“Disability” is a word that often polarizes. It is a concept that assumes classification: once a person is disabled, he or she is conveniently tucked into that slot, as though disability were one single thing. The assumption is that the various disabilities have sufficient overriding similarities to live comfortably and logically alongside each other in one single category. When that thinking is examined, it seems woefully naïve.

Maybe it is actually those who are not disabled who have more in common with each other. There is the shared obliviousness to the general functioning of the human body—all systems humming invisibly, soothing the organism with blissful denial of the thousands of interconnecting elements. It is only when these components falter that awareness blunders in. We learn that there is no end to the permutations of debility that can unhinge us—an unfortunate flipside to the genius of human complexity.

So perhaps it is the non-disabled who should be saddled with the constricting, uniform label. The term “temporarily able” may be linguistically awkward, but it is psychologically potent, reminding us that the state of “all systems go” is inherently precarious. It is just a matter of time before the balancing act needed to keep the human body afloat becomes afflicted with internal rebellions. These rebellions may be big or they may be small, but they are, regrettably, in store for all of us.

The majority of the Fall 2008 issue of the Bellevue Literary Review is devoted to exploring these issues. The title—“Abilities and Disabilities: The Range of Human Function”—was chosen in order to invite a broad scope of writing. You will find writings in this issue that deal with what might classically be considered as disability, and others that focus on unusual, more subtle, aspects. Some selections bring us directly into the experience of disability; others offer the perspective from differing degrees of separation.

M. Eileen Cronin, in her essay “Breaking Point,” brings us into the immediacy of a pulsing disco on spring break, as she and her two prosthetic legs negotiate the college mating rituals. David Milofsky’s essay, “Cripple’s Kid,” tells us what it was like to grow up watching multiple sclerosis claim ever more of his father, a professional violinist.

In the story “Plazoleta,” by Eric Stener Carlson, we find ourselves eavesdropping on the phone call of an Argentinean woman as she reveals her feelings about her husband and his wheelchair-bound brother. In Martha Cooley’s story “Bad Acts,” the perspective is from the divorced daughter-in-law, who stays by the wheelchair of her former father-in-law during his wife’s funeral.

Loreen Niewenhuis takes us another step removed in “The Girl with the Mechanical Leg.” Here we have the view from the hematology technician who will process the bone marrow transplant of a teenager with Ewing’s sarcoma of the leg.

Disability can affect marriages in a variety of ways. Two stories—“The Wife’s Friend” and “Your Quiet Affair”—deal with extramarital relationships in the context of illness, but the underpinnings and ramifications are vastly different.

A number of writings deal with disabilities that affect the senses. Laura Hope-Gill explores the process of “acquiring silence” in her essay, “Hal-9000, Bach, and the Personal Physics of Going Deaf.” In the poem “The Sleepy Beauties of Sound,” Jane O. Wayne writes “I’d be motionless/ riding the kind of current/no one else would notice, a quiet/fuller than any noise.”

Susan Buis, in her poem “Blind Choreography,” describes moving through a house using hands as guides: “I’ve become a skilled cartographer,/ My handprints cover everything.” The poem, “Hemiplegia,” by Ona Gritz, offers a gentle meditation on how the paralyzed side of the body “feels” sensations from the unaffected side.

Jane Kokernak, who has an implanted insulin pump for her diabetes, probes some of the pragmatic issues that disability brings. In her essay, “Tethered to the Body,” she confronts the question of how to have sex when a medical device is attached to her body.

Several pieces in this issue deal with disabilities that affect the mind. Rick Kempa’s meditation, “The Rudeness,” shows his elderly mother fighting to grab words that are escaping her. In the essay “That Which Remains,” Kathleen Fortin writes of the opposite, the pieces that are left after other memories are lost. There are other stories, poems, and essays in this issue that explore disabilities that might have been, and disabilities in various stages of development.

The range of abilities and disabilities is vast, and this issue of the Bellevue Literary Review seeks to capture an array of experiences within that range. Some of the writings are uplifting; others may be disturbing. But we hope that you find this issue’s offerings evocative, thought-provoking, and ultimately memorable.