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"O That My Words Were Written Down!": Contested Bodies and Unwelcome Words in the Book of Job and Modern Poetry of Disability

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Contributing to modern theology's attention to diverse embodiments and particular histories, this paper brings the poetry of the book of Job into dialogue with new voices: modern poets of disability, especially women. Traditional theological reflections on suffering and disability often turn to Job, although Job's words and the text itself resist easy conclusions. Modern poets of disability reveal surprising similarities with Job, as both seek to reject the meaning others ascribe to their bodies. Comparing the poets of disability to Job reveals how disabling change to the body is experienced as exile and as a new experience requiring new language. The unchanged, able-bodied audience rejects the new insights of the poet, exposing the conflicts between the interpretations that communities privilege and those they exclude. Elements of a constructive theology of disability are found in the way poets of disability creatively reconfigure the changing relationships among body, words, community, and God.

Keywords: Job, disability, poetry, body, embodiment, trauma, identity, suffering

My attention to Job began when Job's story was compared to my own. Although noticeably disabled since childhood, I was a junior in college when my smoke detector woke me in the night to find fire filling my apartment hallway, blocking my escape. Calling for help from my second-story window brought no response, so I jumped. My heels shattered when I hit the concrete sidewalk. As the fire consumed my belongings, an ambulance raced me to the hospital. From the small, local hospital I was medically evacuated by a flight home to a bigger hospital in Toronto to have

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my heels surgically rebuilt from my hipbone. Transferred by ambulance from the airport, I arrived back at the teaching hospital where only a month earlier I had left behind the cast from a previous surgery. My father was waiting to greet me as I was wheeled in on a stretcher. "Haven't I been through enough?" I asked. Catching him off guard, he managed only a startled, "Consider Job."

The invitation to reflect on Job's story is part of the book of Job itself. God's question, "Have you considered my servant Job?" (Job 1:8b), sets the drama in motion, offering Job's story to the attention of the antagonist, the Satan, and to the reader or audience.[1] This invitation lives on as part of a long theological tradition of connecting this text to experiences of suffering. Job's questions helped direct me into systematic theology, where contemporary theologies connect Job's story to particular histories and contexts of suffering, such as the way Gustavo Gutiérrez uses Job to draw attention to the suffering of the poor in Latin America and Johann Baptist Metz uses Job to draw attention to those who suffered in the Shoah.[2] Gutiérrez argues that the author of Job offers Job's words to give voice to others who suffer: "The poet wants to turn Job into an archetype, to make him the spokesman not of his personal experience alone but of the experience of all humankind."[3] Theologians continue to extend Job's power to give voice to suffering, such as the way Johann M. Vento develops Metz's focus on Job into a feminist reflection on trauma caused by violence against women.[4]

"My skin cracks like scorched earth."[5] Despite my familiarity with modern theologies that engage the example of Job, images like this one from poet Anne Kaier, drawing the reader's gaze to her disabling skin condition, startled me by their similarities to the book of Job. Like Job, modern poets of disability, such as those collected in *Beauty Is a Verb: The New Poetry of Disability*, write in vivid language of flesh, bones, and body and put pain into words in ways that are times wildly freeing and at times frighteningly out of control as they confront audiences that do not want to hear what they have to say.[6]

[1] All biblical references are from: Michael Coogan et al., eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version*, 5th edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[2] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-Talk and The Suffering of The Innocent*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1998), xviii; Johann Baptist Metz, "Theology as Theodicy?," in *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 54.

[3] Gutiérrez, *On Job*, 1.

[4] Johann M. Vento, "Violence, Trauma, and Resistance: A Feminist Appraisal of Metz's Mysticism of Suffering unto God," *Horizons* 29, no. 1 (2002): 7, 10.

[5] Anne Kaier, "River Creature," in *Beauty Is a Verb: The New Poetry of Disability*, ed. Jennifer Bartlett, Sheila Black, and Michael Northen (El Paso, TX: Cinco Puntos Press, 2011), 236.

[6] Jennifer Bartlett, Sheila Black, and Michael Northen, eds., *Beauty Is a Verb.*

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Writing from an experience like Job's, modern poets of disability suggest a fresh reading of Job centered on Job's own experience. Reading their work, I realized that in my studies of Job, I had avoided any discussion of disability—my own or anyone else's. Was my avoidance my own prejudice against disability, an assumption of an ableist worldview? Reading the modern poetry of disability in dialogue with the book of Job offered an opportunity to unseat such assumptions and to explore a constructive reading of Job from the perspective of disability.

In my previous studies of theologies of suffering, I encountered little reason to consider disability. Deborah Beth Creamer argues that in theology attention to disability is lacking:

> Disability is rarely mentioned within theologies that otherwise attend to identity particularities (e.g., even as feminist theology and queer theology have attended explicitly to the body, especially in relation to sexuality, they rarely address diversity of ability or embodiment), and disability itself has not yet emerged as a theological lens (e.g., there has not yet been a fully articulated feminist disability theology).... Other works mention disability only in passing, as part of a list of other diversities, but fail to treat these issues as relevant for theoretical or theological construction. Even cutting-edge work on gender, race, and sexuality still assumes a generically healthy body to be normative. Disability is invisible, even within theologies interested in embodiment.[7]

Some might argue, however, that discussing disability by connecting it to Job is not a helpful approach—some could object that disability does not offer a valuable theological lens or even that the book of Job develops the wrong kind of attention to disability. Both objections can be addressed. First, some people assume disability is not a valuable theological lens because disability is often seen as a problem for individuals without a common cause or particular historical context, unlike the histories of suffering studied by liberation, political, and feminist theologians. Disability encompasses a wide range of conditions (visible or invisible, permanent or temporary, painful or painless) stemming from many different causes (from accidents, to genetics, to structural injustice like poverty, racism, or insufficient access to healthcare or nutrition). There is, however, a common character and history to disability. Nancy Eiesland, in her work, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability*, for example, suggests that persons with disabilities share a social situation of stigmatization and exclusion.[8] Sharon Betcher observes that such stigmatization

[7] Deborah Beth Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 55.

[8] Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 24.

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often comes from the way that the nondisabled react to the disabled with "a deep anxiety inherent in humanism's relation to the flesh—a fear of being 'humiliated' (from the same Latin root as '*humus*' or earth) by life."[9] An individual's experience of disability is shaped by the common social and cultural assumptions about disability. Such cultural rhetoric about disability has a history, especially in the way the concept of disability is used to establish what counts as "normal" in a society.[10] As Mary Jo Iozzio notes, "Stereotypical assumptions have defined people with disabilities" so that their stories are always told in certain ways—"those who suffer, as tragic, heroic, and/or victim"—and many labels are used to define them in terms of perceived defects, "retarded, autistic, blind, deaf, learning disabled, etc., etc., etc.,—ad nauseam!"[11] Second, the fact that there are problematic readings of Job does not mean that there cannot be transformative readings of Job. In "Things Too Wonderful: A Disabled Reading of Job," Rebecca Raphael acknowledges this problem: "For centuries, Job has been the paradigmatic sufferer. To the extent that the book has been used to tell people how to experience a disease or disability (a social pressure one can see at work in the text itself), the history of this use falls under the purview of the history of disability."[12] F. Rachael Magdalene agrees, arguing that Job has been read through an "ableist theology, which means that it intentionally or inadvertently bolsters prejudice and discrimination against people with disabilities," especially by insisting that traumas like Job's are fundamentally—and often restrictively—the individual moral responsibility

[9] Sharon V. Betcher, "Becoming Flesh of My Flesh: Feminist and Disability Theologies on the Edge of Posthumanist Discourse," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26, no. 2 (2010): 110.

