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Ramped Soapbox

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RAMPED SOAPBOX

by
Alyssa Marie Radtke

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford
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Approved by

Advisor: Professor Chiyuma Elliott

Reader: Professor Melissa Ginsburg

Reader: Professor Beth Ann Fennelly

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To Mom—

Thanks for laughing, even when you felt like crying.

Love you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks so very much to Dr. Chiyuma Elliott for making me finally put ideas on paper. You're a chipper kind of evil.

Thanks and hugs to Sydney, Austin, Breena, Keri, and Rose for being there in the midst of so many of these stories and for letting me ramble about poetry at obscene hours of the morning. But, more thanks for telling me to "get over myself and write." Multiple times.

Dad and Bro, thanks for three years' worth of cheerleading.

ABSTRACT
RAMPED SOAPBOX
(Under the direction of Chiyuma Elliott)

This is a collection of mostly autobiographical disability poetry.

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The Cosmos by Analogy

“Time was...when the human body was of paramount importance as an exemplar...[e]verything else—society, the environment, the cosmos was explained by analogy with the workings of the human body: the body was good to think with. In time, the extensions of man (civilizations, technology, the exploration of Nature came to dwarf the body...and man ceased to be the measure of all things.”

—Roy Porter, “Bodies of Thought: Thoughts about the body in Eighteenth-Century England”

Industrial language might now dominate human understanding of the world, but the body is still “good to think with.” It is, after all, the thing through which the world is filtered and understood. This fundamental element, though, raises an interesting issue—not all bodies are the same, differing in size, shape, sex, and ability. Because of this, embodied empathy is sometimes quite hard to come by, leading to interpersonal and poetic difficulties.

Language, at its best, has the power to unite people in understanding. “At its best,” though, is the operative phrase. If I were to simply say “Philip Dowd has cerebral palsy (CP),” for example, my audience (or reader) may only be able to glean that Dowd has a disability, if they have vaguely heard of the medical condition. They might not be able to guess at the nature of the condition, unless they know someone else who has the condition (or Dowd, himself).

However, CP is elemental to Dowd and so is a major element of his work. So, how does a poet writing about bodies, disability, and difference move an audience from vague acknowledgement to complex understanding? Dowd, a disability poetics scholar,

uses lyrical language (which resists paraphrasing) and poetic form to explain his embodied state in “New/Unnamed”:

New/Unnamed

Cerebral palsy moves as in tides
Sometimes high, sometimes low,
And I must follow.

Tidally something cosmic
Moves through me
The comic
The forge
Haphaestus.*

My body changes
Patterns
Become
Shifting
Desert like
The sand and time.

Born again
With each muscular contraction,
The excitement
The challenge
The new me.
begins
*Greek god of fire and Volcanism was the artisan of
the gods and perceived disabled.

Form, as seen in “New/Unnamed,” can embody the content of a poem. In terms of disability, especially physical disability, such embodiment is paramount because the obvious visual cues of bodily difference are erased on the page. Here, form fills in some of the gaps that basic medical labeling and inability for all bodies to experience all things similarly create; it gives a reader a textual set of visual/metaphorical cues from which they can begin to derive the nature of Dowd’s cerebral palsy.

Dowd's piece is granted its liveliness and energy by its form, though it is technically free verse. Free verse poetry commonly eschews classical rhyme and meter schemes. In the absence of the guiding musicality of these classic elements, other poetic devices create a poem's rhythm. "New/Unnamed" uses sharp enjambment and unconventional punctuation to push an audience through Philip Dowd's *Ars Spasticus* — his artistic explanation of his experience of spastic cerebral palsy.

Dowd opens this poem with a fairly conventional start to any explanatory piece, a thesis:

Cerebral palsy moves as in tides
Sometimes high, sometimes low,
And I must follow.

This first tercet clearly establishes how Dowd is beholden to the fickle nature of his spastic CP. Beyond that, though, it is also the most conventional of his four stanzas. The first line is the poem's longest line in terms of word count—a total of six words. Dowd also allows complete thoughts to finish within each line of this stanza before turning into the next. The second line utilizes commas just where a reader would expect them, and the final line ends this grammatically correct thought with the anticipated period.

However, in the following two stanzas, Dowd's explanation gains powerful energy as his lines grow shorter and are forcefully enjambed. This newfound power is thanks in part to the sudden shift from a conventional-feeling tercet to these unconventional stanzas, which hint at the unpredictability of CP through irregular shifts in line and stanza length. The poem, in a sense, becomes as spastic as the disability it describes—brimming with sudden, sharp movement that pulls a body, or a reader, with

irresistible force. Essentially, Dowd is using highly controlled and intriguingly crafted stanzas to convey the uncontrolled, un-crafted energy of his CP.

