

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Michele Herman: “The Ropes”

Michele Herman · Tuesday, November 9th, 2021

Michele Herman, “The Ropes,” 2021 Jack Grapes Poetry Prize Finalist selected by Judge Mariano Zaro

This poem opens with a very precise image: “The ropes were mounted/on the ceiling of the gym.” Then, with remarkable pacing the poet unveils the nature of the characters (“Jeannie O’Brian,” “Mr. Dube the gym teacher”). Without leaving the confined space of the gym, the poem expands and becomes a daring celebration of life.

— Mariano Zaro

The Ropes

The ropes were mounted
on the ceiling of the gym
several stories high.

Winter inevitably came
and with it indoor gym
and the gymnastics unit.

I was not flexible. I was not
strong or brave. The last thing
I wanted to do was tumble

in public when the balance
beam, horse and parallel
bars took up their stations

and the mats were hauled
out and the ropes released
from their hooks with a thunk.

But Jeannie O’Brien, the girl
in the wheelchair with the

time-stopping stammer,

the girl with the birdy bones,
the baby grin full of crooked
teeth, the mother who hovered

even in junior high, Jeannie
whose thin brown hair was
always freshly beribboned,

Jeannie who I lost track of
after seventh grade, who
haunts me to this day

because I mostly tried
to ignore her, because
there would have been

too steep a price to pay
to be one of the girls
who volunteered to push

her wheelchair from class
to cafeteria and girls' room
and back, turning my back

on all the jockeying
that went on among
the pretty and able-

bodied who could easily
afford to be thoughtless
and sometimes cruel —

Jeannie would be carried
by Mr. Dube the gym teacher,
who could also be cruel,

to the rope and Jeannie
would place her spindly
fingers on the fat braid

and climb with the speed
and the economy and
the silence of a spider,

like verticality's wizard,
like gravity's nose-thumber,
like nobody's victim.

This entry was posted on Tuesday, November 9th, 2021 at 6:10 am and is filed under [Poetry](#), [Literature](#), [PoetryPrize](#)

You can follow any responses to this entry through the [Comments \(RSS\)](#) feed. You can leave a response, or [trackback](#) from your own site.