[10] Jay Timothy Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014). Lennard Davis discusses how modern understandings of disability developed in response to the way statistics came to define "the normal," in, Lennard Davis, "Introduction: Normality, Power, and Culture," in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard Davis (New York: Routledge, 2013), 1–2. Douglas Baynton explores how the concept of disability was used to define who did and did not count as potential citizens in Douglas C. Baynton, *Defectives in the Land: Disability and Immigration in the Age of Eugenics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016). Susan Schweik discusses how the concept of disability as "disgusting" and "ugly" was used in domestic laws to remove anyone "diseased, maimed, mutilated, or in any way deformed, so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object" off the public streets. Susan M. Schweik, *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

[11] Mary Jo Iozzio, "Thinking about Disabilities with Justice, Liberation, and Mercy," *Horizons* 36, no. 1 (2009): 47.

[12] Rebecca Raphael, "Things Too Wonderful: A Disabled Reading of Job," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 31, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 401.

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of those who experience them.[13] Amos Yong, using the work of Raphael and Magdalene, contends that problematic "ableist" interpretations tend to read the divine speeches and Job's restoration as presenting God as one who removes all defects and disabilities—a theological stance that ignores the complicated experience that disability can be "identity-making."[14] As these authors demonstrate, the lens of disability can be used to identify and challenge problematic readings of Job and discover transformative ones.

Although the book of Job has been brought into conversation with many histories of suffering, including disability, nevertheless, drawing Job into conversation with modern poetry of disability offers new insight because it focuses attention on the poetry and the art of constructing experience into speech, the conflict between welcome and unwelcome speech, and the issues of access and privilege that lie behind such conflict. Emily Arndt writes that the most difficult stories of the Hebrew Bible do not resolve into one simple model of instruction but must be engaged in "an ongoing process—the work of a lifetime."[15] She argues that the work of connecting modern and biblical texts—a work she calls a kind of "attunement"—begins as interpretation but grows into ethics as it reveals new ways of being in the world.[16] Job is certainly a difficult text that demands the work of a lifetime. Attuning Job with modern poetry of disability offers an opportunity to unseat some of the easy (or ableist) connections between Job and disability and to explore the diversity of our embodied connections with one another and with God.

My study is necessarily limited. First, although Job suffers, not all disabilities are experiences of suffering. I limit my analysis to modern poets of disability who share a significant aspect of Job's experience, such as a debilitating or painful bodily change or those whose disabilities are visible to others and judged as a major affliction.[17] Biblical scholars note that

[13] F. Rachel Magdalene, "The ANE Legal Origins of Impairment as Theological Disability and the Book of Job," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 34, no. 1 (2007): 26.

[14] Amos Yong, "Job and the Redemption of Monstrosity," in *The Bible, Disability, and The Church: A New Vision of the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2011), 38.

[15] Emily Arndt, *Demanding Our Attention: The Hebrew Bible as a Source for Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2011), 176.

[16] Arndt, *Demanding Our Attention*, 86–87, 189.

[17] Job's "disability" experience has a sudden and unexpected onset, is physically debilitating, and is visible as a major affliction to others. Job first "fell on the ground" in response to the loss of all his livestock, servants, and children (Job 1:20). Categories of injuries are suggested when the Satan seeks to afflict Job in "his bone and his flesh" (Job 2:3), and then inflicts "loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head" (Job 2:7). At this point, Job is described on the ground: "Job took a potsherd

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while the standard reading of Job assumes he is healed in the epilogue (just as his family, possessions, and social community are restored), the text does not explicitly state his body was healed.[18] Second, while I seek to offer a rich interpretation of Job, my primary interest is to make connections to the poetry of disability; I am not a biblical scholar offering original translations or interpretations of the biblical text. Instead, I use Carol A. Newsom's book, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations*, as a framework because she presents Job as a "polyphonic text" that brings multiple voices and multiple genres into dialogue without clear resolution.[19] I develop Newsom's framework using the work of scholars who analyze Job in terms of disability, with special attention to those who, like Rebecca Raphael, write from their own experience of disability.[20] Third, when selecting modern poets of disability, I focus on North American poets writing since the mid-twentieth century to maintain a balance between common experience and diverse voices, but I seek new voices, especially women's voices. Only a few of the modern poets of disability are explicitly religious poets, so for some religious themes, I focus on the poets who do share religious themes.

To draw modern poets into conversation with the book of Job, I proceed in sections based on the style shifts within the text of Job. First, I explore images of disability as exile in Job's opening speeches and in the poetry of Neil Marcus and Sheila Black. Second, I focus on fragmented language in the dialogue between Job and the friends and the poetry of Karen Fiser. Third, I examine the unwelcome character of Job's words to his friends and the

with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes" (Job 2:8). He is not described as moving from this position. The change to his bodily status is negative—"loathsome"—to Job and to others (Job 2:7, 19:17). Once Job begins to speak in poetry, he expresses in detail his experience as an unrelenting form of disruption: "My inward parts are in turmoil, and are never still" (Job 30:27).

[18] Katherine J. Dell explores his malady in detail, noting that along with the medical condition he suffered also from "mental torment" and "social ostracization," and agrees with Jeremy Schipper about the lack of a clear story of healing. Katharine J. Dell, "What Was Job's Malady?," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 41, no. 1 (September 2016): 62–65, 77, https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089216628418; Jeremy Schipper, "Healing and Silence in the Epilogue of Job," *Word & World* 30, no. 1 (2010): 22.

[19] Newsom uses the work of Mikhail Bakhtin to define a polyphonic text as having three distinctive characteristics. "(1) it embodies a dialogic sense of truth; (2) the author's position, although represented in the text, is not privileged; and (3) the polyphonic text ends without finalizing closure." Carol A. Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 17, 21.

[20] Raphael mentions her disability in her studies of Job, but she describes her experience further here: Rebecca Raphael, "He Who Has Ears to Hear," *Religious Studies News*, May 2005, http://rsnonline.org/indexd987.html?option=com_content&view=article&id=528&Itemid=612.

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poetry of Laura Hershey. Fourth, I address some of the questions of privilege that are raised by the changed style of Job’s final speeches and a previously unmentioned character, Elihu, with the poetry of Lynn Manning and Leroy F. Moore. Fifth, and finally, I consider the questions of divine privilege that are raised by the divine speeches, the concluding chapters of the text, and the whole framing of Job’s story as a model, using the poetry of Vassar Miller, one of the most explicitly religious (Christian) modern disabled poets. In conclusion, I suggest some initial elements of a constructive approach to disabled embodiment.

Disability as Exile

For Job and for many modern poets, if one’s life and body once felt like a familiar home, a sudden disabling change can feel like a kind of exile. Job once had a home—in his social and geographical world and in his own body. When Satan complains that God has “put a fence around [Job] and his house and all that he has, on every side,” the prologue links boundaries with safety, especially the safety of home (Job 1:10). After the fences—the structure and boundaries—protecting his property are destroyed, the next break comes to Job’s skin and bones—the fences of his body. Once this fence is breached, his skin opened and his bones made raw, Job becomes an exile, cut off from his familiar sense of home and sense of self. Newsom observes that Job responds with “no proximate past and future, no focus on immediate causality, but only the speaker’s present sense of devastation referred to the absolute horizons of birth and death”—Job’s whole moral imagination and ability to construct meaning is changed.[21] Although we picture Job remaining in one place, sitting on his heap of ashes, in contrast, his poetry feels full of motion, tearing around his new landscape, attempting to find and rip down any remaining landmarks or boundaries. Job’s words seek to destroy the day of his birth, rip out the night of his conception, hold it back, make it barren, darken the skies of its dawn (Job 3:4-9). He tries to shut down all the elements of his mother’s body that made possible the life of his own body, shutting the doors of her womb, closing the knees, and removing the breasts that received him (Job 3:12-13). Without his former protective boundaries, Job sees the world differently, as his freshly extended sight also reveals new, cruel boundaries that trap him and prevent his escape (Job 3:23-26).[22] Job’s changed body changes his

[21] Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 58.

