The trials and stimulations of getting around Houston's inner loop neighborhoods in a wheelchair
have a fantasy of a performance I’d like to give. I’d like to go into a restaurant in which all of the tables are crowded together, where the host would most likely seat me in my wheelchair at the first table, right next to the door, because that is the most accessible spot, right where the cold wind or hot air will come rushing through with every person entering. From there, I’ll very calmly and sweetly take a labyrinthine path through all of the small aisles, bulldozing through chairs and brazenly pushing tables back, never stopping, metal legs of tables and chairs scraping noisily against the floor as I go. With every inevitable worried offer of help, I will kindly and calmly say, “No thank you, I’ve got it,” until I’ve snaked my way through the whole restaurant. The movement of noises and the path of overturned chairs will fill the restaurant with a map of my own mind, at one point seeming as though it had no destination at all, and ultimately coming to a stopping point at the back of the restaurant, at the bathroom. To be able to enter a building, to look out at the markers of my ears and my eyes are alert for hidden holes and driveways that block the sidewalk, telephone poles planted in the middle of small walkways, steps. The wheels themselves are large, curvy hips that sometimes shimmy, sometimes coast, always whirring beneath my circling arms.

The vibration of the sidewalk against my wheels lets me know that I’m making friction against the ground, carving out a path. The little jogs onto the grass or street to avoid obstacles are an exciting push into dangerous territories, where my ears and my eyes are alert for hidden holes and whooshing cars, as I weave my way around parked cars and deep gutters. I meet the eyes of passersby; then I give them the top of my head.

Despite the fanciness of my new wheelchair, and despite the fact that Houston was voted the most disability-friendly city in the US in 2008 by the National Organization on Disability, I encounter impassable sidewalks and building entrances throughout the city. Although Houston is known predominantly as a driving city, underfunded in the areas of pedestrian- and biker-friendly paths, the city does run a “Safe Sidewalk Program,” providing repairs to sidewalks that serve pedestrian access to schools or along major thoroughfares or wheelchair-user access to public transportation, employment, and various necessary commercial venues. But this program is complaint-driven, and
according to Governing Magazine, “the small percentage of residents who qualify under the program can expect to wait up to two years for sidewalk repairs once approved.” Simply pushing myself through the street appears to be the more convenient option.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), now twenty years old and still changing, has dramatically increased the access that persons with disabilities have to employment, housing, and public and commercial spaces. It’s a civil rights law calling for “reasonable accommodations” for wheelchair users, among other persons with disabilities, to access public and commercial spaces through modifications such as ramps and wide doorways. So why do I still lack access to so many bars, coffee shops, and other businesses? Complicating matters, Texas follows the Texas Accessibility Standards (TAS), certified as an equivalent to the ADA guidelines. Commercial and public buildings are inspected for compliance with TAS when they are built or are undergoing renovations of $50,000 or more, but commercial venues built before January 1, 1992, and not undergoing large renovations (which includes many of the buildings I frequent) are not required to comply with these accessibility standards. Furthermore, beyond the initial inspection, TAS and ADA are only policed, like the Safe Sidewalks Program, when an individual files a complaint with the Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation or the Department of Justice. I have never done this. So far, I feel more empowered in negotiating with business owners themselves to make “reasonable accommodations,” making it clear that I won’t patronize them (and spread the word) if they don’t, than in waiting indefinitely for governmental processes to come through. I can say that it’s thanks to ADA that I can simply say “no” and go to a different venue. Wheelchair accessibility is now a more universal part of commercial building design in the US, a standard against which we can hold noncompliant businesses. This is another way in which I’ve learned to push back against the spaces I move through.

coffee shop recently opened in Montrose called Bungalow Coffee. Marketing themselves on the draw of a bungalow you might find in the Heights, complete with front porch and yard, they are in fact housed in a bungalow. And yes, a bungalow typically does have a couple of steps leading up to the porch, a kind of divider between the public street and the comfortable space of the porch. But the coffee shop didn’t consider adapting this design for someone in a wheelchair. What I was given instead of a ramp was a pained look of apology and an offer to carry me up the steps.

