

## **Images Of Myself and Other Strangers or On Becoming a Card-Carrying Crip**

Bill Albert

### **Berkeley 1960**

"Funny, you don't look Jewish," he says with a loud grin. It is not particularly funny and besides even *the rabbi* says I look Jewish. So, how am I supposed to respond to my dissembling well-wisher?

His grin widens into a shout. He slaps me hard on the shoulder. He clearly wants me to feel accepted, one of "us", not one of "them." He is doing me a big favor. Really he is. He knows it and I am supposed to know it and know that he knows it and so on.

His name is Charles Leighton-Grahme and he is a Tau Delta Something-or-Other. It is 1960 and I've just arrived at the University of California in Berkeley. I'm going to be a college boy. Maybe even a fraternity boy. Boy!

I swallow a mouthful of too-hot coffee in what I imagine might be an acceptable Gentile manner. I feel the roof of my mouth blistering. My tongue will be fuzzy for days.

"Thanks," I reply.

We smile at each other. Charles Leighton-Grahme seems very pleased. To my shame, I don't remember being displeased. Despite my apparent non-Jewishness, I am not invited to pledge Tau Delta Something-or-Other.

### **Sag Harbor 1996**

"I never think of you as a disabled person," says Marty.

It is October 1996. Gill and I have driven up from New York City to Sag Harbor to visit him and Judy. They are my publishers. We are meeting socially for the first time. I like him very much and feel I've known him for years. He reminds me of David, my high-school buddy and still best friend. So although his comment stings, I let it slide past.

Driving down to the City on the Long Island Expressway that evening I wonder if I didn't reply because what he said hadn't stung enough. Maybe I'm not really a disabled person, just an able-bodied guy in a wheelchair trying to pass in both camps.

### **Norwich 1997**

"To me you're not really a disabled person," Chedgey says. "You know what I mean?"

I know what he means, but nod, smile and say nothing.

Another first social get-together. I had wanted to buy one of his paintings, a red Indian motorcycle in a dusty Alabama Hopper landscape. It is a great painting. It is also about seven feet by four feet, completely dominated the sitting room and caused Gill to flee from the flat in tears. My son Saul and I returned the painting to Chedgey half an hour later. Two days after a signed reproduction, suitably reduced in size, appeared on our doorstep. This is an extremely thoughtful man.

He and Debbie have gone to a great deal of trouble to make us welcome. A lovingly sculptured salmon en croute and the round table covered in a tablecloth version of the cover from my book *Desert Blues*. Not so much a meal as an event. We are having a great time and I'm impressed and touched by their attention. Not the moment to make disagreeable crip waves. It seems I can always find an excuse.

### **London 2002**

I had been appointed as a member of Human Rights Commission and a couple of years on I am sitting next to my dear friend and chair of the Commission, Baroness Helena Kennedy. She is a tough, outspoken Scot and a human rights barrister. With her working class background and radical views, I've always been curious as to why she accepted a title and a seat in the ultra-establishment House of Lords. However, I've never asked her. We are attending a lecture on some aspect of genetics being given by a guy sat in a wheelchair.

"It's great to see a disabled person out in front with this stuff," I say to her.

"Oh," she says, turning to me, "you know that's strange, for I never think of you like that, I mean as a disabled person."

"Just as strange," I reply, "I never think of you as a Peer of the Realm."

Helena laughs. So do I.

### **UCLA Medical Centre 1973**

I could swear his name is Dr. Frankenstein. I'm positive I saw it on the label pinned to his white coat. Maybe it's the hospital stress getting to me.

He puts two metal electrodes on the top of my leg and another pair on my ankle.

"This may tingle slightly."

If "slightly" why have my arms and legs been strapped to the side of the table?

"Oh, that's your own safety," explains the doctor. "Can't be too careful you know."

A large machine with a calibrated half-circle dial, heavy arrow-tipped pointer at rest on the far left of the dial, stands on a trolley to the side of the padded examination table. Behind it are other machines with switches, knobs and winking lights.

