

MOSAICS: A COLLECTION OF INDEPENDENT WOMEN. VOLUME 2.

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Edited by Jessica West
www.west1jessedits.com

Print Formatting by Rebecca Poole
www.dreams2media.com

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for permissions or information, contact: indiewomenantho@gmail.com

BORDER TALK

by Emily K. Michael

Jill's coffee glass clinks against the dark wood of the table. The Thai restaurant is dim and quiet. I can hear the crushed ice swirling as she takes a long drag on the straw. My own iced coffee sits untouched. "He's really great," I say. "Loves history, loves to read. Super smart. We have the best conversations."

Jill leans forward, "How did you meet him?"

I sip my coffee. "We met through an online group for blind academics."

"And...is he totally blind? Or does he have some vision?"

"Totally blind. He wears prosthetic eyes—no chance of vision there." I grin. I expect her to laugh.

But I don't hear a smile in her voice. Instead she asks, "That doesn't bother you?"

I check the time on my braille watch—1:15. Our other friends are late. I slide my fingers over the small domed watch crystal, snapping it back in place. What can I say?

"No, it doesn't bother me."

I reach down and scratch my guide dog behind the ears. He's a black Lab who blends with the dark hues of the restaurant. Most servers don't see him, so I keep him tucked safely under the table.

Jill seems relieved. "Well, that's good." She picks up her menu, an elegant one-page creation mounted on a leather board. "What do you think you'll order?"

I examine my own menu though I'm familiar with its options. Holding the page a few inches from my nose, I'm grateful the gesture gives me time to think. The font is small but clear enough.

Blindness.

Most people understand it as a complete absence of vision, marked by a white cane and dark glasses. A little braille and a cute dog. Those are the accessories.

So here I am, sitting in Jill's line of sight—she can't miss me. I have a braille watch on my wrist, a braille Starbucks card in my purse. My cute dog is lying across my feet. I've removed my dark glasses only because this restaurant uses low lights. In fact, I frequent this place for three reasons: the food, the lighting, and the staff's good manners toward my guide dog.

But in Jill's opinion, I'm not blind—at least not blind enough to bother her.

She and I have been friends for over a year, and our familiarity has changed my identity. She understands how I travel, how I work, how I pay for meals. She's asked all the "first timer" questions: *Can you see what I look like? Do you see in your dreams? Would you want to be cured?* If there are any mysteries left, she hasn't voiced them. She's realized that my low vision doesn't mark some un-crossable boundary. And because there's no disability snag, blindness itself disappears.

Jill isn't the only person to perform this kind of revision. Though my students leave excellent feedback on end-of-term evaluations, I find at least one version of this comment every semester: "Ms. Michael has a guide dog, but she's not blind." Sometimes, these comments arise in the midst of class discussion.

As I unpack my laptop, a curious student asks, "Ms. Michael, how do you like using a Mac?"

"I love it! It has all the assistive technology built in. Apple is kind to blind people like me."

Shock and indignation: "Oh, Ms. Michael, don't say that—you're not really blind!"

I shake my head. Because the class is Introductory Composition and not Disability Studies, I don't want to start the disability and language discussion. I simply say, "Blindness is a term I choose."

What may seem counterintuitive is the fact that blind people can

also enact this kind of erasure. Even my friend—the history-lover whose blindness does not bother me—calls my use of “blind” inappropriate. “Look, you have some vision,” he says. “You’re not blind. Stop using my term.”

But I insist that blindness is a spectrum. I choose to be “blind” because that word steps neatly around the vision questions. “Legally blind” is a pretty useless term: only eye doctors know how to translate the criteria for legal blindness into the details of lived experience. And “visually impaired”—a term I used until the age of fifteen—is a tidy way of saying, “My vision sucks, but not enough to need a white cane or guide dog.”

At fifteen, I started using a white cane—not because my vision deteriorated but because my environmental challenges intensified. I moved from the private school where I’d spent nine happy years to a crowded high school campus. My mobility instructor said, “You’ll need your cane.” After a few days of reluctant walking and tapping around campus, I agreed.

As I tell my students, language has consequences in the world. I moved from “visually impaired” to “blind” because I picked up the white cane. Blindness gave me permission to move and think and work in nonvisual ways.

However, the white cane became the line that others feared to cross. As long as I was “visually impaired,” I was closer to sighted than blind. Observers could say, “Sometimes she needs large print or help getting around, but she’s just like us, really.” But with the cane and the dark glasses—and years later, the guide dog—I became *really blind*. The kind of blindness that makes people stammer and speak to the person beside me, instead of addressing me directly.

“Would she like a menu?”

“How does she want to pay?”

“What color nail polish did she pick?”

The most absurd version of this treatment came when I went on a blind date—with a real blind guy. Charlie was tall and bearded with gorgeous, prosthetic blue eyes (I’m a little jealous because he can have

any color he wants). We sat down to dinner at a family-owned Greek restaurant, our white canes tucked away. Unlike the Thai place, this restaurant had pretty bright lights, so I left my sunglasses on. Charlie had no need for sunglasses.

