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Definition of Terms

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DEFINITION OF TERMS

Sometimes I call myself *cripple*, a word derived from the Old English *creopan*, meaning, "to go bent down." So, etymologically, cripples are creepy. Our bodies house the worst sort of luck, and I would bet that most people are afraid to see themselves in the bent form's mirror. As if bad bodyluck were contagious, and traveled via the eye's beam—a belief that seems somehow intuitively logical. Even though my animal fortune has packed its bags and headed south, I'm not immune to a hitch in my swallow whenever I cross the paths with the likes of me.

As a member of the population to which the word applies, I am given some latitude in my use of *cripple* as an aggressive form of self-description. In doing so I may intend to suggest that I have become hardened to its connotations, or that I am a realist about my body's state, or that I am using the word to announce my affinity with a subculture that aspires to outlaw status. Each of these meanings enshrines some sort of little fib. As in the obvious fact that my outlaw status is belied by my helplessness, which causes any swaggering to possess a tinge of pathos.

Because *cripple* is one of those somewhat archaic words that describes a population conventionally seen as oppressed, it now comes off as a slur when spoken in the company of upright citizens. We all know such words, slurs that are mainly racial and which take on a showboat quality when they come from the mouths of their intended targets. Even the word *nigger*, which has been called "the nuclear bomb of racial epithets," had some air added to the pronunciation of its final syllable and was turned into a badge of honor by black comics and rappers of the late-twentieth century. Now when it crops up in the news, in some recapitulation of its deliverance, its gets coded as *the N-word*, as a way of clarifying intention, of saying *I am not a racist* even though the expression *the N-word* is cloying, pathetic.

Perhaps it is the weak who are most exhilarated by damning themselves. When I was a cowering child I fell in love with the words *wop*, *dago*, and *guinea*, because Italians were the gladiators of my town, where we were not an insignificant minority—

the vowels in our last names clanked like armor. I was not tough but thought some metal might flake off the words and land on me. And so I rehearsed them with abandon.

Dago from the Spanish for James, *Diego*—somehow the nationalities got swapped around. The derivation of *wop* is more murky; it could mean *dandy*, or could mean *sour wine*. *Guinea* from *Guinea Negro*, a linkage between Africans and people from southern Italy, forged by the dark skin that I don't have. This was the name we loved best, the one that alluded to the coveted brown tint—the darker the skin, the more status attached. *Guinea!* we yelled as we pushed each other off the floating dock and into the toxic river. In which we Italians were not afraid to swim, though now I sometimes wonder what those poisoned waters did to me.

To me it seems illogical that a word should be permitted to some people and not to others. The problem is intention, I suppose, the assumption being that a member of a community can use an old (corroded by time, and now become appalling) label in a manner that expresses brotherhood, while at the same time armoring the community against those who would besiege it. The intentions of outsiders, on the other hand, can't be so easily trusted. This assumes that the distinction between insider and outsider is easy to make: we need to know skin tone or the number of vowels in a name. The urban accent or the wheelchair. To get permission to say *cripple* I have to let people see me.

It also has an antique feel, like a butter churn or apple press, or like some remnant of the vocabulary of grandparents from the Old World who never really got the hang of English. To make the label more aggressive, and maybe chummier, the brotherhood of those foiled by bad bodyluck sometimes shortens it to *crip*, as in: *the crip community*. Never having been much of a club-joiner, however, I find myself too aloof for the bonhomie of *crip*.

My friend whose family calls her *gimp* says that this name did sting at first, though she assumes they use it to assure her she's not being pitied. When she asked what I am called, I realized that my family doesn't call me anything. They do not refer to *my condition* as a matter of their not wishing to appear ill bred. Earlier in my disease they were probably as stunned and stymied as I was—and in those days it seemed possible to evade the body if we simply did not speak of it. This was a proven tactic, which had served us well in regards to sex.

