

DISABILITY

Poetry Is a Way of Being in the World That Wasn't Made for Us:
New work from 10 poets with disabilities.

By Jennifer Bartlett
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Not long after the debut of *Disability*, the *Times's* Opinion series, in August 2016, careful readers began noticing what seemed to be an unusual trend: Among the many writers the series had attracted were several working poets. This was not a surprise to me — I am one of those poets, and a big part of my life involves work with other poets with disabilities.

Sometime last year, the editor of this series, Peter Catapano, and I resolved to put together a selection of poems — a sort of digital chapbook or zine — that could be published here as part of the series. The result is below: work from 10 poets, myself included,....., which nurtures the artistic talents of people with developmental disabilities. The sampling is very small, and for practical reasons excludes many gifted poets, but it is a start and will hopefully open the door to a better understanding of the significant role people with disabilities play in the literary and visual arts in this country.

I am the author of four books of verse, as well as an editor, along with Michael Northen and Sheila Black, of *Beauty Is a Verb: The New Poetry of Disability.* I am also at work on a biography of the influential 20th-century American poet Larry Eigner, who had cerebral palsy, as I do, and whose body of work consists of more than 3,000 poems. In 2017, Sheila Black, Connie Voisine and I formed the nonprofit organization Zoeglossia to further help poets with disabilities publish their work.

In my view, poetry is the most organic art form; it does not require money or physical labor. A poem doesn't need to follow any particular grammar rules; it is the record of one's own experience of the singular mind and/or body, a singular voice. For many of us, it is also a way of "being in the world," a world that in many ways was not made for us and actively resists our participation. Through poetry, we are able to remake and reinvent that world.

Sheila Black

VIVISECTION

How you bisected me —
the elegance of the scars.
The disease? It was not chemical.
You could not cure it.

I cling to this chill.
Watch how I unfurl
before it, flag of myself,
a mirror distorted. This body —

it is nothing. In an instant
I could transform it.
Now it is a lake spreading
outward, now small and blank,

a flat stone poised
in a hand. Now it breaks apart,
only the grains of it.
Listen, how they drift and scratch.

The old story, the forms
that were broken are still here.
Now they reassemble, a buzz,
a communion.

They promise me courage,
other virtues, the rough shield,
freedom from pain. They tell me
I am this, or this —

calcium, magnesium,
a vitamin that is missing,
blue phosphorus burning.
Chips fall from a chisel.

Joints burst into loud
red flower. A bird flies
out of my mouth,
into the ceiling.

Daniel Simpson

DEMOCRACY

“Look at those eyes,” she warbles,
as I settle myself and my guide
across from her on the bus.
“What kind of dog is that?”
I am about to answer
when a man farther back clears his throat
and says, “Yellow Labrador.”
If he’s going to speak for me,
at least he knows his breeds.
But he knows more than that—
he knows their innermost lives.
He says, “Saddest dogs in the world.”
I wouldn’t presume to know that,
but we live in a free country;
people can think what they want.
“Takes six years to train them.”
He sounds like he enjoys
having tidbits of knowledge to share.
There’s only one problem; he’s wrong:
it’s actually more like six months.
Fortunately for him,
we live in a democracy,
where opinion is equal to fact,
and we all have the right to vote.

Kenny Fries

THREE HAIKU: PLUM, CHERRY, PEACH

Last days of winter
carry his father’s ashes—
blossoms: white, pink, red.

Do people tire
of cherry trees because trees
blossom every spring?

Afterthoughts — a tease
of blossoms, fallen before
the rise of summer.

Kathi Wolfe

MEMENTO MORI

It's 5:23 a.m. again. The birds
chirp mirthlessly.
Their tongues are listless.
The performance nearly
stops
when you, singing
to God's dogs,
fall out of tune.
The show goes on —
on another morning,
in a different room.

SLOW NEWS DAY IN JULY

No subway delays.
Another heat wave.
Only one mass shooting —
in the middle of nowhere.
No worries:
the child gunned down,
her killer and town
have melted
into a warming
iceberg in the Arctic.
Don't be alarmed:
new studies show:
brain freeze, combined
with existential dread,
boosts your immune system.
Welcome to the Age of Ice Cream.

Ellen McGrath Smith

ANXIETY MINDFULNESS EXERCISE, AMERICA 2018

What is that green vase trying to be
with knives poking out where there could have been roses?
A government transforming before our eyes.
The recipe windowed by olive oil spills:
Pine nuts, garlic, holy basil for depression.
Why does the AC sound like a train
plowing through the back wall?
Sixteen million people is two New York Cities.
What if they get cancer? How will they pay?
What if _____ goes back to the nursing home?
I wondered, as a child learning history,

how those men could do what they did
to the Indians and slaves, to women's bodies
and souls? My feet are on the low filing cabinet
near the desk: they are slender and strong,
though the pinkies lean in and depend
on the others in exchange for the symbolic
balance they give. I need to lower my ceiling,
grow a thick skin. They treat us like enemies,
but we're also Americans. I'm so new to this feeling;
with my whiteness I can fade
into the fascist front if I choose.
I'm in a black chair that feels like a cockpit,
and the sunset, when I squint, turns to crossfire.
It's as if I've never seen a raisin until now.
Let me tell you what it looks like in detail.