By now, one could with good reason wonder why I am introducing my own writing with the extended analysis of another poet. The reason is truly simple. “New/Unnamed” was the first poem I ever stumbled upon that embodied disability. I have CP myself, and when I first found this piece as a sophomore in college embedded in Petra Kupper’s “Disability Culture Poetry: The Sound of the Bones. A Literary Essay,” all I could think was that Dowd had taken my constant companion, flattened her, and put her—or at least her inevitable energy—on a page. I was just looking for an article to analyze for a class project via a quick Google search of the phrase “disability poetry;” I used the article, but I was also thus introduced to the beautiful possibility of using the power of language distilled as poetry to articulate my own experiences in a disabled body. Unfortunately, though, this poem is the only piece I could ever find of Dowd’s work.

Disabled life, I have found, is extremely individual. Though I identify strongly with his poem and have a similar disability to Dowd, I have no doubt that his particular disabled experience differs substantially from my own. However, “New/Unnamed” serves as a poetic example of a well-known motto of the Marines that seems tailor-made for the disabled community: “analyze, adapt, overcome.” But, how does poetic text embody the thought process of adaption—if the end result does not convey of some degree of overcoming? The answer, I think, lies within the concept of form, more specifically, form as metaphor/analogy. Adaption is idiosyncratic by nature and has no

pre-defined space to exist in when transferred from thought to page. Free verse, then, allows a poet to find their own way to explaining this fundamental tenet of disabled life.

However, I believe that the adaption of such life experiences to page requires some textual adaption as well. Text messages, news pieces and associated parody rebuttals, bastardized computer codes, and other non-literary forms can be productively enlisted in the making of poetry because employing such forms requires such adaption. This adaption then mirrors the experience of a disabled body navigating places constructed with the able-bodied in mind. In this way, form can transcend being an intrinsic metaphor within a poem and become a larger metaphor for life. It probably not surprising after this discussion of form, adaption, and embodiment, that many of the poems in my thesis are autobiographical as well as formally experimental. These pieces were all triggered by real-life events and musings, often recalled on the short walk home from work.

Something that I attempted to integrate my work—beyond the over-arching adaption—is humor. Philip Dowd, besides writing the single poem that launched a thesis, also gave an interview in *Wordgathering*, a journal of disability poetry and literature. In it, he especially emphasizes that the humor of disability is not often talked about or used. His words read like a personal challenge to me when I first happened across them:

WG: Philip, I want to thank you for taking the time to give us some perspective on your work in disability poetry - both your research and your own poems. Is there anything else you would like to add before we wind things up?

PD: We as disabled poets need to start exploring and exposing the humorous side of living with a disability. We have poems that explore the nasty, the stuff that has been swept away into the back of the cupboard. We need to do this but we need to

find a balance, to learn to write poetry that looks at disability with humor, or the message we give confirms the Pete Singers of the [world's] view that disability is too serious. Where are the humorous poems? I can name a few and have written some fluffy fun poems, like the "Poem to the Plates I Have Broken and the Ones I Will Break and Drop." The British are particularly good at this. We need a balance for every serious poem we write. We should at least try to write a couple of lines of humor, to balance the serious.

WG: Perhaps some of our readers will take up the challenge - well-written poems combining humor and disability. Thank you for the interview.

I am not entirely sure that I have risen to Dowd's challenge, as I think the bulk of the humor that found its way into my thesis is sarcastic. Largely, it is what I can only call "WTF? Humor" derived from reacting against the absurdity of situations involving my disability. My humor in this collection is mostly acidic, so though I delight in poking holes in people's "social scripts," surrounding the oh-so-terrifying moment of interacting with bodily difference, I do so a bit rudely. My tone is partly due to the retrospective nature of the bulk of these pieces. After all, I was shocked into silence (or blubbing, as the case may be) when more *forward* asked me what was wrong with me and especially when I was accused of attempting suicide. Here, I can be rude back with words honed to points by hindsight. Therefore, I cannot say that I wholly succeeded in helping to redress the serious/humorous imbalance that Dowd highlights in the excerpt from his interview. I can say, however, that I have used humorous elements in pieces to help further represent the fullness of disabled life.

The title of this short collection—"Ramped Soapbox"—comes from an autobiographical source, the advertisement that my family placed for me in my yearbook in my senior year of high school. This advertisement, too, has been adapted in this collection as "Post Scripts." The title is also a metaphor for the content of this collection.

The “soapbox” of this project is, at its heart, a platform to speak, to tell stories and rant about things that have been colored by my CP. The “ramp” hints at an adaption necessitated by disability induced wheelchair use, but it is also meant as a larger metaphor for the literary adaptations that poets invent and employ in order to make bodily experiences legible in a world full of human bodily difference.

A disabled body

is a whiteboard,
a header for a list of *wrongs*,
a diagram labeled
with Latinate derivatives.

A star chart
where symptoms are fathomed,
connected into constellations.

is a paper doll [folded,
then] flattened by
nearly anonymous description.

reveling in paper's way,
opaque, obvious.

