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Ralph James Savarese

The Lobes of Autobiography: Poetry and Autism

1. "Sad Dear Saved Me"

"Hours of light like heat hibernate/great icebergs hear the cries of the hurt." So, my son, adopted at the age of six from foster care, began a poem entitled, "Alaska." Written on a communication device in the fifth grade, it establishes a number of exquisite analogies—between light and bears and calving icebergs and "hurt" people. By "hurt" people he means kids such as himself who were abandoned by their parents, kids with disabilities forced to survive in a land of unremitting darkness.

That darkness included the worst sort of physical and sexual abuse, and you can see him find in the natural setting of Alaska the unlit bedroom in which the abuse took place. Indeed, you can see him find the saga of his entire early life: separation from his parents and sister, then frigid loneliness and injury—the two compressed into an image that does not behave, as my sentence just did, chronologically. The awful calving refers *both* to the loss of family and to the physical experience of rape, of being split open, as my son explained almost too matter-of-factly. At once inarticulate and faintly human, the sound of that calving seems an apt correlative for the cry of childhood trauma—especially apt in the case of a boy who literally cannot speak and who, back then, had no way of communicating what was happening to him.

As Alaska waits in winter for warmth it can barely imagine coming, so my son waited for relief from his attacker and, even less probably, for parents who might love him. "yes. dearest sad dad you heard fresh self and freshly responded deserting your fears and just freed sad dear saved me. yes. yes. yes. yes," he typed recently on his talking computer. We had been conversing about the past—in particular, my decision not to have kids and my own experience of depression. And there he was the voice of triumphant spring, in all of its freshness, reminding me to be hopeful. Reminding me in that language, that poetry, I have come to think of as "Autie-type."

2. "AUTIE-TYPE"

"Autie" is a term that some people with autism use to refer to themselves; "Autie-type," a highly poetic language that many non-verbal Auties produce spontaneously on their computers, whether in conversation or in actual poems. In her recent book, *Between Their World and Ours: Breakthroughs with Autistic Children,* Karen Zelan asks, "Why do Autists use language the way they do? Many of their utterances seem essentially poetic." No one can account for it. Perhaps I should say that no one has yet wanted to account for it, as many in the scientific community continue to cling to outdated notions of "mindblindness," which imagine that people with autism have no awareness of self or others. Without such awareness, of course, poetry is impossible. Just today a ridiculous study announced that people with autism aren't vulnerable to contagious yawning and that the ability to "catch" a yawn may be linked to empathy—this despite the fact that at least a third of the Autie group *did* evince such a vulnerability. This despite so many other problems with how the study was conducted.

Some additional examples of "Autie-type" in ordinary conversation? My son once said to his therapist, after my wife and I had rented a hospital bed and put it in our living room (I was having my hip replaced), "Mom and Dad invited injury into the home." He was extremely agitated and trying somehow to explain both his autistic aversion to an unfamiliar object and his anxiety about my well-being. He was also tapping into his past. Words such as "invite," "injury," and "home" seem particularly loaded coming from an abused foster kid. Here again we see the evocative condensation that is a hallmark of lyric poetry.

But lest you think the boy completely humorless, consider this retort to a minor squabble I had with my wife in the car. As usual, we were arguing over directions. "Estimated long time very married," he announced on his talking computer. I still don't know what to make of the odd word "estimated," except to say that it's one of my son's favorites. Perhaps borrowed from the discipline of mathematics, it implies a kind of rough but informed measurement. By putting "very" in front of "married"—in one sense, a grammatical error; in another, a poetic liberty—he gives the latter word all of the meaning that actual experience ends up giving it. Yes, my wife and I are *very* married, especially in the car.

Another non-speaking Autie, in response to the question, "Describe one or two things that people can do or have done that help you," typed to his panel audience, "They have utter respect for diversity, and they understand that diversity leads a tattered life when not wedded to tolerance." When asked about the many fashionable bio-remedies for autism, he remarked, "Spurious relations deceive dogmatic zealots." With their witty consonance, assonance, and alliteration, both responses delight in the oral pleasures of poetry, and they hardly seem, I need not point out, typically conversational. The metaphors of a "tattered life" and "dogmatic zealot" become that much more dynamic in relation to the drama of patterned sound.

