



George Estreich

Feeling Seen: *Blind Man's Bluff*, Memoir, and the Sighted Reader

“Why don’t you write about losing your eyesight?” Jenny had asked me in graduate school after the weekly workshop.

I must have winced at her suggestion.

“You don’t think it’s interesting?”

I shook my head and changed the subject. A burnout of my optic nerves was a worse plot than the aimless novel I would abandon before graduation. More than this, the thought of readers, people I had never even met, knowing I was *blind, disabled*, felt like the opposite of why I chose to be a writer (198).

—James Tate Hill, *Blind Man's Bluff: A Memoir*

Writing about *Blind Man's Bluff*, I stumbled through the dark of my own assumptions. Describing the book as *insightful* or *vivid* or *enlightening*, I collided with the very problem the book—should I say *illuminates?* *Reveals?* *Depicts?* It occurred to me only later that this uncertainty may have been the point, that Hill means to unsettle, even as he entertains. To both welcome and challenge the sighted reader.

Because the book *is* entertaining—moving, funny, and well-written—the challenge is easy to miss. *Blind Man's Bluff* does not appear to disturb the conventions of memoir. It is not fragmentary or obviously theoretical. It tells Hill’s story, mostly in first person, mostly in chronological order, beginning with his loss of sight as a teenager. From high school onward, he adapts and denies, evolving elaborate stratagems to conceal his lack of sight. He becomes a writer. He has a series of relationships. These collapse, as does his first marriage; blindness, or rather his denial of blindness, is implicated throughout. In time, though, he begins to question his deceptions. He finds someone who accepts him as he is. The novelist who recoils at the idea of writing about his blindness becomes the author of *Blind Man's Bluff*. He owns and claims his disability. A tidy arc.

You can read *Blind Man's Bluff* this way, and you wouldn't be wrong. But what to make, then, of the epigraph (from Michael Chabon's *Wonder Boys*): "Writers, unlike most people, tell their best lies when they are alone"? When I reread that epigraph, the book shifted beneath my feet, its ground less solid, uncertain. What does it mean to frame a memoir by equating writers with liars—with a quotation from a novel, no less? To whom are these lies directed, and in what sense are alone-lies different from in-person ones? What defines the "best"—beauty, plausibility, their ability to reveal a larger truth? If an author warns the reader that he might be lying, does this alter, or mitigate, the lie? And most of all, what does the foregrounding of the lie have to do with the book's portrait of disability?

I don't think that Hill means to raise questions about his reliability—at least, not in any simple way. (His visual field may be fragmented, but *Blind Man's Bluff* is not *A Million Little Pieces*.) I do think, though, that the epigraph unsettles the relationship between writer and reader. The epigraph might be read as a friendly caution: don't take the writing, or the writer, for granted. By introducing uncertainty about the words to follow, the epigraph suggests that the meaning of the account, like the meaning of blindness itself, may not be what it seems.

In that uncertainty is the rationale for memoir. If blindness is only disease and affliction, then what story could there be? Why inquire into a condition whose meaning is already known? But if the meaning of blindness is negotiable, produced and reproduced in the synapse between the writer and the world—and then between writer and reader—then there's a story to tell and a subject to explore.

Like many other disabled writers, Hill resists a medical model of disability, illuminates stigma, points to inaccessible environments, contrasts interior experience with external stereotype, acknowledges difficulty while refusing tragedy, and shows that disability's meaning is open, negotiated day by day, encounter by encounter. Throughout *Blind Man's Bluff*, we see Hill representing himself to the sighted. But the self-representations within the text are intimately linked to the self-representation that *is* the text, and Hill's encounters are ultimately part of a meditation on the reading experience itself. Even as Hill shows

himself negotiating the meaning of his blindness with others, he highlights his ongoing negotiation with the reader.

Disease, Memoir, Misreading

I began writing about *Blind Man's Bluff* for the same reasons I've written about other books: I liked it, I thought I might learn something, I wanted to share my insights with other bookworms, I hoped to bear witness to the value of literary nonfiction and the practice of sustained readerly attention in a collapsing and distractible world, et cetera. But I was also driven by pure frustration with Dwight Garner's review in the *New York Times*. I was happy to see a memoir of disability getting well-deserved attention, less so to see the reviewer miss the disability part of the book.