Once upon a time I wanted to make science machines like

these. I'd seen them in the Flash Gordon serials, watched every Saturday, packed in with two-hundred other unruly, not-afraid-of-polio kids, at the movie theatre in Studio City. Great shining orbs crackling with St. Elmo's fire, machines with enormous dials and flashing lights and, of course, control panels with great shovel-handled levers you pulled down to launch the spaceship or open the gates to flood the secret underground tunnels.

It is just such a lever, albeit a smaller version - for smaller spaceships and smaller tunnels - which Dr. Frankenstein now begins to operate. A green light goes on, there is a slight buzzing followed by someone screaming. That's me! I am screaming, not unreasonably, because my leg is on fire. As if in response, the pointer shoots around and clunks loudly at the far end of the dial. "Resistance," explains the doctor calmly in reply to my incoherent complaints. "If the synapses of the nerves aren't functioning properly an electrical charge builds up. That's what you're feeling. I'm sorry about the pain."

He isn't sorry enough not to repeat the experiment on my other leg and then both my arms. Each time I scream and each time the pointer swings and clunks.

You can't but admire the subtlety of modern medicine.

I suppose I should be thankful he didn't have Igor crank me up to the roof for the full lightning treatment.

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Why is Dr. Frankenstein electrocuting me?

Have I done something wrong?

Probably.

But whatever I have done, I am not going to get away with a few minor Flash Gordon shocks.

It is the next day and I've just been wheeled into an operating theatre.

"We can't give you a local anaesthetic as it will corrupt the

tissue sample. But don't worry, you won't feel a thing."

So if I'm not going to feel anything, why have they strapped me down again?

At least this time I am too stoned to care. A shot of pethidine and I'm anybody's, everybody's, nobody's.

Something scrapes softly across my right triceps.

"Deep knife, nurse"

"Deep knife," I repeat dreamily. "Deep knife?"

Howling. An animal, limb mashed in a trap. It's me. There is a red-hot poker stuck in my arm. I start to swear, straining at the straps, telling the doctor I'm going to wring his mother-fucking neck, tear his lungs out, dismember his wife and children. The pain suddenly stops as the knife is withdrawn and the pethidine renews its embrace.

"Hey, listen doctor, I'm really sorry about that. You know..."

He's cutting my arm open and I'm apologising? Of course I am, the bastard still has the fucking deep knife and I'm helpless, a frog pinned out on a dissecting board.

"Scissors."

"You cunt-sucking asshole, fucking mother-fucking fucker ...

Oh, God, please, I didn't mean to say that. Really I didn't."

The good doctor explains that he has just snipped some muscle from inside the incision he made in my arm.

I was right, I am a frog.

"It's over now," he says through his green mask.

I relax back into the pethidine.

Unfortunately, he means it's only over for my arm. I feel a light scraping on my thigh.

Again he asks for the deep knife.

He tells me it doesn't bother him or the nurses if I feel I have to swear.

That's nice.

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Back in the relative safety of my hospital room, trying to watch the Rose Bowl, arm and leg throbbing, I am continually interrupted by a succession of interrogating young interns who write down my answers to their intern questions on their shiny metal intern clipboards.

"How long have you noticed you were having difficulty walking?"

"Have the muscles always been this wasted?"

"Can you raise your arms, please. I see, well, can you raise your left arm then?"

"Have you ever been able to raise up on your toes? I see."

"Is the back pain, here or here? Further up? Further down?"

"How often do you move your bowels?"

"Do you have difficulty urinating?"

"Hold up your hands. Spread your fingers. You have extremely big hands. Can I see your feet now."

"How tall are you?"

"I guess you must play, I mean *have played* basketball. Yes? I see. Well, I guess that stands to reason."

"Can you squeeze my fingers? As hard as you can please."

"Will you puff your cheeks out? Fine, now hold it when I press."

"When was your hemorrhoid operation?"

"Can you close your eyes? Hold them closed now please. Hold them."

"What work do you do?"

"How old is your daughter?"

"Is she developing normally?"

