And I Climbed And I Climbed

troika

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And I CLIMBED And I CLIMBED

Poems by Stephen Lightbown

Illustrated by Shih-Yu Lin

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For Bear

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Introduction

And I Climbed And I Climbed is a collection of poems that tells the story of Cosmo, an eight year-old boy who has fallen from a tree in his garden and broken his back. After the accident he is left paralysed and uses a wheelchair to move around.

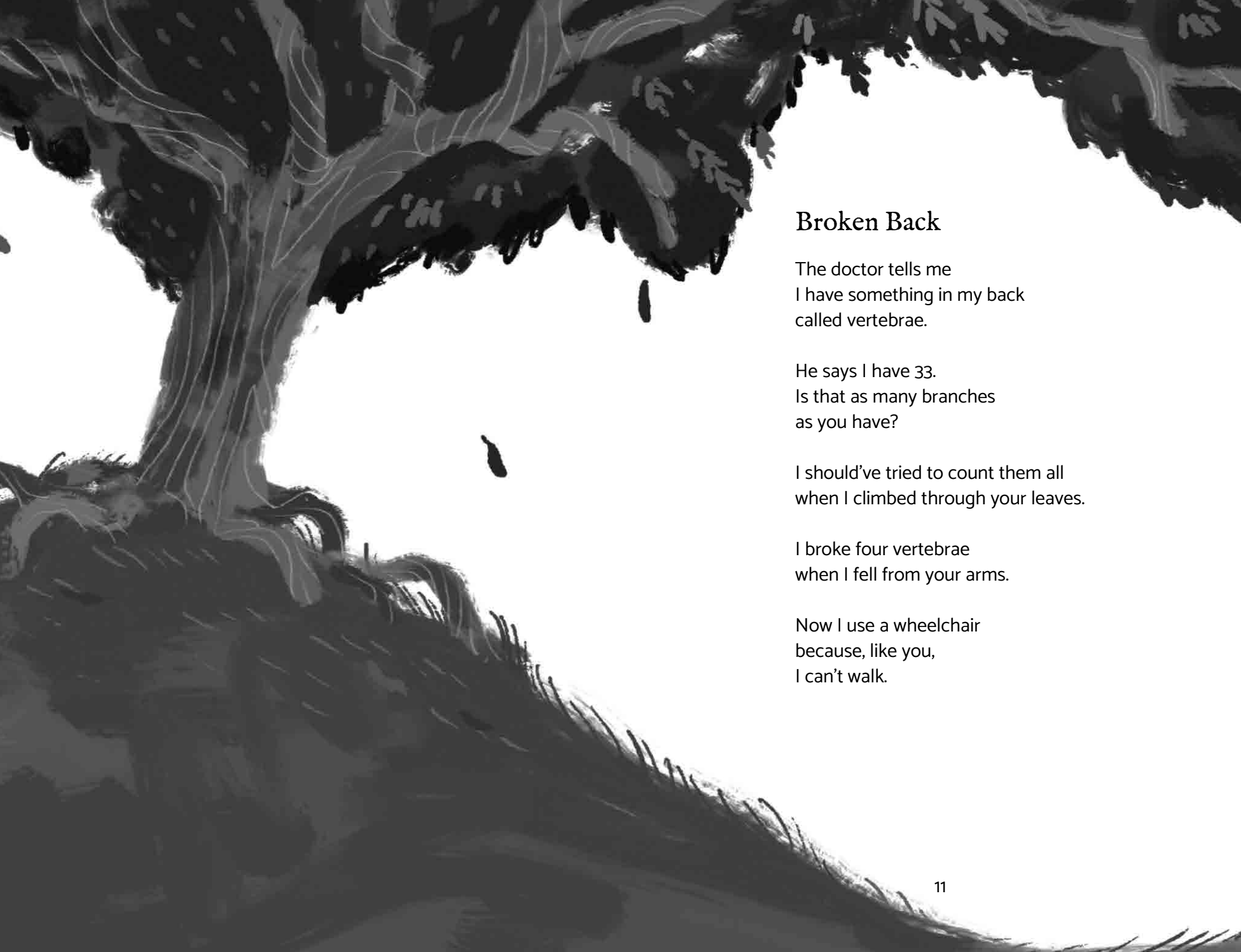
This is a deeply personal collection because, like Cosmo, I also became paralysed after an accident when I was 16. I was sledging in the snow when I lost control of my sledge and hit a tree. Whilst I was a little older than Cosmo is in the book, you will find many of my experiences in these poems and in Cosmo's thoughts and feelings about what he is going through. And of course, I have included a tree, for obvious reasons.

I wanted to write about the experience of becoming a wheelchair user from a child's perspective. To have disability represented in children's poetry and literature is important to me. I wish that, when I was younger, I had seen more people like me in the books I was reading.