[22] Dell describes Job’s sense of being “fenced in” by God as “almost an irrational response from someone in mental torment.” Dell, “What Was Job’s Malady?,” 67.

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perspective—he is no longer safe in his own body or in his world. Although his readers picture him in the same location, he sees himself cut off from home, in a strange, new, and unwanted place—an exile.

Modern poets often describe the disabled body as a place of exile (especially those experiencing a disabling change) and explore the issues of connecting or communicating between the home country and the country of exile. Neil Marcus' poem "Disabled Country" begins by imagining disability as a country, "If there was a country called disabled…."[23] For centuries, Marcus observes, "immigrants" have arrived in disabled country; he himself arrived at age eight.[24] New arrivals feel like they don't belong. "I tried to surgically remove myself," Marcus comments, blending medical language into the journey metaphor, but "found myself, in the end, staying and living there."[25] The language of immigration expresses the way his original body felt like a deeply familiar landscape—a homeland—but the changed body felt like a strange land far from home. For Marcus, however, exile moves in more than one direction. Although the beginning of Marcus' poem imagines becoming disabled as arriving in a strange country, in that new country he also "found myself."[26] The end of the poem imagines leaving the new country of disability, recognizing that such a journey would require remembering that "disabled country" as home.

In a poem called "What You Mourn," Sheila Black describes the year doctors straightened her legs (an attempt to reduce her disability).[27] She writes of her body before the surgery as a home where she "would have nested," and the surgical change to her body as a forced exile:

> imprisoned in a foreign body
> like a person imprisoned in a foreign land
> forced to speak a strange tongue
> heavy in the mouth, a mouth full of stones.[28]

For Black, exile is not only about forced separation from home, but also a problem of language and communication. Her experience in her body is foreign to those who see her body only from the outside. Black contrasts the language used by others to describe her as a child ("crippled," "disabled," and "differently abled") with her own language for her own body:

[23] Neil Marcus, "Disabled Country," in Petra Kuppers, Neil Marcus, and Lisa Steichmann, *Cripple Poetics: A Love Story* (Ypsilanti, MI: Homofactus Press, 2008), 115.
[24] Marcus, "Disabled Country," 115.
[25] Marcus, "Disabled Country," 115.
[26] Marcus, "Disabled Country," 115.
[27] Sheila Black, "What You Mourn," 212.
[28] Black, "What You Mourn," 212.

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that body
they tried so hard to fix, straighten was simply mine,
and I loved it as you love your own country.[29]

To others, Black's body was a foreign body and a foreign land, but she argues that she could love her body as much as her readers could love their own unchanged bodies. Others assumed she needed them to "fix" her body, but she experiences this "fix" as a break, using a comma right after the word to break the poetic line the way her bodily identity was broken. When others changed her body, those changes felt like being forced to speak a foreign language, her native language silenced by "a mouth full of stones."

Fragmented Language

When reading the book of Job with modern poets of disability, both body and language feel broken and the struggle for speech becomes a central part of the poetry itself.[30] Job tries to express his experience of his body as significantly and negatively changed—a change that also transforms his worldview and his language. Newsom argues that, unlike Job, Job's friends "have an easy relationship with language, and are able to speak with untroubled fluency. The privileged terms of value, the tropes, the modes of reasoning, and above all the traditional genres they use appear in their speech as completely adequate instruments for the expression of experience and for knowledge of the world."[31] Job's friends do not change in body, experience, or language. This is a form of privilege, an easy unquestioned access to the language of the community. Readers of Job often interpret the text like the friends, from a similar standpoint of privilege, refusing to have the safety of their bodies and their world challenged or changed by Job's words. Raphael contends that such a persistent misreading of Job exposes "the strength of resistance to Job's own account of himself and his suffering, that is to say, the power of refusal enjoyed by Job's able-bodied, healthy

[29] Black, "What You Mourn," 212.

[30] A wide range of modern theologians emphasize the significance of Job's effort to communicate, in contrast to a developed theodicy. Metz, for example, emphasizes Job's language of suffering, crisis, affliction, radical danger, complaint, and grievance as a language of prayer, not an argument. Metz, "Theology as Theodicy?" 55. David Burrell credits Job for speaking "to" God rather than "about" God. David B. Burrell, *Deconstructing Theodicy: Why Job Has Nothing to Say to the Puzzle of Suffering* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 124. Raphael argues that "Rather than focusing on theodicy (the able-bodied friends' project), let us attend to Job's language of physical suffering, dismemberment, and monstrosity." Raphael, "Things Too Wonderful," 402.

[31] Newsom, *The Book of Job, 130.*

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friends.[32] Job's own poetic speech becomes a kind of resistance. Newsom explains that Job expresses the breaking of his body by breaking apart words and motifs from psalms, exposing different meanings and seeking to re-present them: "Job picks his way through a shattered language he can wield only in fragments."[33]

Body and language are connected. Job's skin no longer cleanly separates inner and outer worlds; neither his breath nor his words travel easily across his lips. Job does not fit in his world anymore, as if God has forgotten his status as a human being and cares better for animals than for Job. Poetry becomes the instrument or art to try to express what has gone wrong. Job compares himself to the wild ass and the ox who are fed without crying out, while Job cries out and is given poison to drink from God's arrows (Job 6:3-6). He fears that his human flesh and bones cannot withstand pain's attack:

> What is my strength, that I should wait?
> And what is my end, that I should be patient?
> Is my strength the strength of stones,
> or is my flesh bronze? (Job 6:11-12)

The friends are part of the inhospitable landscape, like streams that shift from dangerous flooding to parching dryness (Job 6:15-17). In this hostile world, Job weaves images of word, breath, and body, to protest God's treatment: Job's words are treated as nothing but wind (Job 6:26); God has forgotten Job's "life is a breath" (Job 7:7); Job would "chose strangling" rather than this body or this life (Job 7:15);[34] his days are a breath (Job 7:16); God does not even relent long enough to let him swallow his spittle (Job 7:19). Job objects that God "crushes me with a tempest, and multiplies my wounds without cause; he will not let me get my breath…" (Job 9:17-18).

Pain fragments communication, as many of Karen Fiser's poems in her collection *Words Like Fate and Pain* illustrate.[35] In the title poem, Fiser begins, "*Ostalgia*: this strange and perfect word / means bone pain."[36] The word "ostalgia" then draws her into her memories of the hospital "lighted

[32] Raphael, "Things Too Wonderful," 402.

[33] Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 131.

[34] Job's statement seeking strangling can be translated as "my throat would choose strangling [and I would choose] death rather than my bones" because the words for "throat" and "bones" are words that identify the self. Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 135.

[35] Karen Fiser, *Words Like Fate and Pain* (Cambridge, MA: Zoland Books, 1992).

[36] Fiser, *Words Like Fate and Pain*, 8.

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up like an ocean liner / bearing me on and on through the dark."[37] The protection of the lighted hospital, however, does not mean safety from pain—the dark waters engulfing the hospital—as Fiser depicts with a final image of drowning:

> It conjures for me even the wild panicked smell
> of pain too great to bear, when the fragile soul
> goes under suddenly, without a word.[38]

Fiser leaves "the fragile soul" hanging at the end of the line, only to be pulled "under" by the line that follows.

