



Brilliant Imperfection

GRAPPLING WITH CURE

ELI CLARE



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Imperfection

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To the tallgrass prairie
and the crip communities
that have sustained me.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction: Writing a Mosaic	xv
A Note on Reading This Book:	
Thinking about Trigger Warnings	xix

Brilliant Imperfection: White Pines	1
-------------------------------------	---

1	IDEOLOGY OF CURE
	Birth 5
	Prayers, Crystals, Vitamins 5
	Beliefs about Disability 7
	Overcoming Disability 8
	Hope in Motion 10
	Rebelling against Cure 12
	The Restoration of Health 14
	Walking in the Prairie 16

Brilliant Imperfection: Twitches and Tremors	19
--	----

2	VIOLENCE OF CURE
	Defect 23
	At the Center of Cure Lies Eradication 25

Personhood Is a Weapon 28
Great Turmoil 30

Brilliant Imperfection: Maples 33

3 IN TANDEM WITH CURE

Cerebral Palsy 37
Reading Diagnosis 41
Disorder 43
Antibiotics and Acupuncture 44
The Price of Diagnosis 45
Useful, but to Whom? 48

Brilliant Imperfection: Stone 49

4 NUANCES OF CURE

Wishing You Less Pain 53
Wanting Cure 54
Birthmark 54
Cautionary Tale 55
Body-Mind Yearning 57
Yearning for the Peeper Pond 58
Jostling My Anti-Cure Politics 60
Your Suicide Haunts Me 63

Brilliant Imperfection: Shells 65

5 STRUCTURE OF CURE

The Medical-Industrial Complex 69
A Far-Reaching Network 70
Troubled and Troubling Body-Minds 71
Variations on Cure 76
Skin Lighteners and Hot Springs 77

Brilliant Imperfection: Hermit Crabs 81

- 6 HOW CURE WORKS
- Cure Just around the Corner 85
 - Charity Events 88
 - Shifting Technologies 91
 - A Pharmaceutical History of Eflornithine 95
- Brilliant Imperfection: Rolling 99
- 7 AT THE CENTER OF CURE
- Carrie Buck I: Yearning 103
 - Carrie Buck II: Torrent of History 107
 - Carrie Buck III: Feeble-minded 110
 - Lives Reduced to Case Files 112
 - Living with *Monkey* 115
 - Schizophrenia 119
- Brilliant Imperfection: Myrtle 125
- 8 MOVING THROUGH CURE
- Choosing Disability 129
 - Airports and Cornfields 132
 - Interdependence 135
 - Wanting a Flat Chest 137
 - Gender Identity Disorder 139
 - Claiming Ourselves 142
- Brilliant Imperfection: Drag Queen 147
- 9 IMPACTS OF CURE
- Endless Questions 151
 - Ashley's Father 152
 - Resisting Intelligence 156
 - Feeling Broken 158
 - Being Fixed 161
 - Shame and Pride 163
- Brilliant Imperfection: Survival Notes 169

10 PROMISE OF CURE

Normal and Natural 173

Finding Wholeness 174

Gender Transition 177

Bullied 180

A Maze of Contradictions 183

Mama, What Will You Swear? 184

Walking in the Prairie Again 186

Brilliant Imperfection: Cycling 189

Notes 191

Bibliography 201

Index 209

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INTRODUCTION: WRITING A MOSAIC

Meandering through a working-class neighborhood in Chicago, I happen upon a mosaic spread across the front of a community center. The colors catch me; purple, lavender, yellow, orange dance together. Up close the tiles are smooth, jagged, rounded, reflective, translucent, sparkling in the morning sun, no two pieces the same size and shape.

When I set out to write about cure more than a decade ago, I didn't intend to create a swirling, multibranched pattern of histories, ideas, and feelings. I planned to craft a half dozen interlocking essays. I imagined a simple, well-laid-out collage. But as so often happens with creative projects, I've ended up somewhere I never envisioned. I wrote a mosaic.

