

## ACTION TRANSFERS

By ALEX PUGSLEY



THE SUMMER MY PARENTS DIVORCED THE FIRST TIME,  
 THE SUMMER I TURNED SEVEN,  
 I WAS NO LONGER ABLE TO WALK.

Something happened to my super-speed. The flash of quickness I once relied on to propel me past any other living kid left me and I began to limp from an ache localized at the top of my left leg. This progressed into a sharp and steep pain, preventing me from walking, from hobbling, until finally I simply hopped everywhere on my right foot. My older sister said it was because I had an undigested carrot lodged in my hip-bone and explained I should have listened to her about properly chewing my food, but another diagnosis pointed to a form of avascular femoral osteonecrosis and a bone disorder called Legg-Perthes. So I was hospitalized for the months of that summer and spent my days and nights in orthopedic traction—that is, with pulley weights dragging my legs away from my pelvis.

Even though I had brought with me a pencil case of precious effects, and even though my parents had spoiled me with a number of new Letraset Super Action Transfers—acetate heroes that could be rubbed on to cardboard panoramas—my stay in hospital was a strange time for me. I was so surprised by my new situation that I mostly pretended it wasn't happening, that I wasn't in a hospital, that things were the same, and that I would soon be returned to my family's life, delivered from whatever mythical creatures this place contained. But morning after morning, I awoke in the Izaak Walton Killam Hospital for Children, unable to walk away from my mechanized bed, unable to use my legs, unsure what would happen.

I remember the smells of the place, the green reek of the industrial cleanser used on the tile floor, the blended odours of a lunch cart's undelivered meals—cubes of processed ham congealing into cheese macaroni, tapioca pudding melting with humidity, snack-size cartons of souring skim milk. By the end of the fifth day, I developed bedsores and chafed elbows, my skin a mess of raw cross-hatchings, and I was forced finally to pass a bowel movement into a metal bed pan. I buzzed for a nurse to come empty this pan but nurses were often busy and no one came right away. So the smell of my feces, my just-lying-there-on-the-stainless-steel poop, spread through the air, slightly sickening me and very much embarrassing me, for I was not alone in the room. I was in a double room and over the eight weeks of my stay behind the curtained partition was a succession of other kids—tonsillitis kids, appendix kids, car accident kids. A new patient might come in the middle of the night, host a crowd of visitors that morning, have surgery that afternoon, and be gone the next day.

Small talk with other families depleted me—fake smiles, hopeful waves, promises to stay in touch. I was happiest when I was alone and the other bed was empty, a stack of laundered sheets clean on the bare mattress. All day I would occupy myself with my pencil case of precious effects: a much-loved Batman figurine sprung from a toy Batboat, a green terrycloth wrist band, a newly-received Yellow Submarine. For hours I played with this Yellow Submarine, tremendously impressed with the cast-metal permanence of such an artifact, its revolving periscope, and the hatches that opened to reveal a pair of psychedelic Beatles. At the end of the day I watched the black-and-white television mounted on the ceiling, each evening wondering at Truth or Consequences and the lives of people who lived outside hospitals. I awoke sometimes to screams at night—kids wailing, adults sobbing—and sadder adults you will never see than those pacing a children's hospital at three in the morning. The hallway outside my room was mostly quiet with moments of sudden, shrieking calamity.

**MORE TERRIFYING FOR ME WAS THE ATTEMPT** at recreation and diversion on weekday mornings. Day after day I would be wheeled in my hospital bed toward the elevators, the hallway's perspective telescoping wildly like the dolly-zoom in a spooky movie, where I would share the rising car with a perpetually smiling hospital porter. Arriving at the top of the building, I would be steered down the hallway toward the fifth floor play area.

From inside my bed, I watched the walls go by, queasy at the sight of the cheerful posters that featured, say, a photograph of two kittens dangling from tree branches beside the jokey caption "Hang In There!" or a school of cartoon minnows happy to be reading from the same story-book. For this room was full of extremely ill and not-healthy-at-all children: cancer kids, burn victim kids, paralyzed kids in wheelchairs. But my attention that first morning was drawn to a purple-faced boy in a hospital bed.