Now, when backed into a corner, my family calls me *disabled*, the static electricity clumping into quotation marks around the word. *Disabled* isn't cloying exactly, though it does strike me as overly sanitized in its depiction of a state that is so oftentimes a mess. I have been appointed to the pedestrian committee as a representative of the *disabled community* in the small city where I live, despite my protest that bad bodyluck is a condition so variable that no one person, certainly no one as self-absorbed as me, could have a command of the various blows it deals.

My dislike for *disabled* comes from its being cobbled together from negation: not able, like *in-valid*. I like to think I could do anything with the right technology, which only the economies of scale have worked against—it seems by now there ought to be some kind of robotic superstructure to stand me up and walk me. Or a lightweight jetpack (because as early as the mid-1960s, Bell Aerosystems had invented barrels and chairs that flew, all this technology prior to the electronic age that shrunk the phone booth into something smaller than a cigarette pack). One can only assume that the fear of litigation halted the development of jetpacks. That the fear of zombies halted the development of electric bones that would let the *cripples* march.

There it is again, the word I could not resist. *In your face* we say of people who like to invade social boundaries. All my life I have had trouble with being able to correctly gauge the boundary's circumference. A mild form of dyslexia. It seemed as though my choice was either making an unwelcome assault on propriety, or saying nothing; I could never come up with the witty harmless quip. And my inarticulateness has waltzed me through a life of blunders. *Describe me*, I often ask my friends. Skipping over all the bag lady paraphernalia I've acquired of late, they say: *You'll say anything that pops into your head.*

Partly this is due, I think, to my being such a blank slate, the suburban girl with no history and no hobbies, no striking characteristics at all except for an oddly shaped nose and a tendency to laugh at odd moments. A good student but not exceptional. Pretty, but not too. Not bad enough to be interesting in a James Dean sort of way, just a likeable whiner, a slacker before the coinage of the word. Thoughtful but slow-witted. On the high school track team, I often stopped to walk.

And now at last I do have a unique identity, though it is not at all what I envisioned—still better than nothing, I sometimes think. Now I am: *bag lady on a cart jury-rigged with lights and*

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crutches. Know me slightly, and I am disarmed sufficiently to qualify as a *kook*. Know me well, and I become merely an *eccentric*.

The name I find most accurate to my current state is a word our society has circled half a rotation past: *handicapped*. Derived from the eighteenth-century manner of wagering by placing money in a cap. Perhaps America abandoned the word because of the folksiness of its constituents, the words *handy* and *cap*, which seem too slight for the body's grueling sage. But my affection for the word comes from one of my primal reading experiences, a story by Kurt Vonnegut called "Harrison Bergeron" that was first published in 1961, when I was three. I must have read it in junior high and now, looking at it for the first time in over thirty years, I see that though its version of Big-Brother futurism is hammered out with a heavy mallet, the central image still appeals to me.

In the story, a couple is watching a ballet on TV, the dancers weighted with "sash-weights and bags of birdshot, and their faces were masked, so that no one, seeing a free and graceful gesture or a pretty face, would feel like something the cat drug in." Those who are smart (like the husband watching) must wear earphones through which the government broadcasts raucous noises to disturb their thoughts. This image—of the body weighted with a canvas sack full of pellets—turns out to be a not-bad approximation of what my disease actually *feels* like. It spooks me to think about why in junior high school I would have so deliberately filed the story in my brain's otherwise jumbled cabinet.

There is also a genteel quaintness associated with *handicapped*, versus the technological *disabled*. *Crippled*, on the other hand, comes out of the gnomie European setting of fairy tales, which is the basis of its appeal. Both the crippled troll and the hag have power, though we know the plot will end up righting the topsy-turvyness created by the story's mandatory magic spell. The troll will get his come-uppance or the hag will be transformed into a beautiful queen.

The small city where I live shares some qualities with the archetypal setting of fairy tales, in that its streets are clogged with young people at night, the primary colors of their hair massaged into phantasmagoric shapes. Sometimes I'll be rolling along the streets and a shout will ring from the dampness and the dark—*Cripple!* This will unhinge me not because the word is

offensive but because I realize how visible I am, how I have lost, forever and utterly, the ability to blend in. Like the protagonist of the fairy tale, I have finally gotten what was once my fervent wish.