

Confined

By Rebecca Grossman-Kahn

Write about confinement, instructs a page out of my blue book. I'd flipped to this page by chance, searching for a prompt for writing group. We meet virtually, speaking through our computers in the age of the virus. This little book of writing ideas was a gift from my mother at least 10 years ago; it's been sitting on my bookshelf. The startling prescience of this prompt, printed so many years ago, chills us. We agree to use this prompt to get our pens moving, apprehensive of what might spill onto the page.

Confinement in a body. The 11-year-old girl in room 24 right now, confined by cerebral palsy. Confined by her legs like straws, without a curve of muscle. Confined by her strappy physical therapy equipment that looks like downhill ski boots: rigid, tight, always squeezing. Confined by the spinal fusion surgery she had a few days ago, confined by pain with each breath. She is confined by the IV in her vein, tethered to her fluids and morphine.

"How will I poop?" she asks, knowing we want her to poop and yet knowing she can't make it to the bathroom a few feet away. "We'll bring a toilet right here, next to your bed," we say. Confined to this hospital bed, confined to the scrutinizing watch of us, of nurses, of therapists. She is going to rehab tomorrow. Because of the new coronavirus, if Grandpa accompanies her to her rehab room, he won't be able to leave. If he leaves the hospital, they won't let him back in. That's what I have to tell him today. He says it is okay. He says he will be by his granddaughter's side. The girl was born on a different continent. She came here so her grandfather could raise her. He is sitting on the couch across the room, and he tells me he only recently tracked down the girl's mother and father. Why did they leave her, let her go? Did they feel confined by her straw-like limbs, so straight and stiff?

Confinement in a mind. The boy with psychosis who has been living in the hospital for weeks on end. Trapped there by his own mind playing tricks on him, blurring what is real. He emerges from his room at night to ask a nurse, "where are all the human beings?" He is confined to a video loop on replay of his fears, his worries, his anxieties. His fears, his worries, his anxieties. Confined to the unit, he paints miniature scenes in watercolor, swaths of colors that he mixes to just the right shade. He dictates captions to each painting: "A kite difficult to fly." "A bird flying towards a tree that it means to inhabit." "Worried about the wind."

He aches to fly, to feel the wind on his face, and he is stuck inside a drab dark room with dirt brown walls and a stack of mini canvasses to paint. His mind stretches, breaking through the confines of welcome connections. When he speaks of seeing bacteria and other people grabbing his thoughts to chew them up, we speak of pills to contain his thoughts. He feels like tangled fishing line; the harder we pull in one direction, the tighter the knot becomes.

Write about confinement. At first, we think this prompt is ironic, timely, relevant to this specific moment in history as we quarantine across the world. But confinement is nothing new to patients. Confinement has always defined the hospital, long before this virus hit. I don't know of confinement. Even behind the yellow mask I'm asked to wear all day long, I'm still breathing. I breathe the same nitrogen in and out, in and out, in and out; the air becomes damp and warm, the fibers in the mask seem to disintegrate and stick to my lips. My little pocket of air is sour and tannic. But my magic badge lets me free every night. The first time I removed the mask outside, in purple evening light, I never knew a breath of air could taste so fresh, so delicious, so full, so complex.

Rebecca Grossman-Kahn MD is a resident physician in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Her interest in medical humanities has led her to The Examined Life conference in Iowa City, to a workshop in Narrative Medicine at Columbia University, and to tell a live story at the annual Twin Cities resident story slam. Her professional interests include medical education, clinical ethics and humanism in medicine. When not at the hospital, she can be found listening to samba music and touring historic houses. This piece was written during the initial weeks of the coronavirus pandemic.