

Foreword: Dislocations

May this book be contagious.

This warning and wish arrives in the final chapter of *Head above Water*, after the reader has spent hours immersed in the pages of Shahd Alshammari's book. *Head above Water* is one of the first disability memoirs from the Arab region, written from the perspective of a Palestinian-Bedouin woman living in Kuwait. A professor of English, Alshammari's previous books and articles have explored the limitations of Anglophone disability theory and Arabic literature alike with regard to the illness experiences of Arab women. "In Arabic literature," she writes, "discussions of the physically impaired female body are generally absent. They are also rare in Anglophone literatures or in literature written in English by Arab writers."¹ Working at this intersection, Alshammari never speaks "on behalf of the entire Arab world," as her graduate school professors in the UK asked her to do (120). *Head above Water* is written "from the body"—from Alshammari's distinct experiences with multiple sclerosis (MS) in far-flung national and social settings where ableism is a common denominator. In passages alternately addressed to a beloved former student and to the unknown reader, her insights about gender, ethnicity, and illness circulate via the contagion of disability pedagogy.

Head above Water is also remarkable in format—an alloy of diary, blog, conversation, and autobiography that expands the genre of life writing itself. It is the kind of text literary scholar Rebecca Sanchez and I have described as “crip authorship,” noncompliant with regard to publishing conventions and spurring new methods and concepts through the creative force of disability.² Alshammari mentions gratefully coming across Virginia Woolf’s essay “On Being Ill,” with its early twentieth-century call for illness to be taken up as a central theme of future literature. Turning back to that article, we find that Woolf, too, recognized the compositional ingenuity of disability in the face of mis-fit and exclusion. “Let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry,” Woolf writes. “There is nothing ready made for him. He is forced to coin words himself, and, taking his pain in one hand, and a lump of pure sound in the other . . . so to crush them together that a brand new word in the end drops out.”³ *Head above Water* is a book about pain, fatigue, trauma, and forgetfulness; the trembling of one’s hand while holding a pen; the feeling that one has “failed language” (49). It is also a book that insists, in its form and content, that “illness is a place of exploration, a paradoxical place of loss and gain” (36).

One of the most startling formal innovations of the book relates to its organization. In a gesture that is equal parts aleatory and intimately collaborative, Alshammari allows her student Yasmeen, visiting her at home, to read through her diaries. Yasmeen remarks on certain passages: Alshammari’s unbearable grief when her dog dies; the collision of racism and ableism when British strangers demand that she vacate a seat for disabled people on the bus; shame at

being bathed by her mother or unable to zip her own pants. Yasmeen's moments of attention and concern become the pith around which chapters develop. The structure of *Head above Water* mirrors what Alshammari has called, here and in academic articles, the "random disability" of MS (27). A valuable contribution to the lexicon of disability studies, "random disability" encompasses temporary losses, recurrences, and disabilities that are otherwise unruly with regard to time. It's a theory precipitated out of the "multiplicity, vagueness" of MS (9).

In other passages, Alshammari theorizes dislocation across disability and migration. She has grown up thinking of exile as an ingrained condition. She recalls her grandmother's stories of fleeing an occupied Palestine, only allowed to carry one belonging, forced to throw her favorite doll over the side of the boat. When Alshammari's body itself becomes "unhomely" ("unheimlich"), when she can no longer recognize the taste of water or the sensation of wetness, she contemplates this physical estrangement as one node within her genealogy (62). She finds analogous traits in the phenomenon of speech impairment: a slur or a lisp from MS, a stutter when speaking in a non-native language.

A crucial intervention of *Head above Water* is its interrogation of certain ground truths in western disability studies. Alshammari has described her mode of writing as "autoethnography," a term coined by Mary Louise Pratt for "instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer's own terms."⁴ Encountering illness narratives and disability theory during her graduate program in English literature, Alshammari reflects, "I didn't think of the body as separate

from the mind, nor did I know anything about illness as metaphor” (8). She contests the individualism of the western rights-based model of disability, deflating its seeming universality. In her Bedouin father’s tribe, disability is a collective matter, for better or for worse, a source of communal support as well as shared stigma (39). Disability scholar Ellen Samuels has argued that autotheory—a narrative practice and current publishing trend that braids theory and experience, or derives theory from the personal—too often “centers whiteness” and mines the lives of ill and disabled people for nondisabled revelations.⁵ Alshammari autotheorizes otherwise, from a collective and “random” body, calling into question the “auto” that has been so celebrated in white women’s writing.

Head above Water takes its title not from drowning but from buoyancy—the buoyancy of the disabled body. Alshammari leaves us in the littoral zone in the closing pages, nearshore, floating alongside her while the healthy wait on a fringe of sand. One of her final references is to the Emily Dickinson poem “Pain has an element of blank.” The book itself is interspersed with blank pages, generous with margins and space—vacancies we are invited to occupy.

—Mara Mills
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Notes

1. Shahd Alshammari, "Writing an Illness Narrative and Negotiating Identity: A Kuwaiti Academic/Author's Journey," *Life Writing* 16, no. 3 (2019): 433.
2. In US disability studies, "crip" refers to cross-disability affiliation and disability justice activism. Mara Mills and Rebecca Sanchez, "On Crip Authorship and Disability as Method," in *Crip Authorship: Disability as Method*, eds. Mills and Sanchez (New York: New York University Press, 2023), 1-2.
3. Virginia Woolf, *On Being Ill: With Notes from Sick Rooms by Julia Stephen* (Middletown, CT: Paris Press, 2012), 7.
4. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 7. See also Shahd Alshammari, "On Being Woman, Other and Disabled: Navigating Identity," *Word and Text: A Journal of Literary Studies and Linguistics* 8 (2018): 37-47.
5. Ellen Samuels, "Twenty-Seven Ways of Looking at Crip Autotheory," in *Crip Authorship: Disability as Method*, eds. Mara Mills and Rebecca Sanchez (New York: New York University Press, 2023), 205.