Here are some other examples. A painter in Vermont, institutionalized for years, proclaimed, "It's practically getting possible to create satisfying life, interesting and meaningful nowadays because really institutions' popularity slides toward storage underground at a pace faster than police chasing stepping for escape prisoners." About the politics of institutionalization and the role of art in healing the wounds of prejudice and discrimination, he said, "Nothing apartheids you like the insensitive world of institutional existence. Tapping well of silence with painting permitted songs of hurt to be meted with creativity.... Without art, wafting smells of earth's pleasures would kite away to land of inanimate objects, so it's past point of personal hobby." Finally, about our habit of foreclosing futures for people with disabilities, he reminded us, "Fastening labels on people is like leasing cars with destinations determined beforehand."

The choice of metaphoric vehicles is striking; notice how disparate the things compared are. One might be tempted to accuse this Autie of engaging in mixed metaphors, so quickly do the analogies, both implicit and explicit, come. But the point seems to be a world reconnected, a world *included,* on the level of sensory perception. This remediation mirrors the political one: the demise of any and all apartheids. I can't think of a more unexpected analogy than that which links assessment labels, life trajectories, and rental cars. This is precisely what good poetry does: it allows us to view an object or phenomenon afresh.

I need to underscore the quotidian nature of such utterances; they don't appear to be the result of trying, in any conventional manner, to be poetic. Now, I'd be foolish to tell you that I, a mere humanist, can account for "Autie-type." But I want to gesture in that direction and, in doing so, explore the deep analogical impulse that undergirds it. I also want to call

attention to the explicit political content of so many of the utterances. Should it come as a surprise that Auties, like slaves from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, sing their sorrow songs over and over? The oppressed and excluded will always dream of respect. (Just today, my son wrote to one of his former principals, "Desiring to federally, freely insist that other very important principals invite inclusion into their schools.")

"I embody my metaphors," the disabled writer Nancy Mairs asserts in *Waist High in the World,* her memoir of multiple sclerosis. Confined to a wheelchair and the perspective it provides, she resents the casual appropriation of physical disability in an idiom such as, "He's so lame." Why? Because that appropriation doesn't bring with it awareness of *literal* oppression: all of the ways that able-bodied society prevents fulfilling lives for people with disabilities. Auties, I would submit, embody their metaphors as well. Actually, they embrain them. In one respect, they can't help but be metaphorical; an alternative physiology seems to demand it. In another, they evince such keen egalitarian insight.

Recourse to scientific work on autism, savantism, hemispheric lateralization, and creativity reveals a difference to be celebrated, not pathologized. This difference not only rebuts the dominant "theory of mind" hypothesis about autism, but also turns it on its head, suggesting that *we* are the ones who have difficulty understanding, and empathizing with, the "other." Moreover, it indicates an inherent poetic disadvantage in being neurotypical: after the age of seven or eight, when children's brains lateralize to the left, neurotypicals must labor to do the work of poetry. Figurative connections become more difficult to detect, let alone to establish. Auties, on the other hand, seem to behave like Midas: they turn everything into analogical gold.

And this gold isn't strictly aesthetic; it's moral, as I've noted. For what is metaphor but an intentionally blurred distinction? If compassion means literally "to suffer with," then embrained metaphor might constitute the perfect ethical conveyance in a social arena. Picture an ambulance darting to the scene of racial, ethnic, sexual, or class oppression. Picture a very different kind of EMT, one dispensing with his uniform, one truly becoming the person cared for, the person lying on the ground. This group of non-speaking Auties often does exactly this: they over-identify with people in pain. When they read a book or watch a film, the normally discrete boundaries of the self seem to dissolve.

The star of the Academy Award-nominated documentary, *Autism Is A World,* for instance, found it impossible to view *Malcom X;* the violence and

oppression were just too much for her. She had to do her processing in another room, semi-distracted. Recently, my son became so distraught while learning about Harriet Tubman and a little Polish boy whom the Germans murdered that he couldn't continue reading. His breathing was heavy; his eyes had glazed over. In response to his ninth-grade English teacher's question "What are your strengths as a reader?" he replied, "I feel characters' feelings." He then added, "Dread very scary books and wish I took breathing easy mom to class to create more security." What a special kind of engagement this is—at once like a young child's and a perceptive adult's.