I say purple-faced boy because that's all he seemed to be—I had no idea the world held such problematics. He was a Thalidomide child who, God knows how, had survived into puberty and adolescence, and the purpleness of his complexion, which under the fluorescent ceiling lights looked positively saurian, was the combined result of teenage acne and steroid medication. The purple-faced boy was one of fifty cases born in the city and he was, like the jokes I would later hear in the school playground, a Guy with No Arms and No Legs.

He was mostly just a head and I felt so humiliated and sorry for this purple-faced boy, who was living an existence he hadn't chosen but which he must have known was about as wretched as a human life could be—and I am ashamed even now as I write this that on that first morning I couldn't look him in the eye and was too afraid to talk to him. Because he could speak, of a fashion, making glottal noises in his throat to indicate a direction or that he wished returned to his bed a fallen book. I was embarrassed by this purple-faced boy—wondering how on earth he had happened and could what happened to him happen to me?—and I was sickened to feel such embarrassment and this first moment has stayed with me and stayed with

me and stayed with me, because of all the kids in the fifth floor play area, the cancer kid, the burn victim kid, the paralyzed kid in the wheelchair, or me, a kid in traction, we all knew we were better off than this purple-faced boy, who was a horrendous fuck-up of a human. With his misshapen head and squiggle fins he seemed a sort of monster and not a sure bet to be anything but dead. I had never met a kid so marked for death. I could sense he knew this, his eyes were grey and grim and guarded—he probably knew he was not going to get out of that children's hospital and that his possibilities for life were diminished and diminishing.

We happened to be the only kids in hospital beds that morning and the Perpetually Smiling Porter put our beds together, so that we were side by side, our bed rails bumping. A nurse assigned to the fifth floor play area, this was a formidable woman from Herring Cove named Patty Oickle, suggested I share my Super Action Transfers with the purple-faced boy. But in my panic I feigned discomfort, as if I were in pain from my traction weights, and stared instead at the bald chemo kid who was loose on the floor, playing with a golden Hot Wheels car I recognized as Splittin' Image.

From the nearby nurse's station, an eight-track played a record from that year, *Bridge Over Troubled Water*. Though I had loved the first side a few months before, especially the jubilant "Cecilia," the tape's second song became for me a small eternity of suffering. This was "El Condor Pasa," an odd, despairing folk tune, full of faraway sorrow. The singer's existential musings—he'd rather be a sparrow...than a nail...or a hammer...if he could? Who would want to be either? I didn't *understand* the guy—preyed on my child's sense of insecurity and looming dread so that when recreation time was over and I was finally free of the fifth floor play area, I was fantastically grateful to be delivered back to my room, regardless of its screams and smells or possible room-mates, content in my diversion of Letraset and comic books and my pencil case of curiosities. I'd rather stay in my room for the entire two months by myself if I could—if I only could, I surely would.

**BUT EACH WEEKDAY MORNING ON THE POLISHED** floor I would hear the shoe-steps of the Perpetually Smiling Porter and I would be wheeled again to the fifth floor play area. The first day of my second week, my middle sisters brought a care package to me (Twizzlers, Pixy Stix, Green Lantern—Green Arrow comic), and, not finding me in my room, went searching. They found me in the fifth floor play area, next to the bed-ridden purple-faced boy.

They came exploring down the hall, my sister Faith softly humming "See See My Playmate," and then—and I remember this next moment so exactly—they were completely bewildered at the sight of the purple-faced boy. Both reacted by staring at him, hardly blinking, gazing in a sort of simple fascination—not because of any prejudice toward him, but because of a lack of all reference for what they were seeing—which in turn provoked wild curiosity and disbelief. They were having trouble identifying the purple-faced boy as a person, as something more than monstrous, as a creature recognizably human. I felt in that moment that completely ignoring him, was not the sort of example I should set for my sister Faith, who was four years old and quite an impressionable young girl, and so I turned to the purple-faced boy and said hello and told him my name. He did not have a lot of motor control over his neck and his pupils tended to quickly shift and re-adjust, often straining to the limits of the eye-socket. He made a sort of smile, his eyes sympathetic to me, and through the bars of his hospital bed I touched at his nearest appendage.

