UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI

Date: 12-Oct-2009

I, Jillian Weise, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of:

Doctor of Philosophy

in English & Comparative Literature

It is entitled:

Semi Semi Dash

Student Signature: Jillian Weise

This work and its defense approved by:

Committee Chair: Donald Bogen, PhD

John Drury, MFA

Michael Griffith, MFA
Semi Semi Dash

A dissertation submitted to the
Division of Research and Advanced Studies
of the University of Cincinnati

in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctorate of Philosophy (PhD)

Department of English and Comparative Literature
of the College of Arts & Sciences

2009

by

Jillian Weise

B.S., Florida State University
M.F.A., University of North Carolina-Greensboro

Committee Chair: Don Bogen, PhD

Committee Members: John Drury and Michael Griffith
Semi Semi Dash is a manuscript of poems and a scholarly essay. The poems mark a departure from Weise’s first book, The Amputee’s Guide to Sex (Soft Skull Press 2007), by depicting irreal worlds. These worlds are sometimes sci-fi, sometimes pastoral, and always engaged with twisting our notions of narrative poetry. The scholarly essay considers the following micro-dialogues between able artists and their disabled participants—Gillian Wearing and “the woman with the bandaged face”; Matthew Barney and Aimee Mullins; Sophie Calle and Joseph Grigely. The essay then explores disability in poetry with reference to poems by Josephine Miles, Louise Glück and Marie Howe.
Acknowledgments

Thanks to the editors of these journals where the poems first appeared.

The Antioch Review: “After Emily’s No. 745”
Barrow Street: “All the Littles in Exodus”
failbetter.com: “How to Treat Flowers”
Forklift, Ohio: “Tiny & Courageous Finches”
Mayday: “Marcel Addresses Kate (As He Would If He Could)”
Michigan Quarterly Review: “Up Late & Likewise”
The Missouri Review: “Madison Smoak,” “Browsing Ranch Houses While You Dream of Estonia,” “Once I Thought I Was Going to Die in the Desert Without Knowing Who I Was,” and “For Big Logos, In Hopes He Will Write Poems Again”
New Millennium Writing: “Encore”
Pax Americana: “Affairs,” “Bedtime Story,” and “For the Record”
Pleiades: “I’ve Been Waiting All Night”
Shankpainter: “Laid-Over in Cincinnati”
Tin House: “Semi Semi Dash” and “Pound, Drunk on a Forty, Goes Off”
Washington Square: “Bear Behavior Field Guide”
Willow Springs: “Summer Vacation”

Thanks to the Fine Arts Work Center, the Fulbright Fellowship, the Sewanee Writers’ Conference and the University of Cincinnati for giving these poems a place to begin. Thanks to the following teachers and friends: Josh Bell, Tom Bissell, Don Bogen, Jim Cummins, Matthew Dickman, John Drury, Okla Elliott, Michael Griffith, Nathan Lutz, Joanie Mackowski, Kristi Maxwell, Bo McGuire, Ben Mirov and Gary Weissman. Thanks Mom and Dad.
Contents

Epigraph 7

All the Littles in Exodus 8
Semi Semi Dash 9
How to Treat Flowers 11
Up Late & Likewise 13
Bear Behavior Field Guide 14
Tiny & Courageous Finches 15
Pound, Drunk on a Forty, Goes Off 22
Big Logos Explains Love While Running Game 23
Affairs 25
Bedtime Story 26
Laid-Over in Cincinnati 27
Spaghetti Western 28
Encore 29
For the Record 31
Reading with Big Logos 33
I've Been Waiting All Night 34
Summer Vacation 35
Madison Smoak 37
Once I thought I was going to die in the desert without knowing who I was 38
Encounters with Stevens as Goldfinch 42
Browsing Ranch Houses While You Dream of Estonia 46
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>For Big Logos, In Hopes He Will Write Poems Again</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goodbyes</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marcel Addresses Kate (As He Would If He Could)</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After Emily’s No. 745</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Is it possible for causes to act backwards in time, to produce prior effects?
—Paul Davies, *God and the New Physics*
All the Littles in Exodus

I will let you go
& your little ones look

& your herds be stayed
& your little ones also

& if the household be
too little for thee

& he that gathered
little had no

by little & little I will.
Semi Semi Dash

The last time I saw Big Logos he was walking to the Quantum Physics Store to buy magnets. He told me his intentions. He was wearing a jumpsuit with frayed cuffs. I thought the cuffs got that way from him rubbing them against his lips but he said they got that way with age. We had two more blocks to walk. “Once I do this, what are you going to do?” he asked. “I wish you wouldn’t do it,” I said.

Big Logos bought the magnets & a crane delivered them to his house. After he built the 900-megahertz superconductor, I couldn’t go to his house anymore because I have all kinds of metal in my body. I think if you love someone, you shouldn’t do that, build something like that, on purpose, right in front of them.
How to Treat Flowers

Carry flowers upright, whereby the blossoms face upward & the stems point downward. Take the flowers directly home. Make no sloppy small talk with women biting into oranges on park benches. Take the flowers home. Do not leave flowers in the car, not even if you are the kind of guy who has a sun visor, aluminum, & dark-tinted windows. You must never leave the flowers in the car.

*

If the flowers are carnations—why? Wasn’t she worth roses? Wasn’t there a summer bouquet with a few sprigs of baby’s breath, one two roses, & maybe a Chinese orchid? You cheapskate. Why are you such a cheapskate?

*

Leave the flowers on the kitchen table, in their clear plastic wrap, beside the blender. She will cut the plastic wrap with her favorite pair of white-handled scissors. Cutting the plastic gives her great pleasure when it is flowers in the plastic & cutting them loose.

*

You buy the flowers & she cuts the stems, runs water warm, sprinkles sugar in the water, for somewhere, if you heard her correctly, somewhere before you (you’ve forgotten there was a before you) another man told her to put the flowers in sugarwater.

*

None of this will happen in time. C.S. Lewis swears all of time is written on an 8x11 piece of paper & the paper is God. You don’t believe in God, but still. If time is written on the 8x11 piece of paper, all of it, all of time, if that’s true, then you are simultaneously buying the flowers, taking the woman from the park bench in your
mouth, & making love to your wife while she watches a stranger pee into your commode. It is, after all, your commode.

*

I notice you, noticing you, nostalgic for the time before you, which is her time not yours, which you would like for yours, which you would like to pocket along with the change from the ten dollar bill, since the flowers were only five since you bought carnations, roses were ten, & though you had the ten dollar bill, you wanted something (Spinoza & a whole lot of other people agree: “Desire is the essence of man”), you wanted a cold malt-liquored beverage, which requires going into the bar, asking the woman with the orange if she will join you in the bar, isn't she hot in this heat, really, she must be.

*

We are getting stale; I call us stale. I can feel us getting stale & it sickens me.

More.

You sicken me.

More.

I took the flowers & I cut the stems off the flowers. I cut the stems off the flowers because you wanted me to do it, you urged me toward cutting the stems off the flowers & I do not regret one bit of it, not even in the morning.

*

The problem with flowers & your buying them is implicit in the exchange of, yes, that ten dollar bill. Times you have bartered flowers for sex? Times you have tried to barter flowers for sex? People in the world who believe in Time? Seconds it will take for the woman biting into the orange to look up & notice your flowers?
*  

Spinoza says, “One & the same thing can at the same time be good, bad, & indifferent.” The same thing, at the same time, look up, oranges are the essence of man, biting into them is the essence of, look up, look up, the same thing at the same time the flowers the orange in this heat, really, you must be.
Up Late & Likewise

It never stopped raining when I was with him & we were wet & there were parties.

He was from another decade; it was honest. With some you can never tell but with him

I could. My decade let the POWs come home. What did your decade do? The thing about him is

he keeps being the thing. You could never count on him. I did. It never stopped raining

& I could, it was honest, tell. Would you like to be in the same decade with me?

Would you like to be caught dead with me?
Bear Behavior Field Guide

When I get back to Bears, I’m going to tell them I missed them, but not too much. If you tell Bears you missed them a lot, if you remember certain phrases Bears are good at—*Goodbye damsel, I’m off til Spring. Return unto me a bowl of honey*—if you repeat these phrases back at them, if you do it on your knees in a gown, if other Bears are watching, if you say it with wistfulness and even if you really mean it, Bears won’t love you for it. There are lots of things Bears will do like stand on hind legs which means “I am trying to gain more information” or growl which means “I am intolerant of you.” If you say, “Bear, I missed you more than all the berries miss popping from the shrubs and more than all the blades of grass miss knifing through the dirt and more than all the earthworms miss being sea worms, more than all this do I miss you,” then the Bear may charge on four legs towards you, and if this should happen, and if your love be true, do not play dead too long, or too soon.
Tiny & Courageous Finches

Iguazú Falls, the Argentine side, a cave, behind the water, two tiny & courageous finches, Bitto & Marcel, spend the day flying in & flying out.

Bitto is most proud, daily caw, paid vacation & space to think aloud. He likes knowing where everyone is & that where they are, he is far from.

He keeps his finch friends, outside, keeps a wife, Lydia, who works domestics. Marcel comes to the job stoically, not as proud as Bitto, with not as many friends. He is big, rigid, balks at the thought of changing for anyone, an ounce. He likes to read the classics, Hesiod, with rules, everything no nonsense, such as—

"Take precautions, do not dawdle, have some brains, be honest."

Why were they, from all finches, picked?

Bitto thinks it due to he was a great rambler once & rambled to Uruguay & rambled on back. Marcel thinks it due to he was exiled, he was a great
pain in the ass once, & in front
of the Minister, called Kate a flaccid,
incompetent whore & told her
to get lost in the Arbolis.

This was his way of saying, I love you
little bitch finch, why must you prune
the tails of others? Bitto & Marcel
live well together. They work out

the kinks, where to poo & how much
privacy to give. Bitto has even grown
a little fond of Marcel, the older,
the literate, the one who says less.

In this Bitto sees the finch he would
like to be. For now Bitto delights the people
who visit the Falls, flies in singing
weeeeee flies out singing wooooo.

Bitto tried to explain to Lydia
the water, wide blue, the pressure,
the pinch, the wee-woo of it,
the climax, he called it,

which ticked her off & meant
many nights of scavenging
extra tacky shit to nest her with,
a gold thread, a baby’s bib.

In return, she lays a good egg,
she lets him do what he wants,
she listens to his day. “Today,
a family of four, Denmark.
The lady took pictures, the man thought of sneaking away, the daughter of ice cream, the son of pillaging, something or other.”

Marcel, in a rare breach of silence, said, “You know why all those photos?” “The Falls are pretty this time of year?” “She thinks if she takes enough

& if everyone is smiling & if she places them on her mantel—" “What is a mantel?” “She will not be alone in the world.”

Bitto said he liked the idea of a mantel. Bitto told Lydia he liked the idea of a mantel, would build her a mantel, when they grow old in the Arbolis.

Marcel flies the Falls, his left wing aching, will there be no stop—? He twitters for the children, holds his poo & acts happy.

He sees that Bitto is happy & this irks him because to be happy requires it seems some lying & good timing.

So Marcel cracks a seed & works on his index of every time a finch appears in print. He dreams of someday turning
the index into an anthology, which all
finches would read with interest,
thereby validating his work & they’d
present him on the mountain,

during the yearly festivities, where
all finches gather. This gathering
arouses in Marcel a sense of place
in the world, an ambition to congregate

with other finches, as long as they
know him by nametag only.
Once Marcel allowed himself
to be known, with Kate, on the mountain.

