

# Rethinking Repair

by Monica Rentfrow

*Rethinking Repair* is a semi-autobiographical collection of serious and humorous poetic works that explores effects a body with dwarfism has had on one individual. Most of the poems lean on a precise moment when dwarfism—a rare medical condition present at birth—directly has influenced the emotion or outcome of a situation. Conversely, I illuminate moments when dwarfism has had absolutely no direct influence on my experiences; I do this to counterbalance the possible perception or belief that all the experiences in my life center on dwarfism. Indeed many poems are simple displays of managing the “repair” of familial and everyday stresses. In this way, the collection serves as an example of an unusual life experience. Because it focuses on the realities and exigencies of living with dwarfism, this narrative on repair is a crucial addition to the discourse of diversity studies. More specifically, this collection will further the discourse of dwarfism in literature. The poems collected in *Rethinking Repair* are organized in three sections— each of which contains poems that center on the concept of repair to the body, the family, and the mitigation of everyday stresses. Poetic influences include such poets as Mary Oliver, Ted Kooser, Paul Guest, and James Cihlar; professorial influence includes Ted Kooser, Hilda Raz, and Grace Bauer.

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section one

**Another S.E.D.c. Scratch**

"The opposite of beauty is not ugliness, it is injury."  
-- Greg Hewitt, *The Eros Conspiracy*

Metal can save a life  
so can blood and bone.

I didn't know during recess that  
my uncle leaves work  
to have a needle stuck in his arm  
so does mom,  
my grandparents

A week later part of them  
becomes part of me  
in a bright, cold room  
as my neck learns how to be strong  
with the help of dead man bone,  
mashed shavings from my shins,  
wire-bent bits,  
and a dash of grace

*[Spondyloepiphyseal dysplasia congenital, a rare bone growth disorder, caused Monica's type of dwarfism].*

## Anesthetic Awakening

it's a strange thing to lose three days,  
wake with a cry, like rebirth

suddenly what you knew is new  
blinking in this: a re-formed you

a desire to overturn tables  
bubbles through blood

to rise from this bed of clotting cement,  
pluck plastic tubes, lasso freedom

crash and thrash through walls,  
this Bigfoot being of you

## Little Victories

After five months flat in bed  
as bones healed at the base of my head  
the doctor removed the stabilizing pins  
that pierced the first layer of skull skin.  
It would be unwise to sit, they said,  
without a therapist. But when Mom sped  
to fetch my snack, a desire set in  
to rise by myself—and, boy, I would win.  
Hand gripping rail, I threw a leg (dead  
muscled) over the edge, the second as first led,  
and sat there committing a hospital sin  
while the world refused to stop the spin.  
Mom came back and nearly dropped her cup;  
when asked what I was doing, I said: “Sitting up!”



## My Halo

I grew stronger in my neck  
where the doctor stuffed in  
bone and tiny wire  
drilled four pins  
into my head one-eighth inch  
while I was asleep  
puncturing little holes  
in my forehead and under my hair

The four bars threaded down my front and back  
to join with a cast around the torso  
except for the cutout crater  
where I could reach through  
thin, stretchy fabric to scratch around my navel.

For five months I lay on my bed in the living room  
to watch Power Rangers on my side  
sleep on my front, the bed four inches from my eyes  
do homework on my back with triangle-prism glasses  
poop into a bedpan with a towel across my waist  
lying in my halo around our house,  
too awkward to slide me into a car

**Daily Practice**

busy checking cheques of a fat-forties man  
who's just left, she doesn't see me, next in line

I'd like to pound with bare fists on the counter wall  
or chuck a pen at her forehead

but I hang back a few feet, put on the practiced grin,  
pretend I'm wanting not to disrupt this grand work

**Semi**

I did it because I could,  
because I was scared to do it,  
and because it was there—  
resting between yellow-painted lines,  
its gigantic round feet, long-stretched body,  
eyelids holding back the glare,  
and silence that chilled my toes.  
I double-checked the head, to be sure it was asleep,  
then made for it, dashing under the hollow,  
metal belly. There was space enough but I ducked anyway.  
I did not look up until I breathed on the other side  
and lived to tell the tale.