"Can you feel that? Good. And that?"

"How many times have you had mononucleosis?"

"Have you ever suffered from convulsions or fainting?"

"Follow my finger please. That's right. Now the other way.  
Fine."

"I know it's on your chart. But we each have to do our own  
workup"

I *am* a frog.

At least I should be a thankful frog. After all, aren't I a charity  
case, my tests financed by Jerry Lewis and his Telethon? Does  
this, even at thirty-one, make me one of Jerry's Kids?

## **Norwich 1997**

### ***Beverly Hills, December 27, 1973. Elsie Giorgi, M.D. to Ms. G.W. Campbell, Department of Medicine U.C.L.A.***

"I noted that the patient had great difficulty walking and that  
atrophy without fasciculation was present in the upper and lower  
extremities, the trunk muscles, and probably also in the facial  
muscles. His scapulae were winged. I felt that his back pain was  
due to muscle strain secondary to the fact that the patient had to  
brace and splint his back in order to attain enough stability to  
walk. I felt that his abdominal pain might well be secondary to his  
inability to exert enough pressure through his musculature to  
have bowel movements -- hence distension, gas pains, and also  
severe hemorrhoids.

"This young man of 31 presents with widespread and  
progressive muscular disease to the point of almost complete  
incapacitation. His history of poor musculature dates back to his  
early childhood. His father is incapacitated presumably by  
arthritis, but this also bears looking into since the patient may well  
have a familial, genetically based dystrophy.

"The patient had a precipitous birth and required oxygen  
after delivery. No further facts are available at this time since his  
New York obstetrician, Dr. S. Kleegman has since died.

"I do not hesitate to refer him, not only because of his great

need, but also because I think his problem constitutes excellent teaching material.

"Incidentally, the patient has a very striking denial component. I am sure that if words such as muscular dystrophy are carelessly tossed out, he will become very upset. I would urge that all this be avoided until we have a diagnosis after which we can decide how to inform him, etc. "

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***U.C.L.A. January 17, 1974, Dr. Carl Pearson to Dr. Elsie Giorgi.***

"We have now completed our studies. We feel he has clear evidence of facioscapulohumeral dystrophy (FSH dystrophy). There are many features that are indicative of this including some evidence of facial weakness, but he has, unfortunately shown a great deal of additional weakness in his lower extremities and much more than I would normally expect in a man with FSH dystrophy of his age. This is unfortunate and means that somehow or another he has gotten a disproportionately large dose of abnormal genes that give rise to myopathy.

"The electromyogram was distinctly abnormal as were the two muscle biopsies from the right triceps and the right quadriceps.

"In addition, interestingly, there were some changes in the low back by x-ray in the sacra-iliac joints and a little bit of roughing of the anterior margin of some of the lumbar and cervical vertebrae. Therefore it is possible that this poor young man could have two diseases and the low back symptoms that he complains of could be related to ankylosing spondylitis.

"I did not disclose actually the word muscular dystrophy to him. I suggested that he had a primary myopathy rather than a neurogenic disease and apparently he saw fit not to question me



further about this. On the other hand, I told him that I thought that his would be slowly progressive, that he should use a cane for additional support.”

## **Beverly Hills 1974**

“I’m afraid it’s bad news,” says Dr. Giorgi.

Despite my “striking denial component”, which makes me sound like a Chevy with bent Johnson rods, she has decided to let me in on my body’s increasingly not-so-well-kept secret.

As I will not read the let’s-experiment-dead-meat review of medical notes for another 23 years, my main feeling is one of relief. That surprises her. It surprises me too.

Maybe I am pleased that I finally have a name for what has been eating at me, literally, with growing ferocity over the last few years. It is the first step towards knowing who I am, although it will another ten years before I am ready to even start to embrace that knowing.

Right now sitting on the soft chair in Dr. Giorgi’s office on Lasky Drive I am trying to figure out who I haven’t been. I am replaying my first thirty-one years with a new main character.

