

Smile

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“Can you walk?” the skinny, Vietnamese waiter asked me.

The question shocked me. I guessed he did not see me walk into the Wax bar, which was an oceanside bungalow made of cement and a palm leafed roof. Why did he ask? I sat at my chair and looked up at him. He waited with his fingers laced together while the ocean rolled behind him and the humidity sat on our shoulders like blocks.

“Yes I can,” I said. I did not know how else to answer. I stood up from my chair. I felt my bare feet hug the cool cement. I showed him my small chunks of calves flexed with years of carrying my body. My scars that looked like dried canyons along the inside of my ankles and feet. My small feet were covered with veins and hair, and my toes wiggled with less life than dried, curled worms on a sidewalk. But they worked.

“Oh I see,” he said with high eyebrows. He pulled up a chair and threw his right elbow on the wooden bar top. He was a twenty-one-year-old, he said, and his name was Huynh (pronounced *yo*). He talked with a loud voice, small hand gestures, and pauses in between his sentences. The Wax bar and restaurant was empty except for the yellow shirted staff members and my iced coffee as I waited for a bus that would leave in two hours. Soon, the ship where I lived and studied for four months would leave for India later that evening.

“Aaaa.. I wanted to know if you could walk because, aaah, because my cousin has legs like those,” Huynh explained and pointed at my legs. “Only he can’t walk.”

Huynh told me his cousin was a fifteen-year-old who lived in a house all day without access to a wheelchair. I tried to imagine him. I tried to imagine that life. Was this person confined to a bed all day? Maybe his family members assisted him out for gatherings and cook-outs. When was the last time he saw a doctor? Did friends visit him? I hoped that he was not isolated in a bedroom with darkened windows and light from a TV smeared across the room. I hoped he did not hate looking outside because when you are stuck in a bed, hot air and sunlight taunt you as you lay like breathing stones. I hoped he did not cry at night while he gripped a pillow and begged for an answer to the question: *Why was I born with this body?*

My obligation to pound coffee into my system and leave for the bus stop dissolved. I even forgot about the beauty of this town, Mui Ne. Stoplights and busyness were absent, kite surfers and fishermen skimmed empty roads, and palm trees yawned in the wind. Then there was that blue ocean that stretched toward the horizon. Each square of the place was worthy of a photograph, and in fact I had taken many pictures. I scribbled down details and words in my journal and looked at my camera that sat inside my bag which rested on the bar top. I was determined to get a picture with Huynh before I left. I wanted to remember him the same way I wanted to remember a sunset on the ocean.

Huynh tapped his fingernails on the wooden bar top. “Was there a – a time... when you couldn’t walk?” he asked loudly.

“Yes,” I replied and explained how between the ages of nine months and seventeen years old I had ten major surgeries to fix my spine and feet. When I was born in Riverton, Wyoming, my feet jerked toward my crotch and my spine was attacked by odd pieces of vertebrae.

When I was born the doctors told my parents, “This baby is born for a lifetime in a wheelchair.”

I told Huynh of the visits to Shriners Hospital in Salt Lake City, Utah. I remembered colorful carpets, the x-ray machines, giant dome ceiling, the happy therapists, nurses, and surgeons who roamed the floors. Most of them knew my name because of my frequent visits and my mother who worked there as an occupational therapist. We moved from rural Wyoming to Salt Lake City after my parents divorced. I was seven years old when we moved and my mom got the job at Shriners. I remembered the years I dangled my feet from the squishy doctor’s table to see if my x-ray showed that I could go another six months without a surgery. I remembered the IV burrowed in my hand, the white gown covering my body, and the bed that held me like a hand offering me to scalpels and peeping white lights. I remembered the thin flexible rod poked into my spinal cord that injected morphine directly into my system. The catheter invaded my penis and kept me jailed to a bed. Gloved hands inspected my stitches which zipped my flesh from a surgery that lasted anywhere from two hours to eleven.

When I lived in Wyoming other kids also asked me if I could walk. I always shook my head no while I sat with casts, metal twister cables, or braces that held my feet straight. My first surgery was when I was nine months old. The doctors at Shriners did not guarantee that I would walk. From nine months through three years of age, I underwent four major foot surgeries, hours of physical therapy, and a requirement to wear braces and twister cables. My mother often lifted my small body with her hands wrapped around my torso and hoped one day she could let me go.

One late morning at the age of three, with my legs and feet gripped by metal and plastic, I played with a toy truck pushing it back and forth in our narrow kitchen. My mom stood by the table and flipped through paperwork as she enjoyed the sunlight that breathed through the windows. She occasionally glanced out at the hills and fields of northeastern Wyoming. At some point, I stopped the wheels of my toy truck and lifted my body to stand. I imagined that my knees snapped and felt for the first time my weight plunged upright. My small pale muscles awakened and bulged inside the cage of my braces. My shoes that kept my feet straightened were hungry to eat up the path ahead of me. I imagined my hands wanted to be wrapped around my mom’s long legs that stood across the kitchen. I plopped one foot, then another on the yellow and brown linoleum floor. I left my toy truck behind in the wake of my first steps with a giant three-year-old smile on my face. I imagined my mother’s back erupted with ripples, a tornado of light clustered in her chest, and her mouth pulling oxygen. I imagined how her eyelids blinked and questioned if what she saw was real as my legs carried me. I hugged my mom’s legs. Tears dripped from my mother’s eyes. She wanted to tell all the doctors and all the people that doubted me, “I told you so.” It took four surgeries, years of therapy, and twenty tons of hope for my legs to lift my body through that kitchen.

