

Artist's Statement¹

by Kenny Fries

1. Canon as Cliché

Canon²: a rule or especially body of rules or principles generally established as valid and fundamental in a field or art or philosophy:

1. *A group of literary works that are generally accepted as representing a field.*

I never had a canon. There has never been a canon of literature about people with disabilities. Or, to be more accurate, the accepted canon of what I most wanted to write about was the opposite of the experience of my life. The canon of disabled people in literature, though long and luminous, ranging from Sophocles' blinded Oedipus and Shakespeare's Richard III, from Dickens's Tiny Tim and Melville's Ahab to Mary Shelley's Frankenstein's monster, defined disabled people as cripples defined by excess, charity, or villainy. These characters were saints or sinners, the blind man who knows too much, the "feeble minded" who felt too much (and made us pity too much), the superhuman who achieved too much (and inspired us), the greedy deformed by wanting too much.

In the 20th-century, in the United States, parallel to these fictional characters we had real life actual disabled people who loomed over the canonical images of disability: Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Helen Keller, who both reinscribed the various myths of disability that still pervade our culture, one denied his disability; the other defined by it. (Interestingly, both FDR and Helen Keller became "fictional" characters in the disability-defining dramas and movies, *Sunrise at Campobello* and *The Miracle Worker*. The seductive plot possibilities of the medical model of disability, its emphasis on overcoming and cures are irresistible in creating conventional dramatic structure.)

¹ The following statement derives from a keynote address that I gave at Goddard College in 2010.

² Canon is a word derived from a Hebrew and Greek word denoting a reed or cane. Therefore it means something straight, or something to keep straight. Very interesting for a writer who both uses a cane and is decidedly not straight, as we have come to understand the word. It seems that I'm always coming up against a stereotype in conflict with itself.

Cliché: from the French verb, cliquer, to stereotype.

In the summer of 1989, when I began searching for the words with which to begin speaking about my own experience living with a congenital disability, most of what I found was a canon filled with myths, metaphors, and lies. What I found were stereotypes. What I found were clichés.

I began to take the initial steps of finding the language, unearthing the images, shaping the forms with which I could express an experience I had never read about before, so that my experience as a person with a disability could become meaningful to others. What I remember about that summer of 1989 is wanting to throw all those drafts away, not thinking them poems. Not having a role model in whose steps I could follow, unsure of my own identity as both a writer and as a person who lives with a disability, I felt like what Carol Gill has called “a shadow spirit,” unable to meld successfully on the page the nondisabled world I lived in with my experience of being disabled in that world.

Not only was I writing about my life as a disabled man that transformed this experience in which others, disabled and nondisabled alike, could see themselves, I was also writing about my life as a gay man. Being that a disabled man has been traditionally viewed as asexual, and that a gay man has been traditionally been viewed as overly sexual, this was, luckily, a difficult stereotype to live up to. (When in doubt I always chose the latter since not only does a lot of sex make for better reading but it is usually more fun than celibacy, as well.)

2. Cultural Cliché:

1. A trite or overused expression or idea

2. A person or character whose behavior is predictable or superficial

3. a trite or obvious remark

The above narrative has become, to me, a cliché. In situations where I am the only visibly disabled writer and if I don't bring up the subject nobody else will. So, I want to go beyond the expected and offer another, more recent cross-cultural narrative.

In 2002, I went to Japan as a Creative Arts Fellow of the Japan/US Friendship Commission and the National Endowment for the Arts to look at disability and the life of people with disabilities in Japan. During my seven months in Japan I wrote about Japanese gardens.

On the surface, my original intention and the poems I wrote would seem to have nothing to do with each other: disability and Japanese gardens. And it isn't as though I didn't pursue my goal of finding out as much as I could about disability and the life of disabled people in Japan. I did this. But my writing in Japan, on the surface at least, does not have disability as its subject.

Before arriving in Japan, I had not written a poem in over four years. Years of working first on my memoir, and a new nonfiction book, which looks at Darwin's ideas of evolution from the perspective of disability, made it seem as if a poem could no longer hold as much as I wanted my writing to hold.