In the review, Garner considers Hill's book alongside two other memoirs of "affliction": one of cancer, the other of spinal muscular atrophy. Along with *affliction*, Garner also uses the synonyms *illness*, *disease*, *disorder*, and *trouble*. With that last word, he yokes blindness, cancer, and spinal muscular atrophy to the coronavirus. ("These books resonate especially during this Covid relapse," writes Garner. "It's a wary, sensitizing moment. Everybody knows that no one needs more trouble added to their pile.") The review is strangely jocular, opening with a stale riff on writing personal pain ("What doesn't kill you will be the topic of your memoir"); referring to Hill's condition (Leber's hereditary optic neuropathy), Garner repeats a joke about never getting a disease with someone's name on it. He offers lukewarm praise for Hill's book, slighting it as less intense than the other two memoirs, characterizing it as "amiable." By doing so, Garner misses the emotional range of the voice, which is by turns dry, melancholy, bitter, joyful, and reflective. Maybe Hill got marked down for humor: for some readers, *funny* equals *lightweight*. Or maybe Hill's condition just wasn't fatal enough. Whatever the reason, to slight the book's alleged lack of intensity is to miss where its intensity lies.

Garner's misreading of *Blind Man's Bluff* is based on a conceptual error: he equates disability with disease. In his focus on "affliction," Garner depends on an almost parodically extreme version of the "medical model," in which disability is understood as a defect of the individual body, namable by diagnosis. As disability studies scholar Julia Miele Rodas writes, in *Keywords for Disability Studies*:

Historically, disability has been passively constructed by clinical, literary, and social discourses that demean, disparage, and pathologize. The long-standing "medical model" of disability locates disability exclusively in the body, seeing the body as deviant, broken, and in need of a cure performed by nondisabled agents.

It's true, of course, that diseases can be disabling, that people with disabilities often need medical treatment, and that there are gray areas between disability and disease. These gray areas, and the questions they imply—for example, what model should replace, or coexist with, the medical model?—are beyond the scope of this piece. I want to emphasize the more basic point that equating disability with disease leads to grave misunderstandings of both people and books.

Because the medical model is built around diagnosis, it is inherently in tension with the goals of the memoirist. A diagnosis abstracts a condition from social context, time, and individual experience—precisely the opposite of what memoirists do, as they narrate particular lives embedded in time, place, and culture, foregrounding the way a condition feels and the way it alters one's understanding of the world. A diagnosis is definitive, categorical, its boundaries definite; it is an answer. But for a memoirist, a condition is an open question, and a memoir is a different kind of answer.

For these reasons, many if not most memoirs of disability highlight the tension between diagnosis and story, between impersonal classification and lived experience. This often means resisting the tidy borders of diagnosis. As M. Leona Godin writes in *There Plant Eyes: A Cultural and Personal History of Blindness*, "The complexities of blindness, personality, and sense of self are wrapped up in those of being human" (198). That's as good a gloss as any on what Hill is up to, as he himself negotiates the

kaleidoscopic combinations of blindness, personality, and sense of self, showing how blindness is inextricable from work, writing, relationships, family. At the same time, by acknowledging his diagnosis but transcending the diagnostic frame, he raises a question of power and representation: Who gets to describe a condition? How, in other words, should the disabled author contend with what the feminist philosopher Susan Wendell, in *The Rejected Body*, calls “the authority of medicine to describe our bodies” (118)?

Though Hill’s condition has a diagnostic name, *Blind Man’s Bluff* is about disability, not disease. That focus is hard to miss, beginning with the way Hill chooses to name his condition. The word “disability” appears twenty times in the book. That includes two chapter titles: “The D-Word” and “Dating Tips for Those Still in Denial About Their Disability.” “Disease” appears once and “illness” four times, none referring to blindness. In fact, Hill is at pains to distinguish disability from illness: when his first wife is affected by an autoimmune disorder, he writes that “[t]he parallel between Meredith’s debilitating illness and my own disability seemed so obvious, so ham-handed, a writer could never get away with it.” Garner’s sole mention of disability, though, is a passing mention of the Americans with Disabilities Act: he writes that Hill is “grateful for the help.”

To compress this much misrepresentation into only four words is, if nothing else, a miracle of concision. “Grateful” makes Hill sound like a supplicant: it suggests the charity model that activists have rejected, in which people with disabilities are passive recipients of aid. But even worse, to characterize Hill as “grateful” misses his actual feelings about “help.” In fact, Hill is deeply conflicted. For a long time, Hill actually hates getting help, a point which, helpfully enough, he spells out. (He writes, in the second person, “Given the choice between help and not being someone who needs help, you have always preferred the latter.”) As for the ADA, Hill’s sentiments are considerably more complicated than Garner implies: “Thanks to the Americans with Disabilities Act of a few years ago, any school would have to provide whatever I needed. *It was the discretion with which said accommodations might be provided that most concerned me* [italics mine]” (50). In fact, Hill describes himself as “grateful” to get a job, so as *not* to receive Social

Security checks, which he sees as “something between an inheritance and laundered money”: “I had been grateful to finally earn a living, however meager, to scrub the money trail leading to my disability” (185).