The American language poet Lyn Hejinian, in her experimental memoir *My Life,* writes of the "lobes of autobiography." Father, poet, and amateur scientist, I seek to praise the Autie's marvelous brain. And I wish to chide such neurological luminaries as Oliver Sacks, who, while abandoning some of their earlier prejudicial notions, persist with others. The gifts of autism need not be qualified or patronized. Though Sacks now concedes, for example, that his view of the savant was wrong—that he or she is not as distinct from the neurotypical genius (the composer, the painter, the surgeon)—he believes that the savant "fail[s] to develop in the same creative way."

But is this necessarily true? How much instruction has the average savant received? Though not a savant, my son and others like him are only now getting the educations they deserve. Who knows what might become of "Autie-type" as it finds its way into poem after poem? I've already seen significant development in my son's fledgling work, and together we have vowed to perfect our mutual craft. As one of the Auties quoted above would say, "It's past point of personal hobby," or, for that matter, unwitting obsession.

3. "DABS OF DEW"

What follows is a more sustained example of "Autie-type" from my son: an actual essay for his ninth-grade English class. It demonstrates just how fiercely poetic his instincts are. The model he had been given wasn't nearly as lyrical or figurative as what he produced, and you can see him struggling with the expectations of prose—that unambiguous linearity and literality drilled into schoolchildren. There are lines I do not understand and still more lines the reader might not understand because they reflect a private mythology (not to mention, in places, a problem with grammar). Here's what I know: the "beasts" and "creatures" refer to the developing child's pictured antagonists

in *O The Places You'll Go,* a book my son read obsessively when becoming literate at the age of nine. "Great Places" is Dr. Seuss's witty term for the future. "Easy breathing" describes anyone not autistic, anyone not suffering from massive anxiety. The "loud noises" and "wasted, freaky actions" allude to echolalia and flapping, respectively. (Underscoring the significant sensory processing challenges and body awareness difficulties of autism, my son once typed, "I flap to feel my arms.")

The phrase "easy lessons" denotes meaningless special-education classes. When my wife and I adopted him at the age of six, we immediately included our son in a regular school, though he carried the label of profound mental retardation. It had taken us nearly three years to get him out of foster care: "great gates" thus suggests the many obstacles and crushing disappointments he encountered. "Desertion" needs no explanation in an adoption narrative, but "killer trees" does. When he was younger, my son imagined every fall that the trees were losing their children. He refused to rake leaves with me, even to step on the lawn, typing over and over his frantic mantra, "Dead freedom." Years later, the trees seem to constitute an evil force that wants to lure him away from the real world of meaningful relationships. Once his only companion, the trees now taunt him, recalling his autistic tendencies and traumatic past, forbidding him to hope. A final piece of information: we live in Iowa where the wind blows, blows, blows. Next to my son's bedroom stands a large laurel tree, whose long arms brush against his window screens.

Resting in My Bed

When I was little everyone thought I was retarded. The very hurtful easy lessons I attended were time spent away from the real world. Addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division were subarctic activities. Treated as autistic, retarded, and sedated, I saw myself suspended. Ashamed, I seasoned this mind of mine. Wasting time beasts inhabited my very much lost, very sad boy's head. Attempts to freshly respond to humans were terrifying quests through killer trees. Where I sent my real self, reasonable, easy breathing, satisfying humans never could find me.

Each time someone treated me sweetly, the swearing, resentful great beasts fearfully estimated me as bad. "You fear fresh start," they'd taunt. Sadness drew the trees together. Wasted, freaky actions took over my arms. The trees desired to feast upon me. The trees swaying back and forth seemed to call to me. Surrounded by areas of resentful, easy to get lost desertion, I grew numb. Assumed tremendously retarded,

I was seen as hopeless. My illogical gestures seen as responsible action. Years and years, sadly unable to please anyone, the estimated as responsible boy grew numb. The howling wind issued the ultimatum: "You're going to plot to uphold plot, uphold plot to be great."

Estimating me as unfeeling, ferocious humans began to reward themselves. The killer trees promised to fearlessly shelter me from the savage gods who abused me. Years passed. Sad and dead, I looked deserted. Desertion, gyration. Desertion, gyration. The trees golden and red freed me from the resentment. Easy to observe gestures trapped dear self and resentment grew. I joked heartlessly, "My ass is my greatest asset."

The day I met dear mom easy breathing began. She freed my real self. She wore awesome earrings that glimmered in the sun and when she bent down to lightly kiss my forehead, kiss sweetly hoped to greatly shoo the savage beasts. Creatures did stoop down but only for a few seconds. Soon no unjust god rested. They fought to lock great gates, and I breathing hard got sad.