In a poem called "Across the Border," Fiser describes pain as a place cut off from the rest of the land, a "minor archipelago," from which she counsels speech: "Do what every exile does. Tell stories. / Smuggle messages across the border.[39] Stories sometimes can and sometimes cannot cross the border. In "Pointing to the Place of the Pain," Fiser describes pain as "a room / no one else can come into, / however close they try to stand."[40] She describes the room as thick with feeling, "quiet and wounded and intent," but also (and more problematically) as wordless—"the pool of silence / spreading out from the hospital bed."[41] Silence spreads in her poem like a pool of blood, an image of disintegration flowing toward death.

In "The Problem of Personal Identity," Fiser asks whether she is the same person—same woman, same spirit, same body—after pain.[42] She describes pain first as an undoing: "The truth is, pain disintegrates / whatever it embraces."[43] The word "pain" enters into the poem, breaking it, then the line trails off with the word "disintegrates." Fiser continues that "The body / is a problem" leaving the word "body" to enjamb the line, like a trailing hope for connection. Connection ends when the sentence is finally broken, in the middle of the next line, by declaring the body a problem. When she finds a note of hope it is back in "the great happiness of words," with her body telling her story and connecting her to home: "My hands that talk in air / are my grandmother's, knotted and wide / as plain as Mississippi."[44]

[37] Fiser, *Words Like Fate and Pain*, 8.
[38] Fiser, *Words Like Fate and Pain*, 8.
[39] Fiser, "Across the Border," in *Words Like Fate and Pain*, 3.
[40] Fiser, "Pointing to the Place of the Pain," in *Words Like Fate and Pain*, 12.
[41] Fiser, "Pointing to the Place of the Pain," in *Words Like Fate and Pain*, 12.
[42] Fiser, "The Problem of Personal Identity," in *Words Like Fate and Pain*, 50–51.
[43] Fiser, "The Problem of Personal Identity," in *Words Like Fate and Pain*, 50.
[44] Fiser, "The Problem of Personal Identity," in *Words Like Fate and Pain*, 51.

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For Fiser and for Job, speaking in poetry means rejecting forms of narrative that are too consonant. In Job's question that asks why he should wait and be patient, he uses a range of images or metaphors to show how he has been set apart as one who does not fit. He emphasizes he is not like animals who eat with ease, nor statues of stone or bronze that are hard, nor laborers who will be paid or at least get to rest, nor like the Sea or the Dragon that are so dangerous as to need a guard or constant watching (Job 6–7). Job argues that he gets no ease, no rest, no hope, and he rejects narratives that encourage patient waiting. The narratives of expectation, especially the expectation of healing, offered by the friends, simply do not fit: "Narrative time is a time of delay.... But the time of pain is a time of urgency."[45] Sara Ahmed discusses how the experience of pain makes us aware of our skin "as something that 'mediates' the relationship between internal and external, or inside and outside."[46] Pain challenges a person's sense of self and language, just as speech from pain also challenges a community's self-understanding and its language.[47] For Job, "the basic truth of the body is found in the image of the wound and the pain of the wound."[48] Job's poetry emphasizes that "the body—bone and breath—is the space of the self."[49] For Job as well as for modern poets like Fiser, change to the body changes the language about the body and the self, and this new, changed language is often heard by others as foreign and unwelcome.

Unwelcome Words

Words themselves are central to the drama of the book of Job. Job says he must speak. Job is sure that something is very wrong, not just with his body but with the whole world. Job addresses the problem through speech, trying to make God hear his complaint and respond. For what seems like an impossibly long time, Job's words are met with nothing but silence from God. Job experiences a world that no longer feels safe, the protective fences have been torn down, and his language reflects this more dangerous space. In contrast, the friends use their own wordy efforts to try to silence Job, rebuild the fences, and reclaim their safety. When I first read Job after my fire experience, I loved that Job said things about the body and the world that one is not supposed to say—exposing the social restrictions on such speech by breaking

[45] Newsom's description does seem to assume a model like Job's pain, not a form of chronic pain that is diachronic with ebbs and flows to the urgency. Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 135.

[46] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 24.

[47] Vento, "Violence, Trauma, and Resistance," 15.

[48] Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 134.

[49] Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 134.

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those restrictions. Modern poets of disability exhibit a similar dynamic—exposing a barrier between speech that is welcome and speech that is not welcome, by crossing the barrier.

In the book of Job, "word" or "words" occurs more than fifty times, especially in the dialogue between Job and the friends. Interestingly, the first reference to "words" is in relation to the initial silence of the friends: "And no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great" (Job 2:13). Job himself is the one who breaks the silence with words that question his strange new landscape. As Job's words build up, they challenge his listeners to think differently, a challenge the friends reject. Eliphaz is the first friend to speak, asking if he might "venture a word" with Job, his polite hesitance a mask for his strong desire to speak (Job 4:2).

Eliphaz responds to Job's opening speech. As Job's friends mount theological arguments against his claim that he did not sin and does not deserve to suffer, their sense of loathing for Job grows. The friends reject Job's account of "turmoil" with their own accounts of order.[50] Bildad is openly critical, calling Job's words a "great wind" (Job 8:2). Zophar intensifies the critique:

> Should a multitude of words go unanswered,
> and should one full of talk be vindicated?
> Should your babble put others to silence,
> and when you mock, shall no one shame you?" (Job 11:2-3)

In the second round of dialogue, Eliphaz increases the critique by concluding that Job's own body and words testify against him: "Your own mouth condemns you, and not I; / your own lips testify against you" (Job 15:6).

The friends perceive the danger of Job's words, but they respond by rejecting both Job's new worldview and Job himself. If Job is correct, then there is no safe moral order for the friends either.[51] The sense of loathing in their response to Job seems to stem from their own deep fears about being human.[52] The friends need to establish that Job deserves to suffer, otherwise their own safety is as undeserved as Job's suffering. Job himself identifies this when he asks his friends, "How long will you torment me, / and break me in pieces with words?" (Job 19:2) and observes that they try to "magnify" themselves by interpreting his "humiliation" as an argument against him (Job 19:5). The prologue first identified Job's wounds as "loathsome," but as Job

[50] Dell, "What Was Job's Malady?," 69–70.

[51] Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 124.

[52] Magdalene, "The ANE Legal Origins of Impairment as Theological Disability and the Book of Job," 57.

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argues with the friends his self-loathing expands. In Job's first speech, Job describes his life as not worth living, but later three times he explicitly repeats "I loathe my life" (Job 7:16, 9:21, and 10:1). Job's broken skin is no armor against the dangers of the world or the disgust of the friends. Pain and loathing permeate Job, breaking down his identity and his normal connections to his world. In response, Job seeks words to last longer than his body will.[53] Job's act of resistance—his assertion of identity and connection—is speech. Job fights the permeability and impermanence of his body by seeking impermeable and permanent words:

> O that my words were written down!
> O that they were inscribed in a book!
> O that with an iron pen and with lead
> they were engraved on a rock forever! (Job 19:2324)

This cry reminds readers that we encounter Job's words as "written down" and "inscribed in a book"—as poetry and art that keeps accessing new audiences and making connections. When we think of modern issues of disability access and connection today, we tend to think in terms of modern technologies, like wheelchairs, or hearing aids, or speech generation devices. But we can recall that Aristotle long ago defined the term "*techné*"—translated as both art and craft—as a virtue of thought that deals with "what can be otherwise" (with contingent rather than necessary reality).[54] The artistic and poetic form of Job's speeches is engaged in the work of imagining and trying to access new connections, in a way related to the modern technologies used to cross barriers and build access.

