

The Deform Norm

For seventeen years
When the lights dimmed
And my eyes closed
The somewhat-damaged subconscious
That'd taken up squatter's rights
In the back of my mind
Rewired the innocence of my childhood
With the bittered battered judgments
I'd cooked up for myself
After discovering through adolescence
The substantial differences
Between the too-easy sleazy actions
And pretzel-bent words
People used to speak the truth

And though humanity's spectrum for sanity
Seemed to ebb and flow
Based off what one generation held onto
And what the other let go,
In a disabled body: an imperfect skin sack
What I shared of myself
Was as respectfully acknowledged
As the longwinded, politically-tolerated soapboxes
Of what the medical world already claimed to know

And as a subaltern subjugated specimen
Slightly outside the "deform norm,"
My pink spongy control center
Was subjected to the false definition of *average*,
Manipulatively raised by ableism's inauthentic gestures
And governmentally-scripted willingness
To play a trick on *the other*
And reduce disability to a state of mind
In order to see whether or not the "less than"
Could see through the veil
Of an all-too-real Aryan society
Whose eyes wetted with disappointment
Each time they bore witness
To another variation of miswritten code
Making its way into the race
That's pace was only slowing
And showing how *defective* could be *infective*
If precautions weren't taken
To eliminate the problem at its source

In the Most Vulnerable of Moments

He'd lost contact with the first person
And hardened the clay of his human form
Into a tongue-tied writer's block
That's silence reflected the *for show* struggle
Of the could-be, would-be artist
Who thought manufactured prettiness
Outdid the honesty of his heart's legitimate expression of experience
While the clear-minded part of his metaphysical being,
Revealed only in the most vulnerable of moments,
Still clung like a snakeskin refusing to shed,
And held itself accountable for his frailty—
All those unshed childhood tears
Amounting to his current day unwillingness
To speak freely of the illogical conclusions
His mind had drawn to create a nonstandard
Emotional balancing act he'd committed to
So the ugliness of humanity
Was attributed to some, but not to all.
And though, in clarity, he knew
His fabrications were the clever coping mechanisms
Of a dammed up psyche afraid of its own reflection
He liked the warm plush feel
Of perception and perspective's
Telling the story differently
And sweetening the dreamy qualities
Of his most recent chapter
Of innocence, experience
And budding beliefs in catharsis's
Returning consciousness to a steady stream
Because too much concrete detail
From the chronicles of his suffocated birth
And the phantom-felt hand of the southern beauty turned beast
Who once tried to finish him off *in the name of love*
Bittered the kiss he now shared with a for-life-friend
Whose heart, intertwined with his own,
Sought to accompany him through the trials
Of rejoining him with the truths he deserted for self-preservation
By extending her hand to be by his side as he returned
To every twist, turn, and misplaced memory,
So he could open himself to loving and embracing
The man in the mirror he feared,
But who she loved so deeply,
Even when he cried in her arms,
Naked and scared like a child.

Invisible Worth

The tremor returned to my chest
As the course of our conversation
Requested my unsteady memory-filled fingers
To unlock the twice-bolted, brick wall of a door
Built out of fear and self-perpetuated inadequacy
By the frail ego I wrapped in blankets
And treated like a glass-bodied child
Whose emotional bones were too brittle
To undo the locks, swing open the door,
And look into the eyes of the ghostly instigator
Serving a life sentence for authoritatively,
Biasedly, and degradingly-deciding
The *intellectual worth* of others

But once every detail of the event
Had been poured out of me
My lover's compassion and wisdom
Removed my frayed feelings of worthlessness
And stitched pride back into the front lines of my being
And the ghost, my self-appointed poisoner,
Was given pardon, and my shivering heart
Slowed to a steady pitter patter
Of rain falling from my eyes

And though one post-traumatic ghost story
Had now found its resting place
Beyond the realm of self-imposed injustice
Our dissections of theory as practice continued on
And bled into the bleary-eyed hours of twilight
As we debated the dangers of *passing*
And the importance of *authenticity*
She, supporting the belief of *art for art's sake*
Saw no harm in fraud and imitation,
And indicated the value of *passing*
As a necessary means for survival,
While I countered with the importance
Of identifying the masqueraders
Cheapening the worth of the labor
For those willing to strip themselves of false identities,
So they could stand naked and fearless
Before the harsh scrutiny of the public eye
In order to set a movement in motion
And assist others in erasing their shame
Of the form and figure they'd taken

But, it wasn't until after a night of difficult sleep
The fruitfulness of our conversation
Struck me hard as a solitary epiphany
As my newly-stitched pride afforded me the bravery
To release another inmate I'd housed
Whose self-doubt had me continuously questioning
If I, in my disabled body, would still have my job,
My security, and my sense of accomplishment
If those who affirmed my current day worth
Could recognize my capabilities
Within the context of my palsied "predicament"
Or, if I had to remain invisible
And behind the curtain,
To be seen as I *am*, because the human eye,
Rendered me boxed in by the limitations of limbs
And kept outside the realm
Of physical plausibility

Cast in a Different Light

I was surprised to learn
He was a year younger than myself
Questioning if the pizza parlor's lighting
Cast him as the same age
Of his oldest bandmate
The tales of his life—
Both short and tall—
Having imprinted themselves
In the hardened clay of his character
And putty of his personality
The wisp of his hair
And the trim of his mustache
Acting as bodily signposts
For where he'd been
And where he saw himself going

And as a firm believer
Each person encountered
Reflects a part of your *self* back to you
Through action and reaction
I shifted my feet uncomfortably
In hearing the ease with which
He said the phrase, "I love you,"
The core of my personhood
Still distrusting of those
Who could use a term so powerful
Without first uncovering the truth
Of a person's makings
And create from their discoveries
A history stamped by the moment
The heart speaks of its vulnerabilities
And declares with an honest wavering in its voice
From now on, I will only let you see me as I am.