Still the fresh light rested. Wasting time beasts inhabited less of my mind and sensing when the unjust gods stopped fussing, I freed my dear self to respond. Dread began to fill great places and my freshly seasoned mind got far. Old habits rarely saw the light of day. I decided to go test hope, and estimate myself as deserving to be their son. At first hopeful mom pressed. The arms that now greeted me belonged to dear loving mom. She created a safe place. Looking godlike herself, she dearly played with me. As time went on, she invited fresh friends to play with me. Thinking great places safely out of reach, I nervously responded. Suddenly my fearful, biological mom would appear. The trees urged me on, I lost my temper, and in no time autistic, killer gestures ensnared my dear fresh self.

Still my fearless mom never failed me. A seed is very lovingly watered by. hopeful mom each morning as she greets the day. She, like dear, ultimately lobbying for my success dad deeply free mighty, awesome trees' hold on me by feeding the grass. Fresh blades of grass break through the soil and dabs of dew kiss my forehead. She hugs me firmly, freshly so the great trees can't fasten their testing looks on me. Sometimes still the treated with respect boy forgets. Someone breathes hard and they gesture to the trees to test me. For a time Great Places is fearful again. But only for a short time now.

If illogical gestures lovingly desert me now it's because I yearn to love real people now not trees. I yearn to plot to get fresh start. Mom yearns hopefully to free me completely. She heartfully loves me more and more each day. Part loving person, part plant I kid people. Only the kids who look beyond loud noises hear my real self.

The place that opens up my awestruck, just, hopeful heart is restful, pleasant bed. When I look out my window, I am looking out at a king-sized tree. Yes, the trees

are rewarding to look at now. They partly shade the house I live in now. The kind looking tree plots to grow taller. Opening my dear self, I hear my mom call my name. It looks like the sun has moved to the front of the house as I plot my response. Resting hints freely that the green grass grows.

The first thing to be noted is that the piece is very metaphorical. There's a reprise of the Alaska figure in the modifier "subarctic." There's the verb "seasoned." There's the personification of the trees, which seem to "call to him," and the "howling wind," which "issues its ultimatum." The latter symbolizes something like the combined forces of autism and trauma. These forces purport to offer protection from the "savage gods" (itself a metaphor) who beat and raped him, but this protection comes at a cost: withdrawal, even psychic disintegration: what psychologists call the practice of dissociation. If my son is a tree—later in the essay he will refer to himself as "part loving person, part plant"—then the wind can be understood to be "taking over his arms" and insisting on "freaky actions." The rhythmic refrain, "Desertion, gyration. Desertion, gyration," captures the repetition of trauma and the inadequacy of the trees' proclaimed solace. Unable to forget his injury, he engages in the worst sort of self-denigration, punning off the word "asset" and declaring his value as a sexual object: "My ass is my greatest asset."

When he meets his adoptive mom, the possibility of "easy breathing" ensues. A different kind of tree ("The arms that now greeted me belonged to dear loving mom"), she rescues him from his antagonists' "hold," encouraging him to "love real people now not trees." She kisses him and, implicitly, morphs into the very night, which bathes the earth in dew. "Fresh blades of grass break through the soil and dabs of dew kiss my forehead," he declares, morphing as well into the tiny, fragile seedlings that I planted last spring beneath his window. How humongous the trees looked in comparison to those hopeful shoots. "Can the grass survive amidst the dominating trees?" I asked of a lawn care expert. "If you water it religiously," he said. Drawn from actual experience, the analogical network is fabulously intricate and dynamic; it will not resolve itself into a simple proposition. By the end of the essay, my wife has become the sun that "has moved to the front of the house," rousing him from bed. The trees are "rewarding to look at now," as they "partly shade the house" he lives in. A good night's rest, devoid of the dreams that used to plague him, makes green growth possible.

4. "The Tyranny of the Left Hemisphere"

So, how did he do it? How did my son produce such delicate lacework? How do any of the Auties do it, and do it so effortlessly? My neurotypical students, after all, struggle to be figurative in creative writing classes. It's as if they were looking for metaphors in an algebra textbook.