Despite the medical and technological advances of modern society, modern poets of disability reflect a surprisingly similar awareness of a reluctant or fearful audience and barriers to their speech. Laura Hershey says she writes "from, of, about a discombobulated body," risking misinterpretation.[55] In "Telling," Hershey writes:

> When you risk telling your story:
> You will bore them,
> your voice will break, your ink will

[53] Magdalene, "The ANE Legal Origins of Impairment as Theological Disability and the Book of Job," 52.

[54] Richard Parry, "Episteme and Techne," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2021, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2021), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/episteme-techne/.

[55] Laura Hershey, "Getting Comfortable," in *Beauty Is a Verb*, 131–32.

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spill and stain your coat.
No one will understand, their eyes
become fences.[56]

The first line introduces the work of "telling your story;" then each successive line blocks the story from coming out: the audience is not interested and the human tools of communication—voice and ink—break and spill. The poet reaches out, but the audience pushes away; "eyes" gaze out unseeing from the end of a line, while "fences" cut abruptly in to end the poetic line. The hearer will not travel to the country of the poet. The division between speaker and hearer increases, until the poet remains "parked … on the outside" as if in a wheelchair that cannot access the hearer's space. The audience believes they already know the story (something to pity) so they try to stop the poet from telling it.[57]

Hershey's poem, like Job's first poetic speech, breaks the silence and reaches from the place of exile toward those still at home. But as a hostile audience attempts to resist and reconfigure the speech and the speaker, the act of speaking begins to seem pointless, or even dangerous. Job points out that he and the friends no longer speak the same language: "As for you, you whitewash with lies; all of you are worthless physicians" (Job 13:4). By speaking, the poets discover the boundaries between the speech the community accepts and privileges, the safe and whitewashed speech, and the poet's own unwelcome and dangerous speech.

In "Telling," Laura Hershey objects to the way her hearers try to rewrite her story, warning others with disabilities (you/your) about how the audience (they/their) will respond:

Your happiness will be called
Bravery, denial.
Your sadness will justify their pity.
Your fear will magnify their fears.[58]

Both poets resist the efforts of outsiders to reframe their experience into accepted terms. Newsom describes how the friends offer Job "narrative metaphors of healing" (such as "sprouting" and "seeing") as "powerful images by

[56] Hershey, "Telling," in *Beauty Is a Verb*, 134–35.

[57] Many disability scholars offer accounts of the different "myths" or "rhetoric" at work, guiding assumptions about disability. The pity myth is regularly discussed, such as here, Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric*, 40–41.

[58] Hershey, "Telling," 134–35.

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which the discordant is made cordant."[59] But such attempts to "impose narrative consonance" on experiences of dissonance are rejected as a "violence of interpretation."[60] Hershey argues for her own definitions of happiness and sadness, refusing her audience's reinterpretations. Job's and Hershey's audiences seek to apply their own frameworks on the poet, rejecting the poet's own vision. The audiences outside the experience of suffering seek to rebuild the fences—rebuild the barriers—so that they need not question the safety of their familiar interpretative landscape. The dialogue between Job and the friends grows choppy; speeches shorten, and images are repeated as any real sense of dialogue breaks down.

Privilege

Before the divine speeches, Job has one final speech, and then one new speaker, Elihu, enters the dialogue to attempt to improve upon the arguments of the friends. Both the final speech by Job and the speeches by Elihu are surprisingly different from the preceding dialogue, raising questions about the reasons for the changes in style. These shifts expose a dynamic between speaker and audience where certain kinds of speech and speakers are preferred or privileged because their words and bodies conform to social expectations. Modern poets of disability are similarly privileged when they do not contest the community's expectations but conform to them.

Job's final speeches from chapters 29–31 become confident and smooth.[61] Job's speeches seem to depart from his earlier discordant speech to assume instead "a working rhetorical world," speaking with "ease and fluency" to an audience with whom he seems to share "a language of meaning and value."[62] Job imagines himself in his former life, at the gates of the city before the gathered assembly, and this remembered position back in the safe landscape (Job 29:1-10). In this working rhetorical world, Job's imagined body also works the way it used to work. Job no longer pictures himself on the ground, looked down upon, but taking his seat while other people move out of the way and grow silent so he can speak (Job 29:7-8).[63] Toward the end of the speech, Job rises to his feet and says, "I stand up in the assembly and cry

[59] Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 134.

[60] Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 134.

[61] Job speaks in chapter 27, much like the earlier chapters, whereas chapter 28 reflects a wisdom poem describing the search for knowledge. My focus here follows chapters 29 through 31.

[62] Newsom disagrees with scholars who think that a different author composed Job's speeches in these chapters; she suggests they are "a new experiment with the resources of language." Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 184–85.

[63] Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 188.

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for help" (Job 30:28b). Once standing, he draws his case together laying out all the sins he could have committed but did not, in a tightly ordered rhetorical form (Job 31:5-34).[64] Job here uses "the resources of his inherited moral language in a novel way" in an attempt to rehabilitate himself.[65] But his embrace of such inherited language becomes a case of Job's own objectifying gaze, as he proclaims with pride and privilege his own value in terms of his charity to the disabled: "I was eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame" (Job 29:15)—a line modern disability studies identifies as ableist as he pities disabled others and praises himself.[66] Job seems to put his pain aside to pick up the moral focus of the friends, as if taking an observer's viewpoint on his own conduct.[67]

Job frames his privilege in theological terms; he believes his case worthy of a conversation with God. Job has complained about the excessive negative attention God seems to have given his body, feeling watched and attacked by God, but here he is frustrated by God's lack of attention to his words.[68] Job's imagined presentation before his community allows him to imagine his honor and to allow the confident and welcomed status he once had before his human audience to expand into a vision of confidence before God.[69] Job longs for "the indictment written by my adversary" (Job 31:35). If Job had his indictment, he says, "I would bind it on me like a crown" and "like a prince I would approach him" (Job 31:36-37). Job desires God's response, a desire now expressed in terms of indictments, signatures, adversaries, and accounts. By possessing God's words, even God's words of indictment, Job seems to forget lying in ashes and imagines himself walking his challenge right to God. Job imagines his unjust mistreatment transformed into his privilege and special right to defend himself before God.

Privilege itself is a problem, however, as this section of the text demonstrates. Job, the friends, and even the readers of the text can be tempted to conclude that their perspective on the text is the privileged one. Job, in the dialogue speeches, first presents his wounds as the reason why his voice should be privileged, but in chapters 29 to 31, Job instead reclaims the privilege of his former community standing and righteous reputation. Job's

[64] Magdalene, "The ANE Legal Origins of Impairment as Theological Disability and the Book of Job," 53.

[65] Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 197.

[66] Kirk Patston, "Disability Discrimination in the Book of Job," in *Theology and the Experience of Disability: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from Voices Down Under*, ed. Andrew Picard and Myk Habets (New York: Routledge, 2016), 43.

[67] Schipper, "Healing and Silence in the Epilogue of Job," 20; Dell, "What Was Job's Malady?," 72–75.

[68] Raphael, "Things Too Wonderful," 411.

[69] Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 198.

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friends dismiss Job's words and integrity by appealing to the integrity and privilege of tradition. Readers of Job can feel that their access to parts of the text unknown to characters in the dialogue, like the wager between God and the Satan in the prologue, makes their interpretation more privileged and justified than any character's.

Newsom argues that one of the early readers of the text inserted his or her own argument into the text as the character and speeches of Elihu, "blurring the boundary between text and reception."[70] In many ways Elihu represents a reader: "The reader always comes to a conversation that has begun without him.... Hence the need to interrupt."[71] In the case of Elihu, he enters the dialogue to improve on the arguments of the friends against Job.[72] As a later reader, Elihu has the privilege of being able to read the divine speeches before inserting his own speeches, so he can present himself as if he has the advantage of knowing the mind of God well. In contrast to the way Job's pain drove Job to speak, Elihu's anger at Job's unwelcome speech makes Elihu's need to speak painful: "For I am full of words ... I must speak, so that I may find relief" (Job 32:18-20). Job's words about Job's disrupted body have disrupted Elihu's own bodily life, and Elihu is determined to fight such disruption.

