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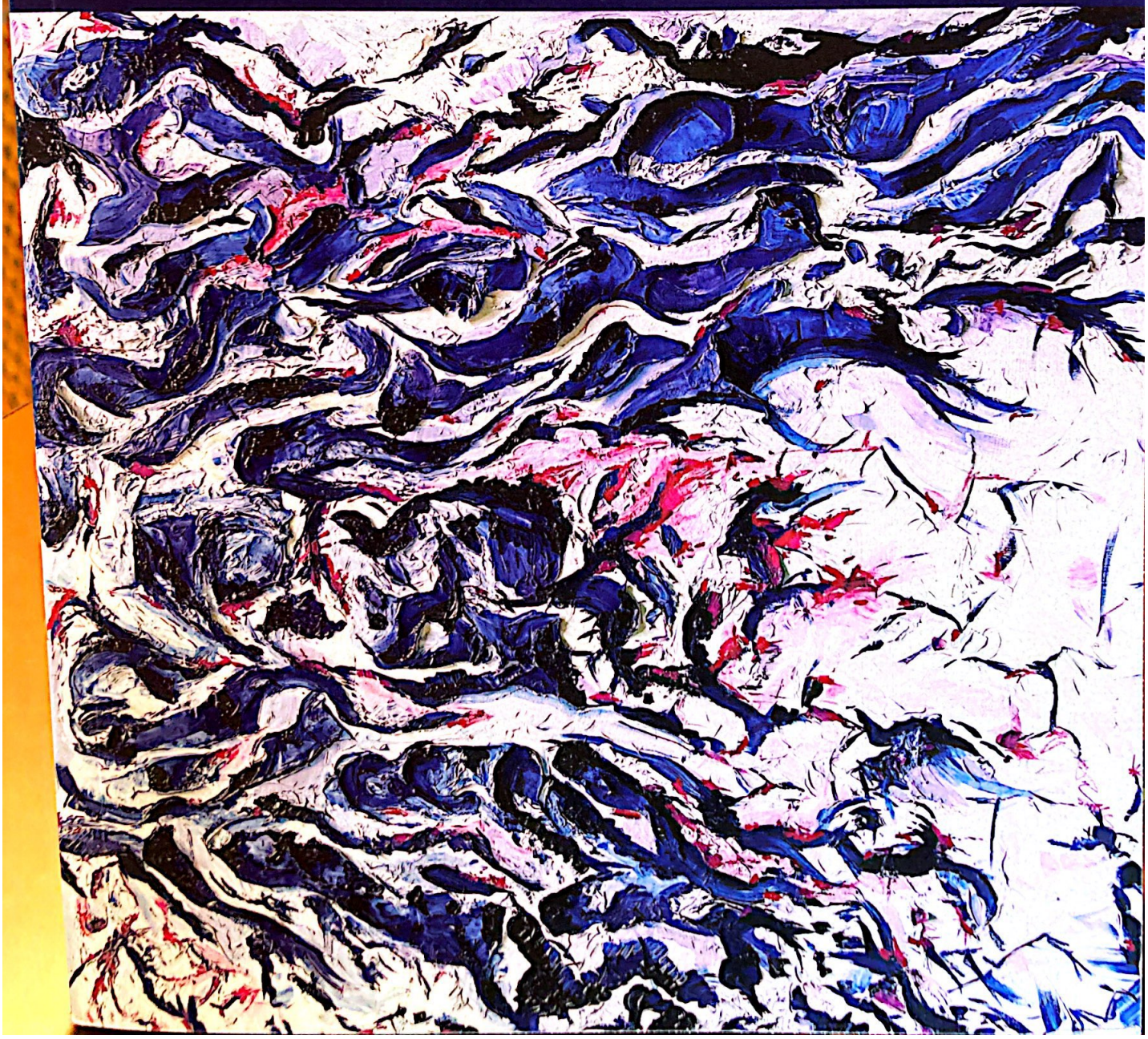
the Examined Life *Journal*

A Literary Publication of the
University of Iowa
Carver College of Medicine



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Bent Double

JAMES NIKOPOULOS

I am a hunchback. Or I was. I'm still not sure how to clarify a malformation I inherited and then had, mostly, corrected. When I was fifteen years old, my parents flew me to see Dr. Smithson—the genius. He came recommended. He's one of those professionals everyone agrees is a genius, in large part, because he acts crazy. After all, what can you expect from someone who barely sleeps and never takes a vacation? They said uninsured children would arrive by the busload demanding their miracles; they said he never had the heart to turn a single one down.