## Metal

### I.

paper clip  
 bracelet  
 notebook binding  
 handcuffs  
 screws  
 plates/shunts  
 electrical wiring center  
 piping  
 silverware  
 scaffolds  
 sheet metal  
 factory machinery  
 blood content  
 water purifier  
 elevator handrail

### II.

the way it bends to the mind  
 natural resource made unnatural  
 shape-slammed to make tools that shape-slam  
 shrieking sound of laser cutting  
 requires goggles, lead-weight gloves  
 reflects light to capture pictures  
 holds time in its place  
 prints paper, templates, person x-rays  
 cuts what shouldn't be cut  
 brainless follower of controls by another  
 fulfills purpose of solidity and strength

### III.

piping shrieks to the sound of laser cutting what shouldn't be cut . . . handcuffed, holding  
 time in its place . . . a brainless follower of controls from another . . . silverware prints on  
 paper templates . . . personal x-rays require goggles . . . lead-weight gloves to make tools  
 that shape sheet metal the way it bends to the mind . . . reflecting light to capture pictures  
 of blood controls . . . natural resource made unnatural

## Stakes

I was lying on the hard white table top, the pins like not yet rusted stakes of a country fence jamming out of my knee and ankle. For reasons I do not remember I could not be given anesthetic. My insides shook like a burp in the Grand Canyon.

A man came in with bolt cutters as big as a German Shepherd hidden behind his back. He approached the left side of the table while I tried to focus on the ceiling tile with the painted happy butterfly.

I could see the one leg of the cutters at attention in the air. I closed my eyes.

## **Spondyloepiphyseal Dysplasia Congenita**

I don't really like babies  
but the young SEDs get me  
every time  
the way they stagger  
with limbs they may never grow into  
on hips that contain not an ounce  
of bone  
chattering in high octaves  
and pushing themselves back up  
from the floor  
chasing others twice their size  
Shortcutting under tables with no need  
to duck head

Once, sitting on the side  
of a crowd, I saw a girl of three,  
very small,  
padding about, darting from one  
side to the other, weaving through legs  
like corn stalks  
while parents sat by  
seemingly cooler than the cucumber  
on my lunch plate  
and I just about pulled a superhero stunt  
before I realized I did just the same  
at her age

## The Bone Room

My doctor's secretary walks  
to the door of The Bone  
Room, turns a key in  
an old metal lock. Only  
a teenager, I do not know  
what Laura is offering me.

I am admitted to a room  
full of bone bits and wholes  
on thin wooden shelves,  
in cabinets behind dusty  
glass doors. Missing bodies' hands,  
joints, clubfeet, a pelvis, a cranium  
enlarged from achondroplasia.  
It is like a history  
of my ancestors, my people.  
I look but do not touch.

I turn around  
and there it is: a whole  
skeleton, complete with scoliosis.  
Missing eyes, missing spirit—  
it hangs in its case.  
My feet grow roots  
and my ears fold in  
on themselves as Laura  
recites facts, smiling.  
It was such a structure  
that if my skin and muscle were to fall  
away it would be me  
standing forever in a glass display.  
I could be a sacrifice to science.

section two



## Population Control

*you always want two caterpillars*  
she says on the day I learn to pluck weeds

I'm warned to *never let them kiss*  
*because they might get too attached*  
as I take from her palm  
the tiny pruning tool,  
turn to the mirror

I hear *that's why we take out*  
*some of their legs every week*

I lean into the wall  
the way I've seen her tilt,  
press belly-gut to granite—  
when I wince she smiles:  
a leg falls in the sink

I look for the hole, shocked  
that I can't find the wound

even when she flips on the vanity  
to *draw those bugs out—don't*  
*forget that light scares them still*  
as my hand raises for round two  
in this fight of face gardening

later, looking at the finished job, I wonder  
when the lady bug popping lessons will begin

**What to Keep in a Kangaroo Pouch**

toothbrush  
water bottle

extra shower soap  
a change of clothes

neck pillows  
campfire logs

a guitar  
some stars

quilt from our bed  
brown sack breakfast

the keys you forgot  
on the way out the door

**Nuts For My Sister**

I took you a crunchy  
peanut butter sandwich  
today while you worked—  
nuts of love bulging  
the slices of bread

I wrapped it in a napkin,  
then another and another,  
securing the wrapped sides  
with tape, as I wish  
I could you

I brought you also  
a few small bars of chocolate,  
as if its sugar  
could make your world sweeter

## Tender

I would swear  
it was my father's favorite  
word. I'd hear  
it almost every dinnertime,  
how tender the meat was.  
Pork, beef, turkey,  
and the venison he'd shot  
the week before: it was  
all tender, any way he cooked it.

I do not hate meat,  
but I do not like most  
besides ham and seafood.  
My father hardly ever ate seafood.

What he didn't know was  
that if he weren't in the kitchen  
counting how many of the "agreed"  
bites I'd eat, my baby sister  
was reaching across plates  
bite after tender bite.