Disability in the modern context raises some complex questions about privilege. Job identifies the arguments of his friends and the violence of the attacks on his body as a disadvantage—a devastating change from the privileged life and reputation he once had. In "The Magic Wand," Lynn Manning challenges anyone who assumes that disability is always either a lack or a gift of privilege by describing how revealing his white cane changes the way he is seen as a Black man:

> Quick-change artist extraordinaire,
> I whip out my folded cane
> and change from black man to "blind man"
> with a flick of my wrist....
> It is always a profound metamorphosis
> Whether from cursed by man to cursed by God,
> Or from scripture-condemned to God-ordained.
> My final form is never of my choosing;

[70] Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 201.

[71] Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 202.

[72] Magdalene disagrees that Elihu is a later insertion, arguing Elihu's accusation of blasphemy against Job (key to the Satan's original charge) is central to the legal issues of the text. Magdalene, "The ANE Legal Origins of Impairment as Theological Disability and the Book of Job," 54.

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> I only wield the wand;
> You are the magician.[73]

When Manning's skin color is seen first, he is a danger to avoid; when his blindness is seen first, he is a place of theological drama and interest. Manning's cane, designed to increase his access to the community, instead becomes a tool his observers use to reassert that their interpretation of his life—not his—is the one that matters.

Leroy F. Moore's poem "Invisible Man" describes his experience as a Black man with cerebral palsy:

> From Jim Crow to Porgy theft of his identity
> Hush hush by his own community
> He watches humanity
> Invisible to everybody except his family.

Multiple dominant social narratives render Moore's life invisible. Moore describes a cycle to the way "Black disabled new born boys" are briefly seen but then quickly forgotten, "Cute, overcome, pity then invisible."[74] Both Moore and Manning present themselves as pushed into the role of observers on their own lives by those who wield the dominant narratives of the community, such as those who are white and nondisabled. While the character of Elihu interrupts the dialogue and perhaps even the text of Job itself, the poetry of Moore and Manning uses their "real historical situation and moral theological ideas" to expose and interrupt the social narratives that privilege some bodies and stories and reject others—welcoming these stories demands "transformative engagement" from the community (as Arndt encourages).[75]

Moore and Manning draw attention to the range of ways that the body is manipulated by communal narratives of race and disability that seek to privilege some people and exclude others. The observed body becomes, as Katerina Tsiokou claims, "a site for the imposition of essentializing and normalizing forces."[76] Moore and Manning, like Job, argue that the body is a

[73] Lynn Manning, "The Magic Wand," in *Staring Back: The Disability Experience from the Inside Out*, ed. Kenny Fries (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 163.

[74] Leroy F. Moore Jr., *2018 Invisible Man (Captioned) by Leroy F Moore Jr.—YouTube*, Performance, February 26, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJhtoW-TBEc.

[75] Arndt, *Demanding Our Attention*, 189.

[76] Katerina Tsiokou, "Body Politics and Disability: Negotiating Subjectivity and Embodiment in Disability Poetry," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 11, no. 2 (May 2017): 207, https://doi.org/10.3828/jlcds.2017.15.

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place of contested meaning, exposing a struggle between those who are privileged and protected by a dominant narrative of meaning and those who are not.

Divine Privilege

The divine speeches seem to transform the question from which human voice to privilege into a question about whether to privilege Job's voice or God's (for many readers, the answer is obviously God's voice).[77] Everyone in and around the text has been waiting for God to speak, hoping that God will vindicate their point of view, but the divine speeches do not easily conform to anyone's expectations. God does not answer Job's questions or affirm the friends' arguments. Instead, God seems to ignore the landscape of the human community and justice by focusing almost exclusively on creation and wild creatures, ending with the mythical creatures of the Behemoth and the Leviathan. Job responds to God with a frustratingly short reply. The prose epilogue adds yet another perspective, as God criticizes the friends and praises Job, declaring "for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has" (Job 42:7). The friends must work through Job, bringing him animals to sacrifice, for their own restoration. God accepts Job's prayer, restores Job's "fortunes" by twice as much as before, and Job's community returns to him, including as many new children as he had before—all without explicit commentary on if or how Job's physical state changed (Job 42:10-13). The text only hints at deeper changes to Job and his relationships, recounting the names and beauty of his new daughters and Job's unusual gift of inheritances to them (Job 42:15).

Interpreters take many different approaches to the divine speeches, but attention to disability requires avoiding interpretations that discount Job's voice by reading God's message as "God is God, and Job is not."[78] Just as accepting the friends' words in place of Job's own would be a violence of interpretation, so too would accepting God's words in place of Job's own. In this way, Raphael's "disabled reading" of Job celebrates God's silence about Job in the divine speeches from the standpoint of God's final praise for Job's words: "Thus God's final affirmation of Job's integrity *and his words* (Job 42:7-8) leaves that self-representation intact. Nothing in the divine speeches has overwritten Job's self-narration."[79]

[77] Raphael argues that the either/or framework must be rejected. Raphael, "Things Too Wonderful," 402–03.

[78] Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 235.

[79] Raphael, "Things Too Wonderful," 423; emphasis mine.

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To expand Raphael's approach, Vassar Miller's richly theological poetry offers surprising connections to the divine speeches. Born in Texas in 1924, with cerebral palsy that impacted her mobility and her speech, Miller's parents taught her at home because no school would allow her to attend.[80] As with Job and many of the other poets discussed, Miller writes about both the difficulty and importance of poetry or speech, a task that was also physically difficult for Miller but also one she saw in religious (especially incarnational) terms.[81] The divine speeches are written from God's perspective. Miller only occasionally tries to imagine God's perspective, such as in "Sick Dog," where she wonders whether the sky is like God's gaze "embracing me as mine embraces my dog / bowed, burdened under / unendurable strangeness."[82] Miller's sense of communion with the strangeness of creatures and with God in a world wider than the boundaries of the human community runs through many of her poems. This theme fits well with the divine speeches and helps develop a disabled reading of Job by reflecting—not rejecting—Job's own sense of a strange world outside the protective boundaries of community, health, and privilege, when examining the divine speeches.

Miller's disability, like Job's, shapes how others see her differently from how she sees herself. Her poetry describes noticing the power of these social narratives and rejecting them. Two of her poems directly reference how interpretations of Job have become tied up in these social narratives. In a poem called "Speculation," Miller describes such an example:

> I still remember saying to my aunt
> one time, "Why am I me?" and she supposing
> that I had turned a much too youthful Job
> burst into tears. Or maybe she had glimpsed
> life's mundane craziness we
> hid from each other in a game of rummy.[83]

Miller could have been asking the same "Why am I me?" that any child might ask, but her aunt interpreted it as a tragic question of a disabled child. Miller does not make the same assumptions about herself, instead she imagines that

[80] Frances Sage, "Vassar Miller: Modern Mystic," in *Heart's Intention: On the Poetry of Vasser Miller*, ed. Stephen Ford Brown (Houston, TX: Ford-Brown, 1988), 20.

[81] Janice A. Thompson, "Challenging Interpretations of Disability and Incarnation in Vassar Miller's Poetry of Connection," *Christianity & Literature* 70, no. 4 (December 2021): 1–20.

[82] "Sick Dog," in Vassar Miller, *If I Had Wheels or Love: Collected Poems of Vassar Miller* (Dallas, TX: Southern Methodist University Press, 1991), 154.

