

## Staring at the Other: Seeing Defects in Recent Australian Poems

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### Abstract

When it comes to encountering the body of the other, is poetic language bound to fail? Can failure nevertheless be productive? This paper discusses four recent Australian poems which depict public encounters with bodily otherness, taking up Emmanuel Levinas's suggestion that the other is experienced in a "defecting of disclosure", which involves both an unsettling intimacy and a profound distance.

The paper explores this paradox through two visual motifs – staring and hyperopia. When bodily otherness is encountered, this often prompts staring – which theorist Rosemary Garland Thomson sees as a site of relational and signifiatory potential, beginning "when ordinary seeing fails". I argue that these poems, through the varying ways in which they stage awkward encounters with seemingly defective, disabled others, emphasise the defects in our own ability to clearly see the other.

### Keywords

Poetry; disability; the Other; staring, Emmanuel Levinas

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When the other appears, whatever their embodiment, I am interrupted. But there is a particularly heightened experience of this interruption when I am faced with their halting gait, palsied limbs or immobile expression, their scars or prosthetics, their slurred or stuttering speech. I find myself wanting, yet not wanting, to stare, a prolonged and heightened examination of the other which is more than mere curiosity. I am obsessed with them, while also acutely aware of my own vulnerability. Their otherness seems to prompt an encounter in which failure is integral, a failure which also belongs to me.

Rosemary Garland-Thomson (2009) refers to staring as “an intense visual engagement which creates a circuit of communication and meaning-making”, which begins “when ordinary seeing fails” (p. 3). In this paper, I want to think about poetry as a form which is not only able to acknowledge this impulse to stare – this amplification of the rupturing presence of the other – but actively generates staring, and can even make it productive. I conceive of poetry as a site of human encounter characterised by defecting, as Emmanuel Levinas (1981) writes of it – in the dual sense of failure, and of a receding subjectivity (p. 90). In writing, this defecting is of course entirely linguistic, but in the poem it is a language whose power is also especially visual – a poem is a saying which is seen, and an object which speaks. As this paper proceeds, the poem, then, might be seen as a movement of language in space which incorporates rupture at the level of the intersubjective. In addition, any straightforward concept of intersubjective rupture – the assumption that profound difference necessarily precludes profound intimacy – will itself be interrupted. A Levinasian approach may help us to see the self and the other as belonging to each

other, bodily, even before (and after) words can be found to describe this overwhelming encounter.

Since staring is never abstract, but always about this or that particular body, I will be looking closely at four recent Australian poems, in order to illuminate how the ways in which poems take form are intimately related to the ways in which we encounter bodies as other. My approach broadly incorporates what G. Matthew Jenkins (2008) refers to as the “double-double turn”, a critical and ethical attention on both the problems inhering in language and the priority of the other (pp. 6-21), but in particular I am interested in how the otherness of language is shaped (or misshapen) by the otherness of the other. All the poems I will discuss overtly seek to stage an encounter with the other, but take differing approaches to this fraught task. This discussion will not involve assessing or ranking how effectively the poems engage in the representation of others, as if writing could possibly avoid failure. The question, instead, is what these poems do with failure. The reader invariably stares. Then, as the other looks back, they may find it is their own seeing which is flawed.

This paper will explore this dynamic as it plays out in the particular textures of these poems, through the optical motif of *hyperopia*. This is a defect of vision where the closer the object or person in question is, the more they become obscured, blurred. In this way, the reader (or starrer) cannot be entirely sure whose body is defective, the other's or their own, or the space between them. In these poems, the other is encountered in a “defecting of appearing” (Levinas, 1981, p. 90). That is, through interruption and uncertainty – known through the failure of the body, encountered

bodily in the failure of knowing. Poetry is indeed a form of writing that “refers ... to the disruption to which all form is prone” (Jenkins, 2008, p. 18), which includes the forms of each and every human body, forms we simultaneously recognise and seek to disavow.

### *1. Deep water*

This complication is palpable in Cate Kennedy's poem “Swimming class” (fig. 1), which appears in her 2011 collection *The Taste of River Water*. The poem depicts two ends of a public pool, that ostensibly democratic domain of shared water, which brings each person into close proximity with other near-naked bodies, in their diverse vulnerabilities and pleasures.

*fig. 1*

#### **Swimming class**

At the other end of the hydro pool  
the Special Needs Adults  
float and call out through their aqua-aerobics session;  
at this end is the Baby Swimming Class.

