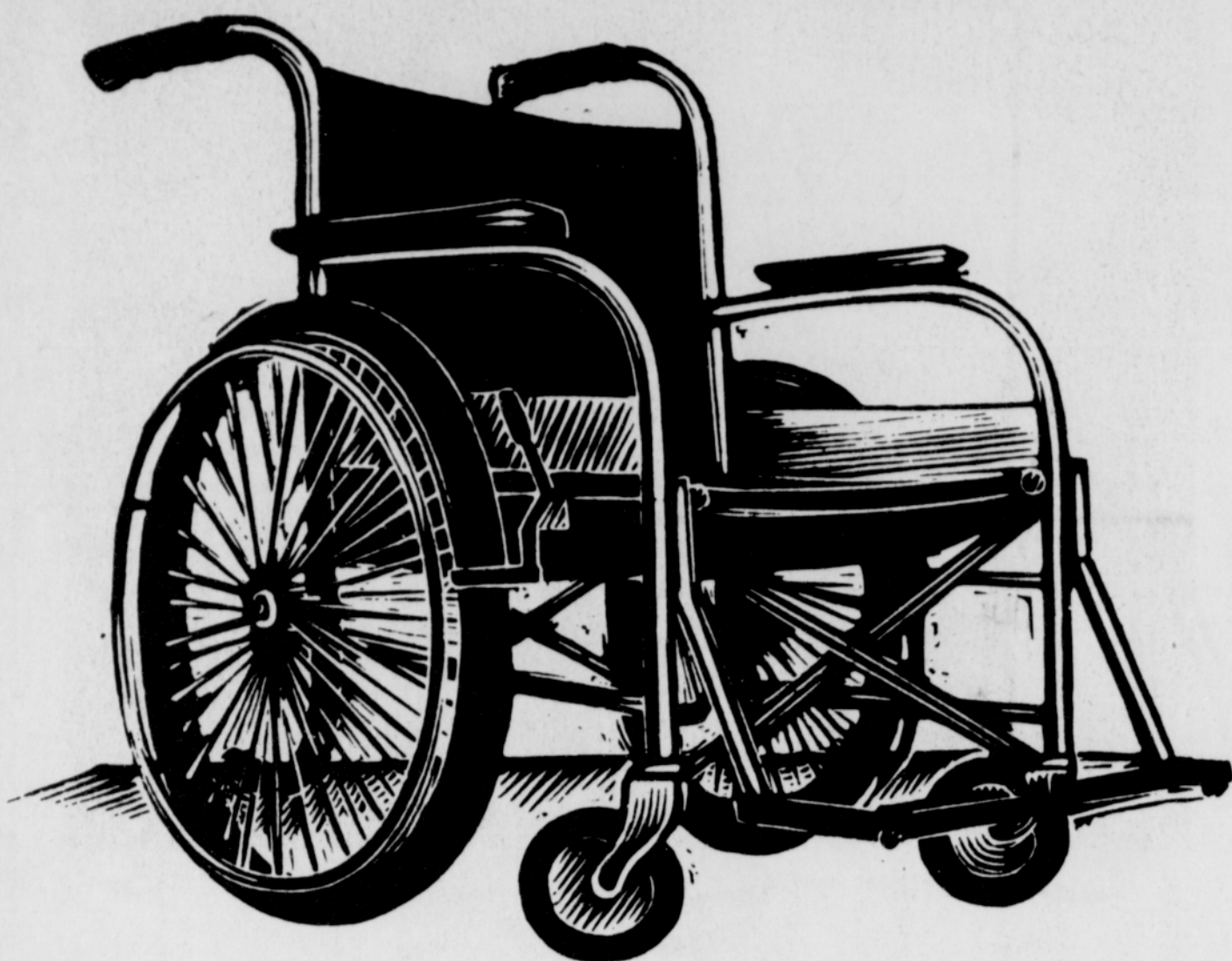




GRANTED

by Rene Ungerecht

The air felt thin and cold in my lungs. I pressed my bare hands to my face again, testing their frigidness and wondering what I was supposed to do with that knowledge. Looking down 21st there was still no bus — the big bright lights that would keep me warm and take me home. It was too cold for all this waiting. To even get to the bus stop I had to find someone to push me up the curb cut which had been iced over.

I thought of Choi all curled up, sleeping in the hospital room I had just left. She was so pretty. Even after an eight hour surgery, even with tubes running in and out of her, she looked like an angel asleep. Tawny skin and her dark hair seemed only to make her appear more warm, more peaceful.

"Visiting hours were over a half hour ago," the nurse had told me.

"I don't want to wake her. I just want to stay awhile longer." The nurse had looked at me, my wheelchair, then Choi and Choi's wheelchair neatly tucked away in the corner of the room, nodded and left. Maybe she had heard the sob I was choking on to hold back. Maybe she just didn't want to waste energy on asserting herself.

She left and I did cry. Quietly, though with all the drugs they had given Choi I doubted a chorus of wailing could wake her.

God, Choi, don't leave me. I couldn't stand it. When the hospital killed Sue... killed her because they didn't know how to care for a quad... I just... you know, you were there when I botched the suicide attempt. You pulled me back. You made it okay again. Like Sue, you made it okay to be a quad. If you die Choi... Twice is too often.