After Bonnie and Faith left—they were not allowed to stay as the fifth floor play area was off-limits to civilians—I showed the purple-faced boy the Letraset I was working on, a space adventure called *The Red Planet*. Letraset was about finding the right place in the landscape for the action figure as well as cleanly transferring it to the panorama. Sometimes in my haste the figure, especially if it were in a pose I considered humdrum, would only partially come off the acetate, forcing me to line it up again and to try to match, say, a sentry's hand

with a disembodied ray-gun. The purple-faced boy examined my handiwork, noting the split-level choreography I had achieved around a cliff face, and glanced at the sheets of acetates.

I passed him the last sheet and the teaspoon I'd been using as a transferring implement. He accepted the acetate but made me aware that he didn't need the spoon, producing from the bed-sheets a pencil, sharpened at both ends. He held his double-pencil in pincer fashion, one of his appendages having opposable digits of a kind, like a swollen crab claw. He penciled the acetate figure into the landscape with surprising authority and concentration. His handiwork was superb and glitch-free, his effort very genuine, and, as I nodded to him, the mutual enterprise involving us, bonding us, I understood I had a colleague in the fifth floor play area.

**THE PURPLE-FACED BOY WAS STEADY AND** studious and resolute—he took nothing for granted, ever watchful, noting everything for himself—and he had a superpower. He had an ability to read fast, very fast, there's-no-way-he-read-it-that-fast. His gurney-bed was home to an improvised library and book after book vanished into his eyes. I saw him put away *Tintin au Congo*, André Norton's *Witch World*, and *The Fellowship of the Ring* in the space of a day. He would use his double-pencil to guide his eyes along a line of text and, when reading a newspaper, arranged his bed-sheets on either side of a column so his gaze wouldn't bounce around. Because he didn't really speak himself, I guessed his reading was swift and free of any subvocalization, fields of text moving clean into his nervous system. One quiet Wednesday in the fifth floor play area, Nurse Patty Oickle rolled over to our vicinity one of the hospital's book trolleys. This was an assortment of sorry-looking children's books within which had been stowed some adult hardcovers like *King Rat*, *The Valley of the Dolls*, and *Papillon*.

The purple-faced boy was fascinated by *Papillon*. I saw him read it three times, and, though I could be baffled by the tedious sameness of the pages of an adult

book, I scanned through it myself, understanding it was a true-life adventure about criminals escaping Devil's Island. But I was busy finishing General Custer, my next-to-last Super Action Transfer. The remaining Letraset was some jungle-themed piece I didn't care for called *Animals of the World*, all elephants and peacocks, and I offered it to him. His eyes spun to their furthest extreme, bloodshot with strain, indicating I should return to him the *Papillon* hard-cover. In the top right corner of the book's first end-paper, he placed the image of a bull elephant and rubbed it perfectly into the book. He turned the page and positioned a second elephant on the next recto page, again in the top corner, so the images would align. He turned the page and began another, in this manner filling up the book's first quire, his double-pencil whittled down to a nubbin. I said nothing, watching the acetate animals emerge glistening in each page corner. Then, in a moment that revealed to me an intricate genius, he fluffed these first pages, making the animals shape-shift in a shimmer of animation. He had made a flip-book.

"We can do this," I said to him, excited and raising myself off my hospital bed. "You can do this. We can do the whole book. I'll help you. You wanna do it?" The purple-faced boy looked at me, his own eyes shimmering for a moment, their grimness replaced by insight and curiosity. I asked him again and slowly, because the movement was onerous, he nodded his heavy head, yes, yes he would do it.