We mothers nurse our sturdy, solid-fleshed toddlers,  
hold them close to us, buoyant, safe;  
and smile back  
at the unfocused smiles of the adults –

or at the closed-off gaze, looking past us –  
and lower our perfect children  
like a blessed baptism  
into warm water.

This,  
this paddling and kicking,  
this taking of breaths,  
this turning in the water and touching the side,  
immerses all of us.

My hands are solicitous, conscientious,  
beneath my child's tender armpits,  
although I long to swim myself –  
break free and kick to the far side,  
slicing through water, remembering how to stretch,  
my solitary rhythmic breathing slow and silver –  
I tread water instead, and hold her  
robust and sure as a dolphin.

Now she wants goggles,  
now she wants to float, her head on my shoulder  
and observe her own reflection, twisting like a mermaid  
in the misted overhead mirror.

The disconnected shouts of the other group –  
half-formed words, lost calls, whale songs –  
bounce off the high hangar ceiling.  
They bat away our floating toys  
and watch, incurious at first,  
as we form ourselves and our babies into a circle  
to sing *Old MacDonald*.

One girl paddles over  
and waits humbly outside the circle,  
and her carer guides her back;  
*no, Susan, over here, back here, Susan*

but at the chorus, hesitant, remembering,  
one by one they join in:  
*E-I-E-I-O!*

The babies laugh as we thresh them through the water,  
lift them streaming and squealing above our heads,  
and we're all singing now  
our voices, across the pool,  
afloat and warm and out of tune,  
miraculously weightless.

Our children's hands reach for us  
like a benediction,  
showing us the way  
into the deep water.

Here, the lyrical narrative of the poem begins in the delineation of two distinct spaces. At one end of the pool, “we mothers nurse our sturdy, solid-fleshed toddlers”. At the other, “the Special Needs Adults / float and call out”. The mothers “smile back / at the unfocused smiles of the adults – / or at the closed-off gaze, looking past us”. These capitalised others, whose particular conditions or subjectivities are left unspecified, express “disconnected shouts... / half-formed words, lost calls, whale songs”.

The sense of separation here is emphatic. The poem is situated within the world of the mothers and their children, gazing out occasionally towards the other group, who are established as distinct through overt and implicit comparison, kept separate in a physical and phenomenological sense. The children are “perfect” and “safe”, suggesting the special needs adults are neither. Throughout most of the poem, these

adults are not given individual identities. They act within the bounds of the plural pronoun “they”, a collective, indistinct from each other and distinct from the non-disabled.

This kind of boundary requires constant effort to maintain, and is vulnerable to either leakage or complete collapse. In this poem, as the mothers sing a nursery rhyme to their children, Susan, one of those with “special needs”, approaches them, drawn to the singing. She disregards her carer's requests to stay within her proper end of the pool, and becomes the catalyst for the deconstruction of the separateness the poem is predicated upon – the group “remember[s]” the song, and “one by one” they begin to sing along. The water-level of the poem rises and swells here to a kind of epiphany, in which everyone is singing, flawed and afloat.

This “Swimming class”, it seems, is a lesson in how collective singing might seem to dissolve difference, how the other can prompt their own inclusion into the time of the song – and, indeed, in the space of the lyric poem. The poem arrives here at a kind of *transcendence* (Wahl, 2016), a return to a shared, flawed flesh, where the voices are “out of tune” together. But it is also indicative of the mode in which the disabled tend to be granted entry to able-bodied spaces. The union has occurred on the adult-and-child side of the pool, and within the wordless chorus of a nursery rhyme – “E-I-E-I-O!”.

Yet, the poem, deliberately or not, resists its own completion, continuing beyond its expected ending with further ambiguities. Another, final stanza turns away from the

undifferentiated space of unified singing, back towards the toddlers.

Our children's hands reach for us  
like a benediction,  
showing us the way  
into the deep water.

The “we” has suddenly retracted, from every person in the pool, regardless of embodiment, back to the mothers, the more circumscribed “we” which the poem began with. Those with special needs return to their end of the pool, no longer included in this secular prayer. It would appear, then, on first glance, that “Swimming class”, having encountered the other(s) and experienced a sense of the permeability of identity, wants to shore up the borders, provide the kind of resolution and completeness Levinas (1987) warned against in his essay “Reality and its Shadow”, on a corporeal as well as formal level.