Since then, my legs had lifted me to many places, including the Wax restaurant in Mui Ne, Vietnam, where I talked to Huynh. I saw him take in my story. He sat crunched in his seat with occasional eyebrow lifts and low hums of the voice. I felt his imagination swirl. I won-

dered if he thought: *What if my cousin was born in America?* I threw my senses to my feet. My soles perched on the wooden legs of my chair. I remembered the feeling of the day before when I pushed pedals thirty miles on a rusty cruiser bike along the coast. Sweat poured out of my skin, and pain clicked in my ankles. I would never hate that feeling. I wanted that feeling of gearing through thirty miles of thick humidity and earth swallowing sun. I wanted the ability to see small villages with squared wooden homes, oxen pulled carts, and the smell of sour fish. I wanted to hear tires crunch the asphalt. I wanted to see scenes of a rock island calmly sleeping under the protection of night where the moon hung spherically in the sky and yelled white light onto the ocean and road.

Huynh looked at the bar top and told me Vietnam did not have any places like Shriners. He had family members who were in England trying to get his cousin to Hong Kong or America where a surgery could be done, but they lacked money to make it happen. I asked him if he could ever go to college.

“No, it’s not like America. We don’t get the same schooling. No university near here,” he said with a crushed face and lowered head. A breeze rolled on top of the counter and slapped the leaves that dangled from the roof.

I crunched my jaw. I felt guilty for complaining about taking a test, writing papers, and attending classes. Huynh maybe wanted the stresses I had in college. He might like opportunity to travel, to take college classes, to ride a bike up the coast of a foreign country, to visit with the locals, or not to work at the Wax bar.

I grabbed my calves and squeezed. Why was I born in America and

Huynh’s cousin born in Vietnam? I had the luck to be born in a place that fixed my deformed bones for the cost of nothing, a place with skillful surgeons who gave me a vehicle to experience the world. I could sweat and grind up the coast of Vietnam, travel from my homeland, see Mui Ne’s beauty, and meet Huynh without needing a wheelchair. I was born in a place where I didn’t have to work in a restaurant as a waiter my whole life. I could become a fully educated person and gain the tools to give something back to the world and visit parts of it. I released my calves and took a deep breath.

It was time for me to leave. I asked Huynh to write down his contact information and the word for smile in his first language: *cười*. Something I asked every local I met. The other yellow shirted staff came over to see what Huynh was writing. They began smiling and laughing.

After Huynh was done writing, he straightened his back and made a declaration. “You are coming to dinner tonight with us. And you will eat a traditional Vietnamese meal with us.”

I painfully turned down the offer. Huynh looked saddened. I gripped my camera in my bag. Huynh did not have a camera. He lacked the luxury to capture this moment in a photo or of any moment around him in beautiful Mui Ne. For that moment, I wanted to own the memory in the same way as Huynh. I left the digital camera in my bag.

I walked onto the beach away from the Wax restaurant and wished I had one more night. I waved goodbye to Huynh and to the other staff members who wore yellow shirts, smiles, and blurred hands. I smiled back and felt the hot sand pile over my bare feet.

Wonder as a rhetoric of ineffability in ekphrasis and translation in Chaucer’s *The Book of the Duchess* and Coleridge’s “The Garden of Boccaccio”

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“The Garden of Boccaccio” (1828), a poem by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, is probably not a direct imitation of Geoffrey Chaucer’s longer poem, *The Book of the Duchess* (circa 1370). However, the two works overlap in one significant respect: they are both narrations from the first-person point of view in which the author “wonders” at a work of art but struggles with the problem of incomplete or defective expression. The speaker of each poem describes his own relation to the subject work of art in terms of wonder and has difficulty with the ineffability or inexpressibility of that relation. The narrator of Chaucer’s poem is freed from chronic insomnia when he “wonders” at a romance (a medieval genre characterized by courtly adventure) he finds in a dusty old book. The saving knowledge he gleans from its pages affects him so profoundly that he falls asleep, experiencing wonder again in his dream but again failing to express this experience in the poem he writes afterward. Coleridge’s speaker instead eagerly surrenders his own mature mental state to gain a childlike ignorance, thereby more closely appreciating the art that is the subject of his poem but shutting out his readers in the process. Both poems, then, are ekphrastic in that they describe other works of art; furthermore, both express their meaning by failing to express it. Even though won-

der is demonstrated differently in the two poems, both Chaucer and Coleridge choose to fuse the occasion of ekphrastic wonder with the rhetoric of ineffability, a structure which in turn prompts their readers to have the same kind of experience by “wondering” at the poems they are reading.

Before beginning a discussion of wonder in Chaucer, we should first qualify “wonder” by briefly tracing this concept from the Greeks to Chaucer’s day. Aristotle and Plato both named wonder (*thaumadzein* in Greek) as the beginning of philosophy, but neither discussed it at length.¹ Subsequent philosophers did not change this function of wonder: its relationship to philosophy as the founding passion was a consistent one from the Greeks to Dante Alighieri.² One sense of what the Greeks meant by wonder is particularly useful to trace to Chaucer: *paradoxos*, a Greek synonym of *thauma* (that which causes one to marvel). *Paradoxos* is that which is “contrary to or surpassing common opinion or belief.”³ This sense of wonder finds its way into the *Consolation of Philosophy*, a prosimetrical (written in alternating verse and prose sections) work written in Latin in the sixth century by the Roman-born philosopher and statesman Boethius.