

Kin

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For all my kin

Growing Pains

I didn't know I was disabled.
I thought everyone went home
and sat in their wheelchairs.

*

The extra pair
of boxers and trousers
in the back of my school bag.

*

A fight in the playground,
he kicks my leg,
hits the splint. I smile.

*

The black woman in the mobility scooter
ruffled my spiky hair. She was the first
to see me, not the chair.

*

The old man in the electric wheelchair
joking outside the hospital toilets
'Don't go taking this for a ride.'

*

My parents give me a bear
with a lab coat and thermometer
from the hospital gift shop.

*

The first kiss and she says
'I'm surprised
you can kiss.'

*

'Why do you like the hospital?'
'Nobody stares at me here.'

I Have a Literal Mind

Dad tells me to pull my socks up
and I yank them till they rip.

A teacher says take a seat,
I pick up the chair and walk out.

The Difference Between a Dog and a Biscuit Tin

It's Boxing Day and I'm nearly ten and a half.
I got the camouflaged Action Man for Christmas.
I told Mum I wanted to open it on my own,
but my special scissors won't cut the plastic.
Just as I start to stick my tongue out and sweat,
Mum calls my name from the front room.
I shuffle down the stairs on my bum.
Mum says I should use the stairlift.
She taps me on the shoulder and says
'Look at the telly! This film's got a boy like you.
See? He even flaps his hands like you. He's called Kyle.'
On the screen a man and a woman stand
in a kitchen that looks bigger than ours.
Her scarf is the same colour as my blue badge.
The man rubs his face with his big hands and says
*Whatever happened Nic, whatever happened to us?
Kyle happened.* Mum tells me to pay attention
but the screen's too bright. The man is now standing
in front of a house that posh people have.
He shouts too loudly, *For God's sake it's autism,
he doesn't know what love is.
He can't tell the difference
between a dog and a biscuit tin.*
Mum pulls my hands from my ears
and points toward the person she thinks I am.

Notes

'Kin' owes a debt to Ona Gritz' wonderful poem, 'We Are Everywhere', which appears in her debut full collection, *Geode* (Main Street Rag: 2014).

'The Spastic's Guide to Sex' couldn't have existed without Jillian Weise's poem, 'The Amputee's Guide to Sex'. Thank you to Weise, and to the hundreds of disabled poets who have made my work possible.

'The Night Before My PiP Tribunal I See My Dead' is for all my friends who died benefit-related deaths. It is estimated that over 120,000 people have died as a result of austerity. At least sixty-nine suicides have been linked to the Department of Work and Pensions. In 2016, the UN reported that the Tories had created a 'human catastrophe' which has led to 'grave and systematic' violations of disabled people's human rights. At the time of writing, there is a call for a public enquiry into benefit-related deaths. If you want to know more about how it feels to exist as a disabled person in Tory Britain, I would recommend the following three books. They're heart-breaking but necessary reads:

Stef Benstead, *Second Class Citizens: The Treatment of Disabled People in Austerity Britain* (Centre for Welfare Reform: 2019)

Frances Ryan, *Crippled: Austerity and the Demonization of Disabled People* (Verso Books: 2019)

Ellen Clifford, *The War on Disabled People: Capitalism, Welfare, and the Making of a Human Catastrophe* (Zed Books: 2020)

Acknowledgements

My thanks to the editors of the following magazines and anthologies where some of these poems first appeared, often in earlier versions: *The Dark Horse*, *The North*, *Sick Magazine*, *Zoomglossia*, and *We've Done Nothing Wrong*. *We've Nothing to Hide: The Verve Anthology of Diversity Poems*.

An earlier version of 'How to Wheel' won third prize in Verve's 2020 Poetry Competition, on the theme of diversity. Thank you to Andrew McMillan for judging the competition and editing the subsequent anthology. Thanks to Stuart Bartholomew for running Verve with such cool, unrattled aplomb. 'I Have a Literal Mind' was a poster in the loos of the Cut Arts Centre. Thanks to the Poetry People for producing the poster, and to the Cut for putting poetry on the walls.

My deepest thanks to Gerry Cambridge, who saw many of these poems in their more unruly versions, and provided immensely helpful edits and commentary.

In the early days of the pandemic, Liz Berry offered to send writing prompts to people who were shielding. Her prompt booted me into writing 'Dear Legs'. The poem simply wouldn't have existed without Berry's gentle nudge in the right direction, and without that prompt, this book wouldn't have an ending.

If it wasn't for a writing workshop that I attended in Year 10, I would never have picked up a pen at all. Thank you to Dean for leading that workshop, and to the Leiston High English Department for bringing a bunch of rural kids to poetry.

Thank you to Dean and Naomi, who commented on these poems at every stage of their development. You both suffered through many, many truly awful poems from me to get to this point. You both saw the potential in

strangled drafts. For as long as I've been a poet, you've both supported my work. I'm always grateful that you two saw something worth persevering with in my poems. Thanks isn't a big enough word.

Many generous hearts were instrumental in making me the person who could write these poems. To Ms. Humphrey, the best SENCO anyone could ask for. 'First Meeting' is as much your poem as it is mine. To Mr. Kennedy, for making detention the first place where I could think. To Miss Kenny, Ms. Smith, and the entire Leiston High English Department, for encouraging me, always. You all said I would have a book one day, and it seems you were right! This one's for you.

Cheers to Dave, even though we never talked about poetry, our many coffees laid the groundwork for these poems.

A great deal of these poems began in the Cut Loose writing workshop, run by Michael Laskey and Dean Parkin. Thank you to Michael and Dean for creating such a rich, generative space for writing, and cheers to the Cut, for being such a vibrant local hub of poets and artists.

All the poems collected here have benefited from the keen, careful and thorough criticism of the East Suffolk Writing Workshop Group. These poems would have been baggier, shoddier pieces of work without your help. Thank you all for helping me be the best poet I can be.

Thank you to the many people who read this manuscript and offered extensive commentary: Michael, Dean, Naomi, Lucy, Steve, Polly, Hannah, Rob, Flo, Elspeth, Martin and Clive. Regardless of whether I took your suggestions on board or not, all your comments helped me know the poems better. Thank you all for your deep engagement with these small poems.

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to Kim Moore for seeing something in my little poems, and for judging the New Poets Prize amidst a global pandemic.

Thank you all, dear generous hearts. None of this would have been possible without you.

Finally, thank you, dear reader. A poem is only complete when it finds a reader. Thank you for completing these poems.

Thank you so much for reading this pamphlet. If this is your first encounter with disabled poetry, you might want to read more. Disabled poetry has never been more vibrant, searching, global and alive. Because I could happily quadruple the length of this pamphlet just by recommending books, here are just a few recommendations of where to start reading disabled poetry. If you want to learn more, or if you're looking for something specific, get in touch with me on Twitter: @inadarkwood

Tilling the Hard Soil: Poetry, Prose and Art by South African Writers with Disabilities, ed. Kobus Moolman (University of KwaZulu-Natal Press: 2010)

Beauty is a Verb: The New Poetry of Disability, eds. Jennifer Bartlett, Sheila Black & Michael Northen (Cinco Puntos Press: 2011)

QDA: A Queer Disability Anthology, ed. Raymond Luczak (Squares & Rebels: 2015)

Stairs and Whispers: D/deaf and Disabled Poets Write Back, eds. Sandra Alland, Khairani Barokka & Daniel Sluman (Nine Arches Press: 2017)

Imaginary Safe House, eds. Shane Neilson, Roxanna Bennett & Ally Fleming (Frog Hollow Press: 2019)