I also believe that it is important that poets and writers with lived experiences like mine get to tell their own stories, so that the voices on the page are authentic.

In *And I Climbed And I Climbed*, Cosmo writes poems to the tree that he fell from, as a way of coming to terms with what has happened to him. In some of the poems he is angry and sad, as you would expect him to be. But in others he is happy and excited, as he rediscovers his voice and his capabilities. I hope you enjoy accompanying Cosmo on his journey.

Stephen Lightbown



Broken Back

The doctor tells me
I have something in my back
called vertebrae.

He says I have 33.
Is that as many branches
as you have?

I should've tried to count them all
when I climbed through your leaves.

I broke four vertebrae
when I fell from your arms.

Now I use a wheelchair
because, like you,
I can't walk.

In Hospital

On the first day I could eat food, I said I wanted custard.
Not long after, a huge bowl of custard appeared.
On the second and third day I asked for custard.
And it appeared.
I asked how long I could eat custard for.
Until you feel better, they said.

As if you can eat custard every day in a hospital!

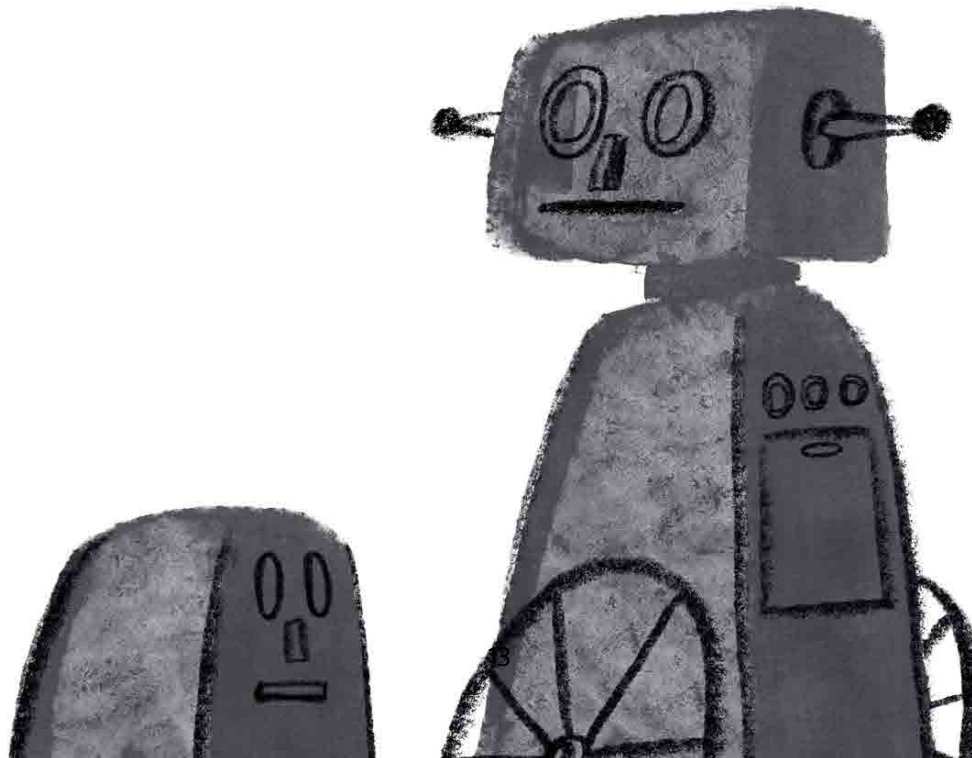
After I could manage a full day in my wheelchair
I was told to get ready for Wednesday.
Because on Wednesdays it's swimming.
And when I swim, I feel free. No chair, no pain,
just Cosmo again.

As if they have a swimming pool in a hospital!

The nurse pushed me down to the secret corridor.
The one where they have robots.
Actual robots on wheels–
moving the washing, taking meals, carrying all kinds
of things I couldn't touch.
These robots are cool, the nurse said.
They're on wheels, just like you. Cool like you.

As if they have robots in a hospital!

After swimming, I ate some toast
and went to look at the robots again.



Some Days I Hate You

and I want the wind to rip you
out of the ground, tear you
from where you feel safe.

Or for someone to take an axe to you,
chop you down till only a stump is left.
Or for your bark to turn rotten
and all your leaves to fall off and never
grow back and you'll stay cold forever.
Or for your tree friends to turn their backs
and leave you alone in the garden.

Then I read that there are three trillion
trees in the world.
I try to count that far, I count up to
one thousand and twenty-six.

That's the furthest I've ever counted.
But then I stop because I count
back to one. You.