The fact that Cate Kennedy is most well known as a writer of short fiction has led many critics to view her poetry through the lens of narrative and its resolution. While the stanzas in “Swimming Class” do “strongly resemble paragraphs of a short story” (Alizadeh, 2012, para. 8), I think it is oversimplifying to state that the poem challenges “the divisions that cause disunity and segregation” (ibid., para. 10) in any straightforward way. The poem's lineation is almost entirely premised on discrete units of meaning – it proceeds with little enjambment, each line ending at a comma, a period or a breath roughly aligned with natural speech. However, the lucidity and care with which the poem proceeds only serves to provide a contrast with what lurks just beneath its clear language – the disruptive presence of the other. Here, the



closer the poem gets to the other, the more blurred its vision becomes.

In “Swimming class”, despite its surfaces, there is a continual and nervous ambivalence in the poem as to its mode of address, who belongs in the “us” and the “them”. The poem cannot help but end in suspension, with this “us” still in the water, not yet moving towards the depths it gestures towards. In any swimming pool, the water inevitably gets into our mouths and is spat back out. Human hair, earplugs, bandages, bodily fluids, all brush up against us, threaten to enter. Our skin soaks up the tepid liquid, our fingers wrinkle, our eyes become raw with the chlorine, that chemical defence against the visceral presence of the other. In the pool and in the poem, both contained places of human encounter, we are exposed, vulnerable. We try, and fail to keep the other distinct.

## *2. Walking awkwardly*

In contrast to the fluid, lyrical movement of “Swimming class”, Hazel Smith's poem “The Poetics of Discomfort” (fig. 2) more consciously embraces the unsettling disturbances of an encounter with the other, incorporating them into the dynamics and textures of the poem itself. Smith's poetry in general is preoccupied with the political and interpersonal implications of language's ambiguity (Wilkinson, 2016). The voice that emerges is that of a mind in the process of being thrown off course and grasping for flawed language as ballast. But “The Poetics of Discomfort” is an especially acute example, because it revolves around bodily otherness, that which

both compels and resists being spoken of.

*fig. 2*

### **The Poetics of Discomfort**

the microfictions of your life  
are walking awkwardly

she balances on crutches  
slowly shifts her weight

feet trail their east  
and west protuberances

props herself against a post  
and shakes her phone out

you wonder if you should  
you hesitate and wonder

everyone is ignoring her  
and you know what it's like  
to be ignored

do you need assistance?  
No, followed by a full grimace

a mistake made knowingly is more  
a booing crowd demands refunds

you are angry with yourself and  
irritated with her for being irascible

returning home  
a disability activist on TV  
admonishes the very kind

of heinous act you've  
just been perpetrating

along with others  
or their more felicitous inversions –

the deaf speaker  
lip-reading your question  
from the deep north of the lecture theatre  
then lithely returning it

or years ago in class  
you didn't know  
whether to ask the girl  
with cerebral palsy to perform  
her poem out loud

an ordeal for her and for the class  
agog at your insouciance  
their mute cheers spurring on  
this literary paralympian

pleased or displeased to have  
read the poem out

slow to respond  
when you ask her  
*can I publish it?*

The poem begins in the second person, and with a metaphor both abstract and embodied; “the microfictions of your life / are walking awkwardly”. The second couplet marks the arrival of the woman who seems to be the source of these myriad uncertainties; “she balances on crutches / slowly shifts her weight”. In the loping blank rhythm of this description, this figure simultaneously emphasises how the

awkwardness of “your life” is merely metaphorical, while also suggesting some kind of equivalence or parallel, a potential point of empathy or solidarity. The woman, standing “prop[ped] against a post” with her “feet trail[ing] their east / and west protuberances”, appears to be having some kind of difficulty handling and using her mobile phone. The speaker immediately ponders whether to help, at first hesitant, then thinking,

you know what it's like  
to be ignored

do you need assistance?  
No, followed by a full grimace

The first thing that stands out about the poem is that it is, unusually, centre-justified. Given the asymmetry of the movement of the woman on crutches, and the imbalance of the encounter, the poem's visual presence is not only stareable, but holds a certain pointed irony. It is as if the poem is trying to stand up on its own strength, erect and poised, rather than leaning against the left side of the page. And yet this stance means there are no straight lines, and the white space expands, so that the poem's short, irregular lines appear even more exposed.

