

This Is The Landscape

Julia Watts Belser

So reads the doormat of conditional welcome:
Here will pass the en-abled, blessed be their less complicated bodies.
They will be able to hustle up a flight of stairs,
decipher the PA, endure fluorescent lights,
and follow long, thick, complicated words.
They will not come with service dogs or baby strollers,
with sign language, wheels, or walkers.
They will be strong and stoic,
like machines that never break,
expectant of perfection.
They will not come a-hobbling.

I will not run with them,
those who would devour my wholeness
because it does not measure up, standard-sized.
I will not come begging
on my knees.

This is the landscape of loneliness,
the stink of pity,
the way someone's story of tragedy curls around my body
where it doesn't belong.
Well-meaning people apologize for the wrong things:
I'm sorry about the scooter, they say.
I'm not.

I'm sorry about what passes for the accessible entrance
(the back way where they cart out the trash)
about the sidewalks that quit without curb cuts,
the single step that could have been smoothed,
or the "accessible dorm" where disabled students live—
good thing they don't want to visit their friends.
I'm sorry you haven't had the privilege of seeing me
in your schools, your delis, your bathrooms, your boardrooms,
I'm sorry you don't even know to miss me,
that you grew up in a world that didn't bother to build me a way in.

But this is the landscape,
and I am *not* sorry.
I'm angry, and I'm weary, and I'm tired of waiting.
There are apologies due,
but they needn't all come pearling from my lips
like bribes to the borderguards of inaccessible terrain.
I am not sorry.
I am not the one who's shamed.