[83] Miller, "Speculation," in *If I Had Wheels or Love*, 144.

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she "might have walked about with different luggage / of language, skin, and heritage" and that if she had met a "poor creature" like herself she too might have pitied her.[84] Miller works to empathize with her aunt, but she does not connect all meaning in her life to disability. Perhaps disability is just part of "life's mundane craziness." Miller's own lived experience that the world is different from that which most people assume spurs her imaginative and artistic thinking about how the world could be different. In particular, like the divine speeches and with direct reference to Job, Miller especially rejects society's tendency to frame relationship to God in terms of deserving. In "The One Thing Needful," Miller chides a young minister for being too confident in his conviction that the more he gives to God, the more God gives to him. Instead, she offers Job as one who "could do nothing else but love" in the same way that "he could not help breathing, being hungry / for air, no less so when the air turned angry."[85]

The divine speeches operate in wild spaces that are very different from the safely fenced, domestic world where Job once lived.[86] The first divine speech describes the broadest limits and boundaries to the created world—the earth, sea, light, dark, snow, hail, and winds (Job 38:1-24). The second describes the wild animals who fill and inhabit these wild spaces—the mountain goats, deer, wild ass, wild ox, ostrich, horse, hawk, and eagle (Job 39: 1-30). God showcases a wide range of creatures across a broad, wild landscape with a gaze that seems to celebrate lives beyond "human purpose and control."[87]

Miller's poem "Spastics" (1974), titled with a word that showcases the way "others" judge cerebral palsy as strange and ugly, is narrated in a voice like the divine voice in Job, calmly observing the difficult lives of many creatures:

> They are not beautiful, young, and strong when it strikes,
> but wizened in wombs like everyone else,
> like monkeys,
> like fish,
> like worms,
> creepy-crawlies from yesterday's rocks
> tomorrow will step on.[88]

Unraveling the "othering" title, Miller shows "they" are "like everyone else," odd, but working at living lives that are ultimately all mortal. Bildad compares

[84] Miller, "Speculation," in *If I Had Wheels or Love*, 144.
[85] Miller, "The One Thing Needful," in *If I Had Wheels or Love*, 114–15.
[86] Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 240.
[87] Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 246–47.
[88] Miller, "Spastics," in *If I Had Wheels or Love*, 207.

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humans to "maggots and worms" with disgust (Job 25:6), but Miller sympathizes with "creepy-crawlies." Although the animals of Miller's poems are more humble than those in the divine speeches, Miller's poetry, like the divine speeches, decenters the human story to refocus on God's connection to the unique and vulnerable lives of all creatures.

Capturing a connection to the fragile lives of all creatures, in "On the Examination Table" (1974), Miller describes herself through comparison to other living things.[89] Her eyes are "two birds," her tongue a "dry leaf," her breath a "fragile moth," her belly an "overturned turtle." Each one is trapped and fragile, aware and afraid, as her whole body—"dull dog"—"shies into terror's / mythical monster."[90] Miller repeatedly raises up the lives of creatures that seem unimportant in terms of the divine. In "Approaching Nada" (1977), she describes the poet as a mouse, scurrying "clean to the border / of the ineffable"[91] and in "Pigself" (1984), she blends the life of the pig and the poet together in their "alphabet" "of grunt, groans, snuffles, and snort / so that the spirit can spell / even the word for God."[92] Instead of elevating the human being above other animals, Miller pairs the poet and the pig on the ground, both lowly and limited, and yet also both making their own kind of imperfect language and connection to God.

Job experienced his changed body as a changed landscape, where the meaning-making of the human community no longer fit or welcomed his situation. The divine speeches reflect this changed landscape, but even more broadly so, showing the difficult lives of many wild animals who live far beyond human domestication. Job experienced a frightening, violent, and lonely world, and to some extent the divine speeches reflect this also, especially in describing the monsters of Behemoth and Leviathan. Both Newsom and Raphael explore connections especially between Job and the mythical monsters of the Behemoth and the Leviathan; Job himself suggests connections to the Leviathan, asking if he is the Sea or the Dragon (Job 7:12), and God describes Behemoth to Job as that "which I made just as I made you" (Job 39:15). The poetry of the divine speeches offers metaphors of connection and comparison, dwelling on the descriptions of these creatures with admiration, as "magnificent beings whose pride is appropriate to their place in creation."[93]

[89] Miller, "On the Examination Table," in *If I Had Wheels or Love*, 206.
[90] Miller, "On the Examination Table," in *If I Had Wheels or Love*, 206.
[91] Miller, "Approaching Nada," in *If I Had Wheels or Love*, 231.
[92] Miller, "Pigself," in *If I Had Wheels or Love*, 273.
[93] Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 249.

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Both Newsom and Raphael discuss the monsters in terms of the sublime, however, for a disability-focused reading of Job, I disagree with some of their conclusions. Newsom suggests that Job resembles the Behemoth, who can strongly defend itself, while God resembles the Leviathan, full of thrashing action, ready to attack, and "king over all that are proud" (Job 41:34).[94] Newsom sees Job's encounter with this Leviathan-like God as an encounter with the "tragic sublime" that breaks apart his subjectivity grounded in what he had assumed was the "moral continuity between himself, the world, and God."[95] She claims that Job comes to know "the preciousness of being" and a kind of "play of death and life at the boundary between the human and inhuman" that shifts one's attention from knowing to being.[96] Raphael, writing with explicit attention to disability experience, challenges some of Newsom's reading. She agrees that the monsters "shift Job's attention away from himself" but in a way that Job is instead "recovered and transformed as one of God's magnificent monsters."[97] She emphasizes that the divine speeches "build on rather than demolish" Job's own self-articulation such that Job remains "the author of his own representation, if not of his suffering."[98] Raphael suggest that the beauty of the poetry of Job draws the reader "away from the initial situation and into wonder at the sublimity of the cosmos."[99]

Identifying Job, or any disabled person, through the metaphor of a monster is not the approach I would take—even when intended to include different bodies. Human societies have identified disabled bodies as monstrous in such problematic ways that I would prefer to avoid any such association, even Newsom and Raphael's careful reappropriation of the monstrous through a turn to aesthetics and encounter with God's strange creatures.[100] Modern poets of disability object to the assumption that an observer's gaze can access the meaning of the body because even the person with a disability encounters a complex relationship between the body and meaning. When Miller tries to explain her body to an audience, she describes it as a "mod

[94] Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 250–51.
[95] Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 253–55.
[96] Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 256.
[97] Raphael, "Things Too Wonderful," 421.
[98] Raphael, "Things Too Wonderful," 421.
[99] Raphael, "Things Too Wonderful," 424.
[100] See, for example, Jenifer L. Barclay, "Bad Breeders and Monstrosities: Racializing Childlessness and Congenital Disabilities in Slavery and Freedom," *Slavery & Abolition* 38, no. 2 (April 3, 2017): 287–302, https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2017.1316966.

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dress," "stitched to my flesh, / basted to my bones."[101] Her clothing metaphor—describing her disability as outside of her and hiding her, and also as inside her and part of who she is—offers a much more complex reading than just something the observer can interpret by seeing her body.

Miller and the other modern poets of disability illustrate that a disabling experience does not come with one meaning—a conclusion that fits well with a text like Job that keeps exploring different meanings. Again and again Miller revises poetic images to express herself. She describes her own sense of the broad expanse of the world in which her life takes place:

> Mine, the catching of breath after pain,
> the peace of those who have
> almost died and still live.

Like Job's opening speeches, facing the absolute horizons of birth and death, Miller knows pain, but she catches her breath as her own, as "Mine." As Raphael notes, the divine speeches do not explain Job in God's terms. Instead, God's silence about the meaning of Job's life allows Job's own wild thrashing with words and images to stand as Job's own.