But who is it that is exposed here? The text itself, certainly. As if silence or breathlessness almost crowds it out on either side. One might also think the woman “balanc[ing] on crutches” would feel exposed. To those unaccustomed to the sight of prosthetics, it may seem that such a person is a figure of instability, or incompleteness, in that as she grapples with a quotidian task in public, she would

appreciate someone helping her. To be visibly lacking any aspect of what passes for an autonomous, capable body is surely to feel some kind of exposure, even shame. “The Poetics of Discomfort” – both the poem and such a poetics – defects from that assumption. In the poem, the question of help is answered with its only capitalised word – “No”. The accompanying “grimace” provides a further emphasis of refusal, grating with assonance against “assistance”.

Immediately, and again in a later scene, a crowd is conjured in the poem, amplifying the sense of awkwardness and exposure. First, a virtual crowd booing your offer of help, “demands refunds”, as if you have failed to fulfil your required role. Later, the students’ “mute cheers” of encouragement as a disabled classmate recites her poem, the reading as if in the mode of a sporting achievement. In both cases, the poem makes unsettlingly clear that the otherness of the other arises from within the dynamic of the spectacle, in the expectation that she struggle to overcome her challenges. Ironically, it is at this same moment that the audience, in their detachment, are shown to have lost some crucial aspect of their humanity.

So, even though as the poem unfolds it is clear that the pronoun “you” refers to the speaker, the reader continually finds themselves implicated in the poem’s equivocations. The short lines, most of which refer entirely to internal thought rather than events or images, are enjambed so as to withhold any clarifying context, underline this – “you wonder if you should”, “you are angry with yourself”, “you didn’t know”. Here, the reader is driven (or, indeed, I am driven) by an empathy which undermines itself by presuming to know. My hesitant intervention – I assume an

understanding of what a particular bodily posture or movement implies – is steadfastly refused. I become self-conscious, suddenly preoccupied with my own instability. The poem's language is insistent, critical, focused not on the other, on the self, disrupted. I am “angry with yourself and / irritated with her”; my actions, “heinous”, reminding me of other transgressions with their “insouciance”.

It is here that we see the precipitous, double-edged nature of what Levinas calls the “defecting of disclosure”. Right at the moment of encounter, as bodies are exposed in their apparent particular defects – whether of movement, speech or prejudice – the other's subjectivity withdraws from the scene.

years ago in class  
you didn't know  
whether to ask the girl  
with cerebral palsy to perform  
her poem out loud

You cannot be sure if she is “pleased or displeased to have / read the poem out”. In the midst of this “ordeal for her and for the class”, she can only be seen in the role of a kind of literary paralympian, receding behind an awkward, projected trope of inspiration.

In Smith's poem, the other seems to have defected, to not be clearly present. And yet, this is only the case if we read a poem as consisting of its surfaces, as if a voice could come only from what is said. The refusal of assistance in the opening scene is emblematic of the refusal of the poem itself to prostheticise the

representation of disability. The other has a presence which owes its power not to the generosity of the self, or any kind of poetic ventriloquism, but to the otherness of her body. She does not possess articulate, clear, seamless speech. Her poem exists beyond this poem, spoken and yet unwritten.

### *3. Words meant for me*

Where Smith's poem depicts the withdrawal of the other's subjectivity from the perspective of the self, Kit Kavanagh-Ryan's "life prep (dear able bodied partner)" (fig. 3) turns the tables, giving voice to the ambivalence and defiance of this defecting from the inside. Kavanagh-Ryan is an emerging poet and essayist, whose writing brings together an intensely direct and intimate expression of a crip perspective (McRuer, 2010; Koppers, 2009) with the disruptions of linguistic deconstruction.

*fig. 3*

#### **life prep (dear able bodied partner)**

I'm sorry for the questions  
husheyed, widevoiced  
*was it an accident? Is she—*  
—words meant for me  
given to you  
as I fall at your feet

skittlespilled and–  
*Can you–do you*

(“Do I *what?*” I wonder  
blood on my teeth)

We laugh and check  
for broken fingers  
hold hands as  
passers-by offer yoga tips  
and cups of coffee  
as they congratulate me  
for breathing

The poem is framed by the bitterly rhetorical imperative phrase, implied in the opening apology and the concluding congratulations, *pardon me for breathing*. But the phrase – which in its ordinary usage fuses self-assertion with melodrama – is turned inside out. Rather than accusing others of not allowing her to be herself, the speaker here takes on responsibility for their inappropriate questions. The directness of her apology (to her partner? to the reader?) seems to suggest that their intrusive demands to know the source of her difference are her fault, a kind of internalised ableism. But in the opening stanza of the poem, the tumble of events, alongside a grammar of interruption and of what remains unspoken, emphasise that it is not a question of responsibility, but of how verbal violence occurs with such swift, apparent inevitability. While staring is usually assumed to be prompted by the details of a deformed or defective body, the poem reveals through the details of its language, its ruptures and contractions, that staring is much more to do with a defect in the process of seeing.