PERL Poem

```
they_ask_question ( ) ;  
my $answer = bornlikethis ( ) ;  
stranger_response ( ) ;  
sub they_ask_question { “What’s wrong with you?” ;  
return ;  
}  
sub awkward { my $answer = <varybyaudienceandattitude> ;  
  if (!(!@*&)) {  
    mumble ‘$uh_cerebral_palsy or sigh’ ;  
    back_away “internalcurse” + oldanger;  
  }  
  if ((polite) { +confidence ‘$cerebral_palsy or stale_joke’ ;  
    smile “internalfiling” ;  
  }  
sub terminate {  
  die “Poem?” ;
```

Spasticity

Feeling something close as breath and as constant, too,
negates and necessitates a proper description:

*a form of muscular weakness typical of cerebral palsy,
-caused by damage to the brain involving reflex
resistance to passive movement of the limbs
and difficulty in initiating and controlling
-muscular movement*

My legs, with spastic syllables, dictate the runes
that mark my body. I'm left with a script
I can't decipher and can only say that my legs
are stiff as cadavers, rubber band rioting,
proving like Pinocchio's nose in lies.
I only have control over description;
my words ordering the internal
entropy of the collection
of taut chords that buzz within
my raucous instrument of a body.

I share this unmarshaled
asylum with the essences
of the last two lunatics
liberated from the Bastille
203 years before my birth,
so I know, like de Launay,
you can't stop such
rebellion with negotiation—

How To: Get to Your First Class 5 Minutes Late

- 1) Hear your first alarm.
- 2) Crack an eye open.
- 3) Hit snooze 3 times.
- 3) Open both eyes.
- 4) Check weather.
- 5) Drink the cold coffee on the nightstand.
- 6) Watch a YouTube video while gaining consciousness.
- 7) Pull the blankets back.
- 8) Grab the robe next to the bed.
- 9) Don it and tie.
- 10) Reach for canes.
- 11) Curse when you notice they're across the room.
- 12) Hold on to whatever feels sturdy to get them.
- 13) Use them to walk to the bathroom.
 - 13a) Curse the fact that you blocked your only walkway plugging in your wheelchair last night.
 - b) Collide with wheelchair.
- 14) Fall.
- 15) Crawl your way up using wheelchair as support.
- 16) If not seriously injured, continue to bathroom.
- 17) Waterworks.
 - 17a) If summer, shave appropriate areas.
 - b) If not, don't.
- 18) End waterworks.
- 19) Check that your products have rinsed out of your hair.
- 20) Resume waterworks until fully de-producted.
- 21) Grab towel.
- 22) Dry off.
- 23) Grab canes from towel rod.
- 24) Try to avoid the giant puddle on the floor.
- 25) Experience the rush of every slight every slip.

§ 35.151(b)(4)(ii)(C) Path of travel--safe harbor

the
Department
stated
public entities

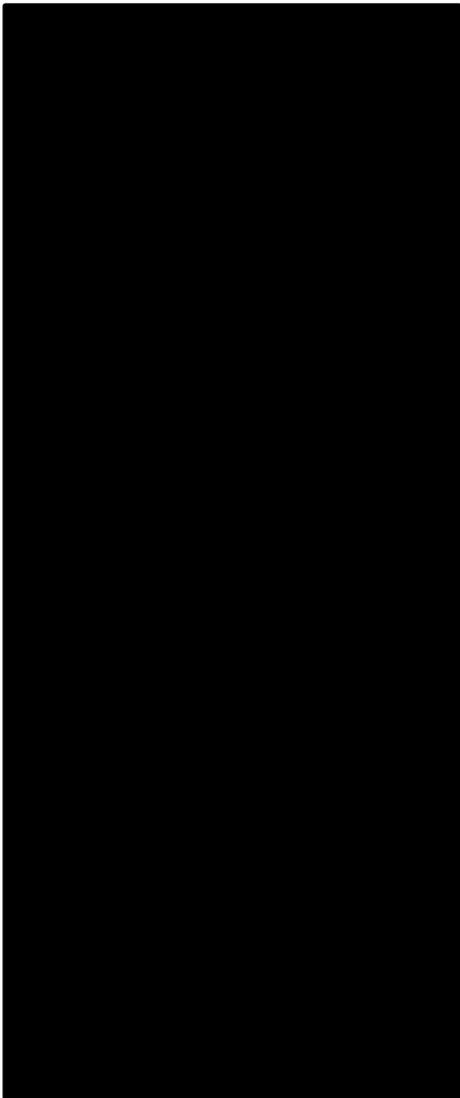
are

only
required to modify
to comply
if
is planning
alteration

The ADA is silent on the
issue of "grandfathering"

- 26) Grab robe and carefully put it on while balancing on the toilet.
- 27) Position self at sink.
- 28) Brush your teeth.
- 29) Comb product through your hair.
- 30) Scrunch and spray curls.
- 31) Walk over to bed area.
- 32) Grab weather relevant clothing from piles.
- 33) Check if all clothing is clean.
- 34) Sit on bed.
- 35) Take off robe.
- 36) Fight with bra clasp.
- 37) Dress upper half.
- 38) Use hands to marshal legs into underwear
- 39) and pants.
- 40) Stand.
- 41) Fight with button and zipper.
- 42) Locate shoes.
- 43) Sit.
- 44) Force uncooperative feet into socks/shoes.
- 45) Check time.
- 46) Make-up?
 - 46a)hint: not unless you're dressed up.
- 47) Grab canes.
- 48) Walk over to wheelchair.
- 49) Unplug wheelchair from charger.
- 50) Place canes on bed's footboard.
- 51) Transfer to wheelchair.
- 52) Accessorize as needed.
- 53) Check time. Shit.
- 54) Unplug phone.
- 55) Double check location of your ID card.
- 56) Run.
- 57) Arrive at designated building's handicapped entrance.
- 58) Pound the door button a few times to find the sweet spot.
- 59) Grumble.
- 60) Give up.
- 61) Fight with and hopefully open the door.
- 62) Find the elevator.

