective of the state of your physical constitution.

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

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

I regained the leisure of digesting literature within the overground tunnel of the hyperbaric chamber, a sealed cylinder of pressurized oxygen readily accessible to my bloodstream. I now knock on doors of terse marvelous verses that diminish my loneliness, connect me to what feels like the entire galaxy. The physical synapse decimated by the doctor's blade was replaced by more a subtle synapse, a webbing between me and other authors. David Whyte, Marie Howe, Ada Limón, Emily Dickinson, T. S. Eliot, among other voices, cut into me bloodlessly, poetry that rattles through me with gilded uminosity.

I listen to their mellifluous work as my socked feet dance on the walls of the chamber. Riffs of rhythm and meter perfume the silence, notes shimmering in the air. I am struck by an epiphany that the decadent taste of faith shaped into words was not hijacked by my stroke. Their language reinstates my incorrigible obsession with the written word, repatriates me into chains of syllables. I view poetry as an internal audit, a means of feeling my way into this stormed body.

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

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

We seek infinity within our disabled bodies. The oceans and continents between us seem to condense into a singularity. As we find ourselves in each other's eyes, undistracted by social media, we are beheld, heard, segmented yet, somehow, transcendently whole. The delicate significance encrypted in our kinship of recognition, an almost hallowed well of self-reclamation, is so profound that it does not survive criticism or analysis. It demands plunging immersion in attentive presence. My bungled attempts to sift it through mental concepts only reduce its experiential nectar into a sort of scholarly chemical water diluted of its magic. We are not scared of our

impermanence. We are coterminous with everything. We are all unbound. My right side is not my dark nemesis. Not anymore. I hug my unfeeling right shoulder with my left hand, returning my body to its nest, reestablishing my right riverbanks. I extend my compromised spinal cord from my sacrum to the crown of my head, gesturing with my right arm—my current third cousin, my soon-to-be neighbor, my will-be self. I will not begrudge you, no matter your recession from my brain.

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