She asked the basic questions—
How many finches do you flock with?
Do you want to sit on my eggs?
Where do you see yourself in three days?

In the cave, Marcel thinks of Kate,
how she looked perched on the crag
that first afternoon. She liked to read
the surrealists. Her chirping
did not aggrieve him as other chirps did.
While Marcel saw himself as a loner,
a misanthrope, Kate was a weirdo too.
Giving things up, Marcel thought.

He might give things up for Kate.
Bitto did not make such sacrifices.
He kept Lydia in thick leaves.
Bitto believed in what he called
“the spirit of the moment”
which is why Bitto enjoyed
his job genuinely. Except when
the ladies of Brazil entered the cave
like this one, carrying a baby,
dropping it into the Falls.
Next an older man, with cane,
who came almost everyday, his wife
had disappeared. Next a couple
from Australia, where ten years
into a marriage, a stall, an impasse.
The cave was quiet for a while.

Bitto thought about Lydia
& building a mantel.
Bitto continued flying in
& out of the Falls, for no one,
for himself, for the spirit.
Sometimes they talked about God
& did he exist. Bitto said yes,
obviously, faith & feelings.

Marcel said no, obviously, science
& reason. Marcel said,
“I am a spiritual person.”
“What is that?” Bitto asked.

“Decency.” / “But wait!
Spiritual means a spirit. Do you
have one?” / “Do I think
there’s a spirit of Marcel? No.”
“Then you’re not spiritual.”
Marcel let the conversation drop.
His wings hurt from flapping.
He could not be bothered with Bitto’s

spirituality, skinny little Bitto.
The closest Marcel came to religion
was when he had to humor Hesiod
who believed in theogony.

Around this time, Kate visited.
“I’m here to deliver a message
from the Minister of Finches,”
Kate said, looking awfully

subdued in her new plumes.
Marcel believed she was not
only there for that reason.
He spent each day sorting

through reasons people came
to the Falls & there was never
only one reason for their coming,
there were five or six reasons,

stacked on top of each other,
overlapping each other, contradicting
each other, such that humanity
was a big wad of squawk.

Marcel knew Kate must have
asked for the assignment & that
to ask for something was to want it.
“Is there anything you want from me?”
Marcel began, “Is there anything at all I can give you? I spend my days flying in & out of the Falls, which is a testament to my strength, & though I am not spiritual, I like the surrealists, & I’ve tried to write you to describe my nostalgia for our time on the mountain but I can’t get it right since I don’t think it is nostalgia, that implies something of the past, lost forever, & a sadness, a gravity I don’t think worthy of us & Bitto wants a mantel & to fill it up with lies, & Bitto doesn’t mind because he lives in the spirit of the moment, but I want more, like some guidelines, & to write the Great Index of Finches, so we can be happy, & I just said we, which is what I mean, you & me, so if you’ve come here as courier from the Minister of Finches, & nothing more, then you can go now, but if you’ve come for other reasons, stacked reason upon reason, & if even one of those reasons tangentially relates to me, Marcel, then please, speak.”
Pound, Drunk on a Forty, Goes Off

See here, what are all these birds doing in your verse, am I to think flight or fear?
Hell I can’t make heads or tails.

Sure I spent time in lock-down & when they let me breeze the lawn, a bunch of soap-dodgers hit me up asking what did I say on the radio & why such nonsense in my line. I'll show you a wad of nonsense.

Let's begin with H.D.—a word if I may about that slippery one, I left her. Not the other way around. I don’t care how many books she writes. If a man thinks he wants a poet of the female variety, let him think twice.

Don't go thinking I couldn't row the stick. O, I could row.
Big Logos Explains Love While Running Game

The problem, if we believe Hegel, involves rationalizing myself as your slave. National Geographic did a piece where they gathered women in a room with smelly T-shirts & said—Sniff. What do you think? Women pick genes most opposed to their own. Thusly nice guys finish last. I see you put green eyes in to match your sweater. I prefer you take your sweater off. You spend too much time inside the books. I believe it started with Being & Nothingness, that rat bastard knew women, & said to Beauvoir, “Honey yours is a necessary love. We need the soft & simple ones, too.”

In other words, yours is a think-boat. I myself am a fish. Nothing big, a minnow. I don’t go far & I swim through traps. I’m wanted in ten states for wooing older-thans with fingerfins on backsides. Where did they land: some job teaching split infinitives. I myself write a few ditties about fruit.
Such as “Why are your bananas all up in a bunch? I just want to take you out for lunch.” My insight comes from Weil who blames gravity.

The reason why—when one person steps up—the other steps back. I’m not so don’t you step.
Affairs

Affairs are amply appreciated by contemporary critics under the name of discontinuity. Affairs come into their own when we translate the whole question from structure to behavior. Affairs disappear altogether. Many affairs remain unabsorbed. The concept of the affair gives another dimension to the impact of epiphanies. Affairs in general may be analyzed according to whatever distinctions one uses in analyzing. Affairs are associated with shortness. Final affairs are an obstacle to artistic comprehension caused by the seemingly premature placing of the end. Such affairs exist in every perception that one’s tentative comprehension is not complete. Such affairs depend on the convention that “every thing counts.” Affairs challenge us at a more fundamental level. Affairs are never completely resolved. Final affairs are the most extreme.
Bedtime Story

Once there was a country based on chickens & how many chickens could hatch from one basket. The basket was woven by the Tribe, three generations of weaving. Once woven, every hand touched what every other hand had & there were no have-nots. Duly celebrated.

Chickens & camaraderie. Do you like a chicken? Of course you do. Everyone slept warmly in the basket. Everyone suitable for hatching hatched while the basket accommodated many generations. A generation is generally considered from chicken to chicken, like that.

Once we knocked on the doors of our neighbors no one could stop us. The basket grew & grew. I should probably tell you now that your father screwed around. For every chicken, another chicken, plenty of room in the basket. I can tell you expect a wolf I will not give you.

I searched the woods and fields and all like that not finding. What do you want with a wolf?
Laid-over in Cincinnati

En route to a conference
   on the disenfranchised self,
       she called a man she’d only

met through his essays, dizzied
   by colon & double dash.
       He really knew how to break

a sentence down to its knees.
   He had read her treatise on
       Dewey Dell. He whispered

I am picking into your sack
   as she latched the Terminal
       C stall. What are you wearing?

Overalls, flannel, straw hat.
   We are in the field, we are
       fashionably late for dinner,

& there is a sunset—
   No, there is not a sunset.
       I thought women fantasized

about the sky? Never
   mind, I’m close, go back to that
       one line. I am picking

& picking & picking into your sack.
Spaghetti Western

Darling, I don’t mind being replaced.

I found a cowboy whose tongue replicates a swirling lariat & I am so happy mornings you wouldn’t recognize me.
Encore

He climbed four flights
& so arrived out-of-breath,
leaned over the rail outside.
I could hear him compose himself
like a sheet of music rustling
on the piano, a tune well-suited
for cranky audiences, allegro,
coda, encore & I taught him
everything about letting.
Letting it come, letting it go,
letting it fold over & back again.
The door opened to the kitchen.
I owned a full set of silver spoons
& knives, copper-bottomed
pots & pans I bought
thinking it would make me want
to cook. I didn’t realize the zing
has to be there from the get-go.
It doesn’t just announce itself
one Sunday with butter
for a brûlée & steamed milk.
So I didn’t cook for him.
Maybe that’s why we broke.
Though every time the split
felt false as fractured bone
that some intern re-sets with tongs.
He was always later than I expected,
twenty-seven-years-old
& never had a blow job he liked.
What were his women doing?
I was sad for them then,
thinking of the last brunette’s head
below his belt, had she knelt, had she not looked in his eyes?
The first time it was a procedure, lying flat, he looked at the ceiling.
I didn’t break out any tricks, the shocker, the bedroom rocker.
It was as simple as coloring in the lines, a little red here, some pink.
I recalled my first go-down with a man who had a girlfriend
& kept pushing it at my mouth like a fork, open, open, until I did
& he told me I was the best,
& he thought I had been around,
& I didn’t correct him.
This one with his hands at his sides looked terrified, his teeth clenched,
the collar of his button-down cinched at the neck. He removed nothing but his pants, & before the glory glory he stopped because of a condition, I can’t remember what he called it, a condition whereby he needed candy bars, he needed to play with the red ribbon from my hair, he needed to be a boy again, wearing his pants. Of course, he got better.
He was very good by the end & I hope this poem finds his new brunette: What you have, I gave him that. Don’t be sad.
For the Record

The phone & this guy who I for the record never loved says he’s broken up with Sharon. He’s broken up with Sharon that’s it he says he wishes he’d stop doing that with women.

For the first time with a guy I’ve seen naked I’m not jealous not even thinking would I do it again not even thinking. On his mind he has Sharon, a restaurant, a page of Raymond Carver he’s tried to kill for seven or eight hours at the keypad, a cabin in the hills, the woman from Verona. You still loved her when you were with me I say not even thinking.

It starts to snow. The first time it did that—snowed outside while I was inside with the windows—I thought the lights in the city had gone out & we were all fucked.

Snow is one of those things so small you can barely put your finger on it in the singular. When I was with you I went to see her he says & I wait on the phone for the rest.

When he was with me he called seven or eight hours a day & we drove through snow to the movies in Wellfleet where the walls between screens were so thin you could hear
the action the next film over. Once only once have I been with a man who by his elbow bumping mine made me forget the movie which movie all the movies all the time & this guy has just released Sharon back into the world.
Reading with Big Logos

I’m reading a book on the Chicago World Fair, 1934, back when Hitler was “beating us at our own game.” Big Logos reads The Tempest so at least other people have been there & if you say Caliban at a cocktail party, you win. One subject you shouldn’t bring up at a party is the Pillow Angel. I tried. We sterilized a nine-year-old girl yesterday & I’m supposed to act calm & poetic about it? We removed her breast buds & uterus. We wanted her to stay small like a pillow. What could she say? She’s a vegetable. To say something requires a thought a time a place nerve cells in the brain. Once I forgot to take the pill. For a few days there was talk of what we would do, if I would go, if he would drive me & how it would make us feel. Now I’m at the Chicago World Fair. I stand in line to see the well-bred babes. Is this history? I stop reading. Get off that island, I say. Who starts it. Who ever does. It’s cold in the apartment. The chair & the chair more & some more. We’re spent. Burn the evidence, someone says & we do.
I've Been Waiting All Night

I reckon you were asleep with your girl before the phone rang. Make something up.

I've been waiting all night to tell you about the couple in post-War France,

the woman fresh in her grave
& the man who didn't like his mistress dead,

no sir, & so exhumed her, to the dismay of his wife, who had him arrested

for the stink he made.
She was reburied, returned to the dead.