Later on, when Hill *does* request ADA accommodation (a screen reader, so he can serve as a fiction editor at his university’s literary journal), he describes himself as frustrated, not grateful. Because he’s an instructor, not a student, his request hits a brick wall:

Why faculty blindness was considered different from student blindness made no sense. Then I remembered which of us wrote checks to the university . . . With budget cuts brought up in every faculty meeting, how many classes would I be assigned if I asserted my ADA right to software costing more than a thousand dollars (194)?

Hill’s attitude towards “help” evolves. At first, he is ashamed of receiving help and is glad to work, to “scrub the money trail leading to [his] disability.” Later, he looks outward, not inward: he recognizes the unfairness of the situation, in which acknowledging disability might put his job security at risk. “Help,” in other words, is only one locus of Hill’s transformation, as he moves away from shame and concealment and towards an understanding of economic pressures, stigma, and rights. That’s a movement away from the medical model, from a biomedical account of blindness centered in the individual body, and towards an understanding of the body in social context. In an essay published in *The New York Times*, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, the disability studies scholar and bioethicist, describes a similar arc:

As we manage our bodies in environments not built for them, the social barriers can sometimes be more awkward than the physical ones. Confused responses to racial or gender categories can provoke the question “What are you?” Whereas disability interrogations are “What’s wrong with you?” Before I learned about disability rights and disability pride, which I came to by way of the women’s movement, I always squirmed out a shame-filled, “I was born this way.” Now I’m likely to begin one of these uncomfortable encounters with, “I have a disability,” and to complete it with,

“And these are the accommodations I need.” This is a claim to inclusion and right to access resources.

Hill’s focus on disability is also implied by what he *doesn’t* write. Though his condition is hereditary, he offers no lyrical flights about genes, no meditations on family history and fate, no biographical sketch of the doctor for whom his condition is named, no tantalizing glimpse of future gene therapies, no profile of an eccentric square-peg genius prototyping a Geordi LaForge-style visor in his garage. As a teenager, Hill does travel with his mother to Japan for an expensive and unproven cure. It doesn’t work, though, and eventually the pills gather dust in a drawer. The equation of blindness with medical catastrophe isn’t the last word, but the first. It marks an early phase of the very transformation the memoir narrates. Hill begins with the medical model for his condition, but soon leaves it behind.

In Hill’s evolving understanding of his blindness, and in his increasing awareness of access issues and economic pressures, we can see the way in which his book is both deeply personal and less conventionally personal than it seems. Even for all its disclosure and exposure, a memoir may be outwardly focused. The writer may interrogate experience to reveal the self, or the troubled synapse between the self and the world, or the way the world is inscribed *in* the self. The writer may not accept the division of “world” and “self” in the first place. These considerations apply to *Blind Man’s Bluff*. Hill’s evolving attitude towards assistance is personal, but it points to an American equation of independence, economic self-sufficiency, and human worth. Having internalized that equation, “[preferring] not being someone who needs help,” the younger Hill faces internal barriers along with external ones.

Similar issues play out in Hill’s relationships, and particularly his first marriage, where Hill frames his effort to compensate for blindness as “[trying] to earn my keep” (73). There’s a heartbreaking scene in a bus station: Hill is there with his wife, trying to figure out which bus to take to work. The woman behind the counter simply points, a gesture Hill can’t decipher. He doesn’t want to admit he can’t see. He doesn’t want to ask his wife for help, but he wants her to offer it. It’s a standoff in which blindness is relevant, but

interwoven with everything else: independence, communication, the couple's growing incompatibility, their increasingly entrenched resentment of each other. The moment ends in bitterness:

“What do you want me to do?” Meredith asked over my shoulder. Her voice had softened, but her tone had not.

I mumbled a response.

“What?”

“I said I'll fucking walk to work.” (155)

Complicated, yes. Amiable, no.