Camisha Jones

WHEN THE CARETAKER CALLS TO TELL ME MY GRANDMOTHER HAS DIED

For Juanita "Nanny" Hicks

After Cathy Linh Che

I let the rigid syllables
contaminate my veins

the cluttered room quakes
til nothing is left
on the tables or the shelves

the color weeps from the walls
the waves beneath the floor
wake rise crash

and I am without

anchor

now

alone

within grief's crater

I shut off the TV's clattering mouth

sit on the floor

with the silence

rising like smoke

all of its space and fumes

filling the living room

the kitchen

climbing the stairs

I sit still quiet

let the world finish

shifting

let the names

of those who mothered me

fade to past tense

Lateef McLeod

I AM TOO PRETTY FOR SOME 'UGLY LAWS'

I am not suppose to be here

in this body,

here

speaking to you.

My mere presence

of erratic moving limbs

and drooling smile

used to be scrubbed

off the public pavement.

Ugly laws used to be

on many U.S. cities' law books,

beginning in Chicago in 1867,
stating that “any person who is
diseased, maimed, mutilated,
or in any way deformed
so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object,
or an improper person to be allowed
in or on the streets, highways, thoroughfares,
or public places in this city,
shall not therein or thereon
expose himself to public view,
under the penalty of \$1 for each offense.”
Any person who looked like me
was deemed disgusting
and was locked away
from the eyes of the upstanding citizens.
I am too pretty for some Ugly Laws,
Too smooth to be shut in.
Too smart and eclectic
for any box you put me in.
My swagger is too bold
to be swept up in these public streets.
You can stare at me all you want.
No cop will buss in my head
and carry me away to an institution.
No doctor will diagnose me
a helpless invalid with an incurable disease.
No angry mob with clubs and torches
will try to run me out of town.
Whatever you do,
my roots are rigid
like a hundred-year-old tree.
I will stay right here
to glare at your ugly face too.

SO MUCH

I hear their painful cries jut up from cracks on the street.
The block is a scorching frying pan,
frying my brothers on the pavement.
Our bodies are etched on the concrete,
blood drenched as permanent ink.
Chalk should not outline our death bed
or a body bag be our first casket.
Bullets lurch out of guns,
slice the air, and
pierce the thin borders of our black skin.
Eat away at our muscle and bones,
borough through sinews and blood vessels,
until it reaches and stops our hearts.

It is not just the gang member on the corner
whose aim we have to dodge,
but also police on the beat
whose itchy trigger fingers
leave us with our brain matter
splattered on the concrete.
Now we have to watch out for the neighborhood watchmen.
The wanna-be-cops who think we are foreign to our own neighborhood.
Trayvon had a hoodie on to protect him from the rain,
but it didn't protect him from the bullet from Zimmerman's gun.
Old George just couldn't help being a deadly Don Quixote,
and shoot at every black boy,
claiming he was a hardened criminal.
My coco skin is not a target for your gun.
It is the sacred encasing of God's masterpiece
that gives warmth and joy to every loved one it touches.
No bullet will destroy what God has made immortal.
We will all rise again one day to walk under the sun.

Jennifer Bartlett

THE DAY AFTER THE TERRORIST ATTACK

for Mel and Timothy

The day after the terrorist attack,
I took out Girly Man and read
a poem about 9/11, and I thought about exactness.
My body is stuck in traffic memory.
Two days out, and everyone has lost interest.
Only eight people died, no guns.
It's only an inner-city school, after all.
Not much of a tragedy in a wealth
of sad news.

When you are in trauma, you go to the nurse.
So, I went to the nurse. I sat in his garden,
and he told me some stories
while I drank the last of the coffee with milk.
The nurse's husband, Timothy, held my hand.
They bickered, which, under the circumstances,
was charming. I felt so small,
just a tiny sliver of barely a woman; like Joan Didion.
I can't even think of the right word to describe
what happened: Incident? Attack? Accident?

The words that keep popping in my mind
are "out of sorts."

The nurse laughed when I said, recalcitrant.

Up the stairs in the tiny apartment, not really large enough
for two grown men, a grumpy Chihuahua, and a random cat,
the nurse showed me a book Jane Jacobs inscribed to him.

After, Timothy walked me up the street to work,
as if I were not a professor, but a child
dragging her feet on the first day of school.

Allison Hedge Coke

TEMPORAL

All those streamers
kaleidoscopic sky wheels
wavering prisms, luminous.
So many impressions
the moments way and back
when spinning never stopped.
Incapable speech, sense.
Earthquake sleep.
Patterns in dark/light.
Knowing the moment just before.
We believed them awakenings,
beautiful meaning, the stuff of stars.
Just one more little evil the forceps left.

torrin a. greathouse

ELEGY ACROSS TWO BODIES

I.
its back is broken

no way it will survive
the night

childish unknowing i stroked the mottle-brown slick
of the squirrel's dew drenched fur

bent a wire frame from the muselets
that cork a champagne bottle's breath

threaded tiny rubber wheels
to carry its body's weight

i was so assured of survival

unable to comprehend the minute body
still as spring morning

against the smell of burning eggs
i buried it beneath the driveway
marked the site with a feeble cross

had not yet decided on a name

thought i considered lucky

II.

i wake amid the fractures of my own body
of slow & untidy decline

the first time i walked with a cane
this felt like a small extinction

took so long before i could name this
new growth second limb mine

sometimes i dream of atrophy
the geography of this skin
when i no longer recognize it

as my own

sometimes the dream ends with my body
wrapped in a wire frame

hard black rubber teaching callouses
down the center of my palms

i fear this a kind of death an unfamiliar burial
can almost hear pity edging into a doctor's voice

i am not certain you will ever walk
again

CONTRIBUTORS

Jennifer Bartlett is the author of "Hindrances of a Householder" and other books, as well as two essays for Disability, "Longing for the Male Gaze" and "Disability and the Right to Choose." Sheila Black is the author, most recently, of "Iron, Ardent," a book of poems, and the Disability essays "Passing My Disability On to My Children" and "Trying to Embrace a Cure."

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