After jail, he dug her up to fuck again.
Attached suction cups & crafted

a wig from a broom. You can go now.
I'm more in the mood than you're used to.
Summer Vacation

It was not my idea to go skipping the isles in search of roots & science. You needed a return to the essence of Logos-ness, you dared to ask—Who am I—& it led us to the black beaches of Delos, to the Greeks, for we are all Greek. While the tour guide called the statues of erect penises scene-stealers, I’d call them cock-blockers. I know you like being the best & biggest when you bone. Herein, lies our problem. When you caught me on top of the statue, I was not taking pictures. Why should you care? I still came back to the bamboo floors of our tiki hut & slept soundly by your side. Plutarch is your man for dismissing this minor indiscretion. He says, “When I go to a restaurant to eat fish, I do not care what the fish thinks of me.” Did you honestly think a summer vacation would cure us of our milieu? That I’d fall back in love with you? What am I supposed to do with all these babies I’ve made? How was I supposed to know the statues were not standard statues? I’ve been to Paris. The Eiffel Tower is incapable of coming. It was not my idea to take the evening excursion to the conference of Great Geneticists. If I’d been traveling alone, I would’ve sought a bird-sighting trip & a Bloody Mary. Now we have four hundred babies, which I am to call yarmies according to the man from Princeton who insists they are merely gallbladders & gums. Big Logos, I already have a gallbladder
& I already have gums. What do you want me
to do with these? I can’t fit them in my suitcase
& I won’t donate them to science.
They’re my yarmies & I’m keeping them.
Madison Smoak

Dearly beloved Madison Smoak, cheerleader at Hickory High, on-again-off-again best friend. How did she smell like that? I saw Madison Smoak with the roll-on bottle of essential oil though she refused to tell me which oil was essential. “Get your own,” she said. I saw her roll it on her wrists, up her arms, down her shirt. Madison Smoak bought hers from the headshop where her boyfriend, a lanky guy named Beef Jones, bought his bongs. Madison Smoak was rumored to screw the gym teacher in his Mazda Miata before the bell for first period. That early in the morning? “Madison is always raging for it,” they said. “What I wouldn’t give to do Madison Smoak.” “I’m calling because I heard you were friends with Madison.” “I’d never cheat on you with that whore Madison Smoak.” “Are you going to the party at Madison’s?” “I might have cheated on you with that bitch Madison Smoak.” She smelled like musk, vanilla, magnolia, cinnamon & none of these. I tried a dozen oils & still never smelled like her. “I like to think,” she said, “that one day Beef Jones will be walking his wife to the Victoria’s Secret, getting something to spice up their defunct sex life, & he’ll smell a woman who smells like me, & he’ll think of me, & remember with deep sorrow & regret how I used to afford him the pleasure of sitting on his face.” Madison Smoak was lovely.
Once I Thought I Was Going to Die in the Desert Without Knowing Who I Was

Joshua Tree, CA—A young professional, Jane Doe, was raped & murdered at the Cactus Motel off Twentynine Palms Highway Sunday morning. Officers responded to the call, made from Room H, at 4:17 a.m. Jane had tried the phone, found the landline dead, flipped her cell, dialed 9-1-1 again & again, tried the front desk, wanted to call her most intimate, to whom she was a mistress, & knowing this was not her weekend in Verona, & knowing it was her duty to provide mischief not trouble, liveliness not near-death, & knowing exactly who would pick up the phone if she called him, & knowing the voice on the other end would say, “Yes? Who is it?” a question Jane decided was not hers to answer, decidedly none of her business, he would have to do it, & so far he was doing it daily, making arrangements in bars to take his dick out, for his & her enjoyment, under the table, until his dick became habit, & he said, you make my dick happen, which made her feel like a creator of dick, & she loved it, & she feared losing it, & made no demands that he leave his wife, & was unmoved to tell his wife, he would have to do that, it ails me, he said, the ailment Jane attributed to a mid-life crisis, it was easier to think this than to ask what was really wrong with him, or what was really wrong with her, & so resigning him to his ailment in Verona,
she called instead a friend, a distant, 
a friend who knew nothing, not the affair, 
not the trip to Joshua Tree, a man by the name 
of Clint who worked for Express Trucking, 
data entry, third shift, Jane knew he would be 
awake playing Guitar Hero, or masturbating 
to the Girls Gone Wild DVD she’d encouraged 
him to purchase, since when they last spoke, 
the girls char·charred in the background, 
on TV, & Clint loved them, which is when 
she made her recommendation to purchase, 
because what else did Clint have to live for? 
Clint could do nothing for her.
What did she expect Clint to do for her 
in Room H, an auspicious letter, the voiceless 
glottal fricative, had has him his her hers, 
letter of breath, of bare sound, of hate humanity 
& Hell. She began making bets with God: 
she would not encourage Clint to pornography, 
she would stop romancing a husband, 
she would go to church in the morning, 
she would find a saint after service, 
she would wear long dresses & call mom. 
She couldn’t call mom in a moment like this, 
to tell her a man, possibly dangerous, 
certainly deranged, was standing outside, 
breathing heavily, banging hard with his fist, 
& had no answer when she spoke to him.
“Yes? Who is it?” she asked, expecting the owner, 
the proprietor, the landlord, the hotel manager, 
there’s been a fire, an earthquake, a problem 
with your credit card. Then remembering 
the man with dirty hands who all day walked 
back-&-forth beside her window, from his room
beside hers to desert, from desert to his room
beside hers, she remembered thinking him
attractive, disheveled, t-shirt, khaki shorts,
she could pin him in a line-up, six two,
she remembered thinking even of fucking him,
of what that would be, for he was a businessman
at a Fortune 500 company, drove an Audi,
wore sunglasses with a haircut, he had accounts
manageable, he was en route to Los Angeles,
on the redeye, the kind of man who fucked
stewardesses in supply closets before selling
a pie chart to Tokyo, how far she got thinking,
earlier in the eve, & now hoping desperately,
scanning the room for defense, that it was not
this man, but that it was the owner of the motel,
& she expected some reply from the door,
since otherwise Jane knew no one in Joshua Tree,
had not been to any of the bars, clubs,
nor karaoke joints that the 911 operator
suggested she may have frequented, are you sure
you didn’t go out anywhere meet anyone?
& though she told the 9·1·1 operator:
“I am positive I met no one tonight I am
going to die please he is banging on the door”
the operator didn’t believe her, kept insisting
are you sure are you absolutely sure while she
screamed “WHO THE HELL ARE YOU?”
& thought of him passing her window,
thought of him casing the desert, thought
of how before, when before he was not
a threat, she was going to say to his hands
how dirty, he had been walking the desert,
she could see him, digging out the desert,
as he hassled the door knob, hurried past
the window, he was at the back door now,
she had people to tell she loved them,
she had things left to say, & the operator, miss
what are you doing staying out there alone?
Encounters with Stevens as Goldfinch

The Falls were quiet with Bitto gone
to raise feathers & Kate invisible
on Skype & lone Marcel in the cave.
“I’d rather be a zero than a one,”

Marcel thought, looking up from Euclid’s
Optics. The sun set on the lagoon
as the tourists ambled through the park.
Marcel was thinking of the rescue

of a girl from a nearby jungle & how,
to be fetched out of something,
you had to be in something & Marcel
wasn’t in anything other than a book.

His screen didn’t ring, his job paid in seeds,
he had no credit, no authority. He missed
Kate though he did not admit it, instead
he thought, “Why are ones so strange?

If I chirp once, why do I want, always,
another & am not content until I get it?”
Then he performed an experiment.
CHIRP, sang Marcel & tried to let be,

go on with reading. He couldn’t
& before he knew it, CHIRP—CHIRP.
He felt better & looked to Bitto’s empty
bed of leaves stolen from trees & wondered
what sort of feathers Bitto was raising. “He is a liar & a thief,” Marcel thought & knew he was right to think so, but even lies add up to something.

The Goldfinch sauntered in, half-past six, with briefcase & insurance. He always talked what-if-something-happened instead of what-did-happen.

Goldie had these ideas, these grand ideas, such as “You are only pleased when eating ice cream,” & “In Key West,” &c. Marcel wished Bitto was there.

Bitto liked to take Goldie’s words & muck them so that Goldie’s words on nothingness became in Bitto’s beak—“Nothing that jizz & nothing that jizzm.”

Today, all business. “We should insure your left wing,” Goldie said. “What if it gives out permanently?” Marcel flapped the wing to show it worked.

Goldie opened his briefcase, pulled papers from it & set them on the dirt. “What if a giant sloth lumbered in & wanted the cave for himself & used the pages from your books for toilet paper & ate you?” “If I’m eaten, what do I need insurance for?” Marcel said. After all he was not in anything,
not in trouble, not in a bind, not in a socioeconomic climate of anxiety, he was just a finch. “Besides,” he said. “I have never seen a sloth. I’m not sure sloth exist & suppose they do, what would an animal of gargantuan size want with a cave of this size?” “You never know,” Goldie said, wetting a talon with his tongue. It was getting late. Marcel wanted to return to reading Euclid. He knew what was next: the Grand Ideas

Monologue that Goldie gave & when he delivered it, he liked his listener to interrupt him & say—“Go on, high ship.” Goldie began: “I got married, I lived a long life with a wife who stopped reading my poems when I was forty as if I died & my poems with me.” Go on, high ship. “So I traveled south the country, all became hysterical to me, ki·ki·ri·ki, no rou·cou, no rou·cou·cou. I was losing my mind, & in losing it, I realized I had nothing & nothing had me.”

Go on, high ship. “I told my biddy, I don’t love you. If I said I loved you I meant the nothing that is.” Go on, high ship. “I’m in love with
plough-boys & old women in wigs
& bowls & cats & broomsticks & paltry
nudes & dwarfs.” Go on, high ship.
“I’m in love with Florida & Havana
& the Carolinas & Jersey City & Hartford,
but mainly Florida.” Goldie wet his talons
& bowed his head. Marcel thought
his was an old story & he an old finch.

Since he was so unhappy, Marcel figured
he should do something, become
the what-did finch. But you can’t tell
finches what to become.

Later Marcel had difficulty falling asleep.
I will not think dirty things, I will keep
the brain sharp for Euclid, honest for Hesiod.
The cave was cold. Marcel saw the folds

of Kate’s plumes near her breast & while
it wasn’t dirty, it wasn’t clean either,
what he was thinking, & Marcel said, No.
That is all that was, that is what-did.

That is done. He turned his thoughts to
Goldie, poor Goldie, wetting his talons.
The moon shone on the lagoon like
a giant sloth. Marcel fluttered close

to the wall of the cave & fell asleep afraid
& began to have his what-if dreams,
of Kate, of high ships, of twos & threes,
like all what-did finches do.
Browsing Ranch Houses While You Dream of Estonia

At first it's cool like winning Final Fantasy IV.
I find one that meets all my requirements--
waterfront, hot tub, little winding path
into woods for totally-expected infidelity.
Then I'm looking closer at the j·pegs, wanting
to call the carpet mauve but never being
entirely sure what color mauve is, & each time I ask
you won't give me the straight answer,
always somewhere between pink purple brown
which is about as definitive as your future plans,
Estonia Escanaba Escalator, & do you want
a future that sounds like the beginning
of a sneeze?  I'm in a slide show
walking around the nice people's house
who live on Whisperwood Lane,
who chose to deco with ducks,
who hung flowerpots on hooks in the master suite,
who have a King-size mahogany sleigh bed
begging to burst out of its 10x12 confines
& dash properly down the mountainside.
O neat.  They've taken this shot in an aerial
sort of manner, which makes me think the Husband
perched atop the TV cabinet while his head
bumped into a potted airplane plant.
Is that a type of plant?  O blasted.
Am I going to buy a ranch house?
What will I do with Jack-&-Jill closets,
his-&-hers sinks, a two-car garage
with a workman's dormer shed?  What could I
possibly want with a third bedroom?
What would I put in there?  A box of e-mails?
A speakerphone?  A statue of yourself?
I saw -- forgive me -- I saw in the adult toy store plaster of Paris & instructions for making a dick mold. For a few seconds I was thinking—snap, snap, we better get to work. We have a lot to do setting you up & keeping you frisked until the timer buzzes. However, I think it might look lonely sitting on the mauve carpet under the airplane plant. I think it might detract from the overall cozy-feel of the ranch house. So I'm on a two-acre lot now that backs up to a creek. I think on this lot it might blend in more, like a rock, or some felled timber, & it could be, sort of, I don't know, a donation, for the good of the $7 tent renters. At least until I build this barn I'm browsing, this barn with a cupola, & some let's-stay-in-one-place-to-eat stalls.
For Big Logos, In Hopes He Will Write Poems Again

Maybe it’s because you’re cut off
from your roots, & you need to go
to Spain, be with your forefathers,
the Diego Logos, whose remains lie

in the sea surrounding Majorca.
There you’d feel more *insula maior,*
less *insula flatbrain.* There you’d rest
in hammock, mid-afternoon, writing.