The epilogue brings the final contrast, as the imaginations that stretched out into the wild spaces return to the fences and gates of the human community. The book of Job closes back in the domesticated landscape where Job and his friends live, but where their language and practice must also change. The community must change to be more protective, not less, toward those who do not fit in expected ways. The voice that Job had captured as his own weaves back into the life of the community with God. Job shares his prayer with others and will leave his possessions to others, including his daughters. Meanwhile, the poet of the book of Job leaves his or her words, written down and inscribed in a book, for anyone to consider.

Conclusion

Job's story has been connected to many stories and histories, from offhand comments to detailed academic discussions. Nevertheless, connecting Job to modern poetry of disability is a new approach that contributes new insight. Theology needs to hear more voices from the perspective of disability, and modern poets of disability provide richly artistic and constructive reflection on their experience. Listening to these voices helps to discourage problematic ableist readings of Job, such as interpreting disability as God's

[101] Miller, "Introduction to a Poetry Reading," in *If I Had Wheels or Love*, 185.

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punishment, or as the disabled person's individual sin and moral responsibility, or as an opportunity for patient and virtuous waiting until an ending where everything broken is healed. Instead, the modern poets of disability draw attention to the way bodily changes reverberate as changes that affect a person's whole sense of self-identity, community, world, and God. As the person with a disabling experience works to reformulate and rebuild connections, nondisabled observers often offer resistance and reinterpretation. In this way, the disabled body is experienced as a place of contested meaning, "a site for the imposition of essentializing and normalizing forces."[102] Poets of disability, from Job to the modern poets, help expose and creatively navigate this contest of meaning.

Considering various modern poets of disability alongside the text of Job highlights several provocative themes. A sudden disabling experience, like Job's, is experienced as a breaking apart of the previous understandings of self and the surrounding world. Such breaking apart is also a breaking of fit with and access to the community, its language, and its narratives. Poets like Neil Marcus and Sheila Black amplify experiences like Job's where major changes to the body feel like becoming an exile in a foreign land. Poets like Karen Fiser describe the way that pain can feel like a place cut off, as disintegration, or as a spreading silence and increasing distance. Even as the poets find their language changed, they long for words and for connection, but they encounter resistance instead. Poets like Laura Hershey help identify the fears of the audiences that do not want to hear the poet—they want to leave her in her wheelchair parked "on the outside"—to protect their sense of their own safety. Poets like Lynn Manning and Leroy F. Moore expose some of the dynamics of the intersecting narratives of privilege and power that welcome some bodies and reject others. These narratives of privilege can take the poets' words—and even their accessibility aids, like Manning's cane—to deny access to the community, such as through racialized, gendered, or ableist readings of bodies. As part of the effort to rebuild connection to the community and to rehabilitate how to fit within the world, poets like Vassar Miller challenge the listener to recognize a wider and wilder view of creation. Like Job, Miller shows that many lives are difficult, and even the lives of creatures who are often looked down upon are lives that can root out their own different language and connection to the world and to God. Miller's poetry argues that embodied life does not come with preassigned meanings, and connection to God is not framed in terms of "deserving" but only in terms of love.

The insights the poetry of disability brings to dialogue with Job's story can help identify some implications for a constructive theology of disability. First,

[102] Tsiokou, "Body Politics and Disability," 207.

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sharing the concerns of modern theological anthropology, disabled persons—like all human persons—have a creative, relational freedom through which to respond to "divine self-communication received in and through the finite realities of the world."[103] This claim challenges the dominant social narratives that privilege those without disabilities by assuming silence or dependence from people with disabilities.[104] Communities use metaphors and models, narrative and rhetoric, to describe disability as "an unwanted way of being" according to a variety of moralized, medicalized, racialized, or gendered norms.[105] The poets use their own creative metaphors to expose and crack open the normative boundaries built by self-preservation and fear.

The creative freedom of human persons with disabilities is especially relational. Job and the modern poets of disability decry the loss of relatedness—to the body, to other people, or to God—and seek reconnection through poetry.[106] Reconnecting, however, also requires change and creativity from the community, just as Job's community must change as Job returns. Poetry challenges "the fixity of any single metaphorical relationship by multiplying the potential connections between disparate things, creating contingent relationships among things not previously associated with one another and imbuing objects with new symbolic meanings."[107] Disabling experiences often involve discovering that realities previously assumed to be stable and unchanging—such as the integrity of the body or one's fit within the human community—are in fact changeable and contingent. Poetry, Lambeth explains, helped her "investigate and reinforce the blur I felt between body and world, and gave me the space to insist upon the bounding line's fluidity."[108] Poetry, for Miller, became a "personal struggle for order in

[103] Mary Doak, "Sex, Race, and Culture: Constructing Theological Anthropology for the Twenty-First Century," *Theological Studies* 80, no. 3 (September 2019): 510, https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563919856365.

[104] Nathan Esala, "Towards Contextualizing 'Contextual Bible Study' among the Bikɔɔm Peoples in Ghana," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 154 (March 2016): 114.

[105] Tanya Titchkosky, "Life with Dead Metaphors," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 9, no. 1 (January 2015): 9, https://doi.org/10.3828/jlcds.2015.1.

[106] Fries observes "connection" as a common theme in all pieces in his collection. Kenny Fries, *Staring Back: The Disability Experience from the Inside Out* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1997), 3.

[107] Christina Scheuer, "Bodily Compositions: The Disability Poetics of Karen Fiser and Laurie Clements Lambeth," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 5, no. 2 (January 2011): 162, https://doi.org/10.3828/jlcds.2011.13.

[108] Laurie Clements Lambeth, "Reshaping the Outline," in *Beauty Is a Verb*, 175.

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what has often seemed my disorderly world."[109] Poets of disability write of an embodied reality that is less stable and less protected than most people assume, and they do not simply reflect or imitate the fragmented reality they experience; they relate, fabricate, construct, and create.[110]

A constructive theological anthropology of disability recognizes "the multiple (or intersectional) levels of injustice that degrade human embodiment," but also a wide variety of human embodied experience.[111] Poets of disability describe a vast and varied world of living things that sometimes fit wonderfully together, but also a world that can be strange, or lonely, or a surprisingly difficult fit. From this perspective, the human body, disabled or nondisabled, is not the place of obvious, visible, abstractable, moral, and theological meaning we often want it to be. Instead, living out one's unique embodiedness in relationship to self-identity, community, and God is a creative and relational process of meaning-making. Especially for poets, words are central to this human art of connecting an embodied life to meanings, histories, and communities. Language is not the only means of connection, however, as scholars working on behalf of nonverbal family members note—embodied connections are also made through formats as different as technologically complex accessibility devices and simple forms of touch.[112] Arndt suggests that difficult texts must be engaged in an "an ongoing process—the work of a lifetime…."[113] Embodied life can be a difficult text of its own. Human persons can better welcome the wide and sometimes difficult variety of embodied life by sharing stories, reducing barriers like fear, and continuing to imagine and build a community that protects and includes all people.

[109] Karla Hammond, "An Interview with Vassar Miller," in *Heart's Invention: On the Poetry of Vassar Miller*, ed. Stephen Ford Brown (Houston, TX: Ford-Brown, 1988), 38.

[110] Titchkosky, "Life with Dead Metaphors," 6.

[111] Doak, "Sex, Race, and Culture," 522.

[112] See Brian Brock, for example, who writes for his son: Brian R. Brock, *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2020). Thomas E. Reynolds also writes for his son: Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008).

[113] Arndt, *Demanding Our Attention*, 176.

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