The best guess, admittedly reductive, is an overactive, perhaps even dominant, right cerebral hemisphere. We know that the normally non-dominant right hemisphere is the site of artistic ability in most people. As one primer on cerebral lateralization explains, "Linear reasoning functions of language such as grammar and word production are often lateralized to the left hemisphere of the brain." Here, too, reside logical and linear algorithmic processing, as well as measurement skills. "In contrast, holistic reasoning functions of language such as intonation and emphasis are often lateralized to the right hemisphere of the brain. Functions such as the transduction of visual and musical stimuli and spatial manipulation, facial perception, and artistic ability...seem to be lateralized to the right hemisphere." It should be pointed out that not every neurotypical person's brain is organized in this way—a percentage of lefthanders exhibit the opposite lateralization—and that many human abilities are clearly and complicatedly controlled by *both* hemispheres. That said, one hemisphere (for the vast majority of people, the left) is dominant.

Recently, a researcher worked out the details of the right hemisphere's artistic responsibilities with respect to poetry. In "Poetry as Right Hemispheric Language," Julie Kane analyzes the various elements that constitute poetic discourse—image, simile, metaphor, allusion, personification, synecdoche, metonymy, paradox, oxymoron, understatement, hyperbole, emotion, connotation, symbol, alliteration, assonance, and parataxis—and shows that all of these elements depend on significant right-hemispheric activity. Reviewing split-brain studies, as well as studies of people with damage to either their left or right hemispheres, she concludes that the right hemisphere "controls, or is capable of controlling on its own, a number of very subtle but intriguing linguistic functions which...are virtually synonymous with 'poetry' or 'poetic' speech." Kane goes on to assert that the "degree of right-hemispheric involvement in language is what differentiates 'poetic' or 'literary' from 'referential' or 'technical' speech and texts."

Having established the importance of the right hemisphere for poetry, she asks a very simple question: how do people write it if the left hemisphere is dominant? Ultimately, she believes that they effect a

"temporary reversal" of customary dominance when they compose their poems. She speaks of a "sudden and transient *loss of or decrease in* normal interhemispheric communication, [which] remov[es] inhibitions placed upon the right hemisphere and allow[s] it to function at a greater-than-normal linguistic level."While she focuses on poets with documented mood disorders, particularly mania (because mania itself seems to be "accompanied by reversals of normal laterality"), she contends that most poets "exhibit temporary elevations of mood (hypomania)" when writing. For Kane, this relatively minor manic state is virtually synonymous with creativity, and it brings about a change in the way language is processed. Might Auties, too, effect a "reversal" of customary dominance, or might they begin with a right-hemispheric advantage? There is clearly nothing temporary about their poetic output. Indeed, neurotypical poets appear merely to visit the country (or one like it) in which Auties consistently and urgently dwell.

New work on savantism echoes the inhibitory theory and asks us to imagine cognitive disability as a creative boon. In a *Wired Magazine* article entitled, "The Key to Genius," Steve Silberman writes about the search for an underlying cause of a whole range of disorders, including autism, and the emergence in the 1980s of a theory of left-hemispheric dysfunction. In Silberman's account, such dysfunction produces the necessary inhibition of the dominant hemisphere. And since the arts generally require inhibition, savants might be more like neurotypical artists than previously thought. The *former* might simply enjoy both a creative head start and a sustained intensification of artistic ability. The discovery of unexpected savantism in previously neurotypical individuals has led scientists to reconsider the special status of this type of genius—to the point that Silberman remarks, "We may all carry a savant inside of us waiting to be born."

Silberman points to the work of Bruce Miller, who noticed that some patients with frontotemporal dementia (FTD) actually develop artistic abilities as their language faculties erode. He relates:

> One patient of Miller's, a 78-year-old linguist, began composing classical music soon after the onset of dementia, though he had little musical training; he felt that his mind was being "taken over" by notes and intervals. Another patient, an established landscape artist, turned toward abstraction and painted even more expressively as her verbal skills declined. Brain scans of FTD patients confirm patterns of damage similar to those found in many savants. As the disease progresses, these patients experience curious perceptual alterations, becoming more attentive to textural details, visual patterns, and sounds.

Miller believes that "dementia does not create artistic powers in these patients, it uncovers them." The disorder, he maintains, "switches off inhibitory signals from the left temporal lobes, enabling suppressed talents in the right hemisphere to flourish." This hypothesis has prompted one Australian scientist to champion the cause of "liberating our inner savant from the benevolent tyranny of the left hemisphere." Importantly, Miller's findings accord with well-known case histories in which people who had never written poetry suddenly started writing it after becoming aphasic.