- 63) Press relevant button.
- 64) Curse architect.
- 65) Get in elevator.
- 66) Press desired floor.
 - 67a) Forget if "GR," "G," "1," "1F," or "1R" is the desired "basement."
 - b) Press at least 3 before your remember.
- 67) Ride and exit elevator.
- 68) Find classroom.
- 69) Scan for an open spot.
- 70) Wrestle with empty chair until
 - 70a) someone notices and helps
 - a1) Say something about the "chairs always winning" or the "wheelchair feng shui being off"
 - b)or you succeed in clearing the wheelchair space by yourself because no one else sees.
- 71) Pull in.
- 72) Turn off wheelchair.
- 73) Pull out class materials.
- 74) Realize you've forgotten something.



Practical Trivia

Ma, guess what.

[After waiting 5 minutes, I realize
'pestering toddler' is not a good tack.]

At the trivia competition today,
the moderator asked, "What
piece of civil rights legislation
was passed in July 1990?"

The Americans with Disabilities
Act, right?

Right, well, I was the first person
to buzz in with the answer...think
I was the only one who knew it.

Great! Your wheelhouse.

Worse, after the round, he found me.
Said sorry...for "voicing his
assumptions" and that "there was "no
reason I should know that."

Your response?

"Who else would?" and a WTF look.

I'm Gonna Pray for You

Not because of, but in spite of your disability,

you're going to become part of my conversation with God.

I'm gonna ask that God give you strength and fortitude for your battle
as you roll through the Walmart parking lot.

I'm going to pray that he gives you tangible peace as the auditorium
darkens before a concert.

I'm praying that He will rewire your brain so that you have a miracle
I can use to prove my own faith in debates with my friends.

I don't know your name, 'cause we've just met, but you'll remember mine,

because you never forget someone who scares the Hell out of you.

Tools	for	Life Symptoms
A new prescription	for	chronic manifestations of a nebulous future
An old prescription	for	clockwork riots
A phone call	for	classification of that New Pain, not yet benign
Jeans	for	coverable continuity marks
Concealer	for	constantly visible ones
Rain boots	for	comfortable luck
Coffee	for	consciousness
A wheelchair	for	kinesthetic projection

Self-Portrait as a Frustrated Cigarette

Ugh. Physical Final Exam
in Health 2day!

20 years since ADA and I
get to use a hand bike
alone in a room.

Accommodation!?! Gah!

You've come a long way,
baby.

What am I, a Virginia
Slim?

White Noise to the Tune of Red Ink

Life's a punk song today
loud red shouts
Plath's tulips
or Holland's
(it was supposed to be
Italy, the classic essay
for new grief-rav disability
parents says)
I've been the Flash and
my chair's dead red for it
Getting up to go to bed
I fall into my chair's
right wheel and get
a burning strawberry
That's what I get
for editing late
Oi!

For A Summer Camper's Mother

You reluctantly believed the doctors
pessimistic fortune tellers who read your
son's low muscle tone like upturned palms
and labeled it "Athetoid Cerebral Palsy"

They gave a pyrrhic litany
"He might never..."
listing basic skill after basic skill
Sports he probably wouldn't play
words he might not say

The "maybe" of their careful phrasing
caught you like a latch as old dreams
for him—now precious vapor
danced with tea steam and
the leaves of your drink shaped
themselves into your question of

FUTURE?

Desperate for an answer
you turn to therapists
oracles who deliver tarot
of strict regimens
and effort

They are the accountants of the battle
their phrasing is only concrete
in the way it seeks to make the
doctors' "possible" more probable

Dreams are not their currency
They can't help you condense
your evaporating
hopes for your four-year-old

I was fifteen that summer
working as a counselor
with the opposite muscle tone:
stiffness to his floppiness
high to his low

Just the same we stand
under the same umbrella

diagnosis—you nervously shared
your question in its myriad forms

FUTURE?

SUCCESS?

ACCEPTANCE?

INDEPENDENCE?

Hoping for the Delphic answers of
the high-functioning

but getting instead only my
nearsighted stutters.

Relativity

“Normal” is like gravity;
it varies by size, scope,
and interaction.

My normal is lunar—tidal,
cyclic. I exist somewhere
between baby steps

and giant leaps. I walk
with four legs, roll on four
wheels. Never more than

one free hand. My brother’s
normal is sunshine: profound
and bright, often blinding.