At one school I went to they called me “Klunker” after my roommate’s cocker spaniel who, he claimed, was so clumsy that he tripped over his ear, fell into the road and was run over by a garbage truck. I never believed the story, but I still couldn’t escape “Klunker.” Now I know for sure that wasn’t me.

I always loved playing sports, but love was never enough.

There were lost foot races beyond counting, not making the baseball team, being really awful at basketball — damn humiliating when you’re six foot seven — hopeless at dodge ball, fist ball, tetherball and later golf and tennis. Now I know why.

I smile. Dr. Giorgi smiles.

Despite the boring, painful hours in Vic Tanny’s pumping

iron, small amounts of iron I must admit, I still looked like the nerd on the back-of-comic adverts who gets sand kicked in his face at the beach. Unlike him I'm never going to become Charles Atlas. At least I knew that one already.

The funny gate-step walk, not being able to run, struggling out of my chair, having to pick up one leg to cross it over the other, getting too easily tired. All that and more in recent years and my childhood and the spotty, tripping-over-everything teenage years and the rest. Nothing to do with me, buddy. Nothing wrong with me, I mean the real, essential me. I'm clean. Not lazy, not a deficient able-bodied person. FSH has made me whole. FSH has made my life legitimate. It was almost worth being plugged in, cut up and then given the third-degree by the interns.

"It will progress slowly," Dr. Giorgi says. "Very slowly."

I always have had serious doubts about Progress.

"That's good," I reply with a brave new smile.

## **Cambridge, Mass. 1985**

"Billy, this is Mother."

As if it could be someone else.

"Arnold and I were in New York yesterday and we were near the Museum of Modern Art, you know right off 5th Avenue, and we saw a man, who turned out to be the director. Wasn't he the director, Arnold? Anyway, he was crossing the street in this simply marvelous wheelchair. Not a wheelchair wheelchair, but like a little scooter with three wheels. You know what I mean? And it's got a bucket seat and..."

"Mom, listen..."

"So, of course, we stopped and talked to him. A very nice man. I think he's got what you've got. You know? Something very similar anyway. And he gave me the name of the company and

I've called them and..."

"Mom, will you please listen to me!"

"You don't have to shout, Billy!"

As if I didn't.

"I am not going to go into a wheelchair, Mom. No way."

"But, darling, it would make life so much easier for you.

Instead of having to schlep around on those crutches of yours.

You know how tired you get. And your back and everything. Now just listen. Are you listening to me."

"I'm listening, Mom."

"It is very light and comes apart easily and fits in the trunk of the car. It runs on a battery that you plug in at night. It has a lovely yellow front."

"Mom, please. I don't need a wheelchair, really I don't."

"But, darling, it doesn't even look like a wheelchair. Believe me. It's called an Amigo. You know like in the Spanish."

"I know like in the Spanish, Mom. But, if I have avoided being confined to a wheelchair this long, I can avoid being confined a bit longer."

"I'm telling you, Billy darling, it doesn't look like a wheelchair at all. A tiny golf cart is what it looks like. Isn't that right, Arnold? Arnold? Oh, sorry he's gone in the bathroom."

"You want me to drive around in a golf cart? Here at Harvard? Mom, do me a favor, OK? I'll look like a complete dork for God sake."

"Arnold and I would like to buy it for you."

"Thanks a lot, Mom. Really. But no thanks."

"Billy! You want to do your mother a big favor? Do you? Try it, that's all I'm asking you, just try it. What's the harm, just tell me that."

"The harm, Mother, is that I'm going to look like a goddamned handicapped person, is what the harm is. Can't you see that? Who needs that? I'm telling you I don't want to have to use

a wheelchair."

"Darling, listen, I hate to say this, and you know how much Arnold and I love you, but you know something, you are handicapped."

"Come on, Dad, open it up," urges my eight-year old son.

"Yeah, come on," adds Maya. "You can at least have a look at it."

My son and daughter circling a big cardboard box, my unwanted present. Did my mother listen to me? Why change the habit of a lifetime?