When the server approached the table, he assumed that I was the blind one and Charlie was the sighted one—and, therefore, the natural authority. Even though I had been to the restaurant several times and Charlie had never been before, the server asked Charlie what we wanted to eat, whether I would like more water, how we would handle the check. And when Charlie asked for a tour of his plate—“Can you describe how the food is arranged?”—the server, utterly baffled, said, “Well you’ve got some lamb there...with spinach and orzo.”

As he hurried away, I did my best to explain the blurs on Charlie’s plate—more from memory than vision: “They usually put the lamb in the middle and the spinach off to one side. Near the top of the plate is where they hopefully placed the orzo.”

I’ve come to understand my blindness as a negotiation between what others think and what I assert. As much as I’d like to be the sole author of my identity, moving in a social world means I must engage with what society thinks of disabled people. Most of the time, those thoughts are dismissive and pitying—if they’re thought at all. They’re the kind of thoughts that lead someone to ask a blind friend, “His blindness doesn’t bother you?”

I believe that all this awkwardness comes from a thirst for assimilation: disability makes the nondisabled so uncomfortable that they *must* erase it. We pity what we cannot cure. But that pity is another border, drawn in heavy ink, to separate people from a condition that scares them. Countless popular essays list blindness as one of the most prevalent fears. So people need to put some distance between their non-blind selves and my nonchalantly blind self. They do this by thinking they have all the answers.

Some weeks ago, I attended a symphony concert with a friend from work. After the concert, he went to the restroom and I waited in the lobby, well out of the way so that seasonal patrons wouldn’t step on

my guide dog. But a disabled woman standing by herself is practically an invitation to ask intrusive questions. My disability has never been invisible, so I have not mastered the art of looking nondescript.

Sure enough, an older woman approached me and began a conversation. After some prodding, she discovered that I had attended the same high school as her son, and that our families shared some mutual friends. When all this was established, she asked, "So how long have you had the dog?"

"For about a year," I said. "We graduated from training last summer."

She stepped closer, lowering her voice. "Is your vision much worse?"

I waited until I thought my voice would be steady. "No, it's the same."

She seemed confused, incredulous. "Well, before, you were using a cane, you know, just to tell people about your low vision."

"No." I found my voice quickly this time. "I was using a cane to help me travel safely. I am now using a guide dog for the same reason—to help me travel safely."

"Well, good for you!" She departed, satisfied with herself for connecting with me and updating her information.

I was infuriated by our positions in this dialogue. Not only had this woman asked me several personal questions in a public place, but she had been so self-assured in her assumptions about my disability—surprised to hear that her judgement of my cane use was incorrect. She saw the progression from white cane to guide dog as a sign that my vision, and therefore my quality of life, had decreased. But I made this change for distinctly un-medical reasons. My guide dog has enhanced the quality of my life—allowing me to travel with more confidence and independence. He is not a sign of my imminent deterioration.

To live with a disability, I must reconcile myself to a land of symbols—each technology or accessory marks my movement away from the human tribe and toward some dark landscape of half-human, half-prosthetic creatures. The borderlands are unknowable, so our culture bestows epic significance on the simplest of tools: a walking stick, a wheelchair, a pair of dark glasses.

I wonder what would happen if we removed the boundaries entirely, if we could understand that disability does not banish a person from meaningful experience. My friends and students already enact this removal when they forget about my blindness: their forgetting is easy because they see more similarity than difference. But it's a sloppy forgetting that also erases the identity I'm proud of, the self I have learned to accept, and the connections I make with other blind people. Much about our society still excludes disabled people—from work, school, media, romance—and erasing my blindness also erases the work I can do to promote inclusion.

I don't view integration as a project of sanding down all our differences until our needs are the same. Disability isn't a one-way system of non-human symbols and human interpreters: it's a constellation of experience. With my labels, I choose a liminal space, crowded with others asserting their definitions. I cherish the noise of activism, the back-and-forth that moves the border.

ABOUT EMILY K. MICHAEL



Emily is a blind poet, musician, and college writing instructor, living in Jacksonville, FL. Her poetry, interviews, and essays have appeared in *Wordgathering*; *Artemis Journal*; *Compose Journal*; *Breath & Shadow*; *Bridge Eight*; *Disability Rhetoric*; *Narrative Inquiry in Bioethics*; and *I Am Subject Stories: Women Awakening*. Another of her essays will be included in the collection *Barriers and Belonging*:

Autoethnographies of Disability, forthcoming from Temple University Press.

Emily also writes for Classical Minnesota Public Radio—offering her observations on classical music, local performances, and singing technique. On campus, she designs and delivers grammar workshops for multilingual learners with a special focus on assisting graduate students. In 2015, Emily made her first appearance at two Jacksonville writing festivals—reading her poetry and offering a workshop on grammar and poetics.

Emily maintains a blog called On the Blink <http://areyouseeingthis.wordpress.com/> where she writes articles about music, disability, and teaching. She is especially interested in exploring nature writing from a multisensory perspective—challenging herself to develop a rich vocabulary for nonvisual aspects of ecology. Emily seeks to open her writing to more-than-human voices.