In his review, Dwight Garner decrees that “[a]s a genre, disease and illness memoirs are permanently interesting if honest and sharply observed.” I would've thought that honesty and sharp observation were standard requirements for memoir, period, but to me the more problematic phrase is *disease and illness memoirs*. As I've tried to argue, *Blind Man's Bluff* is better understood as a memoir of disability, not disease. But either way, there are problems with tidy boxes for both books and people: once categorized, it is difficult to impossible to climb out of the box. You have to earn your way out, with extra honesty and sharp observation. That way you can be “permanently interesting.” Put another way, given the stigma of either disability or disease, the writer of memoir faces an extra burden of legitimacy, an extra measure of skepticism.

While drafting this essay, I turned to Vivian Gornick. Arguing for literary exploration of the self, Gornick dismisses a vast tide of merely topical writing. “The question clearly being asked in an exemplary memoir,” she writes, “is ‘who am I?’” But the “I” of memoir, she writes, “cannot be explained or illuminated in terms of generic disaster (blizzards, blindness, incest, addiction) or the randomness of political misery (class, race, sex)” (93). Blindness, lumped in with blizzards and incest: the move makes Garner's analogy between blindness and cancer seem downright discerning. It's almost as if writers with

disabilities have to do extra work just to show skeptical readers that their lives aren't disastrous. It's almost as if they face *extra* scrutiny, because their lives don't count as subjects for exemplary memoirs.

Behind Garner's category of "affliction," behind Gornick's dismissal of "generic disaster," is the assumption that disability is peripheral to the true exploration of the "I." It's a special topic, like surviving a tsunami, or growing up with incest. Enduring Human Questions™, though, are for normal people, who get to ask *who am I* without explanation or apology. (There's a vague suggestion, in Gornick's case, that the people who write books out of difficult experiences are cheating somehow, getting published on the basis of novelty and not literary talent, sneaking out of their obligation to write well.) Hill hardly shies away from the difficulties presented by the inability to see. But as he also shows, blindness is too complex a human fact to identify as a disaster. Ultimately he shows that "blindness" cannot be partitioned from other experiences. It is not a thing that happens *to* the self. A condition that affects the way he perceives the world, and the way the world perceives him, cannot be located only in the optic nerves.

Delicate Negotiations

The scene in the bus station can be read as an early stage in Hill's journey. Eventually he will reject the simple binary of "dependent" and "independent," coming to something more like interdependence: near the book's end, he writes, "I will never be independent, but how many of us are?" As with many memoirs, the narrative bends toward the perspective that makes the narrative possible.

Hill's arc, as a nonfiction character, is not what it might appear. On one level, we see him move from shame to acceptance, from hiding his disability (or trying to) to being open about it. (The very fact of a memoir suggests this openness.) But on another level, the movement is towards accepting entanglement itself, towards accepting the fact that the personal and cultural meanings of blindness—to use Godin's phrasing—cannot be separated, and that therefore he depends on others: in a lesser sense, for practical help, but in a greater sense to create a world of relationship in which he can flourish.

To create that world means negotiating, in every sense, the meaning of blindness. (The chapters written in the second person, in which Hill addresses a younger self, make clear that the negotiation is internal as well.) He negotiates public space, adapting to an inaccessible world, practicing and memorizing routes to classes and work, trying to preserve and project the fiction that he is still sighted. All along, others' reactions clarify his motive for deception. People talk to the people standing next to him, rather than directly to him; a flight attendant says, with pity, "[y]ou have beautiful eyes" (128); a landlord repairs his radiator, then tells him to "take care." Hill writes: "In his tone I heard, Maybe you shouldn't be living on your own" (187). By writing *I heard*, Hill transcends mere complaint, however justified; he shows us that the meaning of his blindness is produced by a sort of feedback loop. Hill is quick to believe himself a burden, and others are often quick to confirm it. The stigma he faces is more powerful because it resonates, like a sympathetic string.

Hill explicitly links these interactions to the interaction between author and reader. One negotiation shadows the other. Early in the memoir, for example, he addresses the reader, explaining what he literally can and can't see. He's matter of fact in tone, though you can almost hear the sigh behind the prose, the need to answer a question he's faced for much of his life:

It's better and worse than you might imagine. This is what I'd like to tell people who ask about my eyesight. What most people want to know is what I see when I look at them, and the short answer is this: I don't see what I look directly at. If I look up or to the side, I can see something, and this usually fends off further questions. This answer allows people to imagine, however erroneously, that my blind spots are smudges on the center of a mirror from which I can escape by looking elsewhere on the mirror. Lies of omission weren't ones I hastened to correct. (3-4)

Comedy thrives on misunderstanding, and the dry comedy of this distilled scene depends on missed connections, on a dance between the speaker's self-protection and the listener's egotism. People want to know, basically, if Hill can see their faces; Hill politely deflects, recentring his own experience ("I don't see

what I look directly at”—a slantwise echo, perhaps, of *Tell all the truth but tell it slant*). By saying that this answer “usually fends off further questions,” Hill suggests his weariness with the process, his willingness to let his interlocutors believe whatever they want: “Lies of omission weren’t ones I hastened to correct.”