But soon after arriving in Japan, a place I had never been before, this changed. I was overwhelmed with an abundant array of new cultural experiences. I was constantly filled with unfamiliar but emotionally encompassing sights and sounds. Among these experiences, two began to pervade my thoughts: the irises of Meiji Jingu and the voice of Japanese singer Mika Kimura.

I began spending more and more time in the gardens of Japan. What began to emerge from these encounters was a sequence of poems that on the surface are about what can actually be found in some of the gardens I visited. However, that is only the surface subject of the poems because Japanese gardens hold within them a microcosm of what it means to be alive in a mortal world. And living life in a mortal world is perhaps the greatest lesson learned from the experience of living with a disability. There is nothing more constant than change.

Poems

by Kenny Fries

In Snow

This winter I am indoors looking at
each storm pile higher on the ground below.
When eight years old I was determined that

I'd mail my letter, getting caught in snow
deep to my waist. I tried but couldn't get out.
Someone see my footprints, I hoped, follow

me—louder, louder, I began to shout.
Enclosed by white, immobilized like all
those times with casts on both my legs, *about*

to lose my feet, I thought, when someone tall
whose strong arms I remember well pulled me
out. I learned the dangers of being small.

My father will not drive in snow. He
wears rubbers at the slightest sign of rain.
My mother chose to turn us home when we

skidded to my doctor. Forced to remain
inside that day I watched her bake her rare
plain Betty Crocker cake. I still retain

the taste of that white-powdered mix, and stare
all day at winter. *I'll move next year*, I swear.

Excavation

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? Or those

who did? *Freak, midget, three-toed
bastard.* Words I've always heard.

Disabled, crippled, deformed. Words
I was given. But tonight I go back

farther, want more, tear deeper into
my skin. Peeling it back I reveal

the bones at birth I wasn't given—
the place where no one speaks a word.

Beauty and Variations

1.

What is it like to be so beautiful? I dip
my hands inside you, come up with—*what?*

Beauty, at birth applied, does not transfer
to my hands. But every night, your hands

touch my scars, raise my twisted limbs to
graze against your lips. Lips that never

form the words—*you are beautiful*—transform
my deformed bones into—*what?*—if not beauty.

Can only one of us be beautiful? Is this your
plan? Are your sculpted thighs more powerful

driving into mine? Your hands find their way
inside me, scrape against my heart. Look

at your hands. Pieces of my skin trail from
your fingers. What do you make of this?

Your hands that know my scars, that lift me to your
lips, now drip my blood. Can blood be beautiful?

2.

I want to break your bones. Make them so
they look like mine. Force you to walk on

twisted legs. Then, will your lips still beg
for mine? Or will that disturb the balance

of our desire? Even as it inspires, your body
terrifies. And once again I find your hands

inside me. Why do you touch my scars? You
can't make them beautiful any more than I can

tear your skin apart. Beneath my scars,
between my twisted bones, hides my heart.

Why don't you let me leave my mark? With no
flaws on your skin—how can I find your heart?

3.

How much beauty can a person bear? Your smooth
skin is no relief from the danger of your eyes.

My hands would leave you scarred. Knead the muscles
of your thighs. I want to tear your skin, reach

inside you—your secrets tightly held. Breathe
deep. Release them. Let them fall into my palms.

My secrets are on my skin. Could this be why
each night I let you deep inside? Is that

where my beauty lies? Your eyes, without secrets,
would be two scars. I want to seal your eyes,

they know my every flaw. Your smooth skin, love' s
wounds ignore. My skin won't mend, is callused, raw.

4.

Who can mend my bones? At night, your hands press
into my skin. My feet against your chest, you mold

my twisted bones. What attracts you to my legs? Not
sex. What brings your fingers to my scars is beyond

desire. Why do you persist? Why do you touch me
as if my skin were yours? Seal your lips. No kiss

can heal these wounds. No words unbend my bones.
Beauty is a two-faced god. As your fingers soothe

my scars, they scrape against my heart. Was this
birth' s plan—to tie desire to my pain, to stain

love' s touch with blood? If my skin won' t heal, how
can I escape? My scars are in the shape of my love.

5.