And I think out of three trillion
trees, somehow you and I are connected
forever, and I wonder if maybe I should
try to hate you less.

Catch Me If You Can

Sometimes I wonder why you didn't catch me
when I fell through your arms.

My sister Ana – she's five – she looked so small
the higher I climbed. When I got to the top
she looked like I could've put her in my pocket
next to the conkers I'd collected from you.

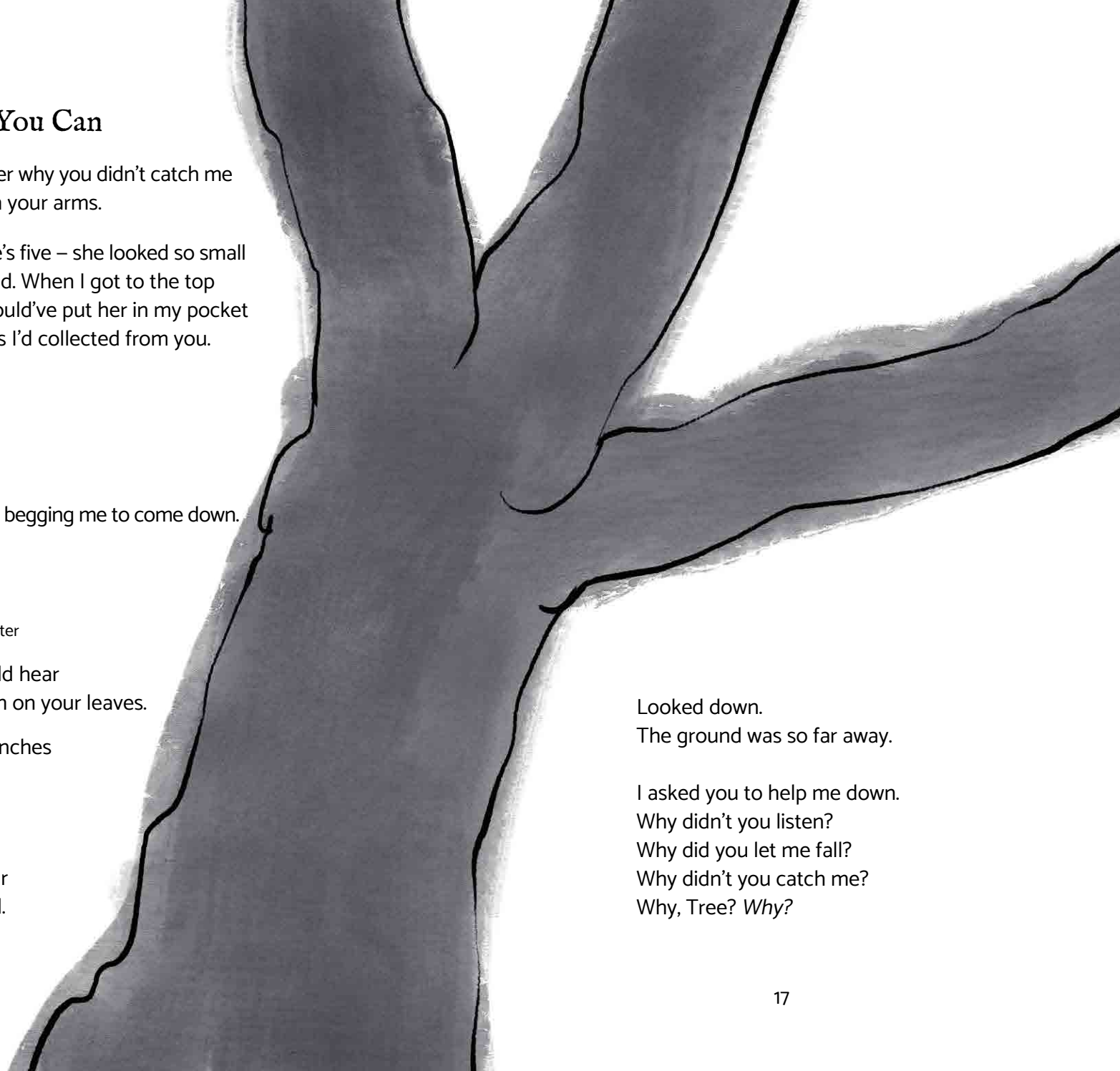
I climbed
And I climbed
And I climbed
And I climbed

Anna was shouting, begging me to come down.
Her voice
got quieter
quieter
quieter

till all I could hear
was my own breath on your leaves.

I grabbed your branches
and pulled
and pulled
and pulled

till the sky was near
and then I stopped.



Looked down.
The ground was so far away.

I asked you to help me down.
Why didn't you listen?
Why did you let me fall?
Why didn't you catch me?
Why, Tree? *Why?*