She has fallen, unexpectedly and dramatically. Those who have observed this are instantly, intensely uncomfortable, to the point where their reactions are inverted and deformed. Their italicised questions are interrupted (“*was it an accident? Is she—*”), not it would seem by any response by her, but from inside themselves. Their demand to comprehend the full nature of her disability is short-circuited, out of embarrassment, exposure. Rather than staring wide-eyed and speaking in hushed tones, they become “husheyed, widevoiced”, looking away from her, talking about her in her presence, as if she were not there. These monstrous neologisms speak not only of the disruption of injury, but also of the speed of events, which seem to overwhelm both tact and empathy. In the time of the poem, these questions arise even before the reader sees she has fallen.

The exposure here is multi-faceted. As in “The Poetics of Discomfort”, the disabled person is certainly exposed by the public gaze, in need of assistance, bloodied, perhaps broken-boned. “life prep” does not retreat from this. But the poem primarily exposes the passers-by. As readers, we are shown people who, unlike the speaker in Smith's poem, do not offer assistance or encouragement, only their own curiosity to know the precise extent of her physical limitations, perhaps even her sexuality (Shildrick, 2009). Her defiant response – “Do I *what?*’ I wonder / blood on my teeth” – is held in parenthesis, as its own private stanza. Paradoxically, while the riposte remains technically unspoken, shielding her within the refusal and retreat of the poem's event, it also speaks loudly, starkly exposing her questioners. In Levinasian (1981) terms, we could say, the *saying* of the poem breaks through its *said*.

Here is what it means to say that the other defects. At the very moment the other is close enough for their brokenness to be felt, something of the space between us becomes fractured, my vision obscured. I see the other in their vulnerability and brokenness, the acuteness of which exposes my ignorance, implicates me. I do not know them, and even as I ask questions of them their subjectivity retreats from me. This is neither absolute secrecy or transparent clarity, but the blur of intense intimacy, the other obscured through a defect of vision.

Disability – or our ambivalence towards it – seems to generate its own deconstruction. What exactly is the source of the rupture, this defect? Whose body? And who am I in this poem – one who would congratulate her for breathing, or one who would laugh with her? The poem, technically, clearly specifies who it is addressed to – the speaker's able-bodied partner. Here, they “laugh and check / for broken fingers”. They hold hands in the wake of broken flesh and disrupted sociality. The intimacy and solidarity of the relationship is another defecting movement of the poem – a mutual support which is palpably present, yet not without its own fractures and asymmetry. The poem insists on multiple differences and the gaps such differences open up – between the two partners, and the others watching. At the same time, as with Smith's poem, “life prep” is written to “you”, to me. So perhaps the poem wants me to consider the possibility of solidarity, to admit that I am already intimate with the other, suffering differentially but together. The poem speaks, without speaking, with “blood on [its] teeth”.

#### 4. *This body next to you*

It is in interruption that we may notice that the other is already here. And, in the sphere of written language, the poem provides the formal means through which such rupture is felt – principally through the line break. But a poem can also create these effects in prose, in the discomfort and sustained pressure of a contained form, where the other is drawn so close as to be inside. Peter Boyle's poem “On the eternal nature of fresh beginnings” (fig. 4), published as one of the “selected poems and micro-essays of 'The Montaigne Poet'”, is framed so as to suggest the blur of subjectivity which bodily otherness invariably generates. Boyle has written through heteronyms or poetic persona before, but in *Ghostspeaking*, from which “On the eternal nature of fresh beginnings” is taken, the scope expands, both outward and inward. Not only are there multiple fictive authors, but the lens of the poems – this poem in particular – opens out to encompass prehistory and drills down into the molecular.

*fig. 4*

##### **On the eternal nature of fresh beginnings**

This body next to you, said the German expert on design, is your ideal self – what you climbed out of once and have since forgotten about. Like gills and dialogues with rainbows, like your life as a ruminant quadruped, it has been erased from your waking story. When the time is right you will step inside it and it will transport you. Do not look at the claws that dangle from its withered right arm – consider only its wings. Say to yourself the word “Perfection”. Be confident. All the stars of the universe were placed millennia ago far inside you.