*"Wheelchair bound."*

*"Confined to a wheelchair."*

*"Stuck in a wheelchair."*

*"Finally gone into a wheelchair."*

Not me. Not me. Not me. NOT ME!

I might have FSH, I might have to walk with crutches, but I'm not one of them and I'm sure as hell not going to become one of them.

Not me.

The cute little kid hanging helpless from his wooden crutches, legs encased in calipers staring out at me with a tragic but courageous smile from the March of Dimes poster. "Help him!"

The limb-wasted boy in the stiff wheelchair, black and white on our '50s TV. One of Jerry's Kids, the genuine article, suffering through ritual humiliation of the yearly Muscular Dystrophy Telethon. "Help him!"

The spastic guy, slumped in his dilapidated wheelchair outside the Greyhound Station in downtown LA, squirming and dribbling. "Help him!"

Dependent, strange, unwanted, powerless and needing desperately to be mended, to be made whole. Losers every one of them. Not the stuff of the American Dream. Not even close.

"Help them!"

Not me. Not me!

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Telling myself I am doing this to shut up my children, but actually curious to see the chair, two days later I finally open the box.

A narrow rubber-ribbed platform about 40 inches long and 18 inches wide, with a yellow cowled electric motor perched at the front. Rising up from motor is a chrome pole with a half-sized bicycle handle at the top. Three small solid rubber wheels. A plastic bucket seat which moves up and down by electric motor on a sturdy metal rod. Under the seat is a battery.

"Amigo the Friendly Wheelchair".

Mom was right. It's not like a wheelchair wheelchair. It's more Rube Goldberg, or as they say in Britain, Heath Robinson. I like that.

"Come on, Dad, let's go for a ride. Please, Dad."

We've been at Harvard since September. We came here because my ex-wife-to-be, a seriously brilliant scholar, has landed a prestigious fellowship at the Divinity School. I've taken time off from my job and came along to hang out. However, using elbow crutches has meant I've been mainly hanging around, dependent on the university-run dribble bus to pick me up and drop me off. I haven't seen much of the famous campus. As if it was really absolutely necessary for me to see it.

"OK, Bobble, but just one time around the block. OK?"

The block, which is full of old, fancy New England and takes in the house of John Galbraith, is on Frances Avenue right across from the far north-east side of the campus. We have a student apartment in the Centre for Religious Studies. Concrete slab. Not so fancy.

"Great!" he shouts. "Let's go."

I sit down in the chair. Bobble stands on the platform, cuddled between my knees. We roll across the street. It's a warm, soft new April day. Lots of people sitting on the grass, reading, talking, dozing. Others strolling around purposefully or not so purposefully. It looks like Andy Hardy Goes to College. We glide effortlessly among them. Bobble giggles with excitement.

"Hey, Pumpkin, how about if we go down to Harvard Square and get some ice-cream?"

"Really, Dad? Yeah? Right on!"

It's the first time we've been able to do something like that. And it's so damn easy. Buying ice cream.

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With one big leap I am free and on a roll. Liberated at last. So why have I believed so fervently all this time that a wheelchair would confine me or bind me, when it's done precisely the opposite? Why have I been disabling myself for the last eight years, dragging my sorry ass around, gradually shrinking my world to the limits of my elbow crutches. And how the hell did my mother know about all this? That's the big question.

And the big answer? Well, who can figure mothers. Perhaps they just see their children.

As for the other, that's easy. I didn't want to be one of those people — the March of Dimes boy, one of Jerry's Kids, the Greyhound Station spastic dribbler. And who can blame me? Who the hell would want to be one them? I still don't want to be one of them.

So who am I now?

One thing's sure, I'm no longer a guy on crutches who just might have broken his leg or twisted his ankle. I am no longer trying to pass. I am an official handicapped person with a

wheelchair to prove it.

People smile at me as I roll past, especially when I'm with my kids.

"Watch the speed limit, buddy!"

"Say that's real nifty."

"Now that's just what I need, Larry."

It's still too soon for that to bother me.

On the street tough-looking Vietnam vets in wheelchairs give me knowing nods and try to engage me in secret handshakes.

