

SANATORIUM

Abi Palmer is a mixed-media artist and writer. Her work often includes themes of disability, gender and multisensory interaction. Her artworks include: *Crip Casino*, an interactive gambling arcade parodying the wellness industry and institutionalised spaces, displayed at the Tate Modern and Somerset House; and *Alchemy*, a multisensory poetry game, which won a Saboteur Award in 2016. She has written for BBC Radio, *The Guardian* and *Poetry London*. *Sanatorium* is her first book.

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Sanatorium

Abi Palmer

Penned in the Margins

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Have you ever noticed that when we're near water I want to fuck? Remember Snowdonia? That icy river? Me stripping down and unfolding into oblivion while you shrivelled up and waited for it to be over. I was in so much ecstasy it has taken me years to notice you weren't right there with me.



The problem is not that I'm constantly in pain, but that pain wakes me constantly. When I have not slept, I am prone to the following: fatigue, brain fog, paralysis, temporary blindness, floating, climbing out of my body, mid-air encounters with a long-deceased and beloved Carmelite saint.

My body is having an opiate crisis. I have been trying so hard to stay tethered to the ground. Each pill is a stone. We keep on piling them up: stones and stones and stones in my stomach, all trying to knock me down for long enough to stop the floating.

I purchase an inflatable bathtub from China. It's small and bucket-shaped, designed for city blocks where everyone is forced to remain upright. When I fill it, the water floods over my shoulders, so hot it could melt its own container.

If I get out alone, I will faint. I surround the tub with different-sized chairs, each topped with a cup of iced water to bring me round. I switch off all the lights and turn on an illuminated plastic pyramid. It plays frog noises and whale song on a loop. I think about sticking glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling, but this isn't a home — it's all our savings.

I sit, silent and bent-legged, folding my toes until their swollen creases soften. I barely breathe, careful for the skin on my back not to scrape the tub's plastic seams.

In 2008 I moved into a flat with my best friend. We took it in turns to take candlelit baths, accompanied by Radiohead's *OK Computer*. This particular combination of warm water, music and light deprivation led to visual hallucinations which I later understood to be a form of synaesthesia: a rose wilts before my eyes; I fall back into a pool of gelatin; we travel along a series of telegraph wires; doves jump up and down in time with the music.

I once repeated this experiment in my inflatable bathtub, but the water was too hot. Instead of falling rose petals, I found myself surrounded by schools of melting sardines.



*Oh Teresa Sánchez de Cepeda y Ahumada, drown me
with your thick and sacred thighs.*



Immersing myself in bodies of water is just one of many techniques I have experimented with to ease my chronic pain. I don't know why floating leads to visions. I think it is something to do with amniotic fluid.

In the early 2000s, an advert for flotation therapy suggested that placing yourself in a room-temperature bath, your weight supported by Epsom salts, is the closest you will get to being in the womb.

Flotation, the ad explained, is like finding yourself in a pre-birth dreamspace. It's a good way to recover from trauma, because it's a memory of what it's like to exist before trauma can hurt you. The argument goes that flotation eases physical pain because you have reminded your body what it is like to live without it.

My birth was particularly traumatic. I was born via C-section but the surgeon did not count on the lumpy scar tissue around my mother's previous Caesarean wound. They cut the hole too small. When they pulled me out, my head got stuck. An emergency alarm sounded as I began screaming and my body went blue.



When I am instructed to picture a safe space I envisage a deep well, full to the brim with icy water into which I have been thrown. But do not worry: I will survive. I lie back and sink into the water, sucking oxygen through the fat gills at my neck.

When I was seven, doctors watched me drag my feet up and down a grey linoleum floor. They decided that getting my head stuck at birth must have triggered a brain haemorrhage, which prevented my neural pathways from connecting properly to my legs.

“Her brain is working very hard,” the doctors said to my mother. “No wonder she gets so tired.”

At 17 I became so exhausted that I could not lift my body from its bed.

When I was 21, the doctors decided instead that my mobility problems were due to a genetic connective tissue disorder. This, incidentally, would have also caused my mother’s abnormal scarring (which led to my head getting stuck in the first place).

When I was 27, I was hospitalised with feet and one knee the size of cantaloupe melons. I was diagnosed with an autoimmune disorder, seemingly unrelated to the above conditions.

The doctors said it was lucky the swelling got so bad or they would have continued to attribute the increased pain and stiffness to one of my other conditions, and refuse appropriate treatment.

They told me not to let myself get too stressed about things, or my condition would get worse.

They suggested I take up swimming.

PART ONE

In 2017 I received funding to attend a thermal water-based rehabilitation programme in Budapest, Hungary.

The Sanatorium was on an island in the middle of the Danube. By day we bathed in mineral-rich thermal water, in a series of 10-minute increments. Between bathing, we took prescribed therapies. My prescribed treatments were: Medical Massage, Underwater Massage, Magnetic Therapy and Underwater Gymnastics.

Every night I was wheeled through a heated underground tunnel to an interconnected building, The Margaret Island Grand Hotel. It's an opulent, multi-tiered structure, built not long after Strauss composed his famous waltz, *The Blue Danube*. Sometimes, when my eyes were tired, I thought I could see the ghost of the hotel's early guests: pale women in opulent gowns with their hair piled high and pinned with flowers; mustachioed men sipping tea in their elegant tailored hats.

Other times I would move so slowly, I became convinced that the entire building had sunk.

Well hi, this is Abi. I've just had my first day of rehabilitation. I've been at the hotel for a couple of days now, with my partner, Hans. He left last night, so today was my first day alone. I've got a carer, Lucy, staying nearby, but yeah, it's a pretty weird feeling, ha ha ha. I'm suddenly realising I'm going to be mainly on my own for the next month, just focusing on my body. I suppose my body is such a significant part of my life that it's always somewhere close to the front of my mind. But it's been five years since the last time I was able to stop and look after it.

I first went to rehabilitation five years ago. It was probably the biggest disappointment of my life. They spent so long lowering my expectations, telling me what I couldn't have. One of the group sessions was about washing a bath. "Imagine you're trying to do your housework. You can't wash your whole bath because you're in too much pain. What do you do?"

I said, "Well, you could talk to social services about whether you need more help to cope with things, couldn't you?"

"Don't expect help," they said. Just wash half the bath.

I was 23. It was my 23rd birthday.