Except such peace makes awful poetry.
There would appear a beetle
by the ill-begotten name of Hydraboo.
He is angry, scaled, with pokey things

like fingers if fingers were shiny blades
of poison. He is evolved beyond
our Horation notion of beetles. He sees
your left ear & it tenders him,

calms him the fuck down: I can’t
blame him for that. Your ear, lined
as it is, like the marks he made by the sea,
& it is soft, with a secret spot

for getting into. Don’t you think
he had a day of flat brain?
You bet. But not this day, the day
you swing in the hammock, composing
a much too peaceful crown of sonnets
or just a crown inside a sonnet
or just a curtal sonnet about a king
who lost his ending, an ending who lost

her king, when suddenly beside you
Hydraboo the Beetle wants in your ear.
What will you do? You are a monist.
Bisabuelo Logos was a monist.

Indeed you are a monad. Sometimes
this is what I do when I am especially
missing you: I pretend you are hiding
behind everyone in the whole world’s face

& I only have to say the code to reveal you.
This is why I buy so much fruit
from so many different vendors.
I guess I’m on the island too.

Do you mind? I wonder how I got here.
I must’ve taken a whale.
I say to the vendors, “You are a royal
pumpkin. You are a five-dollar chicken.

Are you not?” No, he is not, & he is not,
& neither is he. On I walk, eating
pomegranates & berries. As Diego
Logos used to say, Esperanza mis niños,

& as he spoke he saw Hydraboo,
back when he was half-a-pint,
half-a-toothpick, flat without brain,
pinch without body, scuttle here,
scuttle there, & Diego watched him
with your very own eyes before they
were your eyes, when they were still
Diego's eyes watching Hydraboo,

who was not yet boo, & not yet Beetle,
more like Be, only an inkling, before
poems happened, when all writing
was wish & whizgig in sand.
Goodbyes

start long before you hear them & gain speed & come out of the same place as other words. They should have their own place to come from—the elbow, for example, since elbows look funny & never weep. Why are you proud of me? I said goodbye to you forty times. I see your point. That is an achievement unto itself. My mom wants me to write a goodbye poem. It should fit inside a card & use the phrase “You are one powerful lady.” There is nothing powerful about me though you might think so from the way I spit. I don’t want to say goodbye to you anymore. I heard the first wave was an accident. It happened in the Cave of the Hands in Santa Cruz. The four of them were drinking & smoking & someone killed a wild boar & someone else said, “Hey look, I put my hand in it.” Saying goodbye is like that. You put your hand in it & then you take your hand back.
Marcel Addresses Kate (As He Would If He Could)

When the call came for me to join Bitto behind the damn Falls, did I not challenge the appointment, did I not appeal to the High Courts & wait in the dark offices of tree holes & check the box to describe myself as too bird-brained? Did I not beg to stay in the Arbolis with you? Yet you have not returned to me.

I know, I know I got beaked & fifed Hesiod into your ear when all you wanted to do was sleep & sometimes all you wanted to do was pluck me & that was, will always be, fine by me. If I quote the Greats too much, know it’s because I’m afraid of you, yep, yep, how you puff up your feathers, you know how you do. I’m talking out loud again to the can of Brahma, Sage of Seven Ages, Father of Creation: No one worships you. Be quiet, I’m talking to Kate. Also when you entreated me to buy a machine, a machine to show us what we look like when we’re looking at a machine, I suffered the wages,
the set-up & download to find you,
    wearing all your feathers, twittering
with 572 other finches, none of whom
    concern what I have to say here:

I am the original plagiarist.
    Yet you have not returned to me.
Daily I withhold from one million
    strangers, though they be willing,

I withhold the ability of my
cyber gender & this is a stupid
    point I agree—No one wins for withholding.
What else can I say? I’m winging this.

At least when we were speaking in our
deplorable way that was something,
    that was some smutcaw we were given
unto, & seduced me you did in manners
unprecedented & if I sleep with
other finches, let us here reference
the words of the apostle Paul: “I hate
what I do.” I don’t hate you.

I don’t even not like you. I’ve gone
over all the branches & can’t find you.
Today the gauchos arrived & they want
me to ride on the brim of their sombreros
to the ranch & maybe I will find me there
a finch who reminds me of you & you
will have returned to me.
After Emily’s No. 745

Instead of yes to Sweet Pea
A permanent not yet.
Love to tease, love to time-take,

Love to trick the negative.
And after? Aroused by it.
The glib of it, time condensed

To drive, sugar, drive.
Notes

“How to Treat Flowers” quotes Spinoza’s *Ethics*, Part III, Prop. 59.

The water of the Iguazu Falls travels at a flow rate of 6,500 cubic meters per second.

The text for the poem “Affairs” was lifted from the essay “Recalcitrance in the Short Story” by theorist Austin M. Wright. “Recalcitrance” changed to “affairs.”

The Pillow Angel, in the poem “Reading with Big Logos,” is a real person. Details of her treatment are discussed online in “Pillow Angel Ethics” by Nancy Gibbs.

The apostle Paul writes, “what I hate, that do I” in Romans 7:15 (KJV). Marcel modifies it in the poem “Marcel Addresses Kate.”
What’s Up with Disability in Art: Conversations Between Artists

Introduction in Which the Author Speaks of Her Cyborg-ness, The Danger of Donna Haraway & the Larger Issue of Disability Constructed as “Creature” or “Beautiful Grotesque”

Since this essay’s topic will be conversations between the able and disabled,¹ and since by default of you being a reader, and me being a writer, we are engaging in a conversation, I would like to disclose my disability. I come to this topic as a poet and viewer of art who walks with a prosthetic leg. The leg has a microprocessor for a knee and plugs into the wall to charge. Because my daily life and mobility depend on the electrically charged knee—which occasionally misfires, runs out of power, and dies—I began identifying as a cyborg. I would like to make a distinction between the cyborg of Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto” and my own identification. Haraway defines a cyborg as “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction.” The words “organism” and “creature” call to mind, for me, Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein and the Creature from the Black Lagoon. I understand that Haraway wrote the essay prior to the prevalence of real cyborgs and I acknowledge that the essay has been instrumental for Postmodern, Feminist and Queer theorists. However, if I am introducing myself to you as a cyborg, and entering the conversation on disability as such, I need to make sure we understand the term. I identify as “a person whose physical tolerances or capabilities are extended beyond normal human limitations by a machine that modifies the body’s functioning.” In my case, the OED is more accurate because—while my leg, the C-Leg, occasionally dies or breaks down—my “capabilities” have been “extended beyond normal human limitations” in that I have not once fallen while wearing the C-leg.

¹ Yes, I too want better terms.
Why bring this up? I mention Haraway because it is likely that, beyond science fiction, Haraway is the reader's main critical source for understanding cyborgs. The disservice her work does (I read her “Manifesto” as an assault), to real cyborgs underscores a larger issue I find in the construction of the disabled as “creatures.” While disability has made such advancements as microprocessor knees, our notions of it remain stagnated in traditional binaries. Though I would like to find complex representations of disability—representations that transcend binaries of good/bad, beauty/creature, normal/abnormal—instead I am finding a continuation of these binaries. We continue to be fascinated by the disabled. We continue to view disability as “beautiful grotesque.” The disabled person simultaneously attracts and repels. I will talk about the problems with these binaries first by looking to the field of visual art. I will focus on the following three micro-dialogues—1) able artist inspired by the disabled 2) disabled participant in the art of an able artist and 3) disabled viewer of art by an able artist.
PART I. DIALOGUES ON DISABILITY IN CONTEMPORARY ART

ABLE ARTIST INSPIRED BY A DISABLED PERSON: DIALOGUE BETWEEN GILLIAN WEARING AND “THE WOMAN WITH THE BANDAGED FACE”

Let us begin by exploring the work of an able artist who was inspired by the disabled. Gillian Wearing’s Homage to the woman with the bandaged face who I saw yesterday down Walworth Road (1995) is explicit in its intention: the piece is titled “Homage.” In this seven-minute, black-and-white video with subtitles, Wearing takes a public walk with her face bandaged. The video shows two perspectives—Wearing’s perspective and the perspective of a passerby. In an interview with Wearing, Donna De Salvo, curator at the Tate Modern, asks Wearing about the moment when she first saw the woman with the bandaged face. Wearing says, “I was in a friend’s car, and I told my friend to circle around a couple of times, it was just so fascinating” (qtd in De Salvo 30). Wearing acknowledges her fascination with disfigurement, but she does not seem to move beyond that fascination. Nor does she seem to be aware of the problems with stalking the disabled woman when she instructs her friend to “circle around a couple of times.” Later in the interview, Wearing talks about playing “the role” of the disabled woman, however, it is important to note that for the actual woman disability is not a role. Wearing says of the homage:

“I really stood out somewhat maniacally from everyone else. They still looked at me, en masse, as the one, the freak, the odd person out. It was a real choice [...] When I was filming, it was far more horrific, because I went out by myself. When I first walked out on the street, I was laughing because I felt such a mess—not laughing because it was funny but because it was embarrassing, like I hope no one sees me. I had to have a few drinks before I went out. Also, I didn’t want anyone I know to see me [...] People do find it quite offensive sometimes when you look so odd. I haven’t got it on video, but one person did tell me to fuck off very blatantly and straight to my face” (qtd in De Salvo 30).
Wearing’s discussion of the video reinforces the familiar trope of the disabled individual as “freak.” Her commentary on her art disseminates the idea of the disabled as “maniacal,” “odd person out,” “horrific,” “a mess,” “embarrassing,” and “offensive.” Although Wearing puts the onus on “they”—the spectators—such as, “they looked at me ... as the freak”—she assumes that’s what “they” must’ve been thinking. The problem is that Wearing’s discussion of the homage reinforces preconceived notions of disability without moving beyond those notions. While I look forward to any artistic attempt at exploring the disabled experience, I am disturbed by Wearing’s lack of awareness that what she recreates is the experience of another human being. Is this homage? Is Wearing “paying respect to” the disabled woman? Wearing describes the experience as “embarrassing” and she repeatedly states her fear of being recognized by someone she knows. She does not want to be seen. How can such ideas translate to homage?