## Contemplating College Majors

I noticed my father  
when we drank coffee  
in brown chairs  
on his cement patio,  
the sun beat against  
the cold breeze  
on our skin, pleased  
as much as I  
at the sight, a moment  
of soft words and smiles  
when I learned  
that even mean men  
can be sweet in stillness

**I Aim...**

Afraid of backfire throwing me on my butt, I instinctively lock elbows, close my eyes, pretend I can shut my ears. My great-grandfather's pistol is cold and foreign to me, though not my father. I think of his first shot, about my age, Grandpa watching nearby to see if his directions were followed. Perhaps my father closed only one eye. My eyes snap open at the shot to see dirt spring up where my bullet landed. I am surprised to find the world unchanged. I smile. My father is smiling. Maybe Grandpa smiles above the clouds. I look across the dirt ditch—one of many on my father's land behind his ranch-style house. I look at the milk jugs, glad they are not birds or other prey my father hunts with his rifles. I raise the gun. I aim this time. I miss. I aim again. No dust cloud this time.

## The Bookshoppe & Superior Perk

*for Lisa*

The door chimes as I push  
into my place, walking down  
the slant of spotted cement  
—the floor of a once hardware shop.

I hear the familiar hello  
as I pass red couches, books  
on thin metal shelves, wicker  
tables where sandwiches slowly disappear.

Lisa talks about her two boys,  
one in Australia. She suggests a good  
book she's read, looks up a title  
I seek. We smile over an old joke.

If Anne were working she'd talk  
about biking to work. Barb, her granddaughter.  
All three ask how classes and other  
friends are getting along this week.

Streetlight lies on the counter  
from the big front windows  
where I pick up a fat, baby  
blue mug of chai only Lisa can make.

I sit, cross ankles, sip,  
watch water fall from the green  
awning to the sidewalk, feel  
warm sliding down a throat to a tired body.

**Putting a Spin on Things***for Lin*

Was it your idea  
or mine to take  
the world into our hands  
close our eyes  
feel the rise and fall  
of mountains, oceans,  
countless countries  
spinning out of control  
under our fingertips,  
the whole Earth painted  
in crayon colors

suddenly the world stopped  
and I would lift my pointer  
to read the black print  
of foreign lands: Sri Lanka,  
Czechoslovakia, San Francisco

sometimes we'd spin  
again, peeking through closed  
lids, until we landed on one  
our tongue didn't trip on,  
while we knew any place would  
be better than being here  
and neither of us said it



## Google Midgets

Bridget the Midget

Eric the Midget

Midget fight on Springer

Hire a midget

Rent a midget.com

Japanese Midget Submarine

A tiny sub-species of the human race.

Mainly raised in midget mills, for the entertainment of normal people.

Midget madness

Easy midget

Midget hand job

North Eastern Midget Association

Midget Motors Supply

The Midget Manifesto. Proposal:

Harness the inherent power of midgets to provide clean, reliable energy,  
and a source of entertainment for mankind.

Quarter Midget racing for kids

Midget Throwing: A Lost Art

Wonder Midget

Modest Midget

For over a decade, I dreamt of fucking a midget

An extremely small person who is otherwise normally proportioned: offensive.

**A Minute Ago**

a guy winked  
at me downtown  
it was not the sort of wink  
that awakens butterflies  
in my stomach  
but, rather, the kind  
that feels like a spider  
crawled out of your crotch

## Story of My Life

I am paper  
reams and reams of it  
paragraphs stuck  
in my armpits and flab  
I wish weren't back there,  
lodged in hair  
roots, bulging  
at the seam where my  
rib was spared, stitched  
in the button holes  
of my legs, clamped in,  
bound, deep  
in my spine

**The Pine**

undisturbed by a loud landworld  
dozens of ducks sleep  
in the evening sun  
on quiet waves  
with curled necks tucked  
in warm silhouette feathers

## Forgotten

it's raining like the sound  
of two keyboards being typed upon  
but you've lost the ability to listen  
after all this time spent sliding  
windows shut and cursing  
forgotten umbrellas

forgotten are the days of puddle  
seeking and climbing dark tree bark  
to sip from leaf bowls while yellow  
peeks between the clouds

no, now there are meetings to run,  
clocks to race, and ladders to climb instead  
alternating hand and foot to move  
up instead of forward

## Hypotheticals

if I could choose  
the body & being  
of my next life  
I'd be  
a lightning bug:  
though my wings  
might be bent a bit  
or legs squashed  
from a small hand  
cupping me out  
of the night air,  
and maybe even forget  
to breathe  
inside an old jar, it'd be  
worth it to see close up  
the light in the smile of this child