The doctor's wife ran the office; she's the one who shepherded her husband's aberrancy towards his patients'. She's the one who ushered me into the private room where I waited with my parents until a madcap old man threw the door open, walked brusquely to the X-ray lamp, threw up the pictures of my spine—all without saying anything to anyone, not a hello or hey—looked at the picture, then turned around, looked me dead in the eyes with his madcap stare and said, to me, the fifteen-year-old he'd never seen before, "Yup. You have the disease. What are you going to do about it?"

He said nothing else; for an infinity he just kept staring.

Technically, "hunchback" is not a diagnosis. The term is kyphosis. It sounds a lot less derisive. Greek has a way of doing that. Staphylococcus comes from the word for "bunch of grapes," I was told, by a surgeon cutting out a staph infection from my ass as a nurse stood below my crotch sopping up the blood dripping down my testicles. "That's right!" I said to him, as he was slicing away (my parents are Greek, so I pretended that I should have noticed the connection). Cancer is probably the more famous etymology. It derives from the word for crab; supposedly someone saw a resemblance with the veins in the tumor. Kyphosis is not nearly as colorful. It derives from something meaning, brace for it, "bent forward, stooping, hunchbacked."

There aren't many hunchbacks for stoopers like me to aspire to. Shakespeare's villainous Richard III may be a "poisonous bunchback'd toad," but the real Richard had scoliosis, not kyphosis. His spine snaked

down his back; it didn't lump into a blob at the top like mine. Verdi's Rigoletto is a genuine hunchback, as is Hugo's bellringer of Notre Dame. Though there is little affinity between the two of us—no one ever called my back a dome or stuck pins in it, as mean medieval Parisians do to poor Quasimodo. The thing about growing up hunched is that the people who care about you notice it more than the people who don't. As a result, it's not the pins and domes kind of noticing so much as the "sit up straight" and "don't slouch" variety. No one thinks your spine is malformed, not at first. Long before a diagnosis, the malformation comes across as laziness or apathy, as though you are deliberately making the choice not to hold yourself up. When I served as an altar boy, the priest made it very clear to me that my poor posture and constant fidgeting, before all the congregation to witness, demonstrated a lack of respect to God.

If you look up kyphosis today, you'll find that treatment options vary. They center on miscellaneous kinds of exercises and braces. For several years before visiting Dr. Smithson, I saw chiropractors, physical therapists, and orthopedics who told my parents that I could fix my problem with a hearty combination of treatment and self-care. A chiropractor laid me prone and pressed into my back with naive insistence. A physical therapist turned me over and tugged at my legs (this is when I learned that they're not the same length!). An orthopedic strapped me into some harness thingy that looked like a cross between a straight jacket and those gun holsters detectives wear under their jackets in cop shows. And everyone told me, repeatedly, to fix my posture. In other words, it depended on me—sit up straight, stand up straight, don't be lazy. If you are, your back will get more domed, the pain will increase, and eventually you will reach the point of no return. I was told I needed to fix this now, if I wanted to fix it ever.

A few years of this and nothing much had changed. My back continued its downward trajectory.

Then I met Dr. Smithson, who presented things as a simple and rather straightforward choice. If I did what I was told, he was certain—not confident, mind you, but certain—that I would be cured completely. How many sick people get to hear something like that?

One of the plusses of pathology is the expertise it grants. You may not be a doctor specializing in this or that sickness, but you know that sickness. You know it from the inside. I have always tried to use my exper-

tise for good.

For example, when I hear someone warned that their slouching will lead to a hunched back, I'm always like, "No it won't. It will lead to bad posture." When someone with kyphosis is told to stop slouching, I chime in, "They can't. It's not their fault. The spine just doesn't get straighter than that. Leave them alone." The uninitiated often do a poor job distinguishing between bad habits and malformation. You can tell a true hunchback less by their posture than by the smooth roundedness. That line that runs down normal backs where the spine is, bifurcating beautiful bodies into a symmetrical pair of Deltoids, Traps, and Lats—people with kyphosis don't have it. The back is convex, curved outwards like the hump of a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle.

Of the people who know of my experience, one person does not believe in my expertise: my wife. She has seen the traces my brace left on this middle-aged body—the dent in my chest, the scars under my arms. She has heard my parents talk about my trips to Dr. Smithson. Doesn't matter. When it comes to the disease's relevance to our family, not just mine, she is determined to do what she must. Telling someone to stop slouching is counterproductive you say? Nonsense. I'll show you what can be done. By the sheer force of her maternal will, she will redirect the kyphosis branch of this family upwards and onwards. This kind of confidence has consequences for parenting.

