Using the language of the elemental world, [Eli Clare] delineates a complex human intersection and transmutes cruelty into its opposite—a potent, lifegiving remedy.

—ALISON BECHDEL
creator of Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic and Dykes to Watch Out For

Eli's work detonates inside of you, right to the edges where you balance.

—AMBER L. HOLLibaugh
author of My Dangerous Desires: A Queer Girl Dreaming Her Way Home

The books that move us most are the ones that help us make sense of our experience, that take pieces of what we already know and put it together with new insights, new analysis, enabling us to form a fresh vision of ourselves and our lives. For me, Audre Lorde's Sister Outsider and Adrienne Rich's On Lies, Secrets and Silence were such books, and there were significant others along the way. And now there's Eli Clare's Exile and Pride.

—SUZANNE PHARR
author of Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism

Exile and Pride is ... an exhortation for each of us to examine our connection to and alienation from our environment, our sexuality, and each other.

—Kenny Fries
author of Body, Remember: A Memoir and editor of Staring Back: The Disability Experience from the Inside Out

Eli Clare writes with the spirit of a poet and the toughness of a construction worker. The passion and skill of [his] writing will draw you inside a complex life and more deeply inside yourself.

—Jewelle Gomez
author of The Gilda Stories and Don't Explain: Short Fiction

exile & pride
disability, queerness & liberation

with a new afterword by Dean Spade

eli clare

southern press classics, vol. 10

southern press — read. write. revolt. — cambridge, ma
freaks and queers

I. NAMING

Handicapped. A disabled person sits on the street, begging for her next meal. This is how we survived in Europe and the United States as cities grew big and the economy moved from a land base to an industrial base. We were beggars, caps in hand. This is how some of us still survive. Seattle, 1989: a white man sits on the sidewalk, leaning against an iron fence. He smells of whiskey and urine, his body wrapped in torn cloth. His legs are toothpick-thin, knees bent inward. Beside him leans a set of crutches. A Styrofoam cup, half full of coins, sits on the sidewalk in front of him. Puget Sound stretches out behind him, water sparkling in the sun. Tourists bustle by. He strains his head up, trying to catch their eyes. Cap in hand. Handicapped.¹

Disabled. The car stalled in the left lane of traffic is disabled. Or alternatively, the broad stairs curving into a public building disable the man in a wheelchair. That word used as a noun (the disabled or people with disabilities), an adjective (disabled people), a verb (the
My parents insisted I be given yet another set of diagnostic tests, including an IQ test, and I—being a white kid who lived in a house full of books, ideas, and grammar-school English, being a disabled kid who had finally learned how to talk—scored well. They let me join the “regular” first grade. I worked overtime to prove those test results right. Still I was retard, monkey, defect on the playground, in the streets, those words hurled at my body, accompanied by rocks and rubber erasers. Even at home, I heard their echoes. My father told me more than once to stop walking like a monkey. My mother often talked about my birth defect. Words bruise a body more easily than rocks and rubber erasers.

Differently abled, physically challenged. Nondisabled people, wanting to cushion us from the cruelty of language, invented these euphemisms. In explaining her choice of the word cripple, Nancy Mairs writes:

\[\text{Differently abled ... partakes of the same semantic hopefulness that transformed countries from undeveloped to underdeveloped, then to less developed, and finally developing nations. People have continued to starve in those countries during the shift. Some realities do not obey the dictates of language.}^{3}\]

Differently abled is simply easier to say, easier to think about than disabled or handicapped or crippled.

\text{Freak. I hold fast to my dictionary, but the definitions slip and slide, tell half stories. I have to stop here. \textit{Freak} forces me to think about naming.}

\text{Handicapped, disabled, cripple, gimp, retard, differently abled. I understand my relationship to each of these words. I scoff at handicapped, a word I grew up believing my parents had invented specifically to describe me, my parents who were deeply ashamed of my cerebral palsy and desperately wanted to find a cure. I use the word disabled as an adjective to name what this ableist world does to us craps and gimps. Cripple makes me flinch; it too often accompanied the sticks and stones on my grade school playground, but I love \textit{crip} humor, the audacity of turning cripple into a word of pride.}
Gimp sings a friendly song, full of irony and understanding. Retard on the other hand draws blood every time, a sharp, sharp knife. In the world as it should be, maybe disabled people would be differently abled: a world where Braille and audio-recorded editions of books and magazines were a matter of course, and hearing people signed ASL; a world where schools were fully integrated, health care, free and unrationed; a world where universal access meant exactly that; a world where disabled people were not locked up at home or in nursing homes, relegated to sheltered employment and paid sweatshop wages. But, in the world as it is, differently abled, physically challenged tell a wishful lie.

Handicapped, disabled, cripple, gimp, retard, differently abled, freak. I need to stop here. Freak I don't understand. It unsettles me. I don't quite like it, can't imagine using it as some politicized disabled people do. Yet I want freak to be as easy as the words queer and cripple.

Queer, like cripple, is an ironic and serious word I use to describe myself and others in my communities. Queer speaks volumes about who I am, my life as a dyke, my relationship to the dominant culture. Because of when I came out—more than a decade after the Stonewall Rebellion—and where—into a highly politicized urban dyke community—queer has always been easy for me. I adore its defiant external edge, its comfortable internal truth. Queer belongs to me. So does cripple for many of the same reasons. Queer and cripple are cousins: words to shock, words to infuse with pride and self-love, words to resist internalized hatred, words to help forge a politics. They have been gladly chosen—queer by many gay, lesbian, bi, and trans peoples, cripple, or crib, by many disabled people.

Freak is another story. Unlike queer and cripple, it has not been widely embraced in my communities. For me freak has a hurtful, scary edge; it takes queer and cripple one step too far; it doesn't feel good or liberating.

This profusion of words and their various relationships to marginalized people and politicized communities fascinates me. Which words get embraced, which don't, and why? Queer but not pervert, cripple, and sometimes freak, but not retard. Like most of the ugly and demeaning words used to batter and bait marginalized peoples—racist, sexist, classist, ableist, homophobic slurs—pervert and retard nearly burst with hurt and bitterness, anger and reminders of self-hatred. I doubt LGBT communities and the disability communities respectively will ever claim those words as our own. In contrast, cripple, queer, and freak have come to sit on a cusp. For some of us, they carry too much grief. For others, they can be chosen with glee and pride. Queer and freak are mine but not queer, and I want to know why. What is it about that word? What bitterness, what pain, does it hold that cripple, with its connotations of pitiful, broken bodies, and queer, with its sweeping definitions of normality and abnormality, do not? I want to unravel freak, to pull on the thread called history.

II. FREAK SHOW

The history of freakdom extends far back into western civilization. The court jester, the pet dwarf, the exhibition of humans in Renaissance England, the myths of giants, minotaurs, and monsters all point to this long history, which reached a pinnacle in the mid-1800s to mid-1900s. During that century, freaks were big entertainment and big business. Freak shows populated the United

* Since 1999, I’ve been taken to task by folks in BDSM and leather communities more than once for my analysis of the word pervert. In my 1999 endnotes, I try to soften my analysis by claiming that the word hasn’t been “used to construct both individual and communal identities.” But my reasoning is exactly wrong when seen from inside BDSM communities where claiming pervert has in truth been central to building a communal identity. The ways I have misread the word as an outsider to the BDSM world is a great example of how reclaiming the ugly words has so much to do with context. My original intent to find words in LGBT communities that were analogous to the word retard in disability communities becomes extraordinarily complex.—E.C., 2009