He slides on the spectrum
of imp and angel, has a laugh
that sparkles like morning

rays on dust motes. Dad’s
normal is mercurial, all
(contained) quicksilver. He

shifts songs and moods
as he types in his cavernous
office upstairs, near the

heat. Mom’s normal is
terra firma. She is steady
even as she spins. Prefers

tasty greens and fresh blues.
She keeps the chaos in order
for those that stand upon her

and with her. My family’s
normal is two wheelchairs,
hilarious spasms and odd

vocalizations. Sorry our strange
is pulling on yours; but
relativity is not just for relatives.

Sorting Books

A stranger says, Splenda-voiced, “scars tell stories.”

With a vast collection, my legs are a library.

And because I’m wearing shorts, she
seems to think I’m the public sort.

True, the entire Shaving Accident series
came in today—Ruby Tributaries is so
hot off the presses, it’s still burning
and leaving red winter trees on my shins—

but I’d rather she not rifle through for the
illustrated children’s edition of my first skinned
knee or the collection of sewing patterns donated
by the surgeon who failed Home Ec’s suturing unit.

She pulls the “Inadvisable PSA” pamphlet
from the dustiest alcove, reciting, in
her cough syrup tone, “It gets better, you know.
Your condition is no reason to attempt suicide.”

Suicide.

By cutting.

My shins. My...shins.

There are easier ways to ensure blood loss.

If you're new to the world of seated mobility aids...

You're going to have a view of every bipedal butt in a crowd
and your line of sight *will* mark their sways

This is awkward;

however, **DO NOT** question your sexuality.

According to most of the assembled asses, asking [thinking even]

“Does she know how well she fills out her skinny jeans?”

“Does he walk like that *on purpose?*”

Or even wondering on friendship—

“Can I figure out a way to hug that doesn't involve her
sticking her butt out for a mile?”

is the epitome of mental masturbation because
you don't have any sexuality anymore

...welcome to a truncated tableau.

Disability Catcalls

Wheelchair Versions

“Slow down, or you’ll get a speeding ticket.”

“You need a plow on the front.”

“Speed Racer!”

“Wish I could sit down.”

“Watch out! She’ll run you down.”

“You need nitro boosters.”

Cane Versions

“You’re walking! It’s a miracle!”

“It’s good to see you up and about.”

“Do you use your canes as weapons?”

“You can walk!?”

“Help! I’ve fallen and I can’t get up!”

“What’s the occasion?”

“How’s upright treating ya?”

Plumbing

Then, Ms. H asked an even more personal question than “Seeing anyone yet?” “Can you get pregnant?” Head tilted curiously, gaze drifting towards my A-cups. “Excuse me?” I stammered and as I adjusted the conservative neckline of my crew-neck t-shirt.

“Can you get pregnant? I mean, with your disability, does everything work? Can you have sex?” Holy Mother Mary, I had to talk about sex with someone who knew me in kindergarten! “Ummm...I’ve never tried. But, I think the plumbing works.” I was staring at the stains in the institutional carpet, trying to determine what each was made of, desperate to keep my voice from becoming a nervous loud soprano. “I have a regular period...I mean, that’s all I know. I don’t really need to go beyond that right now. High school, remember?” “But, can you have sex?” Man, Ms. H would not let this drop. “Ummm...never tried. Honestly, with my spasticity, I’m likely to repeatedly kick the guy before he does anything.” I laughed nervously to try and diffuse the bizarreness of the conversation. She looked at me quizzically, which caused me to have to explain what “spasticity” meant in my case. “I have a form of cerebral palsy called spastic diplegia,” I had just learned how to pronounce my exact diagnosis two weeks previously, so my next flush was one of pride as I continued, “which means I have extremely high muscle tone in my hips and legs. When I get excited, my legs stick unbendably in front of me. I don’t even know what my hips might do. So that might sex difficult, but, again, haven’t really tried.”

She stared at me, “So, no kids, then?” “Not now, maybe after college. If I find I guy willing to work around, the, ha, uh, ‘hazards’ of my body. I’m only fifteen, I’ve got time.” She smiled pityingly at me, like teenage pregnancy was some rite of passage I was regretfully going to miss.

Closest Thing to a Love Poem I've Got

1. Withholding

This is a story I've told dozens of times.

I asked permission to write it down.

You said yes.

Yes, with a caveat that I still take as a compliment—

"But, if my children find it in their English textbooks
and can tell it's me you're working from, I'll sue."

So, I can write down how you called me that night,
wanting to know your chances with my then roommate.

And how you failed to catch the most obvious hint—

"She can't date you because she's close friends with someone who likes you."

And how you kept asking me who until I spat, "Me. Idiot. Me."

....

....

...

And how,

you hung up.

And how, even so, I'm writing you in universal second person.

2. Hope(less)

You never did have much tact, anyway.

I heard every complaint about every girl you dated during
freshman and sophomore years.

You steered every conversation toward them

and away from me so clumsily,
our long conversations might as well have been virgin
slow dances in a middle school cafetourium.
Still, when you heard I hadn't seen much of David Tennant's run,
you invited me for an afternoon's education and
actually had the foresight to apologize for the three flights of stairs
I was gonna hafta climb to get to your couch.

And how! Hope springs eternal.

You'd told me, in the middle of a sleep-drunk convo about girl #3,
that our friendship was getting weird on your end—

"People think we're dating."

