

1.

Recently, I had a discussion online with Paul Guest about John Ashbery's use of the term 'invalid's rage' to describe Guest's work. Guest noted, "I prefer, often enough, the natural course of the river and in that the other phrases/terms are, for the most part, adjectival rather than nominative: handicapped, disabled, crippled, and so forth. Invalid, though, is, or can be read, solidly nourish." As the conversation developed, Guest wrote, "I don't think I have any particular responsibility to the world or to poetry, except to write as best as I can."

Guest is correct in his assertion – and he is not.

*This body is not a tragic body.*

*Unlike others, my weaknesses are on constant display.*

To be *human* means to have a responsibility. To be a poet means to be an examiner, a critic of the language.

*Joe Cornell's brother had it too*

*only then it was called*

*invalid or in valid*

Guest later writes, “Art’s main use is to entertain and inform.” Here, I realized we were speaking two different dialects. I would argue that the role of art is not to inform but to *trans*-form. The goal of poetry is not to entertain, but to *show*.

*the body wants and wants*

*it is this wanting that is*

*without end*

## 2.

In the film ‘Music Within’ Richard Pimentel, a father of the Americans with Disabilities Act, narrates, “It was at that point that I realized it was anger that was driving me.’ How to divide the anger or lividness from activism? How does one convince rather than alienate? How does one make others – and oneself – believe that a body’s difference is largely irrelevant?

*She asked how I make it up the stairs.*

*A more accurate question might be*

*how do I make it through this world?*

In my case, the day to day battle is not how to deal with the body’s movement, but the consciousness’s anger at the resulting experience. It is this discomfort that gives birth to poetry. Poetry is this space, this in between.

*how to get to the*

*that quiet that*

*is poetry*

As Helene Cixous says of the feminine voice or *écriture féminine*, “Write yourself. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth.” Similarly, I am considering a new language to describe the alternate body. Not what the so-called able-bodied society might call the flawed body, but an alternate one. Ultimately, this experience is no different from any other. All poets, all humans, are constantly attempting to find their own language within the prescribed one. The language that describes our particular condition and my condition is no more or less than that – particular.

In Jack Spicer’s Vancouver lectures on the topic of dictation, an audience member questions what, ultimately, makes the poem the poet’s own. Spicer responds, “You have the alphabet blocks in your room, your language, all of these other things which are yours which they [what Spicer calls the Martians, what others call the muse, what William Everson refers as God] want to say.”

### 3.

*Ornithology*

*Being disabled is not what you think.*

*Limitation exists only within the context of others*

*as the only language the body knows*

*is that which it tells itself.*

*Movement appears painful from a distance*

*when rather it is just the body reiterating itself.*

*Like one of da Vinci's hopelessly grounded things*

*these limbs make a contortionist out of me,*

*lifting my one good wing from the sidewalk*

*I unfold finally, cinematically,*

*after a winter of wordless birds.*

I asked my first-year composition students to respond to this poem as part of a unit on poetry, humanity and the nature. Other poems included 'Wild Geese' by Mary Oliver and St. Kevin and the Blackbird by Seamus Heaney. One student responded, "Bartlett immediately explains that 'limitation exists only within the context of others/as the language the body knows/is that which it tells itself.' These three lines speak a whole volume of truth, as what is limitation except a human-defined word to explain a disadvantage as compared to a preset standard?"

*Aren't we all damaged human forms?*

Finally a student wrote, "Our minds are the most important aspect that only the individual can have and cherish, and Bartlett recognizes this as she '[lifts her] one good wing from the sidewalk/[and unfolds] finally, cinematically,/after a winter of wordless birds.' She understands that there is more to the self than the physical body, and her metaphorical unfolding occurs after a cold winter consciousness of her supposed disability, and segues into a hopeful springtime of flourishing."