What dialogues are occurring in *Homage to the woman with the bandaged face who I saw yesterday down Walworth Road*? The purported dialogue is between Wearing and the woman with the bandaged face. However, the woman with the bandaged face is absent and displaced. Wearing does not connect with the woman in any literal, physical way. They never meet. Instead, Wearing forces a dialogue with other able individuals. In the video, the dialogue is forced with able passersby on the street whose comments are displayed in subtitles. In the interview, the dialogue is between Wearing and the able curator De Salvo. If a disabled individual had interviewed Wearing, would she have been more cautious in choosing words to frame her experience? Would she, for example, have said to a disabled interviewer: “People find it offensive ... when you look so odd”? Finally, the dialogue is here, in my disabled viewing of Wearing’s homage. What am I asking of Wearing or of contemporary art? I am asking for contemporary art to include the disabled, and through that inclusion, to render less exploitative, less objectifying art.
The next micro-dialogue we will consider includes a disabled person as a participant in the work of an able artist. Aimee Mullins, Paralympic athlete and double amputee, appears in Matthew Barney’s *Cremaster 3*, the final installment of *The Cremaster Cycle*. Stephen Holden, in a review for *The New York Times*, describes the cycle as an “esoteric five-part epic ... exploring artistic creation and destruction.” The inclusion of a disabled person in *Cremaster 3* is particularly important since *The Cremaster Cycle* has “already been canonized as a major work of contemporary fine art.” I am pleased to see disability represented in “a major work.” The distinction between *Cremaster 3* and Wearing’s homage lies in the consent of the disabled individual. Aimee Mullins consents and actively participates in Barney’s film. The woman with the bandaged face neither consents nor participates in Wearing’s film. The dialogues provoked by Wearing’s film exclude the disabled individual; they are a reflection of the able artist’s ideas about disability and the able public’s response to disability. What are the dialogues in Barney’s film? The first and most obvious dialogue occurs between Mullins and Barney. In an interview for a book that chronicles *The Cremaster Cycle*, Mullins says, “We were a prosthetic team.” Mullins speaks of herself, Barney and the designers as a “team,” which suggests that she felt camaraderie on the set. Mullins continues, “When Matthew first told me about the Entered Novitiate character ... I thought ‘I can’t do that.’” Mullins did not mean she could not perform the character, but that she was concerned about the reception of her portrayal by disabled viewers: “I remember thinking how many disability-rights activists were going to be calling me, outraged.” One can imagine Mullins’ concern stems from the depiction of her—which I will soon address—as a bride-turned-cheetah who is murdered. Mullins
justifies her decision to work with Barney when she says, “The fact that I’m athletic really lent itself to the characters I play in the film” (qtd in Spector 492).

I would like to focus on the scene where Mullins plays bride to Barney’s apprentice. Mullins’ character, the Entered Novitiate, transforms from bride (with glass legs) to cheetah (with clawed feet). The romance turns violent when the cheetah-version bites Barney on the shoulder. Barney then kills the Entered Novitiate with a blunt object. In the final scene shot at the Guggenheim, Mullins dons jellyfish legs as the resurrected Novitiate who is blindfolded and led by lambs. Does this scene featuring Mullins in *Cremaster 3* complicate notions of disability or reinforce stereotypes? We see Mullins’ disabled figure play good, as the archetypal bride, and evil, as the anthropomorphized predator. The cheetah costume calls to mind Guglielmo Plüschow’s *Black and White Nudes* (1890). In Plüschow’s photograph, a white female nude lies beside a black male whose legs are covered in cheetah fur. Though Plüschow’s work precedes Barney by over a century, we are looking at two similar images. The artifice—cheetah fur—signifies the figure, in Plüschow’s photograph a black male and in Barney’s film a white female double amputee, as Other.

The role of Other in both images is made possible by the artists who themselves are not Other: they are white males, they identify with society at large, there is nothing exotic about them. In an essay titled “The Vulnerable Articulate: James Gillingham, Aimee Mullins and Matthew Barney,” Marquard Smith laments the film for “feed[ing] our culture’s fascination with spectacles of difference, even if it does so in new ways” (59). Smith complains that the media posits Mullins as a “Cyborgian sex kitten” and neglects to view her as an amputee. I’m not sure how anyone who views the film can not see Mullins as an amputee. And I’m less interested in condemning Mullins for her portrayal of the character, but is Barney simply feeding fascination? How new is Barney’s application of
the Other to art? He borrows from the stereotypical exotic cheetah to dress Mullins. The cheetah costume—as representative of something wild, something in need of taming, something to be feared—is not new. We have seen this trope, where the subject of difference takes on an animal-like quality, before in photographs.

I am interested in how photographs of difference inform the current scene we are viewing in Barney’s *Cremaster 3*. Nude photographs were first used for ethnographic studies. In 1879, the *Photographic News* printed images unfamiliar to its Victorian audience: naked portraits of the Zulus of South Africa. The ethnographic photos sought to prove, through the then-popular science of physiognomy, the superiority of the white race. The field of medicine appropriated the photographic medium to study the body, examining not just any body, but the bodies of medical anomalies. In the 1860s, Dr. H.W. Berend hired a photographer to document his orthopedic patients. So began a tradition of looking at that-which-is-different-from-us in photographs.² The problem with the genesis of the Other in photographs is that the person identified as Other was being acted upon—by anthropologists in the case of the Zulus and by physicians in the case of the patients. Likewise, Barney acts upon Mullins—literally and figuratively. He acts upon her by striking her. He uses her physical difference as a foil.

Nancy Spector, a curator at the Guggenheim, writes that Barney’s characters are “born from psychological constructs; they are personifications of inner, largely unexplored topographies” (19). Where does disability lie in this topography? If it is Barney’s inner turmoil being advanced through his art, then Mullins is merely an actor of his “psychological constructs.” However, even as actor, Mullins participates in the dialogue on disability. She directly speaks to Barney. She considers the potential dialogue with

---

² Even as I write “that-which-is-different-from-us” I wonder if I am in the “us” I speak of. A person with two legs is different from me.
“disability rights activists”; she considers how her participation might invite criticism from the disabled community. Was Mullins’ proven right? Did the disability activists come knocking? I can’t speak to whether Mullins has had to answer for her participation in Barney’s film, but I can say that the two preeminent disability rights watchdogs—Ragged Edge Online and Disability Studies, Temple U.—make no mention of Mullins’ portrayal in The Cremaster Cycle. As a disabled viewer, I was uncomfortable with the film but I can’t tell if that’s because of its treatment of disability or because I’m uncomfortable watching The Cremaster Cycle in general. It would make me anxious to see a bride-turned-cheetah attack someone, even without disability present to complicate things. While I agree with Marquard Smith, that the film “feeds our culture’s fascination with difference,” I’m encouraged that an actual dialogue took place, on the very subject that Smith addresses, between Barney and Mullins. In Wearing’s Homage, the only dialogues that took place were between Wearing, her able passersby and the able curator. Wearing takes advantage of the unwitting woman in bandages to play out her own ablism and to label that ablism art.  

Barney engages Mullins not only as a character in his psychodrama, but also in a conversation off-camera.

DISABLED PERSON Responds to WORK of ABLE ARTIST:
DIALOGUE BETWEEN JOSEPH GRIGELY and SOPHIE CALLE

The final micro-dialogue takes place between the disabled viewer, Joseph Grigely, and the able artist Sophie Calle. This is the most literal, and archival, of the three dialogues because Grigely wrote a series of thirty-two postcards in response to Calle’s work. Grigely is a deaf visual artist. He wrote Postcards to Sophie Calle in response to Calle’s exhibit Les Aveugles that he viewed at Luhring Augustine Gallery in New York in 1991.

---

3 By “ableism” I mean “prejudice against the disabled” (OED).
The exhibit featured photographs of blind individuals who were asked to define beauty. Grigely’s first postcard closes with: “I am—how shall I say it?—entranced. No other word will do. Yours, Joseph.” The word “entranced” is reminiscent of the fascination in Wearing’s interview. However, Grigely moves beyond fascination in future postcards and begins to question the exhibit. The postcards move from fascinated to angry. He writes, “[Y]our photographs ... reveal not so much the voices of the blind as the voice of Sophie Calle. I turn from the keyhole; I feel guilty, angry” (35).

In each postcard, Grigely opens with “Dear Sophie” and closes with “Yours, Joseph.” By using first names, Grigely invites a closer dialogue with the able artist. As Grigely writes his postcards, he also engages with a larger audience—able and disabled—and addresses ideas of inclusion. For example, Grigely writes: “My concern just now is about why the disabled as a social group have made little progress becoming a central part of our social consciousness. I mean, Sophie, when people talk about ‘multiculturalism,’ they seem to mean everyone except the disabled—we’re something else. Something else” (39). Grigely recounts The New Yorker’s brief synopsis of Calle’s show: the review included the following sentence: “Some of these people look blind, some of them don’t.” Perhaps the most climactic moment in Grigely’s postcards occurs when he realizes that the Braille text, accompanying the photographs, has been hung upside down. Grigely writes, “I have double-checked, triple-checked, quadruple-checked the placement of Jauniere’s Braille text: upside-down, upside-down ... Surely this is unintentional; yet to call it a ‘mistake’ does not redeem it from my consciousness” (50).

The upside-down Braille underscores a reoccurring problem in these three examples of contemporary art that features disability: the disabled person continues to be excluded. In Wearing’s work, the bandaged woman is excluded from the dialogue; she inspires it but is absent from it. In Barney’s work, the disabled person, although a participant, serves as a
foil to the able artist’s character. Finally, in Calle’s *Les Aveugles*, the blind are photographed and invited to attend the exhibit, an invitation particularly pointed in the inclusion of Braille captions, but ultimately blind viewers are excluded since the Braille is hung upside down. And what of Sophie Calle? Does she respond to Grigely’s postcards? Or is this a one-sided dialogue? We can read Calle’s artist statement as a response of sorts. Calle writes, “I met people who were blind. Who had never seen. I asked them what their image of beauty was.” The statement seems flippant: *This is what I did. Here’s a qualification of what I mean by “blind.” This is the question I asked.* I would expect to find at least some critical thinking by the artist in regards to her art; instead her statement reads as if she didn’t think much about the piece. And the execution of the piece, with its upside down Braille, further supports the suggestion that Calle just didn’t care much about the subjects she photographed.

**SEARCHING FOR COMPLEX REPRESENTATIONS OF DISABILITY IN ART:**
**BILL SHANNON A.K.A. “CRUTCH” AND BRUCE NAUMAN**

The three micro-dialogues we’ve explored involve able artists—Wearing, Barney, Calle—with the disabled as inspiration, participant, and viewer. Let us direct our attention to a disabled artist and his able participants and viewers.4 New York-based Bill Shannon, who goes by Crutch, is a performance artist whose disability is integral to his art. Shannon, who was born with bilateral hip deformity, uses crutches in daily life and in his performances. For one of his performances, viewable on YouTube ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_zjfpdRlbbA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_zjfpdRlbbA)), Shannon walks down a flight of stairs and

4 While I am tempted to direct our attention to Chuck Close, he does not draw attention to his disability through his art. Though his focus on the human head could be seen as an erasure of the body, Close used similar techniques to create art both before and after his disability. So while Close is an artist living with a disability, the mere profiling of Close for his disability does not spark dialogue.
records the public’s reception of him. Here’s what he says in the YouTube documentary about the process of walking down stairs.