And then Hill addresses the reader directly. The shift in voice is unmistakable: “Instead of a smudge, picture a kaleidoscope. Borderless shapes fall against each other, microscopic organisms, a time-lapsed photograph of a distant galaxy. Dull colors flicker and swirl: mustard yellow, pale green, magenta” (4). Irony fades before something like wonder. I felt as if I were being let in on a secret: the writer, using his memories of sight to convey the experience of blindness. The account is surreal, mutable, scale-defying, micro- and macroscopic, galactic and cellular. It’s beautiful but ugly too: *dull, mustard yellow*.

Hill’s paradoxical description demonstrates M. Leona Godin’s declaration that “[b]lindness is not just a subject; it is a perspective.” For sighted readers, including me, this is a counterintuitive point. In every paragraph of this essay, as I deleted phrases like “Hill’s vision of blindness,” I was reminded that *sight* and *understanding* are, for me, inextricable. But reading *Blind Man’s Bluff* reminds me that there are other ways to perceive and respond to the world, and that “disability,” as the writer and designer Sara Hendren has said, “is a site of invention and creativity.” For both Godin and Hill, visual memories are markers of an earlier time; the writers draw on their memories of sight to connect with sighted readers. And yet their books complicate this very distinction between blind and sighted, before and after, light and darkness; and because these categories are inextricable, for sighted readers, from the process of understanding itself, the memoirs work (subtly or openly) to hack the reader’s operating system even as it runs.

Hill’s description is a meeting place, a middle ground between blindness and sight. But as noted above, that description is framed as a double encounter: Hill recalls his past explanations of blindness while explaining blindness to the reader. This strategy is enormously suggestive. It shows, in real time, the social construction of blindness, the way its meaning emerges from interaction. It encapsulates Hill’s progress: his past accounts are obligatory, compelled by (awkward) social situations; the present

explanation is freely chosen, and the book is open about the fact of blindness from the title onward. (It's unsurprising that when Hill turns from past to present, the prose turns suddenly lyrical: the explanation is finally on his terms.) Finally, by describing the reactions he's faced in the past, Hill challenges sighted readers to do better, to do more than look for their own reflections. Writing *it's better and worse than you might imagine* suggests that the reader's imagination matters.

That challenge is also present in Hill's wordplay, which leans into the very awkwardness that Hill experiences in person. For a sighted reader, or for me anyway, the phrase *blind spots* is jarring. Like the command to the reader to "picture" something, it's torqued by the fact of Hill's blindness. This move recurs throughout the book: "It's full dark when we reach Nashville" (1); "If I squinted hard enough, uncertainty looked a lot like hope" (34); "the paused movie that my life had become started playing again" (64). Phrases like these charge the reading experience with uncertainty: defending the value of audiobooks, for instance, Hill writes that "the words in my ears were the same words others saw when they held a book in their hands" (45). For me, holding a book in my hands, the sentence was unnerving. Hill's is a printed book that questions the supremacy of print; for the sighted reader, every sentence is a subtle nudge, a reminder that the eyes are only one route stories take to the brain.

The Best Lies

Blind Man's Bluff contains a structural irony: the sighted reader agrees to be guided by a blind writer. I don't mean to suggest that the reader is transported to a disabled or quasi-disabled position, like one of those exercises in which people wear a blindfold, or spend a few hours in a wheelchair, to experience what disability "is like." These, however well meant, have been criticized as leading more to pity than empathy. Hill's approach is different: his book may foster empathy, but it also questions the standpoint from which empathy might be offered. It asks what might need to change in the reader before anything like empathy might be meaningful. It questions the ground rules of a society within which empathy might occur.

By facing ideas both counterintuitive and compelling—that blindness is not tragic, for instance, or that it can be a creative source—the sighted reader may feel disoriented by his own mistaken assumptions. Memoirs of disability are sometimes persuasive, offering a criticism of injustice, illuminating stereotype. Hill does this, but the persuasive impulse is also dissolved into the conditions of reading.

