

KALEIDOSCOPE

INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE OF LITERATURE, FINE ARTS, AND DISABILITY

Summer/Fall 1988

Number 17

\$4.00



Paul Klee, Scleroderma, and
Metaphor

Philoctetes: The Wound and
the Bow

Disability as Metaphor in
Literature

Colors of Silence:
Morris Broderson

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JUST ANOTHER YEAR IN CHRONIC IA

DALLAS DENNY

We're on the big damned yellow and black school bus, on our way to a "picnic," which means that we will stop at a roadside park with three trees and two concrete picnic tables and eat extra crispy recipe Kentucky Fried Chicken, bones and all, and maybe even the plastic sporks, the hungrier of us. Then we will be put back on the bus and ride back to the hospital, where we will disembark and be rolled back to the musty, dusty, and always gloomy buildings, back to the chronic wards. The hydraulic wheelchair lift of the bus is broken, which means that the technicians have to load and unload us through the fire door at the back of the bus, sweating and cursing, and occasionally letting one of us bang on the asphalt, warping our rubber-rimmed wheels.

Once, on such an outing, I was unloaded first, and rolled away down a hill as the technicians struggled with Mordred Holmes, who was fighting to stay on the bus. They didn't notice as my wheelchair gathered momentum, passing surprised picnickers and campers, whizzing past tents and oak trees until the wheels hit a root and the wheelchair stopped. I didn't stop. I was thrown forward and plowed into a yellow-and-green umbrella tent, collapsing it and scaring hell out of the young couple inside. I got a nasty cut out of that one, just over my eye, from a tentpeg. I remember staring at the sun through the treetops, feeling bodies under me, under the canvas, wriggling into clothes, and then a circle of people

around me, staring, questioning, until two of the white-suited technicians came running down the hill, and then everybody understood, and looked away, or looked at me in that pitying way, and the young couple whose tent I had wrecked looked at each other and then down at the ground.

I have a bruise on that same eye today, because the techs sat me beside Jack Oliver, whom I dislike. When they wheeled me up beside Oliver, he said, "Why did you go and put him there for? You know he's going to spit on me

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and then I'll pop him one." The technicians just shrugged and left, and I spit at Oliver, and he plugged me one, and then there was a fight as the technicians wrestled him to the floor in the aisle of the bus and gave him an injection of Valium in his buttocks. Now Oliver is just sitting there, enjoying the high from the drug.

O'Rourke is driving the bus today, his whites yellowed to the exact shade of his teeth. O'Rourke has figured out exactly how much gasoline his car

uses, and measures it by the drop. He tells Stoner, who usually works with him, that it takes him exactly three-eighths of a gallon to get to work from his house, and seven-sixteenths of a gallon to get home, because there are more hills on the way home than there are on the way to work. At break time every evening, O'Rourke goes down to his car, a 1968 Oldsmobile, and pours in gasoline from milk jugs he keeps in the trunk. I try to look out the window every afternoon about 3 PM, when O'Rourke comes in. He never varies by more than one minute, and usually his car is choking and gasping, running out of gas, as he pulls into the parking lot. It's fun to watch him run out, which he does on occasion, a couple of hundred yards short of the parking lot. It ruins his whole day.

O'Rourke drives the bus like he drives his car, as if there were an egg between his foot and the gas pedal. He accelerates very slowly, but if a car in front of him happens to be moving too slowly to suit him, he becomes absolutely apoplectic. Stoner tells me in confidence that O'Rourke is crazy. But Stoner is crazy, too. For one thing, he is insanely jealous of his wife. He spends his suppertime parked in his car, across campus at the building where she works, peering at her through cheap binoculars. Stoner is the kind of guy who has everything, but none of it is very good. You know what I mean. Formica dining set, imitation crushed velvet sofa and chair, velvet painting of Christ on the wall of the living room, K-Mart stereo, a console color television set that spends about six months a year in the shop, an eight-year-old Buick with a broken air conditioner. That kind of stuff. Every month he gets a "great classic" book in the mail and carries it about on the ward for two or three days, showing off the imitation leather binding, but of course not reading it. Stoner has not read some of the best — Tolstoy, Joyce, Melville, Conrad, Dickens. What he

does read are magazines from the top racks of mini-marts. I never liked pornography myself. But Stoner is always waving a picture of some nude in front of my face, knowing I can do little about it. He shows the stuff to Margaret, who he has figured is a lesbian, and to Stelson, who has Gilles de la Tourette Syndrome, and who curses uncontrollably when he sees the pictures.