“You can call it dancing if you want to. But as a kid, I wasn’t going around, ‘O I’m dancing right now,’ all I was trying to do was figure out my way of getting up the stairs without anybody seeing me and doing it in this very strange way, you know, and with a certain timing, certain pattern, certain way of achieving it. Technique, style, nuance, all those things were falling into place but I wasn’t calling it that, and I didn’t consider it that, and I still don’t.”

Shannon doesn’t call it “dance” because it is simply his way of going up or down a flight of stairs. When we turn to poet Josephine Miles, in the second portion of this essay, we will again see how stairs feature in an artist’s early life. Shannon speaks about not wanting anyone to see him, and of going down stairs “in this very strange way.” I cannot ignore the connection to Wearing’s interview where she discusses her fear of being recognized and her fear of “look[ing] so odd.” However, while Wearing’s concerns lasted only for the duration of the project, Shannon’s are a mode of being. Shannon says: “Think about how many people will say ‘sorry’ to me in one day. Just imagine everywhere you go: ‘sorry, I’m sorry, sorry, oh sorry.’ After a while that really will affect you.” Shannon speaks to the uninvited pity he encounters on a daily basis. His artist statement further details how able individuals perceive the disabled: “In the same instance I could be an heroic daring stuntser for one and a pitiful struggling mope to another.” Shannon’s comment on being simultaneously “heroic” to one person and “pitiful” to another just by default of walking with crutches, highlights the continuation of the disabled as “beautiful grotesque” in public perception.

By turning the camera on the public, Shannon makes them participants and subjects of his film. Shannon says he wants to “invite the projected narrative of ... assumed sadness, or assumed failure or awkwardness and invite it in so that I’m not the subject to it but the host” (qtd in Kuppers 62). Shannon screens his films while lecturing at schools. He speaks of how he developed his techniques: “You’re relating to your environment as it comes
to you on an improvisational basis.” The improvisation calls to mind Bruce Nauman’s piece, *Stairway*, which challenges how we think of going down a flight of stairs. The piece was commissioned by Steve and Nancy Oliver for their property in California. It does not function as a regular “stairway.” The stairs are irregular. They match the topography of the land so that the smallest stair is an inch and a half and the biggest stair is twenty inches. Nauman’s stairs force the walker to change and improvise the way he or she walks. We expect our stairs to be of uniform height and width much like we expect our bodies to be of uniform limbs and functions. Nauman upsets this expectation. In an interview for *Art:21*, a documentary produced by PBS, Nauman explains: “Because there is no regular rhythm to going up and down: you have to take each step and watch it … you can feel yourself, your body, kind of measuring where your foot has to go at each step. You can't ever quite find a rhythm and it makes you very aware of yourself.” Nauman’s staircase accentuates the physical act of going down stairs while Shannon’s performance shows how the public responds to a man on crutches going down stairs. Aside from the more complex renderings of ability represented in Shannon and Nauman’s work, the micro-dialogues explored thus far tend to exploit or objectify disability.
PART II. LOOKING TO POETRY FOR DIALOGUES ON DISABILITY

Now I will turn to contemporary poetry to see how the micro-dialogues we’ve witnessed between contemporary artists are present between poems and poets. There seems to be a dearth of poets, past and present, who speak from an authentic disabled perspective. Although able poets often employ persona to explore disability, similar to Wearing’s personification of the woman in bandages, the lack of genuine perspectives on disability is disheartening. Is it because there are no—or very few—disabled poets? Is it because disabled poets are reticent to identify as such? Or is it because of disability’s precarious position in poetry? Classic poets dictate the disabled body as a topic for two emotive responses: laughing or crying. Horace, in his letter to the Pisos, warns against the poet who writes disfigurement into poems. He begins by envisioning a painter who sticks a “human head on a horse’s neck” and asks: “How could you possibly manage to keep a straight face?” He then addresses his audience:

“Dear Pisos, dear friends, a poem’s exactly like
Such pictures as those, when the poet’s fantasies
Are like a sick man’s raving dreams in which
You can’t tell head from foot nor what it is
That they’re attached to” (ii.3.8-12)

Horace’s “Ars Poetica” emphasizes form and order. His instruction, later in the poem, to “produce no human babies from monsters’ bellies” gestures towards eugenics, though eugenics, as a word for “better breeding” did not exist in Horace’s day. Similarly, Aristotle’s Poetics emphasizes order: “Beauty is determined by magnitude and order.” Here we see “beauty” dependent on “order.” What is meant by “order”? I am interpreting “order,” for these poets, as related to technical aspects: the use of metrics and syllabics, the five-act play, to name some examples, and “order” as it relates to the body. Sydney, in The Defense

5 What do I mean by “authentic”? Such a question could take us many footnotes. I am thinking of “authentic” in terms of a diagnosis of disability.
Sidney, like Haraway, uses the word “creatures.” Through some etymological research on the word “creature,” I come to an entry in the OED that cites *Paradise Lost*: “Sight so deform what heart of rock could long / Drie-ey'd behold?” Here we see the idea of the “deformed” as a subject for crying over or “laughing at” rather than a subject to treat as other subjects in poems. One dominant assumption for classic poets was that “deformed creatures” in verse functioned as spectacle. Even Pope, himself “deformed” by severe scoliosis, extols order in these lines from “An Essay on Criticism”: “Thus when we view some well proportion’d dome, / The world’s just wonder, and ev’n thine, O Rome!”

But I did not give a summary of classic rules for visual art, so why am I now resurrecting Aristotle, Horace, Sidney, Milton and Pope? Because I could not find disabled people writing contemporary poetry. And I wondered why. And the farther back I looked the more I thought I knew why. The disabled were *symbolically annihilated*, to borrow a term from Gaye Tuchman, as subjects for poetry. By that I mean the disabled stood as symbols of comedy or tragedy and ceased to exist beyond those symbols. The symbolic annihilation led to a vacuum; poets writing from the disabled experience dared not address it. Instead, able poets addressed it for us, casting us in the same comic-tragic roles as dictated by the Greats. It is this vacuum that led me to visual art in the first place. We must be somewhere, I thought. I turned to visual art in order to hear what disabled artists were saying. Only after finding conversations between visual artists did I begin to look for them in contemporary poetry.

---

6 This statement by Sidney nearly made me drop out of my doctoral program and abandon the study of poetry. I simply did not know what to do with the statement, where to put it, how to think about it objectively, without being emotionally and psychically distressed.  
7 Gaye Tuchman introduced the term *Symbolic Annihilation* in 1978. The term has since been used by Feminists and Queer Theorists.
A BRIEF PAUSE DURING WHICH WE DISABLE DON JUAN

Earlier this week, I was talking to a student who studies Byron. She talked about his 1,000 lovers and his incestuous sexcapades and Don Juan. “All that with a club foot,” I said. “What do you mean?” she said. She had never considered the implications of Byron’s physical difference when reading Don Juan. She didn’t even know he was disabled. I don’t blame her. I often feel as if the Academy wishes to conceal the disabilities of writers in the canon. “O let’s not read that into Don Juan,” I can hear someone protest. Only in the last decade has Disability and Literature begun to appear in course catalogues. So it is not surprising that I could not initially find dialogues on disability in poetry.

RESERVATIONS ABOUT THE VERY ENDEAVOR OF NAMING DISABLED POETS
& THEREBY FORCING AN IDENTITY ON POETS WHO MAY NOT WANT TO ESPOUSE ONE

“No one seems to like people with disabilities,” writes David Pfeiffer in an essay titled “The Disability Movement: Ubiquitous but Unknown.” Pfeiffer considers why such distaste continues to be prevalent today.

“Disability is seen as a personal tragedy, a disgrace to the family, and/or a punishment from God. People with disabilities are to be pitied and they are regarded as a burden to society, to the family, and to themselves. [...] These attitudes are due to the fact that people with disabilities are diagnosed. They are viewed as having a deficit named in that diagnosis. Unlike members of other social movements they are not allowed to self-identify” (162).

Given these perceptions of disability and the lack of self-definition associated with disability, it is easier to understand why poets with disabilities might be reticent about self-identifying. Here’s a personal example. I was at the Book Fair of the AWP Conference in Austin, Texas, standing beside Jim Ferris, who wrote The Hospital Poems, when a woman approached and without any introduction, asked, “Are you a crip poet?” I didn’t know what to say. I know what a crip is—although the word “crip” always makes me think of gangsters
first, a shortened version of the word “cripple” second—and I know what a poet is, but I'd never heard the term “crip poet” before. I answered “yes” because it seemed like that was the answer she wanted, and it also seemed like to answer “no” might get me in some hot water, perhaps an argument on whether my poems were crippled enough, or whether I was, and these are not typically things I discuss upon meeting someone. I don't know what would've happened if I had answered, “No, I'm not a crip poet.” I answered “yes” and then she gave me a big hug and it seemed I had just been initiated into something without knowing what it was.

My reservations about the term “crip poet” are similar to my reservations about the terms “disabled poet” or even the politically correct term “poet with a disability.” What does any of it mean? Ferris published an essay on defining “crip poetry” in the June 2007 issue of Wordgathering, an online journal of poetics. In the essay, titled “Crip Poetry, Or How I Learned to Love the Limp” Ferris writes, “Crip poetry centers the experience of disabled people; it shows disabled people taking control of the gaze and articulating the terms under which we are viewed.” Ferris cites characteristics of “crip poetry” which include “a challenge to stereotypes and an insistence on self-definition; a foregrounding of perspectives of people with disabilities; an emphasis on embodiment, especially atypical embodiment; and alternative techniques and poetics.” While it’s encouraging to begin to have acknowledgment of poets with disabilities, I find it also discouraging that these first efforts are essentializing. They seek to brand a common disabled experience as if such a common experience exists. Since “disabled” is a contentious word—who does it include? who does it not include?—it is irresponsible to suggest that all disabled people have similar things to say or similar ways of saying them. For example, Ferris cites “crip poetry” as having “an emphasis on embodiment.” Would a poet with an intellectual disability need to emphasize embodiment in her poems? Ferris contradicts himself. On one hand, he wants disabled
people to “articulat[e] the terms under which [they] are viewed.” Yet he then articulates those terms for them. He even wants to name them, to give them the term—“crip poet”—by which to identify themselves. While this may have benefits—one thinks of how “queer” has been taken back by people who identify as “queer”—it strikes me as presumptuous to brand all disabled people under a common nomenclature.\(^8\)

At the same time, it seems necessary to know who we are, or at least to know that poets with disabilities exist, and that the disabled experience is not limited to how able poets write it. In an essay titled, “Boon and Burden: Identity in Contemporary American Poetry,” Carl Phillips shares an exercise he does with his students. He reads a poem without telling his students who wrote it. The students analyze the poem using various approaches. When Phillips reveals that the poet is Langston Hughes, the students abandon their previous interpretations and consider the poem as it relates to the African American experience even though race is not the poem’s subject.\(^9\) “Rather than enriching the possibilities for meaning,” Phillips writes, “these aspects of identity had prompted readers to impose on Hughes’s poem what it might be radical to suggest is segregation—however inadvertent—but I’ll suggest it” (160). The readers in Phillips’ class have isolated the poem from all other possible interpretations. It must be about race.

At this point I’m ready to throw up my hands and say, “Fine! No more! I do not want to ‘segregate’ poems in terms of able/disabled.” However, such a conclusion would suggest that I wish I did not know Hughes as an African American, and that I wish I did not know the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance, and that I wish I did not know the poetry of the Black Arts Movement. The poems from these movements—some memorable, some less

---

\(^8\) I will dispense with Ferris’s term “crip poet” and instead use the term “poet with a disability.” The difference between a “crip poet” and a “poet with a disability” is that the former forces a common rubric on the poet—How to Write Crip Poems—whereas the latter describes the poet.