It's still too soon for me to understand.

## **Norwich 1988**

"We'd like you to go along to the Annual General Meeting to represent the MD Group," says June Marriage. "You won't have to do anything. Show the flag, that's all."

The Muscular Dystrophy Group is mostly parents of boys with Duchene. A doctor I saw in Newcastle suggested I join to keep in touch with what's going on relating to my condition. I have been to only one meeting and didn't see what it had to do with me. I never went back. They are obviously looking for something to do with me.

I suppose I can go to this one meeting for them. What's the worst that can happen?

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There is a small man hunched in a wheelchair sitting at the front of the room. His hands rest curled on the arms of his chair. He stares owl-like through his thick glasses out into the audience. Next to him is a woman whose head is lolling alarmingly. She is drooling. A young girl sitting next to her leans over to dab at her mouth with a white handkerchief. To her right is a guy with his

eyes closed. So he doesn't have to watch her drool? No. His hands move lightly over a piece of paper in front of him. Right, he's the blind person. Facing them in the large room are about twenty people in various states of permanent and ill-favoured disintegration. Wheelchairs, crutches, white sticks, a few hearing aids, lots of out-of-context body movement.

I sit in the back, by the exit, watching. No way do I want to be part of this.

There is much talk of the need for better access at the theatre, a new ramp at City Hall, more down curbs, white markings on some stairs. I drift off.

"Do I have any more nominations for the Committee?" asks the small man.

There is muttering. Something metallic and hollow clangs on the floor. A wheelchair falling apart? Oh, God, no! I try not to look.

"I nominate, Bill Albert, from the Muscular Dystrophy Group," a voice says.

I open my mouth to protest but everyone who is able to has turned to look at me and I only manage a weak smile.

It seems I can't escape being made part of the show.

The worst *has* happened.

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"How many of our people will come to a dance?" asks Richard.

I have not only been press-ganged onto the Access Group, I have been put on the Publicity Committee. We are meeting a few months after the AGM.

"Well, I don't know if that matters much," I reply. "My mate said he and his band would do it for nothing. We only have to pay for renting the Labour Club for the night."

"You might be right, Richard," David laughs. "I mean, us wheelies can't dance, the deaf people can't hear the music to



dance and the blind people wouldn't be able to see where they're going. It could be a complete shambles."

Brendan gurgles a laugh and his body slams backward in his wheelchair.

"I thought you wanted to raise money for the Group," I say.

"Isn't this too good an opportunity to pass up?"

"But is this really the kind of image we want for the Group?"

replies Richard. "Folk music is a bit... well you know."

"I like the idea", Brendan says.

Or at least I think that's what he says, as his words struggle out in distorted spurts.

"That's all very well, Brendan, but you know I think we must be rather more careful about this decision."

Brendan twitches, jerks violently in his chair and makes a face, sticking out his tongue. I freeze, thinking he is having a fit. He winks at me.

I smile back, starting to enjoy myself.

Richard, of course, ignores the exchange. He has to. He's blind.

## **London 1992**

"What's that?"

"I said why are you in a chair?"

"You're kidding me, right?"

"Sorry?"

"Ha! You a new cripple then or what?"

"No, not entirely. I mean I've been using a chair for a few years now. And I'm in a disability group up in Norwich. I thought maybe..."

"Wait, I got it. You're a Yank aren't you?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"So, they go around asking that kinda thing over there in the

States?"

"I don't know really, I've been living over here for almost thirty years."

"Really? Haven't lost the accent, have you?"

"I guess not."

"Well, listen, mate. It's just that you don't go asking people about their impairment, that's all. That's not what it's about. What it's about is that crap over the road there. Just take a look. Head patters, do-gooders and lady-bloody-bountifuls raising themselves up by putting us in our cap-in-fucking-hand place. You know what I mean? And what do we get? I'll tell you what we get. No transport we can use and no jobs and shit schools and no getting in here and no getting in there and all that sort of shit. You know what I mean? And then once a year they remember us poor disabled bastards and we get wheeled out and they throw some silly bugger in a vat of baked beans and everyone thinks that's bloody great and they give us their bloody guilt money and that's us sorted out for a while and they go away feeling good about themselves. So, listen I don't want to get heavy with you or anything like that, but what the fuck does all that have to do with why I use a chair?"