In the case of stairs, it is usually necessary to be carried. To reach my arm up around someone’s neck as he or she reaches one hand under my thighs and one hand under my back, breathes, and lifts. Sometimes my carrier is a complete stranger, sometimes a boyfriend or a close friend. For many years, it was my father. To be carried is to know what it’s like to carry that person’s body. “Don’t worry, I’ve got you,” I like to say. In some arms, I’m heavy and unbalanced. In others, I hang neatly against them, buoyant, as though lying in a hammock. I note the rare one who puts his hand on the back of my skirt before lifting me so as not to show my ass to the world, and this subtle attentiveness sends me. I’ve known others, excited or confused about their newfound power, who swing me around haphazardly like a life-size
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ragdoll. Some are cautious, some are laboring, some are effortless, some are nervous, and some are careless as airport baggage handlers. I know the distance of my face from theirs, their breathing and the tightness in their shoulders and neck, learn the rhythm and weight of their steps. I’m sure they know a few things about me, too. Sometimes the only way to push against architectural barriers is to give up on physical barriers, to take on another’s body as an extension of my own, and in return to offer up mine as an extension of his or hers. But this is a lot to offer up for a cup of coffee, and I pick my carriers carefully.

As a person with a disability, it’s often difficult to find access into a countercultural space. The bars and coffee shops frequented by people of my community—writers, artists, musicians, academics, hipsters—tend to be housed in either buildings built before ADA or TSA came into being or are simply set up to look as though they are old, hole-in-the-wall spots, disguising their faces from the busy streets. And because of this, I know that all of the signs that are simply meant as visual boundaries to mark off a cultural space are often physical boundaries blocking me out of that cultural space. Chances (now, sadly, closed), Big Star, and Poison Girl, to name a few, are all places that I can only access with help over a step or two. I entered each of these places for the first time with the help of a friend or a stranger, and I don’t hesitate to do so again. But that first encounter of a boundary around the building, blocking me out of that space, always smacks hard. It seems to question whether I really belong. I’ve been fortunate enough to find a way into unconventional cultural spaces over the years, and as I do so, I make myself more visible as a disabled person in that community. I ask questions about wheelchair access and handicap parking, get to know the owners and workers, and little by little, my act of resistance to open up those spaces is to make my experience visible from the inside out.

The eight-plex in which I now live didn’t originally have a ramp, and the Federal Fair Housing Act doesn’t require owners of housing built before March 13, 1991, to build me a ramp—only to allow me to add one myself. So I bribed an architect friend to design a ramp for me. I ordered all of the materials for delivery, and I then further bribed my friend and her coworkers to build the ramp. Menil Properties came along afterward to paint the ramp in their matching colors, and that’s the DIY manner in which I carved myself a path into a neighborhood and a living space I’d wanted to access for a long time. I’ve learned through processes such as this one that independence doesn’t mean self-sufficiency. Rather, independence requires a constant negotiation with my community, trading of favors, voicing my needs clearly, and a bit of patience.

I often wonder what it would be like to live in a city that was built for me, in which I could float easily, alone, in straight lines from one safe bubble of space to another. In “Figures, Doors and Passages,” Robin Evans describes how domestic architecture has shifted since the Renaissance from an open matrix of interconnected rooms that all served as thoroughfares for one another to a place of solitude and “independent access” for private rooms through hallways. With this comes a shift from a way of life in which accidental encounters and contact were a daily norm to a way of life in which “purposeful or necessary communication was facilitated while incidental communication was reduced, and contact . . . was at best incidental and distracting.”

If we look at the design of the larger city, we can see that Houston itself, in its sprawling form, its focus on convenient car passageways, and its well-known lack of zoning laws, focuses its design on a compartmentalized way of life, on “independent access.” Galleries, restaurants, and shops, because they don’t necessarily exist in an integrated space with the businesses around them, build their own environments for themselves. And as the majority of us travel alone to work by car, we spend our travel time in solitude, avoiding the random encounters with strangers that New Yorkers might have in their travel on subways, trains, and in taxi cabs. But because many of these spaces designed for independent access don’t allow me the same kind of access, I experience Houston in a more matrix-like manner than most. I find myself going three quarters of the way around a building before I find an entrance with a ramp. And often that entrance leads to a back room or a kitchen that no one else typi-