

Beauty is a Verb

THE NEW POETRY OF DISABILITY

edited by

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Jennifer Bartlett

PREFACE

(for Reginald Shepard)

For me, the idea for *Beauty is a Verb* can be pinpointed to one single moment, December 10, 2005, the day Norma Cole read at the Bowery Poetry Club for the Segue Reading Series. A few years earlier, after a stroke, Cole lost and regained her ability to speak. Now, she used her temporary aphasia and slurred speech to compose a poem that noted a list of words she could no longer enunciate. The result of her reading this work was alternately hilarious and devastating. Cole laughed at the ridiculous, yet utterly wrenching, situation of a poet losing words, and the audience laughed with her. Yet, it wasn't as simple as that. Although the audience laughed, they were also visibly uncomfortable. From the sophistication of Cole's work and her genius as a person, one can guess that this was no accident. Can an entire anthology be sparked by one reading of one poet; I am sure crazier things have happened in this world we called poetry.

After, I began to consider a series of questions. What did it mean to have a disability poetics? What was the history of the movement? What about poets, much like myself, who have a disability, but do not align themselves with identity poetry or the disability poetics movement? How do they fit into such a context, if at all? Shortly after, I was invited by Sheila Black and Michael Northen to participate in a panel exploring many of these ideas at the 2009 Associated Writing Programs Conference in Denver. Over cocktails, the idea of our anthology, this anthology, was born.

While *Beauty is a Verb* includes many views of disability, we hope to consistently consider the social model of disability. It is for this reason that we primarily chose poets who have a visible disability. In this the poets' difficulty becomes twofold: a struggle with physical limitations (which, in themselves, can be a construction) coupled with society's critique of the non-normative body. We mean to explore not only what it means to have a genre called "Disability Poetics," but to look at poetry influenced by an alternate body and how this intersection forms a third language. Hence, we include not only poets who created and embrace the disability/crip poetics movement but also those who might resist such a classification and have never been considered in that exact context.

There are absences in the collection: we did not include poets writing about HIV/AIDS or cancer. While these disabilities without a doubt fit into the social model, they could be arguably classified as illness. We also did not include alcoholism. As Michael Davidson notes, most poets could be looked at through a disability lens, even poets such as Robert Creeley, Allen Ginsberg and Robert Duncan—all of whom had vision problems of some variation. In addition, the collection tends to lean toward poets who are dedicated to publishing with independent presses: we did approach a few poets who publish with mainstream presses who declined to participate. Mainstream writers tend to reflect the predominant view of disability as tragedy. We wanted to avoid this norm not because it isn't valid, but because we are interested in investigating an alternative.

Beauty is a Verb is not, nor meant to be, a comprehensive collection. There are far too many wonderful American poets with disabilities, many of who are noted in Northen's essay, to create such a book of a reasonable size. Rather, we mean to provide a selection that explores a range of poetic sensibilities. The three editors come together from very different backgrounds: Black, a poet and academic, is a long-time New Mexican working within the vein of narrative poetics. Northen, in addition to being a poet, is founder and editor of the disability poetics journal *Wordgathering* and a scholar of disability poetics. My own work and considerations embody an experimental lyricism informed by so-called Language Poetry. We hope the range in poetry here will reflect our range in knowledge and aesthetic.

Individual sections reflect this aesthetic range. The division is a mix of chronological and stylistic order. The "Early Voices," all of whom are deceased, are poets with disabilities writing in the mid to late twentieth century. These poets generally avoid having a narrative of disability as the forefront of their poetics. This, particularly in the case of Miles, was perhaps not only an aesthetic choice, but the result of writing in a time when disability was utterly shunned. Previous to the 1960s, the common attitude tended to be that in the rare case where a person with a disability was successful in any field that the disability was deemphasized as much as possible.