\(^9\) The poem is “Island.”
so—affected political and social change. What is Phillips' advice for creating strong poems that affect change? He points to a strategy in Rita Dove's collection *Thomas and Beulah*.

“One of Dove’s strategies is to scatter those particulars [of race] throughout the collection of poems—in the course of reading which, we get to see Beulah sometimes as an African American, sometimes as a woman, sometimes as a mother, wife, daughter. The final effect is that we see her as a composite of all those things—she becomes as multifaceted as any human being” (173).

In order to write identity, and write it well, one must “scatter” it? One must become a “composite” of “all [...] things”? One must not only be “African American” but also “woman” and “mother” and “wife” and “daughter”? Is this so? I’m beginning to feel the “burden” in the title of the essay. What a burden to need to be all things at once and to need to “scatter” one’s identity. Do we ask this of poets writing from the dominant identity? Phillips seems to disagree with himself, later in the essay, when he writes, “The most genuine, authentic poem is the result of a consciousness articulating itself as only that particular consciousness can” (184). I’m confused. First he applauds the strategy of “scatter[ing] those particulars,” particulars of race, gender, sexuality\(^\text{10}\) and then he applauds poems that articulate a “particular consciousness.”

The “particular consciousness” of a poet with a disability is vital to both effect change and discover new and invigorating ways of reading poetry. While I’m discouraged by the idea that identifying poets with a disability may lead to segregated readings of their work, I do not think we (poets with disabilities) can afford to be written, and therefore known, only via the work of able poets anymore. I use the word “afford” purposefully, because it costs something when one’s identity is written by someone outside the identity. The “particular consciousness” of an identity is lost in someone else’s consciousness. What would American poetry of the 20th century be if the African American experience was

---

\(^{10}\) Phillips makes no comment on disability as an identity in this essay. His triad of identities is race, gender and sexuality. For Phillips, disability as an identity is a non-subject.
limited to the poem “Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery” or the book *The Dream Songs*? So it is imperative that we name poets with disabilities and find out what their poems are doing. This is a bigger project then my essay. For the purposes of this essay, I will look first to Josephine Miles, as a poet with a disability, and as a precursor to the Disability Rights Movement. Then I will consider how two of the paradigms we witnessed in visual arts—Able Artist Inspired by the Disabled, Disabled Artist Viewing Work of Able Artist—provoke dialogues in poetry. I will analyze the dialogues occurring between Louise Glück and “the cripple on the subway”; then I will offer my version of Grigely’s *Postcards to Sophie* by writing *Postcards to Marie* in response to Marie Howe’s poem “The Star Market.”

**JOSEPHINE MILES, PRECURSOR TO THE DISABILITY RIGHTS MOVEMENT**

When I began researching, I was hoping to find a poet affiliated with the Disability Rights Movement. The movement reached its apex in 1977 when the disabled and their advocates took over the fourth floor of the San Francisco Federal Building for three and a half weeks. During this protest, people with disabilities and their advocates received support from the American Legion, the Black Panthers, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Organization for Women, among others. The protest resulted in the ratification of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, which prohibits any federally funded program from discriminating against persons with a "qualified handicap." Section 504 paved the way for the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. The Disability Rights Movement has been called "the last inclusion." I expected to find someone who wrote poems in tandem with the movement, and who appeared at sit-ins and demonstrations, since poets are commonly known for their famous acts of solidarity: Ginsberg walked into the Stonewall Inn and shouted, "Gay Power! Isn't that great!" After the assassination of Malcolm X, Amiri Baraka packed his bags in the Lower East Side and
moved to Harlem, and the Black Arts Movement was born. Adrienne Rich refused to accept the National Book Award individually, and instead banded together with Alice Walker and Audre Lorde to accept it on behalf of all silenced women. These examples show two main things that the Disability Rights Movement lacks: 1) poets whose work reflects the time and culture of their movement and 2) a sense of community.

Since the Disability Rights Movement has no such spokesperson, I'd like to consider Josephine Miles as a foremother to the movement. Miles is a poet with a disability whose life and work has been instrumental in my understanding of what it means to be a poet and a woman and a disabled person and a teacher and an activist. "I felt sort of on the sidelines," Miles says in an interview conducted by Ruth Teiser and Catherine Harmon and published as *Teaching Poet: An Oral Autobiography*. It's hard to imagine Miles "on the sidelines" since she was the first woman to receive tenure in UC-Berkeley's English Department. She taught literature courses and founded the *Berkeley Poetry Review*. She produced thirty-three books of poetry and criticism. In books such as *The Vocabulary of Poetry: Three Studies* (1946) and *The Continuity of Poetic Language* (1951), she traced the usage of words as they appeared in poems, and created charts to record which words were in vogue, out of vogue, or recurring. Miles used canes, walkers, and wheelchairs, though she did not address it directly in her poems until her final collection titled *Coming to Terms*. She lived at the height of activism in the 60s and 70s, but she felt “on the sidelines” due to her disability: “They [the feminists] didn't ask me to be a part of this because, as I say, I think women always take the attitude toward me that if they'd lean on me, I'd fall over.” I bring up this quote from Miles because it echoes Grigely's idea of the disabled as “something else.”

In an early section of the interview, Miles describes the layout of her high school and how it contributed to her development as a poet:
“The high school was divided by floors. The science and the languages were on the second floor. I had to climb up one flight of stairs. English and history were on the third floor, which was really very hard for me to get to. I could climb stairs then, with help, but it was awfully hard. So, I postponed as much of English as possible and did a lot of languages and sciences—whatever I could on the second floor. I remember writing a poem at the end of my junior year which was called ‘To Dr. Edwards, On Going to the Third Floor’” (29).

Though Miles mentions this poem in an offhanded way, it’s interesting to note that the poem directly addresses issues of access. I can’t speak to the poem’s merit since I have not read it and, to my knowledge, Miles never published it. I can say that, as a young poet dealing with issues of access, I would have loved to have read such a poem, or any poem, in which a “particular consciousness,” or perhaps, in broader terms, a person living with similar challenges, had written about it. Poets of the Black Arts Movement looked back to poets of the Harlem Renaissance who looked back to poets like James Weldon Johnson who looked back to African spirituals. Who can poets with disabilities look back to? Who came before? After high school, Miles encountered resistance when she wanted to attend UCLA. The dean of women advised against it.

“The dean said [...] I'd have to ask too many favors, and she thought it was right that I should go to a small college where I could be protected. So I was weeping heavily as I went out the gate. The cop had let me in, and so this cop—I guess he was waving us on, and then he sort of stopped and said, ‘What’s wrong? Why are you crying?’ I said, ‘Because the dean of women wouldn’t let me come here because I’d ask too many favors.’ He said, ‘What favors do you have to ask?’ The ones that were on my mind, of course, were very trivial. It was just a matter of registering. I said, ‘I'd have to stand in line to get registered, and I'd have to get permission to drive on campus.’ He said, ‘You get somebody to stand in line for you, and I'll let you drive on campus’” (38).

Miles experiences predate the Disability Rights Movement. And while that movement brought changes to public policy, issues of access are not entirely resolved. Likewise, the attitude that the disabled “ask too many favors” remains widespread.
I'd like to consider a poem from Miles’ final collection *Coming to Terms*. Prior to this collection, Miles’ work engaged the quotidian details of life—in such poems as “Market Report on Cotton Gray Goods” and “Apartment” and “Shade.” She seems like the granddaughter of Wordsworth by including fragments from everyday speech in her poems. In *Coming to Terms*, Miles presents her disability along with her usual touchstones of everyday life.

Before

Earlier, what I remember: a small
Flame of arthritis in the midst of fields
In the Euclidian Sunday mustard fields
And the mud fields of the potted palm,
In Jackie's airy room;
And at the fire station
All the brass
And all of us
Feeding the gulls.
A fresh salt breeze and foam
Around a plaster leg.

Away from the chloroform intern, joy
Of the long journey when I ran
Free of the plaster, and got back
Down those long hills, spent out.
Where had I been, oh tell me.
And where
Under those vast sunny
Apricot trees in the front yard?
Go tell Aunt Rhodie the old gray goose is dead.

The first stanza of the poem moves from place-to-place, from the “mustard fields” to the “mud fields” to “Jackie’s airy room” to the “Fire Station” and to the beach with “[a] fresh salt breeze.” We have sensory language. The “flame of arthritis” calls to mind a kind of pain that burns. The “mustard fields” are visually bright yellow. The last line of the first stanza centers these sensations, and movement from place-to-place, “[a]round a plaster leg.” We can deduce from the first stanza that the speaker is remembering a mixmash of places and sensations. The pain of arthritis is introduced early in the poem but we don't
know of the “plaster leg” until the last line of that stanza. The second stanza begins: “Away from the chloroform intern, joy.” Chloroform was a type of anesthetic used to induce unconsciousness so that doctors could perform surgeries. Chloroform had side effects, such as dizziness. I can see one interpretation of the first stanza as a chloroformed stanza, a dizzy stanza, wandering from place-to-place. Where are we? Which field? Why are there gulls in our Fire Station? O, we’ve moved on to a different scene from memory. In the second stanza, “[a]way from the chloroform,” the speaker runs “free of the plaster.” I like the interrogative line, “Where had I been, oh tell me,” which I read as less of a question to the reader—no question mark—and more of an internal struggle. Rather than, “[Reader] Where had I been, oh tell me” I interpret the line as “Where did I go? Where had I been when the chloroform worked its spell? Oh tell me.” Anyone who has been under anesthesia knows that it’s a strange and self-fragmenting process: by self-fragmenting, I just mean that you can’t be sure of who you are, or where you are, or what has happened, when you wake from anesthesia. So naturally, the speaker’s tone is one of distress. The speaker goes to the natural landscape, the wide open, “those vast sunny / Apricot trees.” She escapes. The most peculiar line in the poem is the last: “Go tell Aunt Rhodie the old gray goose is dead.” Is this a directive to the reader? But where is Aunt Rhodie? And what is the old gray goose? On a literal level, the line comes from a traditional folk song. On a metaphorical level, the “old gray goose” is the speaker’s other self, wherever she had been, where she could not run around nor get “back down those long hills.”

I hope that I have not segregated the poem too much nor limited it from alternative interpretations. The poem continues to keep things from me. For example, I’m not sure what’s meant by “Euclidean Sunday.” What is Euclid, the Greek mathematician and Father of Geometry, doing in the poem? What does he have to do with Sunday? I’m also intrigued by the poem’s title. Before what? I can read “before” as this-happened-before-
that happened but I'm not sure of the pivotal event and I don't want to assume that event to be surgical. Does Miles' poem offer a composite as Phillips suggest poems of identity should? The speaker of the poem is a child and a niece and disabled. Miles “scatters the particulars” in that she does not make the “plaster leg” the only thing the poem is about. The poem seems much more about a fragmentation of self. For comparison's sake, I'd like to look at “The Cripple in the Subway” by Louise Glück.