"That's a bad thing? You don't seem to like this girl much."

"No. Yeah. Yeah, it's bad. You're a friend."—

So, we planned for Saturday and I climbed
your elevatorless Everest that weekend
and exhaustedly collapsed on your couch.

Still hoping.

We watched about six hours of Tennant's best, curated by you,
interrupted more than a few times by your roommate mooning me in greeting.

That was *tasteful* of him.

3. As if

The best part was that next Tuesday when you finally
explained the reason, beyond our friendship, that you
squirmed at the thought of dating me—
advantage.

Specifically, the fact that people thought you
were taking advantage *of me*.

How did that lovely roommate of yours apparently phrase it?

"How do you have sex with that cripple on our couch?"

Classy, that one.

Classier, how you repeated this verbatim
with neither preamble nor apology.

As if it was normal.

dictate your relationship with another human.

As if I wouldn't care that you thought defending me was

blustering, " I don't. We never did and never will."

and had the gall to repeat that part, too.

Thanks.

Just what I needed to hear

to kill/complicate my feelings for you.

4. Yet.

A year later, we both get invited

to an overcrowded, overheated meet-and-greet.

Desperate for air, I introduce you to two of my dearest friends outside.

You hit it off with one of them.

She wasn't the girl you were dating.

The girl you were dating attempted to slash her wrists

with your car keys as you broke up with her.

My friend, though, called you a "waffly twat" and

threw darts at your picture while sitting in my room one Saturday.

You call me to tell me to tell my friend that she's your
girl girl and not your rebound girl.

And, yet, nearly two years past,

And she's still your girlfriend

So. Yeah.

Thanks for granting me permission to write this.

Idiom

“I’ve gotta run!”

“*Don’tcha mean ‘roll?’*”

“...so, anyway, I was kinda just standin’ in the corner when he...”

“*Don’t ya mean ‘sittin?’*”

“Walk with me?”

“*Rollin’, rollin’, rollin’...*”

“So, I ran, well, rolled, into her...damn it, now you’ve got me doing it...”

What does it say about you that you compulsively edit my idiom?

What does it say about me that I call words that barely fit *idiom*?

But, then,

neither of us can literally

“*hit the road*” now, can we?

Balancing Frustration

to balance means to count

steps

between stability

nineteen

grab the wall

to slow the (~~toddler~~

trip-

lunging) push

of

six

five

momentum towards

(~~mother's~~)

concrete's

embrace

breathe. table

(by now old)

ten

(enough!)

these

pauses

are (shouldn't be)

seven

blocks

to build

a tower

three

lose one

(curse)

and

f

a

l

l

No Worries -- Just Courage

Fifth-grader With Cerebral Palsy Mixes Smiles, Honesty.

May 23, 2004 by DT By Nick Sortal Staff Writer

She's a straight-A student with a perpetual smile and fierce independence, but with Alyssa Radtke it goes beyond that.

Yes, she overlooks her cerebral palsy and fusses over her brother, who has a more severe affliction than her own even in the year their father fights in Iraq.

And it goes beyond that, too.

What really sets the fifth-grade student at Nob Hill Elementary in Sunrise apart and earns her one of 27 top honors, from among almost 270,000 Broward County students, at an awards presentation Monday night?

Well, Alyssa, 11, just tells it like it is.

She is a storybook character -- if the story is about a child who says, "The emperor has no clothes."

"With Alyssa, it just comes out of her mouth, and the thinking behind it just amazes you," teacher Mary Jasinski says. Alyssa's parents agree.

Alyssa's honesty cuts to the bone, maybe tickling a nerve along the way:

She says the colonial times, Great Depression and World War II are her favorite topics in school.

"I don't know why I like total tragedy and the academics of smallpox, I just do," she says. "But I'm glad I didn't live during those times. They didn't have Caesarean

No Worries—Just Life

Journalist who turned a Stenopad Sideways Mixes Up Sarcasm, Honesty.

March 31, 2015 Rebuttal by Alyssa Radtke, college Senior

He's a human interest journalist who believes his got a good ear for relevance, but with Nick Sortal it gets weirder than that.

Yes, he drops a pity-bomb of family context in the second sentence. "More severe affliction?" It's Wolf-Hirschhorn Syndrome—chromosomal, not Biblical.

Deep breath, people.

What really sets this bottom-shelf staff writer at the Sun-Sentinel apart and earns him a place in the Radtke family's collective RAM?

Well, Nick, of parental age, just frames details in the strangest way possible.

He is a storybook character—if the story is about a troll whose toll- riddle is "What would make this better writing?"

"Nick made me look like an idiot, and the thinking behind some of his quote-mining just baffles me," teacher Mary Jasinski complains. Alyssa's parents agree.

Nick's eye for oddity cuts deep, maybe bloodletting too much along the way:

Alyssa says HISTORY is her favorite topic in school.

"I still have a thing for academic tragedy," her future self says. "But I really wish Nick

sections, so my brother and I would have been dead."

She helps first-graders at Nob Hill Elementary with reading, which "can get quite boring because you hear the same story, over and over," she says.