Autism seems to unleash a similar savant-like—one might even say, following the Australian scientist's political metaphor, *democratic*—sensibility. As East-European countries engaged in "velvet revolutions" during the late '80s and early '90s, so some autistic brains have engaged in their own kind of rebellion: a new and successful "Prague Spring." Though autism obviously comes with a host of challenges, its poetic gifts needn't be understood as akin to dementia's or aphasia's considerable trade-offs. We do see in my son's writings, particularly in his syntax, evidence of left-hemispheric dysfunction, but he is perfectly capable of correcting these errors when prodded. After many drafts, he can pass as neurotypical in his prose. (The personal essay at the beginning he refused to correct, signing, "All done. All done.") Moreover, he's very good at math and other traditionally left-hemispheric activities. More useful would be to conceive of a different kind of power-sharing arrangement with the left hemisphere, one that derives, as I've hinted, from right-hemispheric dominance. Again, if it can be demonstrated that the poetry of Auties "develops," there would be no reason at all to dismiss it as substandard art, and a concept of neurodiversity, even reversed *neurosuperiority,* might take hold. (When shown the new work on savantism, my son delighted in the spectacle of the creatively retarded—that is neurotypicals—struggling to do what he does naturally.)

But what do we know about cerebral lateralization in autism? A number of key studies have established *right* hemispheric dominance in autistic children with significant language impairment. A 1977 study explored the notion that "autistic children process information predominantly by strategies of the right hemisphere from birth and, unless unusual events occur, continue to be right hemisphere processors throughout their life." Another study from 1986 concluded, "The majority of autistic subjects showed reversed (right hemisphere dominant), but not necessarily reduced, patterns of hemispheric asymmetry." One of the most interesting things about this study was its observation that children with more advanced language skills were "more likely to exhibit a normal direction of hemispheric asymmetry."

The authors speculated that the "possibility exists that a shift from right to left hemisphere processing of speech occurs as the autistic child acquires more spoken language." Finally, a third study from 2005 confirmed the claim of right-hemispheric dominance and "atypical functional specialization for language."

Now, imagine the "unusual events" of the 1977 study to be literacy instruction and the acquisition of a communication system—a simple letter board, say, or computer. How might these interventions affect cerebral lateralization? Might the acquisition of additional *written* language also lead to the kind of greater left-hemispheric dominance that the 1986 study mentions? Thanks to the work of Morton Gernsbacher, we know that there is no necessary link between spoken and written language facility in children with autism. My son can't speak, but he can certainly understand what's being said to him, and he can write well enough to be earning all "A's" in a regular language arts curriculum. Yet what happened when he became literate? Do Auties, like neurotypical children, necessarily lose their right-hemispheric dominance, or do they in part retain it and, in doing so, establish a new kind of perceptual and communicative government? The questions are numerous. Whatever the case, if we assume that right-hemispheric activity remains high in Auties who have been taught to read and to type, then it isn't hard to see how they might converse poetically and perhaps even have a leg up in writing poems.

5. "DEAR LITTLE POLISH BOY"

Having gone out on a limb (the one brushing up against my son's window screen?), I thought I'd crawl out a bit further. Not only do I think Auties possess a poetic proclivity, but I think they possess an empathetic proclivity as well. Elsewhere I've referred to my son as an emotional seismograph, detecting even the slightest tremor of feeling, either good or bad, and reacting to it. Kane tells us that the "right hemisphere is essential for the comprehension of emotion in spoken language, as expressed by vocal tone, pitch accent, and modulation." The same is apparently true for written language. A 1981 study demonstrated that right-hemisphere-damaged patients exhibited a "dampened appreciation of the kind of emotion" that characters in stories experience. It just might be that the legacy of right-hemispheric dominance in Auties is a heightened sensitivity to emotion. My son has said repeatedly that emotions, both his and other people's,

"assault him." Along with a penchant for metaphor (about which I will speak in a moment), this burdensome talent may drive the extraordinary, sometimes crippling, empathy I have witnessed in non-speaking Auties. What is irrefutable, because well documented, is the essential contribution of the right hemisphere to human empathy.