The second section—"The Disability Poetics Movement" or crip poetry—emphasizes embodiment, especially atypical embodiment and the alternative poetics generated from that perspective, which challenges stereotypes and insists on self-definition. Although these poets by no means want to be *defined* by their disability, they create a narrative that speaks to and celebrates identity, and politics are often the focus of their

work. This section is not exclusively poets who align themselves with crip poetics. Jillian Weise, for example, strongly resists this label; yet her work also speaks to a celebratory narrative of the non-normative body.

The final two sections are more varied. Here are a number of poets who would be included in many different so-called schools if they aligned themselves at all. Many of these poets have not previously been explored through the lens of disability.

In “Lyricism of the Body” we gathered poets who, while still employing a narrative form to explore disability, do not necessarily make this the central focus of their work. Yet, many of these poets are heavily informed by the lyric poem and often use this lyricism to celebrate the non-normative.

“Language of New Embodiment” includes poets whose work is informed by experimentation. Instead of narrative, disability is manifested directly through physical connection to the writing. Rather than explaining an individual story, bodily condition is manifested through the form. This is exemplified when Cole writes words that she cannot pronounce, and Wolach makes poetry under fabricated situations of physical stress.

While focusing on disability, *Beauty Is a Verb* is made of poets who reflect on pressing issues of our cultural moment. These include the fragility of the body, the intersection of body and machine (or body and technology), the commodification of the body, and other questions looming on our late-capitalist event horizon about the very nature and being of beauty and function. Part of what is so energizing about considering the current landscape of disability poetry is the degree to which thinking about disability enlists or engages viscerally many concerns animating other current poetry movements from the New Formalists to the Gurlisque. Much of human consideration of time and mortality hinges around the body—how it ages, changes, gains and loses capacities. Questions of how, why, whether this is in fact necessary, go to the deepest center of what it means to be human. We hope our efforts and the efforts of our contributors will begin to address such questions.

Michael Northen

A SHORT HISTORY OF AMERICAN DISABILITY POETRY

In 1983, a brief article appeared in *Kaleidoscope* in which A. J. Baird, a scholar of medieval literature, condemned the current poetry written about disability as super-sentimental, self-pitying and eliciting superficial sympathy, a poetry that failed to rise to acceptable artistic standards and was deservedly ignored by mainstream literature. He put out a call for poetry about physical disability that was tough-minded and grounded in concrete, physical fact. The result was *Towards Solomon's Mountain*, published in 1986. While few of the writers in that volume went on to produce major collections, Baird's collection showed what disability poetry could be. It would not be an exaggeration to call the publication of *Towards Solomon's Mountain* the birth of disability poetry as a genre.

Of course, the writers in Baird's anthology were not the first American poets with disabilities to be published. Josephine Miles, Larry Eigner and Vassar Miller all had success with their writing, but had said little about their own bodies in their work. Because of this, Miles and Eigner, though known in literary circles, were overlooked by the first anthologies of disability writing.

Miles began writing in the 1930s when the public model for disability was Franklin D. Roosevelt, who hid his disability and projected an image of great capability. As a result of this climate, it was not until *Coming to Terms* in 1979—thirty-five years after the publication of her first book of poetry—that Miles directly refers to her own disability. At the beginning of that collection, she wrote ten autobiographical poems, among which several refer to her disability:

This is a hard life you are having
While you are young,
My father said,
As I scratched my casted knees with a paper knife.
By laws of compensation
Your old age should be grand.

The poetry of Larry Eigner, who is often associated with Charles Olson's Black Mountain school, was brought to prominence by Robert Creeley. Because of his cerebral palsy, Eigner did almost all of his writing from what he could observe from his own front porch. To an even greater extent than Miles, his poetry is devoid of reference to his own body, but the limitations under which he wrote affected the content of his work and the unique sense of space he developed in his writing.