"Oh, well OK. Sorry. It's my first demo, you see and ..."

"I got you. Don't worry, mate, you'll learn."

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I'm a slow learner. But what better teachers than other crips. In fact there are no other teachers. Thanks to my many disabled friends in Norwich, I have been learning a lot about who I am. That is why I'm in London and why I'm finding out more. And my teachers here? Five hundred joyfully angry crips, rolling and staggering and stumbling and drooling and twitching and shouting and singing and waving banners in front of London

Weekend Television on the South Bank.

All those good people inside the London television studio and in other studios throughout the country trying to help disabled people by throwing custard pies at minor celebrities and dancing the polka until their grins bleeds. Sponsored walks, sponsored swims, sponsored crawls, sponsored stupidity, sponsored crips. Everybody likes to sponsor a grateful crip, don't they? So where have all grateful crips gone?

I've been here before. Berkeley 1964. The Lucky Super Market Shop-in, Free speech pickets, the Cadillac Showroom Sit-in over in San Francisco. Not-so-grateful Negros then. Not-so-grateful crips now. Me now.

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Before I joined the group in Norwich I didn't know any disabled people. I didn't want to either. They frightened me, repelled me with their crippled twitching, garbled speech, their unnatural ways. I used a wheelchair, sure, that made mother's-practical sense, but it wasn't like an ordinary chair and anyway, using it didn't mean I had to hang around with the disabled. God forbid! I wasn't like them. I had a good job, a wife, kids, a life that most definitely didn't need disabled people in it. Besides, they were socially contagious. If I got too close to them people might say, "Hey aren't you a handicapped person, just like that guy I saw the other day out in front of the Greyhound Station?"

"Not me, buddy. Must be a case of mistaken identity."

But the identity mistaken was my own, my image of myself. I am not an able-bodied person who happens to use a wheelchair. No. I am the drooling guy in front of the Greyhound Station, I am the boy on the March of Dimes poster, I am one of Jerry's Kids. The most important thing that disabled people have taught me is that it's OK.

Paradoxically, what being with other disabled people has also taught me is that these monster images, the ever-present wallpaper of demeaning charity advertising, is a lie. The language that “confines” us in wheelchairs, makes us “deaf and dumb”, makes us “blind as a bat”, is a lie. The idea that we are the sum of our medical conditions is a lie. That we are dependent, mindless, sexless, voiceless and always need to be cared for, done for until we’re done for, is a lie.

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I might have come home to myself sooner if I had remembered and had understood a bit from “Sather Gate Illumination”. It was written in 1956 in Berkeley, where, unknown to my non-illuminated, illusory able-bodied self wandering there four years later, the US disability movement was shortly to begin. In Allen Ginsberg’s clear-eyed, beatific way he saw right to the heart of the Big Lie and out the other side.

Now cripple girl swings down walk with  
loping fuck gestures of  
her hips askew let  
her roll her eyes in abandon & camp angelic  
through the campus bouncing her body  
about in joy someone  
will dig that pelvic energy for sure.  
The lion's ruddy eyes  
Shall flow with tears of gold.

## **Norwich 1997**

It’s Saturday morning. I’m sitting outside Jarrolds waiting for Gill and Charlotte. I’m holding a paper cup, about to take a drink of water. A concerned lady in tweeds rushes up to me and without

making eye contact drops fifty pence into my cup.

She has ignored my loping fuck gestures, my angelic rolling eyes, my bouncing body, my pelvic energy. And why not? Hasn't she, like everyone else, been sucking down those Telethon images? Of course she has, and she knows exactly who I am. So do I.

Thank you, lady. Have a very good day.

I laugh at her and at myself, then fish the fifty pence out of the water.