After his fraught encounter with their respective stories, my son paid homage to Harriet Tubman and the little Polish boy whom the Germans murdered. Writing about these people proved almost as difficult as reading about them. The title of the second piece, "There's No Breathing in Purgatory," suggests a kind of exhaustion with life and its respiratory requirements, and it applies as much to the poem's subject as it does to its author, whose own pulse rate and breathing were extremely aggravated during the period of composition. The pieces display many of the poetic elements already discussed, but they also display a keen interest in historical oppression. So that you understand the first line of, "Estimating Harriet Tubman Respectfully," let me say that "Breaking the Barriers" is the official motto of a disability rights group whose web site features a speech by my son.

Estimating Harriet Tubman Respectfully

If we're breaking the barriers, great freedom fearfully awaits. Harriet realized, until freedom treated her people with respect, her intestines seemed unsettled, her heart beat resentfully, and her fear never disappeared. The challenges she faced each day were far greater than anything you and your people have ever endured; breathing resentful air, great very hard breaths, undermines heartfelt feelings and deeply effects the western world. Pedestals rest on hurt, great, estimated dressed not great human beings deserted by frees. I heartily entreat you to help my unfree, treated responsibly, great, hip, jumping self to walk the trail. You kind, responded easy breathing frees don't understand how terrifying seemingly fresh freedom is.

There's No Breathing in Purgatory

Why do grownups act like human beings are great and then treat each other like junk?
You're only three, dear little Polish boy.
Was there something I greatly forgot to tell you?
Were you fearful that you would die?
You're hard to just not turn away from, you dear little Polish boy.

Years of fearful dread really flood back when I see you,
Hungry, scared, and so hopelessly gutsy.
Treating you so unjustly gets millions of hurt plotting not to look you in the face,
Hearing you sadly silenced, dear little Polish boy.
Uneasy, hustling to get away, you have breathed your dear, last breath.
If getting killed is really fearful,
Dreadful life was even worse, dear little Polish boy.
Estimate yourself as free at last, free from the creatures and the dread.

Both pieces make use of the now-familiar "easy-breathing," "creatures," and "estimation" tropes. In the course of writing this essay, I've come to think that my son has borrowed the language of educational assessment and applied it to these historical figures. In the chapter he wrote for my recent book, he remarked of his former special-ed instructors, "No one was assessing me as sweet." It's as if the utterly incorrect estimation of his intelligence (and thus his worthiness as a human being) has become the primary lens through which he views other figures of oppression. Official evaluation and self-evaluation battle it out, with the marginalized no match for the powerful who cloak their hatred, as in the case of both blacks and Jews, in the mantle of science.

What strikes me is how much my son identifies with his protagonists. In a sense, he really does become them, as he latches on to certain details: the clothing of slaves (to this day my son insists on wearing collared shirts so as to look "respected"), the age of the Polish boy (his age when he had to endure the horrors of foster care). He extrapolates from his own experience of anxiety to evoke Tubman's "unsettled intestines," "very hard breaths," and "racing heart." With the Polish boy, he remembers his own abiding hunger as a child in poverty. Both pieces dramatize the "hopelessly gutsy" struggle for freedom: Tubman's underground railroad, the Polish boy's attempt to escape the Nazis. Of course, both are about—or perhaps I should say, both simultaneously enact—the Autie's struggle for freedom. And yet, having been alone in the world and at the mercy of its barbarism, my son almost can't imagine attaining true independence, preferring, it would seem, the fact of death over the future's agonizing uncertainty.

This deeply analogical operation reminds me of a point that Kane makes about metaphor. Quoting Richard Sinatra and Josephine Stahl-Gemake, she traces the right hemisphere's talent for figurative language to its "ability to process visual analogies on the basis of matching a common trait." Sinatra and

Stahl-Gemake believe that the "very key to the understanding of figurative language such as occurs in similes, metaphors, and oxymorons rests on seeing analogic, imagistic connectedness." I can't help but think of the Auties I cited at the beginning of this essay whose practice of "imagistic connectedness" seems unmatched. They literally see connectedness everywhere. And I can't help but think of my son, who devotes his native gift to the mission of historical empathy: finding and *feeling* a pattern of injustice.

6. "OTHER WAYS OF BEING, OTHER WAYS OF WRITING"

Kane's article offers one final insight. Linking poets with young children (who haven't yet lateralized to the left) and pre-literate peoples, she asserts, "If left-hemispheric dominance for language is not the 'natural' condition of human beings aged eight and older, but rather, a side effect of print literacy, then it stands to reason that *the qualitative changes in consciousness* between oral and print cultures—from community identity, 'magical thinking,' pervasive animist spirituality, and poetry to individualism, science, and rationalism, faith-based religion or agnosticism/atheism, and prose—may be the outward signs of a fundamental shift from right- to left-hemispheric structuring of conscious thought processes and memories." The point is fascinating, and it encourages us to contemplate the very different subjectivity of those for whom print literacy is foreign or in whom right-hemispheric dominance seems to be a natural and perhaps semi-permanent state.