At the same time, *Blind Man's Bluff* is a meditation on writing, and specifically on its own creation. Which brings us back to the epigraph: *writers, unlike most people, tell their best lies when alone*. As the memoir progresses, the epigraph's significance ramifies. It refers, of course, to Hill's self-deceptions: lies told to no one except the self. It's also a sly joke, in that the lies Hill tells to others are not his best; as he later realizes, few were ever fooled. But most of all, the epigraph shows the growth of a writer, one who saves his "best lies" for the reader. His history of concealing blindness reveals a writer's apprenticeship. He's attentive to word choice: "I auditioned euphemisms for *legally blind*, my favorites being 'bad eyes' and 'vision problem'" (51). He thinks about audience: "Not once had I ever said I can't drive; it was always I don't drive, which wasn't a lie. I didn't drive. If that particular verb left room for one to infer choice, so be it" (135). His lies are less blatant untruth than artful deception: subtle, crafted for effect, using the techniques of memoir. The difference is in intent. His in-person lies, intended to deceive, pave the way for the truer fictions, the "best lies," of his memoir. Call it lying in good faith.

But what does that mean, exactly?

A full treatment of lying in nonfiction is far beyond my abilities and the scope of this essay. But it's safe to say that when we're discussing "lying"—or, more neutrally, the treatment of fact—in literary nonfiction, we are nearly always talking about genre, ethics, or both. On genre: Which "lies," if any, are permissible in which kinds of nonfiction? Is genre a boundary to obey ("you can't lie in nonfiction") or a category to bend? On ethics: "lying," by definition, means lying *to* someone (the reader), about someone (the author, the author's family, etc.) or something (historical or personal events). So what obligations does the author have to the reader, to the people he represents, to historical events, to marginalized groups?

Most importantly for my purposes, how does the author frame her efforts? Does the writer acknowledge the lie?

To narrow the field somewhat, I'm not interested in elaborate hoaxes—a false claim to have spent years in a death camp, say—or ordinary lies, self-aggrandizing or otherwise. Nor am I interested in the descriptive conventions that grease the gears of memoir: though the phone conversation, presented as dialogue, might vary from the NSA's transcript, and the little Google Street View sedan might prove that the remembered ranch house was pink and not blue, these don't matter for my purposes, or for the announced "lies" of *Blind Man's Bluff*. For the moment, I'm interested in a specific situation: an author signaling his or her unreliability to the reader, while narrating the personal experience of a disabling condition. To elucidate what's distinctive about Hill's approach, I want to (briefly) compare it to another: Lauren Slater's *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir*.

Like *Blind Man's Bluff*, *Lying* narrates the author's experience from adolescence into adulthood, while linking a disabling condition—epilepsy, in Slater's case—to life, sex, relationships, and writing. Like Hill, Slater characterizes her younger self as untruthful. But where Hill only suggests the possibility of his *authorial* unreliability, Slater goes all in: by book's end, it's unclear whether she has epilepsy, or how many of the events she narrates actually occurred.

For Slater, the fact of epilepsy matters less than the imaginative possibilities it presents. Epilepsy is a metaphor for her experiences. She claims that her lying is part of "an epileptic personality profile." She structures her narrative around the stages of a grand mal seizure. And she uses epilepsy as a source for metaphor, riffing on diagnostic language like *aura*, *fitful*, *seizure*: "Our stories are seizures. They clutch us up, they are spastic grasps" (197). Slater writes that she wants "to ponder the blurry line between novels and memoirs," and in the apologia that ends the book, she remains coy about her diagnosis. At the same time, she justifies her work by categorically dismissing other memoirs of illness for pretending to be "authoritative," while claiming priority for her own "slippery, playful, impish, exasperating text."

The critic G. Thomas Couser has a mixed perspective on Slater's "metaphorical memoir." In *Signifying Bodies*, his study of disability life writing, Couser praises Slater's boundary-breaking postmodern play, but finds her metaphorical approach ethically problematic. As he writes, Slater uses "a familiarizing metaphor," one which "[domesticates] alien or abstract entities by likening them to something known or understood" (125). To make epilepsy work in this way, Couser argues, Slater loads it with "problematic attributes," including "a tendency toward mythomania," and linking epilepsy to mental illness:

In claiming to have epilepsy and an epileptic personality. . . she may not only have misrepresented herself, she has perpetuated a harmful notion of epilepsy as entailing a character defect. Thus, she can be faulted for ignoring the rights and interests of people with epilepsy, who suffer from her remystification of a condition still in the process of being demystified.