And though my morals
Took me by the hand
And had me peevishly ponder
The injustice done to the word *love*
By those shrinking its value
From an unchangeable admission of interconnectedness
To a quickly spoken phrase
Shared with a lightly-known acquaintance
As the hour arrived
And each bandmate climbed the stage ready to perform,

I saw him cast in a different light
But still the same,
And as the sound waves
Of a particular riff and rhythm
Passed through the barriers of my beliefs
I mused on the possibility
Maybe it was his choice to love others openly
And discover firsthand
The population of hearts
Accepting and declining his invitation to be *loved*
That had aged him through my eyes
And made me believe him
To be older than myself,
Who, with my rules for when and where to love
Often found I was tightlipped
With anyone outside the circle
Of knowing what it meant
To give your heart to another

The Tongue Tied and the Comatose

An optimistic lyricist
Eloquently caught the feeling
Of my metamorphosis
In the net of words he'd cast
About frozen blood warming up
As post-stroke, post-surgery,
My stubbornly-cemented limbs
Found themselves reawakened
Like indecisive midwinter Scrooges
Suddenly struck with a Christmas cheer so strong
They joined arm and arm,
And despite the hour,
Skipped down the road
Warmheartedly caroling
Using enthusiastic energy to enchant
The hearts that'd grown disbelieving

And as a friend's massaging hands
Reconnected the long-separated
Puzzle pieces of my personhood
And cleared the fields of my mind's misconceptions
In order to stir my comatose arm and leg
From their deceptive deep sleep
And reintroduce them to *action* and *life*
By reseeding the sprout-ready soil of my skin and bone
And place them among the other fields
Of dreams becoming tangible realities
With rich life-changing proprioceptive possibility
My muscles remembered their own *self*
From experiencing the touch of another
And, with the passion of a word-hungry pink sponge,
Relearned how to speak the language of the mind
By sending long awaited signals
To the bashful brain
Who'd been halfheartedly
Calling all the shots
On what was still believed to be possible
But, from the revelations of recent events,
And a lover's planting hope,
Determination, and the will to succeed,
The disheartened brain,
Heard the body's broken speech
Becoming more eloquent each day,
And recognized the call

Of the unstiffening puppet-stringed parts
Waiting for their controlling commands
And, persuasively nudged by neuroplasticity,
And, reinvigorated by the pure-hearted support of friends,
The grey matter began to recall its ability to close the gaps
And redefine the limits of disabling palsies
So Chance and Prospect
Could turn over my previously statuesque wrist
And open-mindedly read my palm
To reveal the incalculable fortune
Of the brain's ability to heal itself
As arms and legs once weak
Unmovable and displaced by the mind's eye
Became so smooth,
So relaxed, so suave,
Onlookers would ask with lighthearted curiosity
If I'd purposely become handicapped
To temporarily humble myself
And step back from the limelight
Of a perfectly formed body

And as ego-driven appreciativeness
For how the sudden return of sensation
Presented itself as a manifesto for coming out
As a prideful disabled man
Intending to swim stroke for stroke
Through the waters of *acceptable human*
I, not wanting to appear
Un-attentive and unprogressive,
Did not choose to approach
The poetically insightful musician
With the same clamoring classiness
Of fans who stumbled forward
Full of liquid courage and a slurring tongue
To deliver the unintelligible confession
Of how the music had changed them

Instead, I dreamed of approaching proudly,
Soberly, softheartedly, and humbly succinct
With the interpretive analysis
Of how massage therapy's
Breaking up my fascia
Was literally the unfreezing
Of my muscles and limbs
Undamming the river of my blood
So I could untwist my *self*

From culture and society's ability
To know more than the Director of DNA
And Chief of Consciousness,
And make it so the unidentifiable figureheads
Of an able-bodied country
Could have me continue to swallow
The in-the-air prescription
For "untreatable paralysis."

But, each time I went to share my sentiments
A fan, poor timing, or my own
Self-designated speech impediment
Stood unreasonably in the way,
Shutting the door of communication
Linked to my speaking proudly
Of my awakening and coming of age
As a self-esteeming citizen
Of unashamed precedence
My self-doubting knotted tongue,
Still considering whether reality
Would only shatter my attempt at heartfelt validation
Despite two decades of unquestioned respect
Having interwoven our heartstrings
As musician and fan, *brother* and *friend*

And, still practicing bad habits
By opposing self-confidence,
I weighed whether coming clean
About my personal love for his lyrics
Would be met with warm reception
If he knew I was two albums behind
Still enwrapped in the last track
Of *Hope in Transition*
The album of spirited songs
Crashing like waves of wonderment—
Of finally feeling the relief
Of only saying what you mean
And discovering how to recognize your *self*
Among the selves you still wore
To please others and feed the ego,
That back of the brain leech,
Refusing to call itself your amigo
Because when seeing your reflection
You still chose to demean, not preen and redeem,
The beauty of the self you blamed and maimed,
Because you believed yourself unworthy

And thought yourself without sparkle or shine,
The dud in the bunch,
The faulty firecracker
Unwilling to crackle
And light up the sky
Still stringing along your disability
As the reason why you never stood
In the light of achievement
And proudly took a bow
As a heart willing to battle itself
And batter itself for another,
And though the warmth of others
Awaited you around every corner
You kept relationships unequal
Tying another knot in your tepid tongue
Drowning your fields of self-care and self-acceptance
Giving to others, but never asking
For anything in return
Afraid if your life lost its traction
Your blood would return to its frozen form
And you, once again, would be cold
After having watched hope wilt
And return you to the shell of the broken being
You kept telling yourself you had to be