Stelson's disease has not been diagnosed (except by me, and I do not count). He has a neurological condition

He never varies by more than one minute, and usually his car is choking and gasping, running out of gas, as he pulls into the parking lot.

which causes his facial tics, his barks, his cursing. The psychiatrists think he is crazy. He sees the shrink every week for an hour of taxpayers' time, so the good doctor can find out what repressed childhood event causes his continual cursing. Stelson has been seeing the shrink for about four years now.

I have spastic quadraplegia (severe). That's what I read in my chart. Doritos (like the tortilla chips) showed it to me. It is caused by spinal cord and brain damage I got when I wiped my car out on the night of my senior prom. I've been here, in the hospital, on the chronic wards, ever since the insurance money ran out. I can't care for myself, except for feeding myself with a special spoon on my better days. I can't even turn the pages of books or magazines without tearing them, due to the tremors. Most of the staff figure that my brain was fried in the wreck, but Doritos and Johnny Walker knew better. They used to call me Spaz, and the name has stuck (unofficially, of

course). Spaz. Spaz-I-Am. Do you like green eggs and ham? Do you like them, Spaz-I-Am?

Doritos and Johnny Walker were a welcome change from the dour-faced, middle-aged, middle-class pinheads like O'Rourke and Stoner who usually work the ward. Doritos and Walker used to let me sit in the nursing station while they dug drugs out of the medicine cabinet and looked them up in the PDR and maybe took a couple. They would eat Quaaludes like candy, long before anyone else figured out that they had potential for being abused. They would get twisted and bent, looking progressively more like the patients on Chronic III A as the night wore on. Doritos would bring me books like *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, tearing the pages out and handing them to me one at a time, or reading aloud his favorite parts. "As your attorney," he would screech to Johnny Walker, "I advise you to take six Phenergan." I wanted to yell, "Get out! Get out while you still can! Just look what the bastards have done to me!" But of course, I couldn't. And now Doritos is doing five-to-ten in the slammer, and Johnny Walker is in a pharmacy program at Duke. I saw Doritos on the 6:00 news the day he was busted. Seems he went into the bathroom of an Exxon station, he and a buddy, and the attendant, who noticed them lurching around the lot, went into the john and dug their works out of the trash can and called the cops, who picked them up with a pocketful of ampules stolen from the hospital.

When Stoner and O'Rourke and Kelly work, they sit around with their keys on little chains on their belts and tell bad jokes and say disparaging things about various minorities. They never do any work. One day, while Doritos and Johnny Walker were still around, old Jim Peach hobbled up to the nursing station and in his backroom

voice asked for a cigarette. Kelly gave him a ready-rolled, but Peach just looked at it with his lip curled up in a kind of half-sneer and said, as he put the cigarette in his pocket, "No, I want one like those long-haired boys gave me." Kelly didn't catch it, just like he didn't understand why Frank Lee, the screamer, kept talking about "the lights" the day Johnny Walker fed him some mescaline.

Doritos and Walker were replaced by two young guys. One, J. Michaels (that's what his nametag says), is OK, but the other is being broken in "right" by the old men, and is already learning to turn a cold and calloused eye on everything that happens on the ward.

I can see Stoner flirting with the clerk at the KFC as she stacks red-and-white boxes three feet deep on the counter. If I were her, I would just keep on piling up boxes until I had built a red-and-white wall between me and Stoner and this busload of freaks! I can picture her frantically slapping box on top of box, using the Colonel's mashed potatoes for mortar, spreading it with deft strokes with the plastic top of a cole slaw cup, or maybe with a spork. What

They would get twisted and bent, looking progressively more like the patients on Chronic III A as the night wore on.

would the archaeologists make of that wall when they unearthed it in 5000 years? Would they see us as a culture of chicken worshippers, entombing the bones of our revered sacred fowl after a sacramental dip in holy hot oils, in caskets emblazoned with the smiling face of our benevolent white-haired leader? Perhaps . . .

I am shaken from my musings by a lurch of the bus as O'Rourke leaves the

parking lot. He has slammed on the brakes to miss a Corvette. My wheelchair, which is not fastened securely, tips me into Jack Oliver's lap. Jack, despite the Valium, is only too happy to pound the side of my face with his meaty fists. Stoner can't see me because of the pile of chicken boxes, and O'Rourke is too busy cursing the driver of the Corvette and worrying about wasted gas to bother looking in the rear-view mirror. Nobody else is going to stop Jack; that's for sure. The other patients are all too spaced out to care. It looks like it's going to be a long trip.

Dallas Denny is working on his doctorate in Special Education at Vanderbilt University. He also works full time as a psychologist at a residential center for disabled persons. His fiction last appeared in Whole Earth Review in 1987.