The person I knew at that time with the most beautiful back was my friend Jon. Man did I envy every aspect of that kid's physicality. Jon was one of those people who you just knew was an asshole. He had to be. Because if someone so effortlessly handsome and athletic were also a nice person, then what hope could there be for a benevolent God? Ever know anyone for whom puberty was flattering, whose body passed from unassuming child's to attractive adult's without suffering through any awkwardness? That was Jon's. And unfortunately, he was not an asshole. In retrospect, I have to admit that the asshole in the relationship was me. Because when he gave my gut a friendly sucker punch as we passed each other in the hallway between classes, that first week I wore the brace to school, Jon almost broke his knuckles. And I found it hilarious.

I don't think most people who knew of me in high school realized I wore a back brace. I kept it hidden with my own relentless will. I became a connoisseur of the button-up shirt, worn oversized and untucked. If a breeze didn't pick up, it did an admirable job of keeping my secret. It

wasn't unless one noticed my wooden bearing and awkward movements that suspicions arose. Either that or you sucker-punched me between classes. Yeah. Jon definitely got what he deserved.

My brace hugged my body from just above the groin to just below the breastbone. The bit around the ribs protruded outwards to allow my diaphragm to expand for breathing (that's the part I needed button-ups to conceal). Imagine a nineteenth-century corset in rock-hard plastic. The lower part of the brace did the work of straightening the small of the back—as I was to learn, a back with kyphosis also curves too much at the bottom. The harder work of straightening the domed upper branch of my spinal column was performed by a metal bar attached in the front. It traced a path up the side of my pectorals, around to the top of the chest, where it came together in a flat metal pad that pressed back against the upper sternum and collarbone. This was the adjustable bit. Each month we would take that trip to see Dr. Smithson, who would prescribe to the "Brace Man" the degree of adjustment needed. I would then visit the Brace Man's office, where he would angle the metal bar, pushing my chest further back and my back further upright, to the point that if I somehow managed to outwit the brace and slouch nonetheless, the pad that was supposed to press against my chest would end up wedging into my throat. There was no real way to outwit this thing. It was like living inside a giant's hand that was constricting.

If you Google "kyphosis brace," a slew of random strappy things pops up, none of which resemble the all-embracing horribleness of the contraption I had to wear. If you scroll down a bit through the search results, a slew of black-and-white images depicting another kind of horribleness pops up—Frankensteiny collages that look like Victorian S&M props. The brace I wore was not like these either, neither flexible like the first group nor punitive like the second. It was a medium horribleness—neither malicious nor forgiving (kind of like those "friends" you lose touch with after high school).

Wearing a brace like mine gives one the fabled stick-up-the-ass bearing. You cannot lean forward, you cannot twist round, you never look relaxed. Both literally and figuratively, you look like you have a stick up your ass.

At first this is frustrating—to be sure—but as with most things, you learn to adapt. You no longer bend forward to slip your socks and shoes

on; you cross your legs and slip the shoe on sideways. When something falls, you grab it with your toes—yes, as a monkey might—or else you bend at the knees as though performing squat thrusts. Whereas before you tried out for sports, now you don't. If before you were the kind of kid who met up with people, now you are the kind of person who doesn't. Because now you fear social settings and the activities they inspire—an impromptu game of catch? a trip to the bowling alley? squeezing into a car with other passengers? These are a few of the undertakings you are now avoiding.

Dr. Smithson said I would need to wear my brace twenty-two hours a day, for at least two years, followed by another year at night while I slept. I was granted a reprieve of two hours each day and no more. Doing so for longer, I was repeatedly told, would lengthen out the course of my treatment. As in fact eventually happened.

A summer trip to visit my extended family in Cyprus was the culprit. Go ahead and pack the brace into your carry-on, the Brace Man told me. He couldn't possibly expect me to suffer through a ten-hour flight. "But don't get complacent," he also said. If I spent the summer lounging at the beach all day, Dr. Smithson would see it. They would need to tighten the brace more than usual and extend the duration of treatment. I didn't spend that summer lounging at the beach all day, but I did go without the brace more than usual—an extra hour one day, a couple extra hours another, perhaps a bit of a break in the morning. In those years few in Cyprus had air conditioning. Summer temperatures hovered around a humid 90 degrees. A ceiling fan didn't cut it. I would wake up in the morning, take off the brace and slither out of the undershirt I wore to keep the brace from chafing my skin. From that undershirt I would wring out a cascade of sweat. I had to do it over the sink to keep from soaking the floor.