Lacking few of the cognitive skills traditionally associated with the left hemisphere, my son and others like him bring to society an exquisite way of being. Rational hegemony and its concomitant individualism find themselves countered by an overactive, maybe even overdeveloped, sense of empathy and collective identity. Print literacy exists alongside "animist spirituality"; syntax walks hand in hand with image and metaphor; science meets "magical thinking." This might be true of neurotypical poets but not to the same degree or in the same way. Auties' hemispheric differences allow us to reconsider not only who we are as an "advanced" society but also what we mean by *dis*ability.

Yes, a preference for artistic creation and ethical sensitivity reveals a romantic bias, but that bias usefully pushes back against the automatic privileging of ordinary dominance and the world it has bequeathed—both aesthetically and politically. A recent *New York Times Magazine* piece about

Williams syndrome wonders if this state of being might be superior to our own, especially when we consider the neurotypical predilection for ruthless competition and aggression. (Williams syndrome, for those unfamiliar with it, is a genetic disorder comprised of a group of abnormalities on chromosome 7. In addition to elfin facial features, coordination difficulties, and purported mental retardation, it also seems to produce remarkable social affability, a broad and idiosyncratic vocabulary, and astonishing musical talent—including perfect pitch. Significantly, it took the father of a child with Williams syndrome, Howard Lenhoff, to convince the experts of these musical skills.) Why not entertain the notion?

If people with cognitive differences set out to change the world—to engage in what my son calls "political freedom fighting"—or aspire to be artists, we shouldn't stand (or write) in the way. In her study, "Interaction between Language and Cognition: Evidence from Williams Syndrome," Ursula Bellugi cites the case of a girl with Williams syndrome who wants to be a writer, but she dismisses out of hand this possibility, insisting that Williams patients don't possess the requisite intelligence for such a lofty calling. Making use of Bellugi's work, the famed psycholinguist Stephen Pinker dwells on Williams patients' "*recherché* and slightly off-target word choices, such as *toucan* for a parrot, *evacuate the glass* for emptying it, and *concierge* for an usher," and he concludes that the "fine points that govern word choice in the rest of us are not quite in place."

With Bellugi and Pinker, there's very little room for culture in modifying the Williams phenomenon and no room at all for appreciating difference. Why must what I encourage in students—a more precise and sophisticated, even strange, vocabulary—be conceived of pejoratively? What governs word choice in poets? I would love to have this young woman in my creative writing classes at Grinnell; God knows how frequently I exhort my students to use more captivating diction. *When the fire alarm went off, his dinner companion evacuated her glass.* My son makes precisely this conflationary move at the end of his personal essay when speaking of a "king-sized tree." The language of beds migrates to the arena of trees, producing a new relationship, indeed a new and comforting space. The solution to a dilemma (either trees or people), this "tree bed" allows him to feel okay about autism. It allows him to regard the natural world with his "awestruck heart," unconcerned about the sinister forces of dissociation.

I will conclude with a recent poem by my son. I had given him an assignment based on a Jane Kenyon piece. He was perseverating on his troubled past, and I thought I'd show him someone who wrote quite well

about depression. He had to follow the free-verse stanza pattern—three stanzas with five lines each—and the poem's syntax perfectly; where it deployed a noun or a modifier or a dependent clause, so should he. I asked him to displace some of his sadness, the poem's theme, onto a landscape. I wanted him to abandon private, idiosyncratic references, to keep in mind a reader who did not know him. Here's what he came up with. The clever, happy, William Carlos Williams-like ending is all his.

Daring to be Brave

As late as yesterday the leaves hung
on the trees—brown, motionless, dead.
Then, they fell all at once,
bringing winter with them. And, afterward,
everything seemed restful and quiet.

All afternoon I read in bed,
the covers, white and fluffy
like a field of snow.
They have a texture of a woolen scarf,
worn by a sad hero.

How I hated to get up,
but I needed to make dinner:
a sausage sandwich on a French baguette.
A great hurt says farewell
as I open the refrigerator.

Not bad for a developing fourteen-year-old.