The fragments and slivers that make up this book came to me in my fury about eugenic practices, the words *defect* and *monkey*, the destruction of tallgrass prairie. They took shape as more than one disability activist challenged my fierce anti-cure politics. They emerged as I sifted through my own experiences with the diagnoses of mental retardation, cerebral palsy, schizophrenia, and gender identity disorder.

Everything in this mosaic started as a conversation. I drew on disability politics, antiracist activism, queer and transgender movement building, fat liberation work. I pulled environmental justice and reproductive justice into the fray. I used what I know firsthand about ableism and how it interlocks with racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and classism.

I followed the lead of many communities and spiritual traditions that recognize body and mind not as two entities but as one, resisting the dualism built into white Western culture. Some use the word *bodymind* or *mindbody*; others choose *body/mind* or *body-and-mind*. I settled on *body-mind* in order to recognize both the inextricable relationships between our bodies and our minds and the ways in which the ideology of cure operates as if the two are distinct—the mind superior to the body, the mind defining personhood, the mind separating humans from nonhumans.

I trail my fingers along the mosaic, feeling bumps and ridges, the tiles' rough edges, almost sharp. And then I step back to the curb. The individual shapes become less distinct, and a woman's face, a boy in a handstand, feet akimbo, a hand holding a paintbrush emerge. They are vibrant, fractured, whole.

I started to see the patterns among these seemingly disconnected fragments and slivers as I talked late at night with friends hunkered around kitchen tables; watched the maple trees outside my writing room, season after season; and slept outside, sheltered by white pines.

But cure is slippery. Every place I began turned into a hundred new beginnings. I uncovered cure in obvious places: the Muscular Dystrophy Association's fund-raising appeals, the rhetoric of actor and wheelchair user Christopher Reeve as he lobbied for stem cell research and searched for a way to walk again. But it also kept appearing in less obvious places: ex-gay conversion therapy, weight loss surgery, and skin lightening creams marketed to dark-skinned women of color. I heard its echoes in ads for products claiming to remove women's facial hair and felt its reverberations in the medical technology some transgender people use to reshape our gendered and sexed body-minds. I saw it embedded in understandings of *normal* and *abnormal*, *natural* and *unnatural*, in stereotypes about disabled and chronically ill people, in the ways racism casts Black, Indigenous, and other people of color as defective. I slowly realized just how far the ideology of cure reaches.

I couldn't tell any one story without being interrupted by a half dozen others. I landed inside a knot of contradictions. Cure saves lives; cure manipulates lives; cure prioritizes some lives over others; cure makes profits; cure justifies violence; cure promises resolution to body-mind loss. I grappled through this tangle, picking up the same conundrums

and questions repeatedly, turning them over and over, placing them side by side, creating patterns and dialogues.

I'm drawn back to the mosaic later in the day, the bright yellows now light browns in the afternoon shade. I stand again at the curb, admiring. At this angle, I see spirals and stars, concentric circles of blue, a river of deep red. I could swear they weren't here this morning.

I wrote prose poems, diatribes, provocations, personal stories. I delved into history. I crafted political analysis. Cure kept shifting. No single genre was able to contain all these fragments. For a long time, I couldn't envision this book's fractured wholeness.

And then, brilliant imperfection emerged, swirling between my words. I learned this idea in disability community from my longtime friend and fierce activist Sebastian Margaret. As a way of knowing, understanding, and living with disability and chronic illness, brilliant imperfection is rooted in the nonnegotiable value of body-mind difference. It resists the pressures of *normal* and *abnormal*. It defies the easy splitting of *natural* from *unnatural*. It has emerged from collective understandings and stubborn survivals. It is expressed in different ways by different communities. Sebastian taught it to me as an uppity, determined pride. Brilliant imperfection winds through this mosaic, a river of deep red.

Inside these shifting yellows, these ridges and bumps, these triangles and multisided oblongs, I'm still finding ideas, stories, and feelings that provoke me, surprise me, leave me wanting more.

Standing at the curb, I know that the spirals and stars, concentric circles of blue were here all along. They simply appeared because my angle changed.

Come sit with me. Let this mosaic that began in conversation spark a hundred new conversations.