Carry Me

By Brian Volck
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Of late, I've been reading some works at the intersection of theology and the impaired body. As a physician trying to live as a Christian, that's where I spend much of my professional time. While I treasure idealized portrayals of the human figure in classical and Italian Renaissance art, I – like you, perhaps – am an imperfect body in a suffering world. In my life and work, I experience pain and suffering less as a brutal shattering of perfection than a familiar, often ironic companion.
That's why Catherine DeBoer's essay, "A Comic Vision? Northern Renaissance Art and the Human Figure" (collected in Theodore Prescott's luminous and illuminating volume, A Broken Beauty), so intrigued me. Breughel's limping, lumpy peasants may not dazzle like Caravaggio's impassioned Platonic forms, but they tell me far more about the everyday suffering which shapes our lives. As DeBoer quotes one early biographer of Northern Renaissance artists, "It is the mark of true comedy that one knows how to depict and imitate everything equally naturally, both sadness and joy,

composure and rage – in a word all the bodily movements and facial expressions that spring from the many impulses of the spirit."

How, though, might twenty-first century artists "naturally" represent the impaired or suffering body without exploiting those they portray? Here's where I find the work of visual artist Tim Lowly so compelling. His daughter, Temma, who appears frequently in his paintings, has a constellation of impairments Lowly never disguises. While the emerging conversation between disability studies and post-colonial criticism (see, for example, Sharon V. Betcher's Spirit and the Politics of Disablement) leaves every discussion or representation of the disabled by the (temporarily) abled open to harsh criticism, Lowly lovingly places his daughter in contexts which neither idealize nor demean her.

For me, Lowly's most haunting depiction of Temma is "Carry Me." Six women bear Temma in their arms and look upward with expressions of love and purpose, revealing in their glance more about community and inclusion than a shelf-load of post-structuralist critiques. Lowly locates Temma at the center of a community lightly bearing her, depicting his daughter neither as an embarrassment to be hidden nor a problem to be solved through a series of technological fixes. In a way many of my scientific colleagues would find impossible to articulate, Temma gathers those who hold her into a body. She is not autonomous (she is literally a burden, however light) but her presence – her body – transforms individuals into a people.

Every so often, I come across a way of seeing which calls into question the way I practice medicine: the essays of Stanley Hauerwas, for example, or the stories of Wendell Berry. Tim Lowly's art demand yet another reassessment. Who wields the instruments of healing – those who call themselves healers and helpers, or the patient (from the Latin root, "to suffer") who gathers them together? Temma's image will be disturbing my thoughts for some time to come.

Note: This piece was originally published on the *Image* Journal blog Good Letters.