



Source: Tom Hyland, 'The wars within wars destroying Iraq', *The Age online*, 29/10/06.

Tags: [child/parent](#), [animals](#), [shape-shifting](#), [corporeality](#), [disease](#), [water](#)

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She had always been frightened of the pond—that circle of warm green water that was now surrounded with a wire mesh fence. There was an uproar five years ago and demands that the area be drained and chemicals poured in to clean up the sludge, but some scientists said they needed a living laboratory, so to speak—a place where they could monitor the murky business of mutation and growth.

That was the same year that her daughter was born, a time when no mother gave birth to malformed babies any more, and yet her child had arrived with those impossible long legs and spindly arms. 'A water insect,' she had thought when the baby was placed in her arms. 'I've given birth to a water insect,' and she imagined this creature with the large, slightly bulging eyes, lightly dancing on the surface tension of that pond and then in a flicker of afternoon light, sprouting gauze wings and flying away.

On the wire fence surrounding the pond there was a large sign printed with big block letters: 'DANGER Hazardous Environment DO NOT ENTER'. She had felt compelled to press her face against the wire and imagine what might be breeding beneath the complicated surface of that seemingly stagnant water: amphibian spiders, eels with wings, fleshy plants with tiny white teeth. Once, when she was a girl and before the pond had been fenced off, a boy had pushed her in—and for one terrifying moment she had been deep inside that algae soup, the slippery whip of something smooth touching her thigh, brown ribbons floating and then, close to her face, almost touching her, a budding pupae ready to burst.

They had taken blood samples in the maternity ward immediately after the baby was born, a smear on a glass slide that allowed the chromosomes to be studied. There was so much more known about the genetic blueprint for humans by that time and it had been explained to her that long hours of research had led to the creation of a complete dictionary, as it were—all the necessary words that explained human growth—although the precise definitions and meaning of that language were not yet clear. As for her own particular language, she seemed to be missing some letters and this had been further complicated through the process of reproduction. Perhaps it was the reason for her daughter's shrivelled limbs.

She wouldn't have used the word shrivelled. And although her daughter was unable to walk, she couldn't help feel that perhaps it was the surfaces that she was being asked to walk over that was the problem, not the limbs themselves. Her arms and legs grew increasingly longer and more graceful, the fingers and toes like antennae, as if they were able to sense something else and something more.

The child's back began to scoop, like the hollow of a wave. The doctors suggested implanting a steel rod in her spine. 'I'll attract fridge magnets,' said the little girl, who had

developed an extraordinary sense of humour for one so young. There certainly was nothing lacking in her ability to think, although people regularly assumed that she must be mentally deficient as well.

It was difficult getting about. It wasn't just the stairs, heavy doors and the street kerbs; it was the attitude of other people, the sentimentality and the disgust. She did send her daughter to a school for a while and the teachers were moderately supportive but there was something kittenish about their expectations (a career in arts and crafts) and something fearful as well. Had it been death? The doctors kept saying that the little girl wouldn't live very long—couldn't live very long with the way that she was stretching out. This must be a degenerative disease.

She stares at the pond and thinks that living is a degenerative disease, if you want to put that sort of spin on things, and the surface of the water shivers as if in reply. Her daughter had been attracted to this place, had begged to be carried to the edge of the fence. By that time her body had turned quite rubbery and the physiotherapists had wrapped her in bandages in an effort to keep her straight. The orthotics department in the hospital clinic made a plastic brace to help her sit up in a chair but the child refused to wear it, said that sitting up was an over-rated position and preferred to flop on her stomach like a fish.

Had she been a fish or an insect? Perhaps the child was part bird. But she was also human, an extension of human possibilities, and she had been lying on the grass next to the fence sketching what seemed to be a distorted representation of the pond. Couldn't she have tried the plastic brace just once, taken the opportunity to sit up and at least get the correct perspective?

'But this is my perspective,' this child who was nearing womanhood had replied and in a motion of defiance wriggled closer to the fence. The letters on the sign had worn by that time: 'DAGER Hazard Ment. DO ENTER'. Swaddled in those bandages, her daughter had looked rather like a moth larvae struggling out of a cocoon, a long dark shadow on the grass that was sliding under the lip of the fence where the wire had curled up.

She does recall running forward, warning her not to move, as if such a disabled person could move, but in a sudden burst of sunlight her daughter was gone. There were only brown ribbons of bandage, stained with mud, and over the pond a cloud of stick insects with translucent wings silently humming. They rose up, over the fence, over the sign, over the incomplete words and a village full of stairs and street kerbs that had been such a bother in the past.

She was perfect, absolutely perfect for a different kind of future...but she had disappeared.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Carol Major.*