The Independent Living Movement, initiated by Ed Roberts in the 1970s in Berkeley, did a great deal to spur on interest in disability and writing about disability. Individuals with disabilities began to see themselves as members of a larger group asserting their rights like African Americans and women. In the mid-1980s two important anthologies of disability writing were published that began to cull these individual writings. The first, *Despite This Flesh*, was edited by poet Vassar Miller—whose own writing career was roughly contemporary with Eigner's and who, until the publication of her own *If I Had Wheels or Love* in 1991, kept her own disability out of her poems. What Miller did do in *Despite This Flesh*, however, was to offer up a collection by writers with disabilities designed to provide materials that could be used by teachers of literature. The second anthology, *With Wings*, edited by Marsha Saxton and Florence Howe, was a much more political mix of disability poetry and prose. It became a seed book for many disability writings that followed. Neither of these books, as important as they were, advanced the manifesto for disability poetry to the extent that Baird's book did; it was not until the 1990s that single-author books of poetry—other than those by Deaf writers—appeared that openly confronted the issues of disability.

The passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1992 seems to have presaged a watershed for disability poetry. Of the over three hundred poems in Miller's lifelong collection, *If I Had Wings or Love*, published in 1991, only three poems mention disability and only one, "Dramatic Monologue in the Speaker's Own Voice," gives a direct expression of the impact of that experience upon her as an adult:

I'm either a monster
in search of a horror movie to be in,
or else I'm a brain floating within a body
whose sides I must gingerly touch while
you glance discreetly away.

After the passage of the ADA, many outstanding books of poetry by writers with disabilities began to emerge: Karen Fiser, *Words Like Fate and Pain* (1992); Tom Andrews, *The Hemophiliac's Motorcycle* (1994); Floyd Skloot, *Music Appreciation* (1994); Kenny Fries, *Anesthesia* (1996); Dara McLaughlin, *A Map of This World* (1999), Stephen Kuusisto, *Only Bread, Only Light* (2000); and Jim Ferris, *The Hospital Poems* (2004). While there was great variety in these works, all writers agreed on two things—they eschewed sentimental poetry that made disability the object of pity or charity, and they rejected the image of the supercrip, the inspirational hero who overcomes insurmountable odds.

For two reasons, Kenny Fries may be the single most powerful representative of this group. First, his physical impairments are the greatest, and second, his physical impairments are the most observable. As a result, of all the writers in the above list, the body and the aesthetic of the body dominate his poetry the most. Interestingly *The Healing Notebooks*—which was originally published as a separate book in 1990 (i.e., before the ADA in 1992) and later resurfaced as the third section of *Anesthesia*—is the least graphic about his physical body. The poems deal more specifically with love, his feelings as a gay man and AIDS. Without prior knowledge, one would not know the nature of his disability or even that he had one. By contrast, the two later poems that he chose to put up front in *Anesthesia* hit one with a picture of disability immediately upon opening the cover. Such a move in this 1996 work points to an obvious shift in emphasis for Fries.

Such a move in this 1996 work points to an obvious shift in emphasis for Fries. In “Excavation” he says:

Tonight, when I take off my shoes:
three toes on each twisted foot.
I touch the rough skin. The holes
where the pins were. The scars.
If I touch them long enough will I find
Those who never touched me? Of those
who did? Freak, midget, three-toed
bastard. Words I've always heard.
Disabled, crippled, deformed. Words
I was given.

Not only does Fries put his own body out in public view—something that Eigner and Miller, much less Alexander Pope, given the cultural milieu in which they lived, never

could risk doing—he also questions the socially and culturally constructed nature of our concepts of beauty. Though Fries knows “No words unbend my bones. / Beauty is a two-faced god,” he ends the poems with the assertion:

So each night, naked on my bed, my body
doesn't want repair, but longs for innocence. If
innocent, despite the flaws I wear, I am beautiful.

In doing so, he rejects the moral blame for his situation, a blame that in the past was often attributed to those with disabilities. He is not asking to be fixed or made normal, thus rejecting the medical or rehabilitative model. He is asking instead for a redefinition of beauty and of the way that disability is perceived. He is at once an individual in his own particularities and part of a larger community asserting its right to self-definition.