## Presbyterian Disaster Assistance

No hammer was holstered  
or pipe laid or wire connected  
but we had maps of neighborhoods  
to canvas, all with a door to knock on  
and flash our badges proving  
we were not looters or others unwanted

we sat on couches, pointed at shingles,  
walked through rooms to survey Katrina's  
damage, writing down which mechanics  
needed to stop at this house

mostly though, we drank lots  
of tea, gave hugs,  
listened to stories that wrung  
our hearts, and heard thanks  
for sacrificed spring breaks

no hammer was holstered  
or pipe laid or wire connected  
except those within ourselves  
at the end of the day or mornings  
on the way to the next neighborhood  
when we prayed for more  
of ourselves to give

## Labor Day Weekends at Lakeview United Methodist Campground

After pulling the hoodie over  
her head, leaving it up for warmth,  
she unzips the tent's flap. Morning  
coolness rushes, awakening  
tiny arm hairs in her sleeves.

She stuffs hands in pockets  
and pads across the dirt path  
to the community fire ring  
at the center of the campsites.  
Here parents wait for the hour  
when children wake. Fathers  
read newspapers. Mothers chat  
with mothers. Nearly all have coffee  
cups in hands, laps, or camp-  
chair drink holders. The fire  
from last night's roast and singing  
fest is quiet now.

She drops into a chair near  
her mother with a sleepy grin  
of greeting. Someone asks  
how she slept. With her age  
and love for this weekend,  
she is one of the first kids up.

A bird calls to a bird, a newspaper  
folds and unfolds, wood pops  
while laughing souls do not hear  
the fluttering wings of forgotten  
deadlines in the distance.



**Gelston Hall 150**

many full moons have filled the sky  
since I have looked at this window

I see the ledge where my bonsai tree stood proud  
in its square blue pot, pebbles encasing the trunk

I remember the futon friends would stop in  
to have a nap on while I read at my desk

with the wooden loft Dad built standing over me,  
peppered by multi-color marker messages—a sort of yearbook—

and the lounging stuffed animal, King Frog, atop my tiny TV  
we gathered around with pillows and popcorn on the tile flooring

and the standing closet where I hung my towel  
after the morning war with community showers

and the courtyard I would gaze upon on hard days—  
the spring grass, the fallen leaves, the snow-covered oak

section three

## Routine

I was reminded of my mother's love  
as I lay in an extended wheelchair  
in the kitchen, leaning  
from one hip to the other  
as she slid out my underwear  
with its gathered plush of red  
and slid a fresh set under  
before the dam broke again.

After velcroing the shorts around  
my pinned and pin-filled legs  
and locking the seat up in place  
she pulled back the curtain  
separating our teamwork  
from family watching  
America's Funniest Videos  
on the old, flower-print sofa.

**6-seater Cessna**

I left my corporate desk  
to fly across  
a corner of the country

I touch my Cessna down,  
rubber fighting asphalt,  
scream by the tower in this small town  
to pick up a girl  
young  
probably pressing fingers to vending glass

she is small  
    not fragile  
yet broken in places

a man who knows  
which hinges need screws  
waits for her  
in a wing with warm-painted walls  
washing his hands again and again  
with skin-peeling soap

## Reflecting on My Place in the Cosmos

“In paradise, hospital beds sit under ageless mahogany and sycamore that bear every kind of fruit” -- Fady Joudah, *Pulse 13*

There are no hospitals in heaven!

Paradise is better than any bark bed one can dream up!

NO MORE roommates (who throw linens at nurses)

always managing to checkout before you do,

leaving you alone with crushed and crusted

... “food” they seem to call it

NO MORE drip-dropping meds or pills in plastic cups

or being handed something they believe to be toilet paper

in a “private” space that smells of bleach and sick

and they return every two hours to feel you up

for BP and pulse checks

and each time you think, almost aloud

Yes, I’m still lying in this damn bed

staring across to the cream-colored wall

at the TV with the same lame shows

and I’m wondering if the world outside

has CHANGED

since I realized

Earth is the question place,

Heaven the answer

### Putty Syringed into Outer Ear Will Harden

She stares through the window,  
waiting for the boop and blips  
that will tell me how to adjust  
her new hearing aids, what pitches  
of frequency and volume will help,  
not hurt, her tiny eardrums

In the sound booth, freckled by holes  
like corkboard that keeps sound out,  
or in, she can't hear me  
until the pilot muffs are removed

I slide in the machines  
with molding fit for the outer ear  
made two weeks ago and teach her  
how to turn them on, or up, before test  
two when suddenly she is big-eyed  
hearing the world