**ABLE POET INSPIRED BY THE DISABLED:**
**DIALOGUE BETWEEN LOUISE GLÜCK AND “THE CRIPPLE IN THE SUBWAY”**

“The Cripple in the Subway” comes from Glück’s 1969 collection *Firstborn*. Here is how Kirkus describes the subject material of *Firstborn*: “She [Glück] deals in wastelands ... the lost lives of cripples ... the hopeless and loveless.” The language of the review—“cripples” are “lost” and “hopeless” and “loveless”—reinforces the eons-old tragic role of the disabled. Will Glück move beyond this tragedy or will she (like Wearing) reify the construct of the disabled as both fascinating and pitiable?

The Cripple in the Subway

For awhile I thought I had gotten
Used to it (the leg) and hardly heard
That down-hard, down-hard
Upon wood, cement, etc. of the iron
Trappings and I'd tell myself the memories
Would also disappear, tick-
ing jump-ropes and the bike, the bike
That flew beneath my sister, froze
Light, bent back its
Stinging in a flash of red chrome brighter
Than my brace or brighter
Than the morning whirling past this pit
Flamed with rush horror and their thin
Boots flashing on and on, all that easy kidskin.
The single stanza poem never moves away from its primary subject. As much as Glück tries to couch the subject in a parenthetical—“(the leg)”—it might as well be in bold. “We are talking about a fake leg here, folks,” the poem says in an almost conspiratorial tone to its able audience, both the readers of the poem and the fellow riders of the subway.

There is something voyeuristic, and perhaps fetishistic, about the speaker’s appetite for discussing the leg and the accident. “For a while I thought I had gotten used to it” the poem begins, as if to say, “I wasn’t always like this, really, I was better once, and didn’t obsess as much.” Look at the way Glück uses the word “tell”: “I’d tell myself the memories / would also disappear.” These are poorly imagined lines. “I’d tell myself that I would forget all about being slammed into by a car,” the speaker tells herself. Who believes this speaker? But wait! Are we sure the speaker in “The Cripple on the Subway” was involved in a car accident? We are not. We know a “bike” is involved. We know that bikes alone cannot cause the amputations of legs. Nor can jump-ropes. We have “the morning whirling past” and “rush horror” and “thin boots flashing on and on.” But we do not know what led to the “plaster leg” of Miles’ poem, so why do we demand to know what led to “(the leg)” of Glück’s poem? The impetus of Glück’s poem is the accident. There is nothing more. The sister has no name. The speaker has no other interest than to tell us that she is a cripple, that there was an accident with a bike, and “all that easy kidskin.” The last line, tonally, sounds like “that’s all it was.” The speaker’s mind is made up about her (or is it his?) disability. When I first read the poem I thought “kidskin” was a rather mysterious word to end the poem. It sounds like “kid’s / skin” for one thing, and I did not know what it meant beyond that sound. Kidskin is 1) leather made from the skin of a young goat and 2) gloves. The puzzle is not that puzzling.

I wonder what we think of Glück’s poem? Certainly Glück isn't alone in personifying disability (Bidart's *Book of the Body* gives us plenty of examples as well). Why do able poets
write from this perspective? Glück’s poem, as well as Wearing’s Homage, attempts to “walk in someone else’s shoes.” Unfortunately, the walk says more about the able poet/artist than the disabled experience. Perhaps poets write from the disabled perspective as a way of sussing out their own fears about disability, difference and mortality. Ultimately we will all be disabled in an eternal sense. Perhaps poets see someone, or witness something, and are mused into a poem. Perhaps poets go to disability for the assumed emotional weight it brings to a poem. It seems to me that the emotional weight, rather than coming from the disabled persona, comes from the able audience’s reaction to the disabled persona.

Before I began seeking poems written from a disabled perspective, I found plenty of poems written on the subject of disability, and in persona, from an able perspective. I can hardly pick up a journal or collection of poetry without coming across blindness or deafness or madness as metaphor. I used to count the number of “phantom limbs” that cropped up in poems; the phantom limb is typically a metaphor for the loss of a loved one. This has always struck me as funny because my phantom limb is ticklish rather than painful. When I had a colleague read this paper, she commented that one of her writing teachers actually used the term “phantom limb” as a way to describe the writing process. It was the same writing teacher who was African American and objected to the metaphorical use of the word “dark.”

In an essay titled “Feminist Disability Studies,” Rosemarie Garland-Thomson notes the “major aim of all of my work in both literary and feminist studies is to show that the always overdetermined metaphoric uses of disability efface and distort the lived experience of people with disabilities, evacuating the political significance of our lives and mitigating the influence of disability culture.”
POET WITH A DISABILITY Responds to Able Poet: Postcards to Marie (Howe) After Reading “The Star Market”

In the final conversation between artists on the topic of disability, I will first give the text of Marie Howe’s poem “The Star Market.” The poem appeared in the January 14, 2008 issue of The New Yorker before being published in her most recent collection The Kingdom of Ordinary Time. Howe, by publishing the poem, starts the conversation. Then I will analyze the poem, as objectively as possible, before closing with a few Postcards to Marie. Here is the poem.

The Star Market

The people Jesus loved were shopping at The Star Market yesterday.
An old lead-colored man standing next to me at the checkout breathed so heavily I had to step back a few steps.

Even after his bags were packed he still stood, breathing hard and hawking into his hand. The feeble, the lame, I could hardly look at them: shuffling through the aisles, they smelled of decay, as if The Star Market had declared a day off for the able-bodied, and I had wandered in with the rest of them: sour milk, bad meat:
looking for cereal and spring water.

Jesus must have been a saint, I said to myself, looking for my lost car in the parking lot later, stumbling among the people who would have been lowered into rooms by ropes, who would have crept out of caves or crawled from the corners of public baths on their hands and knees begging for mercy.

If I touch only the hem of his garment, one woman thought, I will be healed. Could I bear the look on his face when he wheels around?

What happens in this poem? The speaker goes to an imagined grocery store, “The Star Market,” to shop. In the checkout line, “an old lead-colored man” disgusts her. The man breathes so heavily he forces the speaker to “step back a few steps.” Once the rebarbative man has finished his business of checking out, he continues to stand there, much to the
annoyance of the speaker. Then the speaker looks around and notices that everyone, except her, is disabled. It was “as if The Star Market had declared a day off for the able-bodied.” In other words, she is alone among the disabled. She is surrounded by “the feeble, the lame.” The language of “feeble” and “lame” is both Biblical—the poem begins with “Jesus”—and the language of eugenics: many individuals labeled “feebleminded” were sterilized in the 20th century. A strong sense of smell pervades the poem. “The feeble, the lame” smell “of decay” and “sour milk” and “bad meat.” The milk and meat metaphors define “them.” Howe writes, “I wandered in / with the rest of them: sour milk, bad meat.” “They” are the metaphors. Let’s take a closer look at those metaphors. The “sour milk” and “bad meat” are expired: expired foods are dangerous; drinking or eating them can cause nausea and food poisoning and even death. In the fourth stanza, the speaker thinks: “Jesus must have been a saint.” Is this a joke? If one believes in Jesus, than He is beyond saintly; He is God. Or is this a sincere thought? The speaker “stumbles” to her car as she considers the pitiable position of the disabled—“lowered into rooms by rope” and “crept out of caves”—in Biblical times.

In the last couplet, the speaker imagines what a disabled woman might have thought about touching the hem of Jesus’ garment. The language of the couplet echoes most directly Mark 5:28 (NIV): “because she thought, ‘If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed.’” In the Biblical version, the woman, who had been bleeding for twelve years, is instantly healed, and Jesus, sensing that someone has just touched him, turns around and says, “Who touched my clothes?” To go back to our poem: it’s significant that the action of the poem takes place in the present-day rather than in Biblical times. There is a grocery store with a checkout. There are cars in the parking lot. So the poem is less an exploration of the story in Mark and more an exploration of the speaker’s thoughts on disability. Going back to the idea of sincerity—Can this poem be for real? And by for real I mean sincere?
Are these really the thoughts of an able person upon encountering disabled people? They stink and encroach upon an able person’s space? As much as I would like to read the poem as insincere, I cannot help but place it in the context of other sincere poems from *The Kingdom of Ordinary Time*. We have the following lines—

“My sister told me that when she was giving birth ...” (19)
“What is the difference between a self and a soul?” (23)
“My husband likes to watch the cooking shows” (25)
“I’m helping my little girl slide down the pole ...” (28)

—and so on. The poems are not experiments in tone. The tone is consistently sincere. So what to do, then, with the blatant disgust for the disabled that our sincere speaker shows? How to read it? Is it possible to read this poem as a condemnation of the first-person speaker’s stance? I think it would be a mistake to assume readers will side, not with the first-person speaker, but with the disabled. It would be a mistake to assume readers will condemn the speaker for the metaphors of “sour milk” and “bad meat” instead of thinking, along with the speaker, “O yes, that is a good way of describing the disabled.” The mistake is casting the disabled in their Biblical roles during a contemporary scene at the supermarket. The mistake is *not caring* about the disabled and their portrayal. The mistake is using metaphors, reminiscent of anti-Semitic propaganda, to describe the disabled, especially during the Age of the Genome. The mistake is the assumption that the reader of this poem will be able. These are the mistakes. I worry that I have become screedy. I would like to close with my postcards to Marie.

Dear Marie, Just read the poem. Felt like killing myself. Must mean it’s a good poem—right? Yours, Jillian
Dear Marie, I guess what I don’t understand is why the speaker seems so scared of them. And if she’s so scared of them, why doesn’t she just leave the supermarket?
Yours, Jillian

Dear Marie, Had a talk with a professor. She thinks the woman of the last couplet is, actually, the speaker. I wish this were true. But I think it’s a misreading. Yours, Jillian

Dear Marie, You creep me out. Yours, Jillian

Dear Marie, I’m sorry I keep getting angry. This isn’t productive for anyone. Yours, Jillian

Dear Marie, Today I took out all the words in your poem that invoke disability and replaced them with words that invoke race. So we have things like ‘The Blacks, the Negros, I could hardly look at them.’ I’m just saying. Yours, Jillian

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE: TOWARDS FUTURE CONVERSATIONS AMONG ARTISTS ON DISABILITY

Representations of the disabled remain, for the most part, stagnated in their legacy—that of “beauty” or “freak.” In her 1911 treatise The Man-Made World or Our Androcentric Culture, Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote: “It is no easy matter to deny or reverse a universal assumption.” Gilman believed “Art is human” and the most vital art “gives humanity consciousness.” The “universal assumption” I would like to see denied is that of the disabled in the old binaries. I would like to see art that does away with the old binaries and “gives humanity consciousness” of the disabled experience without exploiting or objectifying that experience. Disability in poetry and art exists within a discourse: all of this is part of a larger dialogue between the able and the disabled. This is not an end so much as a beginning. While writing the essay, I had to cut certain topics out of the
discussion. Such topics include—how we define “disability,” the romancing and fetishizing of the disabled body, and the idea of the celebrity amputee. I am not trying to start a revolution, but I would like to start a conversation. The disabled remain, for the most part, excluded. We are the “something else” that Grigely discusses in his Postcards to Sophie Calle. We are on “the sidelines” with Josephine Miles. While “American identity” now includes people of color, people of varying sexual orientation, and people of all genders, we prefer figures to have two legs, two arms, two eyes, two ears. Even when the figures are distorted, as early as Berenice Abbott’s Portrait of the Artist, we like the distortion because it’s a farce; it’s not real. I would like us to start including real physical difference—not out of fascination—but out of a genuine interest to give humanity consciousness.
WORKS CITED