**I'M NOT SURE WHY, EXACTLY, IT SEEMED CRUCIALLY** important for two bedridden boys to transfer an acetate figure to every other page of a book called *Papillon*. The venture was ours, it was attainable, it was perfectible, and I liked that we were re-making a contraption already in the world, giving it new meaning and vividness. I suppose the project was our plan, our jubilation, our method of escape, and there was for me something so inexplicably right about it. My days in the hospital, which once seemed never-ending, an infinity of bedsores and decomposing lunches, became fraught and finite. To inscribe every other page of the book's

pages would require 228 figures—elephants, eagles, lions, gladiators, wild west cowboys, I didn't care as long as they were transferred in the mint-perfect style he had established.

In mid-August, there was a visitation from my mother, distracted in a floppy hat and peasant skirt. I put in my request for more Letraset then asked her about the purple-faced boy. How long had he been in the hospital? How long would he stay in the hospital? "He can stay till he's eighteen," said my mother. "And then he'll have to go to another hospital." Then where—where would he go then? But my mother, who was suffering from the lingering effects of a year-long post partum depression, who had spent a few weeks that summer in another hospital herself, who would shortly leave my father for some months, was not able or interested in pursuing an unknown child's possibilities. She shrugged to show there were contingencies in the world she neither controlled nor understood. I didn't push the subject, opting to simply re-emphasize my requisition order for Letraset. And to my deepest pleasure, my oldest sister brought and left me more Letraset—copies of *Zulu*, *Carnival*, and *Prehistoric Monsters Battle*—at the nurses station the next morning.

**IN A CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL, THERE IS A LULL** the week after Labour Day, when sport camps have finished, when canoe lessons are done, when families have returned from vacations and there is lighter traffic on highways. So the hallway outside my room was calm, the other bed in my room unfilled. I was not sure where the purple-faced boy went at night, because in a few days time I was to be released from traction, fitted with plaster casts, and discharged from hospital—and we still had fourteen pages of *Papillon* to finalize—so I asked Nurse Oickle, who had taken an interest in my partnership with the purple-faced boy, if he might be moved to my room. But the purple-faced boy never left the fifth floor, she told me, and needed to be kept under observation at night, and a shift to the second floor was out of the

## WHITE PANSY, 1927 — GEORGIA O'KEEFFE

It's like those photos of the dead, disengaged in some essential way, but beautiful, an innerness so intent the wall glows. The spot where soul once came and went, the only real colour, yolk-gold, though mauve-black bruises mar the fringe where caress deepens to a pinch. The rest white, frosted cheeks and chins. Why didn't she place it in a vase? Memory alone isn't enough to keep anything alive. All that's left is the levitating smell of oil, the shush of a hog's hair brush. A flower long-gone, petals crisp and cold, puckered at the core like lips sewn shut.

*What is art?*

A gasp of dazzle.  
An old woman staring you  
down with her bone face.

— Barry Dempster

question. So I asked if my stay in hospital might be extended. But this, too, was impossible because the appointment for my casts with the orthopedic surgeon was booked for Friday morning. In this moment the face of Patty Oickle from Herring Cove was faintly plump, solicitous—but she was baffled that I wanted to stay longer in hospital when there were, as she put it, "only three more jeezly days of summer left." So I asked, if the purple-faced boy couldn't be moved to my room, could I be moved to his? She wasn't sure but said she would ask.

The next morning the purple-faced boy was not present in the fifth floor play area. He was somewhere having tests—he was in line for an operation to repair a congenital heart defect—and there was some concern whether his system could stand such a procedure. On my own, I worked on *Papillon* but nervously and only completed one image, a Triceratops whose horn-prong I almost mangled, very nearly twisting it in the final transfer. I had one last day in hospital and thirteen more pages to complete so I asked again if I could visit the purple-faced boy, wherever he was, and finally

Nurse Oickle relented. I never knew if she got higher approval or simply snuck me on her own.

The Perpetually Smiling Porter wheeled me after hours to the elevators and we ascended to the summit, moving beyond the fifth floor play area and through a room of odd incubators where inside were cocooned pinkish, wrinkled creatures—newborn infants, I saw, but smaller than newborns, and some with open chests, for this was the neonatal ward. I was mystified that hidden on the fifth floor was an entire culture of other patients, preemies kept alive in ICU isolation. In the doorway to his room, on his gurney-bed, was the purple-faced boy.