Her way to spruce it up and motivate?

"I'll give them meaningless letter grades. You know, like the state of Florida does with schools and the FCAT."

Jasinski says Alyssa could answer every question in class, but that's not her style.

Says Alyssa: "I don't like people who are showoffs. So why would I be something that I don't like?"

"NO WORRIES," SHE SAYS.

Her catchphrase

Alyssa is one of 27 students to be spotlighted at Cooper City High School Monday night as top honorees in the Sun-Sentinel's Kids of Character program. They are also among the 405 children from Broward's public schools recognized in a special section in today's paper.

The honor made Alyssa a little uncomfortable. Because of her cerebral palsy, she doesn't like standing out.

"This isn't a pity thing, is it?" she says, implying that if it is she'll have no part of it.

She sings in the school chorus, routinely waves away assistance from teacher's aides and was the only kid in her class to participate in the Jump Rope for Heart fund-raiser. And even though handwriting exhausts her, she completes every language arts problem, ignoring the

hadn't printed that C-section quote. That is, on many levels, inaccurate. I should have said something about general modern medicine."

Her future self helps freshman at The University of Mississippi with writing, which "can get quite boring because you see the same assignments, over and over," she says.

Nick's way to spruce this up and fabricate?

"I'll quote her saying something caustic towards the state test and its standards." (Note for non-Floridians: the FCAT, or Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, was the state test for grade three through twelve at the time.)**

Jasinski says Alyssa could benefit from learning to be quiet in class, but she's young enough that her self-control is still developing.

Says Nick: "I like that that quote shows off Alyssa's smarts and caring. So why would I be concerned with connotation?"

"NO WORRIES," SHE SAYS.

Her catchphrase, or what you will repeatedly ask her to say for the next month

Nick is one of 10²⁷ journalists to be highlighted in various forums every day as sub-par writers in the Industry's Writers by Formula program. They are also among the 100⁴⁰⁵ writers from schools anywhere recognized in a "Back Away from the Commas, Slowly." splice section on today's word processors.

The honor made Nick a little uncomfortable. Because of his sideways Stenopad, he doesn't like standing out.

teacher's instructions to just do the "evens."

All done with a smile and her catchphrase.

"No worries," she often says.

Her particular type of cerebral palsy is called spastic diplegia, which hinders muscle control, especially in the legs. She uses two canes, which she decorates with stickers and paint, or her walker, which she calls her chariot.

Her 14-year-old brother, Andrew, is even more challenged, a byproduct of a rare chromosome abnormality at birth. He requires 24-hour supervision.

Alyssa jokes with him, lets Andrew pull her hair and adjusts his air tube.

"I think that because he's so dependent, Alyssa is so independent," Bonnie Radtke says. "She wants to do things herself."

Alyssa has been on her own more in the last year or so because her father, Bill, a reservist in the Marines, was called to fight in Iraq. Because of her brother, the one-on-one time with her mom has been scarce. But she doesn't complain.

"She just takes things in stride," Bill says. "I know I'm biased, but she talks and acts like she's in college."

He is now back in the United States, but is often away from home because of his job as a pilot for the Department of Homeland Security. The family moved to Plantation in 1993, after their Homestead home was wiped out by Hurricane Andrew.

Rather than take physical therapy classes on school time, Alyssa goes to Pediatric Therapy Associates in Plantation after school three days a week. Her latest

"This isn't a pity thing, is it?" he says, implying that if it is he'll have no part of it.

He breaks too many pencil tips, but routinely waves away assistance from pen-bearing friends and was the only man in his newsroom to participate in the Make Your Own Papyrus at Work Day. And although papermaking exhausts him, he completes all his articles, ignoring the editor's instructions to just use a "computer."

All done with crazy eyes and his pencils.

"AGHBARGH!," he often shouts at random passersby.

His particular type of writing is called "slightly disjointed," which hinders reader comprehension, especially in coherence. He uses too few transitions, with he suspects are more than CAPSLOCK subheadings, and too many topics, which he calls "padding."

Here we see Nick unthinkingly and insensitive refer to a brother as a byproduct and reduce him to a burden.

Nick is amazed that a sister would love her ass of brother and would NOT touch his FEEDING tube.

"This quote was truthful," Bonnie Radtke says. "I wish future Alyssa would still do things herself."

Nick has been on his own more in the last year or so because his cat, Jonesy, along with the eleven others he had crammed in his small apartment, have been removed from his house by Animal Control. Because of the health hazard, the one-on-dozen time with his cats has been terminated. But he doesn't complain. "Since he's been in our house, he's meowed mournfully 20 times" Bill says. "I know I'm biased, but he talks

challenge is chasing a Slinky down a flight of stairs, and the children in physical therapy have a language all their own, created out of silliness, not necessity.

"When we're all together, the jokes just fly," Alyssa says. "Even we don't understand the language we made up. All we know is 'Boochie-poo' means both 'hello' and 'goodbye.'"

A FRIEND TO EVERYBODY

Alyssa's train of thought doesn't carry many other passengers, so in a way she's detached from classmates.