How else can I quench this thirst? My lips
travel down your spine, drink the smoothness
of your skin. I am searching for the core:

What is beautiful? Who decides? Can the laws

of nature be defied? Your body tells me: come
close. But beauty distances even as it draws

me near. What does my body want from yours?
My twisted legs around your neck. You bend

me back. Even though you can't give the bones
at birth I wasn't given, I let you deep inside.

You give me—*what?* Peeling back my skin, you
expose my missing bones. And my heart, long

before you came, just as broken. I don't know who
to blame. So each night, naked on the bed, my body

doesn't want repair, but longs for innocence.
If innocent, despite the flaws I wear, I am beautiful.

To the Poet Whose Lover Has Died of AIDS

*. . . then the wasting begins
and the disappearance a day at a time.*

—Mark Doty

The night of your reading I notice he has carved
a place for his wheelchair. But after the first
poem, through the applause, the noise of moving

out of his way. Then, only the space remains
and nobody, not even those standing, eyeing
what was his position, will take his place.

The next day, when you tell me he wet himself
and could not stay, I think how leaving causes so much
commotion, how in school during rollcall the teacher

never knew how long to wait for the voice, *present*,
before moving on to the next name in the order.

The tittering, the shifting in chairs, when it went on

too long. When you first told me he was sick,
I could not ask if you too, were infected—
I searched your poems for clues. Now he has died

and I have gone back to read your poems, needing
your words to prove love does not disappear
a day at a time. All those years together,

over a decade of loss, and I don't know
what's left to say. If we are given love
only to have it taken away, what solace

can anyone offer but your voice be present
among the shifting chairs, the embarrassed noises
of absence. The wait is always too long.

Body Language

What is a scar if not the memory of a once open wound?

You press your finger between my toes, slide

the soap up the side of my leg, until you reach
the scar with the two holes, where the pins were

inserted twenty years ago. Leaning back, I
remember how I pulled the pin from the leg, how

in a waist-high cast, I dragged myself
from my room to show my parents what I had done.

Your hand on my scar brings me back to the tub
and I want to ask you: What do you feel

when you touch me there? I want you to ask me:
What are you feeling now? But we do not speak.

You drop the soap in the water and I continue
washing, alone. Do you know my father would

bathe my feet, as you do, as if it was the most
natural thing. But up to now, I have allowed

only two pair of hands to touch me there,
to be the salve for what still feels like an open wound.

The skin has healed but the scars grow deeper—

When you touch them what do they tell you about my life?

A Slant of Green

Sometimes an island
but not the hours
when the tide

is low, then crossing
over gray-brown rock
is possible. I ignore

the tidepools,
climb the low
side of what was

an island, reach
the ruined Norse
houses, their fallen

walls. But I want
to climb the rounded
slant of green,

to reach the white—
is it a church? A
house with a vane?

I follow the faint path,
gently tilted
upward, lined with

yellow buttercups,
until what seemed
a rolling hill, now

steeper, until I see
the sign: *DANGER*
DO NOT TOUCH

—a lighthouse, after all.
But at the top
there is no yellow

and I am lured
by the profusion
of sea-pinks

to sit at the edge
of the cliffs—have I
climbed this high?—where

the only sounds
are the rising
tide and the persistent

squeak of oyster catchers.
Here at the top, at this
hour, it seems

these are the only
sounds, the entire world:
gradations of light,

earth, water, sky—

But in the distance

I see tomorrow's

weather, too soon

the waves begin

spilling over

the ordered

sheets of rock—

how long have I sat

in this wild bouquet

of time? How long

did it take to climb?

Reluctantly, I descend,

discern foundations

of ancient homes

and once again I cross

the jettied, layered rock,

and am transfixed by the approaching

tide, which in minutes

—or is it hours?—

(I cannot watch it)

will transform the rounded

slant of green I climbed

once more into an island.

Saihō-ji

If the world were soft: languid
days surrounded by infinite

shades of green. Up through the gate:
a rock fall imagines water,

one flat stone for meditation
leads back where the path begins.

Copyright notice: The above poems have been newly arranged for this special issue. They have previously been published in *Anesthesia: Poems* (1996), in *Desert Walking: Poems* (2000), and in *In the Gardens of Japan: a poem sequence* (2017).