Fries not only challenged social constructs of disability in his poetry, autobiography and personal essays, but also edited *Staring Back*, the first anthology of disability literature since *Toward's Solomon's Mountain* published in 1986 and the first to draw on the literary work of disability writers in the last decade of the twentieth century. Like Baird's work, *Staring Back* became a manifesto for disability literature and began to be widely used in college classrooms.

If Baird sounded the call for an honest, unsentimental poetry of disability and Kenny Fries showed how that call could be answered, Jim Ferris came up with the first book of disability poetry that could reasonably be called a best-seller: *The Hospital Poems*. Like Fries, Ferris puts the body, in particular, his body, right at the center of his poetry. “Poet of Cripples,” the leadoff poem in *The Hospital Poems*, is an anthem in Whitmanesque language that proclaims “let me be the poet of cripples.” Just as Whitman focused on his own body, attempting to eradicate the boundaries between himself and others, Ferris says to the average person who looks askance at the disabled: “Look with care, look deep. / Know that you are a cripple too. I sing for cripples; I sing for you.” By invoking Whitman in this opening poem, Ferris is able to align himself with the great American poet of the body and is able to plant the seeds for an aesthetic of disability. He is also able to center his poems within the context of the democratic spirit.

As the title suggests, Ferris focuses in on what the medical establishment and medicalization of the body does to a child who grows up in its throes. In doing this, Ferris recalls for the reader some of the models of disability, including the medical and charity

models, both of which make objects of the disabled person. For all who try to make disability the subject of their gaze, he says:

This world is not open to you—
leave now, trespassers, you who seek to gaze
on my humiliation.

Addressing the tendency to view the disabled as symbols, heroes who overcome adversity, he writes in the title poem of his second book, *The Facts of Life*:

We are not signs,
we do not live in spite of
or because of facts,
we live with them, around them, among

Of all the poets with disabilities, Ferris has perhaps worked the hardest to come up with a critical formulation of disability poetry. In his seminal essay *The Enjambed Body*, Ferris provided the first attempt at a disability poetry aesthetic. Though the emphasis is on atypical embodiment, he also seeks to link his work to canonical literary figures like Whitman, Gerard Manley Hopkins and Emily Dickinson, whose famous definition of poetry declared that poetry should make your body feel unbearably cold and your head feel as though it will physically blow off.

In a 2007 article in *Wordgathering*, Ferris offered the following formulation:

Disability poetry can be recognized by several characteristics: a challenge to stereotypes and an insistence on self-definition; foregrounding of the perspective of people with disabilities; an emphasis on embodiment, especially atypical embodiment; and alternative techniques and poetics.

Each of the poets with a disability who was able to get their writing into print during the 1990s and early years of the 2000s contributed a new perspective. Stephen Kuusisto's poetry was able to portray the perceptual imagery and daily experiences of a person who was functionally blind. Andrews' poetry captured the rhythms of a life with hemophilia. Fiser and Skloot wrote poetry that, in very different ways, examined the loss of memory that accompanied acquired disability. Patricia Wellingham-Jones' *Don't Turn Away* explored issues of disability in breast cancer.

Almost thirty years after Baird threw down the gauntlet, disability poetry is starting to take shape as a genre. In addition to *Kaleidoscope*, magazines such as *Breath & Shadow* and the *Disability Studies Quarterly* regularly publish poetry by writers with disabilities, and in March 2007, *Wordgathering* appeared, dedicating itself primarily to the publication of disability poetry. For the past eight years, the Inglis House Poetry Workshop has held an annual disability poetry contest and published chapbooks of the winning poetry. In 2010, the Associated Writing Programs conference in Denver, and in 2011, the Modern Language Association conference in Los Angeles, offered panels on disability poetry. Petra Kuppers has gathered her writing on the teaching of disability poetry into *Disability Culture Poetry: Pleasure and Difference*, making it, if published, the first collection of essays to focus strictly on disability poetry. The wheels are in motion.