"There are areas where she's more knowledgeable than I am," Jasinski says, citing history, women's rights and slavery. Teachers like talking with her, but she likes hanging with the kids, mixing compliments and jokes.

"She's very quick to praise other kids," says teacher's aide Ana Dos Santos, who accompanies her to chorus rehearsals, PE and every other activity.

"She just calls it as she sees it. You expect the things she says to come from an adult, but not from a child," Dos Santos says. "She doesn't think like a child."

Michael Troonin, a first-grader Alyssa tutors now, can provide the 15-second kids' analysis:

"We laugh a lot, and she wants me to do well," he says. "She's everybody's friend. She makes you feel good."

But Alyssa is facing the uncertainty of middle school: Unfamiliar kids will run down the hall, there are several teachers instead of just one and the school work will be more difficult.

and acts like he's unhinged.

Was there a big enough pity bomb of family context earlier? No? Well, here's some more...MEOWWWW!!! meow? Enough now?

Rather than constrain his article to school related topics for cohesion, Nick throws a bone to the childish, ad hoc sounds he is intimately familiar with to color the personality of article Alyssa beyond misinterpreted one-liners. His latest chasing a glimmer of similarity between author and subject and stretching it beyond credulity, for the word count, not the sense it makes.

"When Nick was here, I was nervous, and the crazy just spewed," Alyssa says. "Even I didn't know what all I'm saying. All I know is 'Boochie-poo' means both 'Why did Nick print this line?'" and "regret."

A FRIEND TO EVERYBODY, BUT NOT REALLY

Nick's train of thought derailed a paragraph ago, so he can say someone he sees as "detached" has buckets of friends.

"This is the quote where I am portrayed at my worst. Sir, I'm teaching my students sixth grade advanced math." Jasinski says, citing one of the many things she can teach better than quite a few teachers. According to Nick, the way to "reattach" yourself to kids your own age in a school environment is acting like a junior teacher.

"Here's his 'junior teacher hypothesis' primary source," says teacher's aide Ana Dos Santos, who's job description is worded in such a way as to make Alyssa seem as dependent on her as possible.

"I often tell her to think before she speaks. She doesn't have the sarcasm filter on like adults might," Dos Santos says. "She

She wants to keep getting straight A's, because that means her parents buy her a rib dinner.

"One teacher here said we've all made names for ourselves and now we've gotta start all over again," Alyssa says. "That's kind of freaky. I'm worried about it so much, I have dreams about it."

With middle school comes another step closer to adulthood, and insight about honesty: There's a lot more gray area than her early teachers presented.

"If you're too honest it gets you into trouble, and of course if you're not honest, that doesn't work, either," Alyssa says. "So it's kind of a fine line between lying and telling the truth."

"It's very, very hard."

doesn't have much discretion."

Michael Troonin, a first-grader Alyssa tutored while in the fifth grade, can provide the 15-second kids' analysis:

"She's a person. I get to miss 30 minutes of class a week because of her," he says. "So, I can put up with her."

But Nick can't end the article here: He must make her seem as anxious as possible, nearly as bad as her future alter ego. Why is he writing the obvious about later schooling like it's profound?

Why does he make a hard work reward out to be a naked bribe?

"I don't really know this now, but I will have this nerve-wracking experience often," Alyssa says. "That's kind of freaky. I'll worry about it so much; I'll still have dreams about it."

With this sentence comes another step closer to the end of the article an insight about newspaper article writing: There's a lot more misrepresentation than one hopes to be presented with.

"If you're too honest it gets you into trouble, and of course if you're not honest, that doesn't work, either," Alyssa says. "So it's kind of a fine line between lying and telling the truth..."

"...in life, and in poetry."

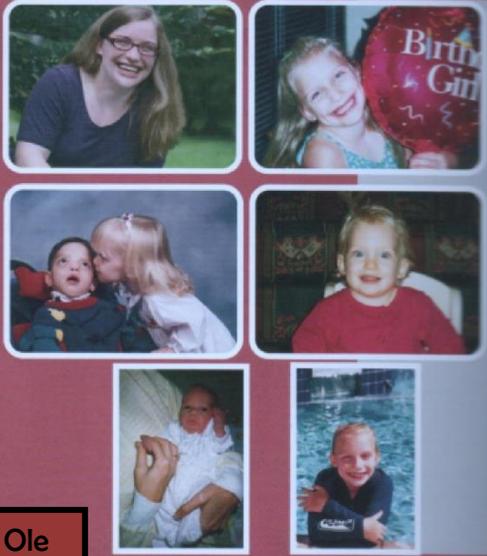
**(Future Note: I wrote FCAT so many times growing up that I still can't spell "fact" on the first try.)

Post Scripts

Alyssa,
God has truly blessed us with your life. You have been such an inspiration to so many. You have always been determined to overcome any obstacle that has been put in your path. We pray you will always know God is holding you in the palm of his hand.

All our love,
Dad, Mom, and Andrew

P.S. Remember to put a ramp on your soap box at Ole Miss to help those that come behind you!



P.P.S (from Ole Miss) Mom,

Consider the soap box ramped.

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