She wants to know what that sound is,  
one she's never heard  
in her nine years of living,  
but she can't name it, can't grab it  
like the paper-bag rustling it is, so close  
to her—right there! that, what is that!—  
sitting, twisting, stillness,  
trying to hold the sound  
like blue jello in her hands  
when she pins it—  
*oh! it's my shirt*  
*on the back of the chair!*

**Short Rules**

short hand  
short stories  
short of the mark

short list  
short supply  
short a bit on cash

short coming  
short circuit  
short-distance calling

short stop  
short run  
short of breath

short cut  
short bus  
shortest path A to B

short skirt  
short shorts  
short-term relationship

short while  
short lived  
short of a miracle

## **The Gait Lab**

for once I am a munchkin in this Kansas land gone wrong: I'm lit up, while the lights are off, with all these electrode balls stuck on my fibulas, femurs, spine, shoulders, and I'm walking the yellow brick road with this same old limp as these laser lights connect with the balls to track at what angle exactly the ankle turns out, the hip pops up, and the back strains to compensate, all so that the great Wizard can tinker with his tools behind the curtain and I'll emerge from the mansion with a better set of legs



**Ty 3**

Pains from my vertebrae glue  
every fragment of my body  
Tylenol 3—thank God for codeine—  
dulls the work of the carpenters  
and convinces my eyelids anchors are attached.  
Ty 3, fed through one of my many plastic  
octopus legs,  
pumps rivers to the source  
where they zipper-opened my spine  
and clamped the metal poles side by side.

I want to let Mom borrow  
Ty so he can shield her  
from the “whore,” “whore”  
my father hurls at her  
from across my hospital bed.

## The Red Box

Sometimes during lunch or watching cartoons on the TV that hangs from the ceiling, a blood-poke lady comes to take my blood. She'll come in carrying her red box that is like a jail for all the blood she takes from kids. She'll have on one of those nurses' shirts with the happy animals all over it—hippos or cats or teddy bears in all different colors. I think it is funny she wears those shirts because she isn't as happy as the animals are.

She knows I don't like her, even though I don't mean not to like her. I make my hands into big rocks that don't open when she comes in—my fingers hiding the purple they have turned from so many pokes. Sometimes I get poked four times a day, sometimes only two times. I like those days.

I don't think the blood-poke lady likes doing the pokes. I think she has a mean boss who works in the basement of the hospital and he tells her to take the blood from kids. I am glad he doesn't do the pokes.

She comes to the side of my hospital bed. With her spidery fingers she starts to open my hands, trying to pull my fingers out. But I am strong. Mom has to help her and tells me to open my hands. She knows I don't want to.

## I, Your Shield

I hugged you until you fell asleep  
and they slid a tube in your throat

a nurse carried me out  
through double doors

back in Mom's arms  
I thought of you lying there  
shieldless  
while they broke your body,  
a sacrifice to science

Mom hugged me  
until we saw you  
again, waking to the  
fight  
of the long night ahead,  
of tubes, beeping, blood  
pokes and pressure cuffs,  
of me tucked in  
that space between  
your hip, arm, and  
a heavy cream blanket

## **My Halo Has Shifted**

I flew over continental states  
to a treatment room  
hidden in a mean supply hallway  
I was laid on the metal table  
no medicine or pillow given me  
my mom holding my hand  
the nurse holding my head  
*Can't move, Can't cry*  
he said with his drill  
before unscrewing the pins  
and screwing them in again  
earthquakes trembling  
my broken body to its core  
Mom and my eyes latching  
together to keep each other strong  
as our souls made rivers on our faces  
and pools on the floor

**Those Little Reminders**

“I wonder why it didn’t fade, as scars are supposed to.”  
--Molly Peacock, *The Second Blush*

scars are tattoos you don’t have to pay for

except you do

and the inker doesn’t ask for an idea:  
just scribbles on the skin of the sleeper

I’d like to have them removed, unstitched,  
these battle wounds of war

take them from my shaved legs, the hills of my hips,  
the zipper up the back holding the battery pack

but then I might fall apart

wisdom ripped like wings at the seams

## Rethinking Repair

*“Unfamiliar with the logic of the physical world,  
As a kid I did not understand repair.”*

--James Cihlar, *Undoing*

Most kids cannot  
understand the logic of the world:  
repairs are necessary  
for the broken

I knew at eight  
a body always can be dealt with,  
as if a connoisseur  
composed by pain

It becomes you,  
a habit ingrained in inner brain,  
teaching others how to think  
in waves of new

You look at you,  
see how the past pieces fit and click,  
make a whole working puzzle  
tight with glue