Literary critic Robert Scholes has noted that when new forms of literature emerge they are often looked at askance by those with a vested interest in maintaining the current boundaries. This is true even of poetry, the genre that one might expect to be the most open to innovation. Like disability itself, however, poetry is a mutable body. Thankfully, we are past the days when Franklin Roosevelt, a president of the United States, could not bring himself to be seen below the waist in public—the climate in which Miles' first books of poetry appeared. Reading a poem that confronts issues of physical disability directly, if not commonplace, is at least no longer surprising; yet identifying oneself as a writer of disability poetry or even admitting the legitimacy of a body of work that could be called disability poetry itself is still a bridge that many poets themselves are reluctant to cross.

As the fledgling field of disability poetry develops, it is inevitable that some who deserve credit will be forgotten. Due to the work of scholars like Michael Davidson and Susan Schweik, part of that credit has been recovered. In the field of disability studies, Davidson's work on Eigner and Schweik's on Miles have helped to reclaim the work of important writers omitted from those first anthologies of the 1980s. Others writers are not so fortunate. Dara McLaughlin's explosive *A Map of This World*, a poetic manifesto that explored the directions a disability poetry might take, is out of print and almost unobtainable. Poet/playwright Paul Kahn published a number of individual poems addressing the artistic, social and political concerns of being a writer with a disability, but never amassed enough to be published in a book. Whether the efforts of McLaughlin's, Kahn's and others like them who contributed to what they saw as a gap in the poetry they read in print would have been recognized if they had lived longer can only be a conjecture, but they too are there, if barely visible, in the history of disability poetry.

There is still a long way to go before disability poetry gets the attention that it deserves. While the poets above show the increased tendency of poets with disabilities to view physical disability as a social construction, it should not be thought that the saccharine and paternalistic poems about disability have ceased to be written. Just as the charity and medical models of disability still hold sway in the American mind at large, they also continue in poetry about disability. The poetry of Mattie Stepanik is a case in point. Much to the chagrin of Disability Studies activists and scholars, the poems of disability that the average bookstore browser is most likely to run into belong not to Fries, Ferris or Kuusisto, but to Mattie Stepanik and his ubiquitous *Heartsong* series. This is not the place to explore how a commercial culture cashed in on Stepanik's disability and death. Suffice to say that Stepanik has become the new literary Tiny Tim hoisted on the shoulders of the American public to reinforce the stereotypes of the disabled as objects of charity and/or courageous heroes and heroines. That Stepanik's books and those like them occupy the space that could offer the works of the poets discussed here demonstrates just how important it is to support the work of these writers. It also shows how equally important is the selection of disability poetry by teachers and the importance of introducing students to these poets by incorporating their work into the curriculum. No matter how much critical acclaim writers like Vassar Miller may receive among the disability community or poetic literati, until their poetry gets into the hands of students and thence into a more general public of intelligent readers, they are likely to be viewed as marginal.

The volume you hold in your hand, *Beauty is a Verb: The New Poetry of Disability*, is an important step in helping to transform disability poetry from marginalia into part of the American text. The time is right for it. By scanning this anthology, noting the writers included, copying a poem that especially strikes you or observing the way the writers dialogue with each other in their essays by reference to each other's work, you are already making your own contribution to this transformation.

Many fresh faces are coming onto the American disability poetry scene. Among those are writers like Ona Gritz, Paul Guest, Laurie Lambeth, Daniel Simpson, Linda Cronin, Anne Kaier, Marie Kane and Liz Whiteacre, and Kathi Wolfe. Just as the Harlem Renaissance led to the development of African American literature and the 1960s to feminist literature, we are in a seminal period for the genre of disability literature. One day, perhaps, our children or grandchildren will look back at this decade, studying it in literature classes in the same way that we view the emergence of those other genres. It is an exciting time, and we have a chance to be in on the ground floor.