The body is itself other, and seems to contain its earlier evolutionary versions, latent and poised to be reactivated. All these incarnations – the ruminant, the aquatic, all the way back to the substance of stars – have one thing in common – a withered right arm. This figure of disability, this disfiguring, is revealed as perennial, not merely human but indicative of life itself, “perfect” in its imperfection, “your ideal self”.

Not that this is at all a straightforward encounter with bodily otherness. There are at least five subjectivities – Boyle, the Montaigne Poet, the German expert, you the reader, and “this body next to you” – not to mention all the others contained in each body. There is no doubt that, as a device for complicating the voice, the use of a heteronym already amplifies the uncanny potentials of lyric poetry, so that it might seem as if the voice, instead of issuing from “a singular authorial body”, speaks “from nowhere, from no body” (Varatharajan, 2016, para. 4). Yet, singular and absent or ghostly are not the only alternatives for embodiment. The other is mobile, multiple, obscure. For all its multiplicity, though, in the poem the body of the other is encountered as “next to you”.

With the other beside me, everything seems to be questionable – history, biology, memory, even the separation of my self and the other. The other may be inside me, or I may even be inside the other. Here, “the subject is immolated without fleeing itself, without entering into ecstasy, without taking a distance from itself... like a stranger, hunted down even in one's home, contested in one's own identity” (Levinas, 1981, p. 92). In Boyle's poem, this disturbing threat to the sovereignty and

containment of the self is posed as a promise, a prophecy – “when the time is right you will step inside it and it will transport you” – a state of being that compels you to say the word “perfection”. The other-embodied-in-the-same is the wellspring of thought and writing, in all their ambiguity and equivocation, “the very signifyingness of signification” (Levinas, 1981, p. 108).

### *5. This uncontained failure*

Poems not only require “readers to become attuned to the nuances of different forms of embodied communication” (Hall, 2015, p. 149), but are predicated on these differences, energised and disturbed by them. In Kennedy's poem “Swimming class”, it may seem as if the other speaks in “half-formed words, lost calls”. The other retreats from speech, but can even retreat within speech – into the defiant privacy of parenthesis, as in Kavanagh-Ryan's “life prep”, or in the slowness and uncertainty of response, as in Smith's “The Poetics of Discomfort”. But it is also not simply a matter of translation, because the other even speaks within my own language, its sounds as well as its silences. As James Hatley (2011) observes, “my very thought is inflected with and subject to the tones and meanings of all the other others who speak and have spoken, or even, will have spoken... in ways I have yet to even appreciate” (p. 93).

Nor is it easy to see the other. Those whose bodies are other are routinely stared at, interrogated visually and verbally, the kind of engagement that reinforces a failure of

encounter rather than resolving it. This may explain why, while Boyle's poem embraces bodily otherness, it also seems to instruct you to disregard that otherness. "Do not look at the claws that dangle from its withered right arm – consider only its wings". On one level, the poem enacts the prohibition against staring, disrupting the possibility of encounter with the other. The paradox of such instructions, of course, is that the disfigurement is all the more present for being mentioned.

The other can only be encountered through hyperopia, a defect of my vision. They are so close they appear blurred, deformed. Who might initially appear at a distance to be "special needs" can move so far into this shared vulnerable space that "they" seem to become "us". Otherness appears then as broken "out of tune" singing, as human movement itself. Or, at a distance, I notice the other balancing awkwardly on crutches, only to find them abruptly refusing my offer of assistance. Unsettled by how profoundly my own seeing has failed, I become so self-conscious that the other disappears. The encounter itself seems broken. And yet, paradoxically, failure itself still speaks of the acute proximity of the body of the other, how impossible it is to absolve myself of them.

In innumerable public encounters, bodily otherness seems to prompt staring, marking the other (and only the other) as different. Yet otherness cannot be contained in one body or person, and some poems, affirming this, stare back. In such poems, the tables are turned, so that through this failure of communication or encounter, I find myself the subject of scrutiny, exposed. As the other stares back, we discover the possibility that "language might find its saying renewed, recreated

precisely through its failures, its collapse, its shame... its accusation" (Hatley, 2011, p. 100). The other reveals that this failure and accusation belongs not only to language but to me.

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