

Guest Editor's Note: A friend told me she had written a poem. "It's about Communication," she said, "of the individual experience of disability - including the scariest parts involving pain, death, etc." She sent it to me in an Email and I saw that the poem was also about self-knowledge and relationships and bodily experiences. "This poem admits," she wrote, "to the individual aspects of disability that we can't afford to forget, but that can be set aside in our rush to reveal the social issues." It seems that disability can sometimes force people into lonely islands. When we dare to sail to the mainland, or cross the political draw bridge to engage in social protests, we are often asked to leave the impairment at home. My friend's poem speaks to that conflict: "I see my own tendencies," Kay wrote, "to hide the most painful aspects of the disability experience from loved ones. Psychologically, I'm aware that [this] is partly a response to the 'gaze' always being directed at me as a conspicuously disabled person, [and] partly a way of negating the pity people offer by hanging tough, and partly not wanting to hurt those I care about with more bad news." I thought you would like to hear something of the soul that went into this poem.

Ten Years Gone

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"Part of it is this:" she could have said, "I love you because I am afraid,
and your friendship, those long moments when you are running the comb through my
hair,

is like that moment when I have not yet opened my eyes to the morning,
cannot even feel the pillow under my ear, but know you are breathing in a bed nearby,
and a half-dozen Mexican men sit silently with rakes
in the back of a pickup at the stoplight outside, and nothing seems to move.
Part of it is because when the traffic sighs into motion and I catch myself
listening to my body, from the feet up and the jawbone down,
its music of pain will be chorused with your chatter of Moby Dick, finished at last,
and how the professor, a small wiry man of sixty with a giant mustache,
is strangely sexual as he leans a shoulder on the wall, nodding at comments
from an eager housewife who's returned to the world of books
and questions that have no real need to be answered before dinner.

"Part of it is that I have faith you will cry, on no anniversary
of either my birth or death, running the seasons through your memory
thinking "Why is she here with me so terribly today?"

It is summer, our time of trading letters, we did not even see each other again until
August."

And you will laugh recalling how our wheelchairs and Anne's, from next door,
locked together one day in an explosive three-way miscalculation,
leaving three college women stuck and giggling
behind a locked door and yards from the phone.

"Long as we're here," Anne said, "anybody got any gossip?"

"Have you been Saved by The Lord?" I said.

"Let me read to you from my lovely essay on the white whale," you said.

And then the phone rang. And rang. And we sat laughing
through the outgoing message, something clever and stupid
we'd spent an hour recording, adding music.

"I love you because you will just barely let me,
and it will be a secret from you, how much, until I am gone.
You will remember the three-story hole in the quad at the center of campus,
covered now with grass and a lighthouse-shaped window to the underground library,
called "the nipple of knowledge" by some because it looks like a breast
emerging from the lawn. You'll remember how you lost yourself below it
among the books one day and missed dinner completely,
angry later that I waited at the cafeteria doors for an hour
when you were buried in the self-discovery of books.

"I love you," she could have said, "because I knew it would end like this,
my thirst for more a raw thing, never slaked, and you not even drinking
or seeing how hard it can be to hold the cup steady.
I love you because in ten years this will still hurt like yesterday,
my going and not saying all I could have said.
And I love you because you will, perhaps, learn what I could not,
so that when the cup grows heavy in your own hand
you will know to have someone else hold it,
and you'll have found a way to share both the liquid and the thirst."

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