That fall I discovered my spine had gotten worse. "I can see you've been cheating," Dr. Smithson told me. He sent me to the Brace Man, who tightened his creation, and he, in turn, sent me on my way with the knowledge that I would be wearing his work longer than originally planned.

But who am I kidding, using quotation marks like that? Other than that first unforgettable meeting, I don't remember much of what Dr. Smithson ever said. He never spoke to me in any straightforward human language. Mostly I remember his looks, which said these words to me much more clearly than any of his twitchy mumblings ever did. My wife says if I publish comments like these I'll come across as ungrateful. I'm not ungrateful, though, not at all. I am unfailingly grateful. Nothing about my life hasn't benefited from wearing that horrible back brace. But admitting

as much doesn't make it any less horrible, the way I criticize my parents for overreacting at me when I was a child, knowing full well now that I'm an adult that they overreacted because they cared.

Another of the plusses provided by pathology is how explanatory it can be. Getting diagnosed with something that you are told has been slowly forming within you for years is like feeling the shock of revelation in slow motion. Bit by bit, the past suddenly makes sense.

It suddenly made sense why I hated sitting Indian style in elementary school, or keeping my elbows off the dinner table, why I disliked church and shopping so much. Sitting up, standing up, any kind of slow walking or carefree meandering—it all hurt. It's the reason why I fidgeted so much, why I complained so much, why I still sometimes look like, in the words of my wife, "a sack of potatoes." Of course it is. It's not that I was lazy or whiny or un-athletic; it's not that I was ugly. It's that I was deformed! —"unfinish'd," as Shakespeare's hunchback eloquently phrases it, "sent before my time / Into this breathing world." There is something reassuring about such revelations.

In cognitive linguistics, there is a theory about why so many languages use similar metaphors to describe emotions and other states of being. For example, many languages describe anger as though it were some kind of hot liquid inside you, about to boil over. As in, "You're making my blood boil!" Or "I'm so mad I'm about to burst!" It makes sense. When we get angry our blood pressure rises, causing our hearts to race. The feeling is overwhelming.

Languages from very different cultures also use similar orientational metaphors to communicate moods: Happy is Up; Sad is Down. This makes sense too. When we're happy we smile; our lips turn upwards. When we're healthy we're happy; we tend to stand up straight and walk with a bounce in our step. But when we're sad, not so much. We frown, we slouch, we feel beaten down. We tend to be unhappy when we're sick, and when we're seriously sick, we are literally down, sitting down, lying down, basically, not able to get up. Universally, whether you speak English or Swahili or Mandarin, erect posture is associated with a positive emotional state, and drooping posture with sadness and depression. We may speak different languages, but we share the same anatomical expectations.*

Maybe this is why hunched backs are so paradigmatically ugly. If Sad is Down, what's sadder than a spine bent double like mine? Maybe this

is also why I am attracted to women with good posture. My wife has the most beautiful, elegantly beautiful posture I have ever seen.

Not long after me, my younger sister was diagnosed with a form of kyphosis slightly less advanced than my own. Nonetheless, advanced enough to warrant her own bespoke orthosis. She hated it. And when I say hated it, I mean she really hated it.

For two years she retreated into a shell of her own making and renounced the world and any future involvement with it. She was going to become a truck driver, so she said. She wanted to work alone. She didn't want to interact with people. She didn't want people to realize she was there.

Her attitude proved very useful to me. I got to be the one with perspective. "Come on, Sis," I would say, "it's not like you have cancer. They're going to fix this. Be grateful."

As a word of advice to anyone who lives with someone suffering and who wants to continue living with that person, do not tell them what they have isn't as bad as cancer. That is not the right thing to say.

Growing up, my sister put up with a lot from her older brother, but I think none of it compares to having to put up with his perspective. During our brace years, I was unbearable and hypocritical, a false light of hope in a relatively well lit room. Did I hate wearing that brace as much as my sister? Of course I did. Did wearing the brace provide me with a newfound appreciation for life and its daily ecstasies? Kind of? Sometimes?

For example, to this day I have experienced no greater sensual pleasure—no orgasm I've reached, no food I've savored or high I've sustained—that even remotely compares to the feeling of the bedsheets against my skin after twenty-two hours wearing that brace.

