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“STAIRS START TO CRUMBLE ALL OVER AMERICA WITH THE SCRATCHING OF A PEN”: HONORING LAURA HERSHEY

On the night I was supposed to meet Laura Hershey for the first time, she was a no-show.

We had corresponded for a handful of years—brief, lively transmissions about disabled poets or ADAPT paperwork, accessible MFAs—and I’d wrung my hands in anticipation since Lambda Literary Foundation’s press release announced our names together in the 2010 class of Emerging Writer Fellows. As is so often the case when we come up without access to our own lineages, I knew little of Laura Hershey’s life, the expansiveness of it, and the great extent to which the work she’d done in the world had made much of my life—especially my education—possible. Whatever respect and recognition I lent Hershey at the time now seems trivial in comparison to her actual contributions. Hershey was a nationally recognized activist in the disability community, campaigning to increase the visibility of Deaf and disabled LGBTQ folks; to protect Deaf and disabled women from becoming domestic violence statistics; to eliminate work disincentives from social security; to increase independent living; to promote Medicaid home and community-based services; and to protect the rights of home care workers and assistive attendants. She was critical in the direct-action movements that led to accessible public transportation, interpreters and attendants in mainstreamed public schools, and the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990.
But what I knew of her that night in Los Angeles was simple and life-giving: Laura Hershey was the first out queer disabled poet I’d ever read on paper. Though our experiences of disability and gender differed greatly, hers were the first poems where I witnessed my own multiplicity coalesce in English. It’s easier for me now—though still not easy—to imagine a future as a disabled, queer activist and poet; at the time—and in these times—any one of those identities could get a person killed. Looking around, one might think that surely the combination of them already had. And yet: Laura Hershey.

We learn early that erasure, both literal and figurative, is one of the more vicious and duplicitous tenets of ableism—discrimination, violence, and social prejudice committed against disabled individuals and communities in order to protect and center the nondisabled. The more difficult it is to locate evidence of an experience, the more convincing its nonexistence, its irrelevance. The contemporary eugenics movement, in all its shifty iterations, has made it easy for nondisabled folks to rationalize the exclusion of disability. When Laura Hershey didn’t show up that night, I worried. One Lambda fellow shrugged at her absence, suggested she might’ve changed her mind about attending. Disabled folks know better. We knew immediately who in the room was kin because we all shifted, re-evaluated the width of the door, mentally scanned the evening for stairs.

The next morning, the email arrived: Problems with travel. Lost luggage, lost tech. Missing piece of ventilator equipment. No local replacements. Resting. Send the assignment and see you later.

That afternoon in workshop, Laura Hershey took us to the mat.

The poet in me wants

to be out there, beyond the pane

with the other poets.

The poet in me wants

to meet and greet,
get my gay on,
shine my wit, my stories:
march of buoyant wheeling protests around
marble departments;
songs on long bumpy bus rides from Beijing to
muddy Huairou.¹

I remember clearly the feeling in the room. Hershey sat
reading at one end of the long seminar table, while another eight
of us flanked its sides evenly, holding our breath.

Imagine friendship incubated in deep reserves
of stamina and eloquent gesture.
Imagine so much lung capacity
you can afford to burn some of it away
in loud laughter and tobacco leaf.
Imagine writing about reliable bodies
striding unpaved rocky terrain,
and coupling toward revolution.²

Some of us shifted uncomfortably in our seats. A few of us
grinned. Game on.

I’d never before been in a workshop with another proudly out
disabled poet. I had no aptitude for it and reached or retreated in
inconsistent ways, uncertain of how to ally without undercutting,
champion without projecting. I had spent so much of graduate
school defending the disability and Deafness in my work that
I had little idea of how to critically celebrate and tend it when
there was more than one of us at the table. Hershey’s poems
were bold, audacious, uncompromising. She wrote candidly
about ableism, about queer crip sex and desire, and about the
thorny wonder of having recently finalized the adoption of a
tenager with her partner of twenty years, disabled activist and
lawyer, Robin Stephens. Hershey modeled how to take up space
without apologizing, how to make disability the given and not
the exception. Hershey was as much about using a poem to tell