He surveyed the scene, reviewing his fellow-patients with steady interest. His colour was not good—his cheeks seemed desiccated, the consistency of tissue paper, the result, perhaps, of some augmented medication—and his thoughts, as ever, seemed far away.

How many kids had he seen come and go? What did he know?

From six o'clock we worked till ten, working until my eyes were dry, my fingers cramped and trembling. "Wanna leave the rest till tomorrow?" I asked, shaking out my hand. "The last two pages?" At that moment an exhausted-looking anesthetist arrived, confused to see me with the purple-faced boy. She told me I would have to return to the second floor, that a night nurse would arrive shortly to take me back my room. I registered the details around me, the pills and ointments at his bedside, the varied prescriptions on his rolling lunch table, the books piled in the windowsill. All the books he read—where did they dwell? Where did they go in his imagination—where did these meanings reside?

I stared at the purple-faced boy, this boy whose name I would never know, contemplating his care and diligence, the shift and flicker of his grey-green eyes. He was oblivious to the distractions of the other room—the beep-beep of the electro-cardiograms, the chorus of haphazard breathing—and working with a

single-pointedness of mind I was only now beginning to appreciate. I was conscious of my staring at him, as he must've been conscious of my staring at him, as he must've grown used to *all* sorts of staring years ago, but the example of his intent was really meaning something to me and as I was wheeled out of the room, I reached in kinship to my colleague, touching at the pincer-fingers that held the double-pencil.

**AT THE END OF SUMMER I WAS RELEASED FROM** traction, encased in hip-to-toe Petrie casts, and given a wheelchair. After two months in hospital, I was free to scissor off my hospital identification bracelet and return to my family's life. My parents were busy divorcing that month so no one in my family was able to meet me. I was told a cab would be coming. I had no trousers that could fit over my plaster casts and so there I was, in T-shirt and green y-front underwear, waiting in a wheelchair at the front doors of the children's hospital.

I was so bewildered to be outdoors amid seagulls and flying beetles and smells of cut-lawns and thoughts of going home that I hadn't really registered the unorthodoxy of my appearance. It was only when the taxi arrived—and the driver, who lifted me from my wheelchair and stowed me in the back seat, kept repeating that it was nothing to be embarrassed about, being in your underwear, no, it was exactly like being in a bathing suit, exactly like it, sure, just like being in a bathing suit—that I felt ashamed for I sensed his humiliation for me, a blinking kid in underpants, unable to walk, waiting alone at the hospital, clutching a pencil case of knick-knacks. The driver was packing the collapsed wheelchair into the trunk when someone knocked on my window. On this morning, the face of Patty Oickle was drawn, anguished. She opened the car door and gave me the copy of *Papillon*, saying I should keep it. I was never told of the purple-faced boy's death, exactly, but I guessed it, I felt it, from her face I knew it.

Years afterward, my older sister would talk of him, recalling in contemplative moments the person she had seen for a few minutes one Monday morning. "He was probably better off not being alive," she said. "A boy like that—he's better off."

Life seemed random to me that summer, death more so—I was only a kid, seven years old, but my sense of fairness was disturbed. Something seemed off in the universe. But I had been given the gift of a book. Coming home that afternoon, lifted back into my house, I opened the final pages of *Papillon*. On the next-to-last page, in the top corner, was the blended image of two Super Action Transfers, a lion with the head-and-wings of an eagle: a gryphon. It was a work of keen talent and I was impressed by the rightness of the proportions, the invisible seam between creatures, the gleam of assurance in the eagle's eyes. The last page was blank and I would wonder for years why it was left this way, deciding at last that it was simply a sign of things to come. ☐

**"THIS..."**  
doesn't try to be hip, it just is.  
It never ceases to make me think,  
question things and get angry"  
—Sarah Polley



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