But is that appreciation or merely contrast? I get a rare kind of headache that can last for twenty-four hours or longer. Those first moments when the pain finally recedes are like a full-body gasp of fresh air. Would I have ever felt this amazing sensation had I never suffered through the headache? Of course not. Was the headache worth it, for the sake of feeling that way? Another way of putting it: If I could go back in time and magically make these headaches never appear, knowing full well that I would be depriving myself of a high I would otherwise never know, would I? Nietzsche said that without extreme anguish one cannot experience extreme joy. There is much truth to this. Nevertheless, fuck that.

The worst part about my monthly trips were not the absurd interac-

tions with Dr. Smithson, nor even the heightened discomfort of the return flight home. They were the moments waiting to meet the Brace Man. In his office, along a table against a wall lay all the other contraptions he had built, and was about to distribute—other kinds of back orthotics, leg and arm orthotics, all-encompassing full-body orthotics that could only have been conceived by someone intimate with the cruelty of Mother Nature's amorality. Futuristic wheelchairs connected to full-body orthotics half my size. I didn't need to see all the Brace Man's patients to know they were there.

When my sister was diagnosed, the revelations of my own diagnosis seemed even clearer. Ah yes, this is genetic. It really is inherited. Knowing this was liberating, because if I inherited this, how much really could I have done to stop it? You're telling me it's my fault for slouching over my dinner? You can't call me lazy now.

For years I had almost forgotten about that time in my life, when I would gape at the luxuriousness of a cotton T-shirt or the mindlessness of other bodies sitting down to dinner or bending over to pick something up, when I would look at the most mundane things with wistfulness and resignation, counting down the days until I too could return to my freedom. But now I have children, and the memories of living that way return. No parent wants to bequeath to their kids the thing they hated about themselves.

The world slings untold arrows at everybody, including at your children. That cannot be stopped, only prepared for. But only you gave *your* kids their inheritance. How much of this can be prepared for, even knowing full well from your own experience, is debatable. I tell my wife over and over: Look, teach the kids to mind their posture, but don't nag them like this is their fault. If someone has it they have it.

As I said, though, my wife doesn't have faith in my expertise. She points out that my story is over twenty years old now. Nowadays they say you can save a child from the kind of thing I went through if you catch their bad habits early. Who can argue with this?

And who would want to argue with this? I don't want to have given that part of myself to my kids. But I also don't want my children to think of this as a bad habit, because I don't want them to think of this as their fault. I want them to know that they're not just being fidgety, that it's not laziness to need to sit down or droop forwards. When I tell my wife this, she tells me I am being fatalistic, which I tell her is such total bullshit,

even though I know she's right. If someone had told me that with some harder work I could have willed this never to have happened, that I could have at least cursed myself if not my lot, I would have bent over backwards to get it done. In the years before she died, my mother's aunt was bent low to the point of supplication. That can't have been wholly genetic. A whole lot of life contributed to what I saw in her.

If you see me today, I don't think you'll suspect this part of my past. One friend even thought I had a dancer's background, because she did, in fact, notice how unnaturally straight I often stood. When I told my wife this she laughed so hard; my wife, who does have a dancer's background, knows damn well that a ballet school would have weeded me out on day one, no matter how elegant my plié. But I was also born into an era that had rendered my malformation manageable, to parents with the resources to make the manageable into something fixable. All I had to do was believe the crazy doctor and let them strap me in and not grumble too much. I'm trying not to sound too grumbly now, because that's not why I wrote this. It takes years to learn not to think of yourself as ugly. I am convinced it took me a few more because of kyphosis. The point isn't to learn how to live with yourself; it's to learn how to live with your lot, and to just get on with it. Just as I've learned that my goal as a parent can't be to teach my children how to live with themselves so much as to motivate them to live with everything else. You get much more control over yourself than you do the rest. Let's hope so, at least.

I used to fantasize almost religiously about taking off that brace for the last time. It was going to be near a raging bonfire, into which I was going to toss that bespoke miracle. And then I was going to dance around the fire in the most bouncy, bendy, un-stick-up-your-assy way imaginable.

I never got to do that. When I confessed my fantasy to the Brace Man, God bless his heart, he recommended against it. I thought, Oh no. Maybe he assumes I'm being ungrateful for all he's done. Maybe he believes I've gone as crazy as Dr. Smithson.

"The plastic the brace is made out of, if you burn it," he said, "the fumes will be toxic."

Nuts.

I never got to dance around that bonfire. I also don't remember where I was when I took that brace off for the last time, nor even how it felt.

*For more on conceptual metaphor theory in cognitive linguistics, see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*, as well as Zoltán Kövecses. *Metaphor and Emotion. Language, Culture, and Body in Human Feeling.*