In his view, Slater's metaphors participate in a long history of stigma. Despite her medical expertise (she's a practicing clinical psychologist), her vision of epilepsy predates the medical model: hers is, Couser writes, an instance of "the symbolic paradigm" of disability, "under which a particular impairment serves as a trope for a moral or spiritual condition" (21).

This approach extends beyond epilepsy. In a deeply problematic passage, Slater uses images of people encountered on the street as symbols for her own self-loathing: "I went for walks then. I saw a dwarf. Another day, I saw a man with no nose. I saw a child with pink eyes and white floss for hair. In the CVS, I stared at my own face in the magnified mirror. My face looked horrendous to me, all tilted and pocked." Apart from the improbability of the occurrence—did the author, on her daily walks, really happen across these convenient human tropes, at that exact time in her life?—the tactic is openly stigmatizing. It is, in essence, a paragraph-long freakshow: the "dwarf," "the man with no nose," "the child with pink eyes and white floss for hair," whether factual or not, exist only to be beheld. They have no substance even as fictions, no interiority, no function except to symbolize the narrator's frame of mind.

In contrast, Hill's approach, like M. Leona Godin's, is anti-symbolic. Blindness does not stand *for* anything. Like Godin, Hill distinguishes the lived reality of the condition from the metaphors that encrust it. Godin is more explicit on the point: quoting Susan Sontag ("illness is not a metaphor, and . . . the most truthful way of regarding illness . . . is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking"), she writes,

Blindness seems to have nearly irresistible appeal as a literary trope, but as such, it has lost the particularity and multiplicity of lived experience. Generally speaking, "the blind" are either idealized in theory, as being exceptionally pure or superpowered, or pitied in practice, as being inept or unaware. I think this is because blind people are rarely allowed to be the authors of their own image (xiii).

Blind Man's Bluff is literally about Hill's long journey to becoming "the [author] of his own image" (with all ironies noted). In that journey, the idea of lying, no less than the idea of getting help, absorbs the meaning of the journey. Lying, originally a response to stigma, is transmuted to the approach of a mature author. His "best lies" are the literary techniques by which he suggests the experience of his condition. As we've seen, his approach is intensely metaphorical—recall his account of his visual field, with its images of galaxies and cells—but those metaphors are meant to *defamiliarize*, to undo the reader's assumptions. He does not depend on stereotypes of blindness; he combats them.

In that approach is an assertion of power. Like Slater, Hill destabilizes the reader's experience: *if the author is lying, how should I read this?* Unlike Slater, Hill leaves no ambiguity about the fact of his condition: it's the basis of his interpretive authority. By claiming the power to lie, the writer asserts the ability to rewrite the script. To literally control the narrative. To be a subject producing meaning, rather than being an object of misrepresentation.

Both Slater and Hill call attention to the implicit contract with the reader. The difference is that Hill wants to rewrite it, while Slater wants to put it through the shredder. In Hill's case, raising the

possibility of lying revises the contract. Given the stigma attached to disability, in which people with disabilities are seen as lesser, their conditions as devastation, Hill's book constitutes a meeting place in which the blind writer and the sighted reader exist on equal terms, in which blindness confers authority. The "contract," such as it is, exists between equals.

Vision and Revision

There's a pivotal scene, two chapters from the end, that shows Hill beginning to rethink the relation between writing and disability. It's after his divorce, and he reluctantly attends a poetry reading:

For half an hour, I sat in awe of her poems, most of them about the disability someone with better eyesight would have noticed while she was reading. To me, seated in the third row, she was only the lines of her poetry, each stanza a flag planted in the center of her life: This is me, and this is me, and this and this and this. (198)

The poet's public truth-telling contrasts with Hill's history of isolation, concealment, and lies. That the poems are spoken, in a book that questions the ordinary senses of "writing" and "reading," is significant. But the scene also suggests the transformative possibilities of reading, and the understanding of reading and writing as a single continuum of activity. Rereading the book on his own, Hill is "envious of how starkly, how boldly, each poem announced her difference"; in time, he becomes a different kind of writer. That transformation is announced by a brief scene, in which he speaks to his students about writing, but could be speaking of himself:

True revision, you tell your writing students, is more than correction. You might find yourself deleting entire pages, rewriting from a different point of view, changing past tense to present, overhauling your entire first draft upon discovering you hadn't known what you were trying to say until the last few paragraphs. Let's break down the word, you say, drawing a slash between *Re* and

Vision. You're trying to see what you've written a second time, see it with fresh eyes, as you haven't seen it before. (227)

In one way, this is a familiar moment in memoir: a hard-won composure on the other side of difficulty, a confidence and authority. Where Hill was once an uncertain writing student, he's now a teacher. But even as he addresses his students, he addresses the reader. "Revision" refers to the process we've been reading about, the process of understanding disability in a new way. At the same time, Hill's brief lecture reads like a summary of Hill's own process: *Blind Man's Bluff* is not just about learning to understand disability in a new way, but also about learning to express it, to rewrite blindness "from a different point of view."