The bus was a scream of lights until I wiped my eyes — warm tears on icy hands. "You want a ride?" the driver asked. I nodded, knowing if I said anything it would be caustic and most ungracious.

The rear of the bus was still out in the street. The driver pulled forward, backed up, pulled forward, backed up; five minutes later he had managed to parallel park.

"Thing won't work," the driver reported, indicated the lift controls.

"Guess you'll have to take the next one. It'll be here in an hour."

"Got the brake on?"

"Huh? Oh, forgot." He hurried to the front of the bus and was back at the controls, fuming furiously over them. "Still won't work. No power."

"Got the lift turned on up front?"

"Huh? No. I'll be right back." Another minute. "It won't work when I push the buttons. See?"

"I help." A middleaged Asian man had come to the back of the bus. Slowly, and not well, he read the instructions, in English and pasted on the control panel, to the driver. The stairs unfolded into a platform.

The driver, somewhere between annoyance and appreciation, listened and worked as the passenger read him the second step and then the third. The driver and passenger secured my wheelchair on the bus. Together they finished tucking in the lift.

I reluctantly thanked the driver and received a grunt. I thanked the passenger; he smiled and shook his head 'no'. Waving he went to the front of the bus, three steps behind the driver.

The bus roared down the street making lurching stops only when mandated. A man my age got on before we turned off 21st. I really took very little notice of him until I realized he was making a beeline for the back of the bus, and then became even more alert when it was apparent that I was the targeted destination.

He looked like a young republican: cleancut, white, and well dressed — pressed shirt and tie. "So, you're the one that held up the bus," he started. "Some of us have to work for a living and need to get to our jobs on time." He dropped into the side seat in front of me, as if the warmth of the bus had suddenly allowed him to melt out of an erect busriders' waiting stand.

"Yeah, why don't you give me hell about it?" I said tiredly, then noticed he looked as exhausted as I felt. Maybe he won't bother, I hoped.

"It pisses me off that they let you kind of people ride."

"Fuck you."

"Really?"

Ha ha. Funny. "Eat shit and die."

"No, no, this wrong!" It was the middleaged Asian man who had previously helped the driver. "Bus late not her fault. Tell your boss, bus fault. I work three jobs and I will be late. Not my fault! I tell boss not my fault. This is America. Everyone has right to ride bus in America. Okay?" He stood, smiled, and returned to the front of the bus.

Awed to silence, I sat briefly wondering why the man kept rescuing me. I felt unworthy of such generosity and mad because I didn't know why.

"God, I'm sorry," the young republican said to me, though not looking at me. He gazed out the window, unfocused. "I was trying to be funny, sort of, when I first started talking to you. I was just joking around."

"Are you always that funny?"

"I just got this boss that gets all bent out of shape if you're not there exactly on time."

"I wish I felt like apologizing, but I don't."

"Huh?" He looked at me startled, as if I had interrupted something.

"Ever feel like you take a lot for granted? I mean that Oriental guy said a lot."

I thought about Choi back in the hospital. She had looked so safe and protected — so asleep. Are you ever in your wheelchair in your dreams? No. Me either.

I thought of Sue in the casket. Cold. Alien. The bright red wheelchair, the silver blaze of her eyes, and that smile that wasn't a smile but laughter: that was all gone. Are you in a wheelchair after you die?

"No, I don't think I take enough for granted."

Rene Ungerecht lives in Portland.



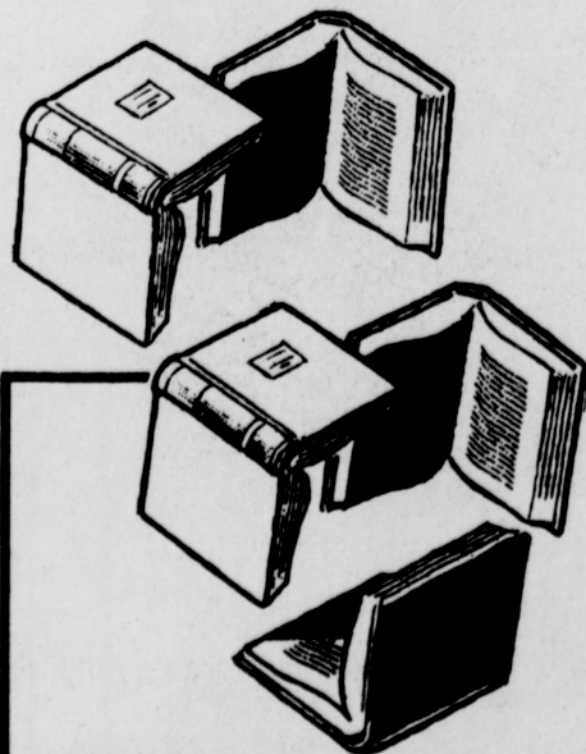
**CANNON
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downtown 436-2261



**THE
NORTH
COAST
TIMES
EAGLE**

A JOURNAL OF ART AND OPINION
PUBLISHED MONTHLY IN ASTORIA,
OREGON, 286 BOND ST. (#4) 97103.

MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER,
EDITOR AND PUBLISHER



CANNON BEACH BOOK COMPANY

132 North Hemlock, Cannon Beach 436-1301