There's an edge to Hill's use of phrases like *revision*, *fresh eyes*, and *point of view*. Like Godin, he both highlights and questions the inescapable centrality of vision to culture. For sighted readers, speaking of "re/vision" points to the capability that is *not* shared by writer and reader, and in so doing points to the validity of other ways of understanding the world—and the possibility of building a bridge with language. The passage is a distilled scene in a narrative, but it is also a form of teaching.

Hill's approach is one solution to a dilemma articulated by Susan Wendell in *The Rejected Body*: when representing disability to nondisabled people, should the disabled writer emphasize similarity or difference? Does emphasizing similarity "[reduce] 'Otherness,'" perhaps paving the way for "assimilation"? Does emphasizing difference help to build "a strong sense of solidarity," while "[resisting] the devaluation of . . . differences by the dominant group"? Wendell offers no easy answers, but her crystallization of the problem helps me understand Hill's narrative choices. The voice of *Blind Man's Bluff*—charming, but with an edge—is a memoirist's solution to the problem of similarity and difference. Hill claims both at once, reaching out to the sighted reader with wit and metaphor, with familiar scenarios: being out of place in high school, falling in and out of love. At the same time, he foregrounds the difference that language has to cross.

Even as Hill traces an individual story, he complicates the idea of the individual. *Blind Man's Bluff* is an apparently conventional memoir that resists convention, a personal narrative that asks about how persons are understood. He refutes the presumption that a disability is the only salient feature about a person. Along the way, he raises the question of who gets to say what blindness means: by mapping his experience for the sighted reader, he makes his text a provisional utopia, one in which blindness confers authority rather than powerlessness. Having lost his sight, Hill can put blindness and sight in conversation, using each to make sense of the other, combining them to reach and guide the reader.

Like the best writing about the experience of disability, *Blind Man's Bluff* troubles the difference between peripheries and centers: dismissed categories of identity—and literature—wind up naming questions central to all books, questions about the way we understand and structure identity in the world, and about how the world structures identity in turn. The categories by which we know ourselves and each other. For me, at least, the reading experience was necessary and disorienting, like being in a houseboat rather than a house: stable, at rest, but afloat, the foundation made of water, but no less sure for that.

Works Cited

- Adams, Rachel, et al., editors. *Keywords for Disability Studies*. NYU Press, 2015.
- Chabon, Michael. *Wonder Boys*. Reprint edition, Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2008.
- Couser, G. Thomas. *Memoir: An Introduction*. 1st edition, Oxford University Press, 2011.
- . *Signifying Bodies*. University of Michigan Press, 2009.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. "Opinion | Becoming Disabled." *The New York Times*, 19 Aug. 2016.
NYTimes.com, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/21/opinion/sunday/becoming-disabled.html>.
- Garner, Dwight. "Three Sharply Observed Books Showcase the Enduring Appeal of Memoirs About Dealing With Disease." *The New York Times*, 2 Aug. 2021. *NYTimes.com*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/02/books/review-year-of-plagues-fred-daguiar-life-like-yours-jan-grue-blind-mans-bluff-james-tate-hill.html>.
- Godin, M. Leona. *There Plant Eyes: A Personal and Cultural History of Blindness*. Pantheon, 2021.
- Gornick, Vivian. *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*. 1st edition, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002.
- Hill, James Tate. *Blind Man's Bluff: A Memoir*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2021.
- Murphy, Annie, et al. *Kevin Can F**k Himself*. AMC Studios, Le Train Train, 2021.
- "Orion Magazine - Seven Questions for Georgina Kleege, Guest Picture Editor for the Winter 2021 Issue." *Orion Magazine*, 20 Jan. 2022, <https://orionmagazine.org/2022/01/seven-questions-for-georgina-kleege-guest-picture-editor-for-the-winter-2021-issue/>.
- Slater, Lauren. *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir*. 10th edition, Penguin, 2001.
- Tomlinson, Tommy. "A Memoir of Pretending to See." *The New York Times*, 5 Aug. 2021. *NYTimes.com*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/05/books/review/blind-mans-bluff-james-tate-hill.html>.

Wendell, Susan. "The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability." Routledge, 1996.