AVE ASTRA

DISABILITY & NEURODIVERGENT CULTURE

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Welcome to **Ave Astra**’s debut Volume 1, the first chapterin bringing disability and neurodivergent culture into vivid focus.

This edition is the result of the dedication and creativity of many contributors, and we thank each person who helped make this possible. Ave Astra marks a new beginning, and we are committedto growing and exploring together in the volumes to come.

We invite you to contribute your stories, art, and ideas for future volumes.Share and be part of **Ave Astra**’s growing community at **ave-astra.org/#submit**

Thank you for taking the time to explore this volume.
As you journey through the pages, we invite you to sign our guestbook and share your thoughts. Visit our guestbook: **bit.ly/ave-v1g**

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How Poems Work in My Dyslexic Mind

By **Kevin Carson**

A web threads like a tailor
weaving scrabbles **of scraps**
to a fabric of fantasy
like a web there are pillars
that binds them together,
each silky **string of words**,
meshing **to** another,
the sound of robins harmonizing
with the rising sun,
dew drops **competing** with snails
to give the grass a fresh coat
the smell of **seasons** changing
as sunlight coaxes open
the blushes of spring,
carving out effort
to wake me from **reality**.
I tasted dewdrops **from** the words
on the page and **my soul** took flight,
the letters serenaded my ears
like the robins
I sneezed **from** the pollen
that perfumes spring,
the sun blistered **my skin** and
though **the words** moved around
like a fly waiting for a spider
to grant it **release,**

the tailor managed to weave

a beautiful tapestry

using **silk** threads

from a **web.**

About the Author

Kevin Carson is a poet, educator, and immigrant rights activist based in Brooklyn, New York. As a Caribbean writer of native heritage, his work explores identity, history, and the struggles of being undocumented. Kevin was awarded fellowships from Brooklyn Poets, Dreaming Out Loud and The Watering Hole. His work is forthcoming in the 2025 International Human Rights Art Movement anthology. He seeks to amplify the diverse voices of his community using poetry as a tool for activism.

Once Upon A Time…

By **Aishwarya Balasubramanian**

There used to be a world
Where waging wars was the norm
At the slicing of someone’s ego
Someone’s ego was above our Earth
Our Earth stood in testimony of rising and falling empires
Waiting, watching, holding onto hope

Once upon a time
A peaceful world only existed in fairytales
In the lores, dreams, myths and magic
The reality was dark, a dystopia enveloping over land and underground
This dystopia hijacked the wind too
Gases burnt into our ozone layer
Trees chopped down and discarded as garbage

Where even the Earth was muffled and silenced
To make way for ‘progress’ and ‘redevelopment’
What fate do you think we with disabilities were promised?

What comes to your mind when we utter ‘disability’?

What ideas does your mind conjure when someone meets you and confesses this to you?

Do you fall back into the old ways?

The old ways of putting us down in the pools of pity

The old ways of lifting us up to the halos of inspiration

The old ways of building too many staircases

The old ways of forgetting to check our access measures

The old ways of putting us aside for the sake of a ‘fit’ humankind

Everything begins in the mind

From beauty, void, noise to wonder, journey and ugliness

From justice, empathy, care to injustice, conquest and control

From the throes of darkness to the affirming shades of light

From the shifting meanings of darkness and light to what is impure and pure

The colonization of colours hides a secret message after all

The weighing scale of hierarchy stands at the top of this

Some were deigned to live and some were deigned to alienation in this world

Our community was huge, the largest, one might say

Our community always waited, for the bells of freedom to ring through streets and places of everything mundane

We were deemed as unfortunate incidents

But we chose to stay, to breathe, to fight in every shape of revolt

Because not all revolts are loud and verbal

Many are lying on the bed, passing through unmeasurable fatigue and the weight of holding an entire society who is eager to bind you to their rules

Some used us as tokens

Some cut off our access

Some prayed to their God for us, without our consent of course

Some placed us in cages we didn’t sign up for

Some thought we were better off deceased

Some took from us our right to disagree

Some wanted to shelter us due to their own fears

Do you know what is sad?

What is grave and sad is how this world had so many chances

To meet us with the tenderness that our ferocity demanded

But we were either too inconvenient for the time, a dent in the perfectly curated dehumanizing system, or simply, illnesses to cure

Our existence never came first, because others had to come before us

The wars, capitalism goals, Islamophobia, hatred and discomfort dedicated to gender non-conforming communities and more

You want to know what came for us?

The scraps, the scraps of a failing infrastructure and nations exploiting our planet

We never needed a cure

We needed communities to be there for us, not trying to fix us

We needed communities to include us in their plans for protecting Earth

Because weren't we always here amongst you?

We never needed charity

We craved for a world to belong, to feel safe in

We craved for a society that didn't steal and manipulate our narratives

Because we are the narratives ourselves, we are the lived testimonies

Just as Earth

We are divergent to the norms

We are a spectrum of vulnerabilities

We are not the paths to reimagination, but reimagination itself

We are not tools for revolution, we are revolution itself

Our bodies were made to hang between terminologies and mental stigmas

Our bodies were colonized in different ways

But did you ever stop to consider the impact of this intergenerational hurt?

Did you ever stop, and pause to witness we were always hurt?

Especially when we were surviving and building coping mechanisms to face your world

So you shouldn't be surprised when you can't control us anymore

When your words and gazes do not affect us like they used to before

Because once upon a time, we used to only survive and long to vent to someone

But now, we are reimagining our own worlds

A multiverse you can say, because who dares to say we can't transcend our limits?

We were never limitations

We are infinity, we are unscripted, we are not checklists to tick mark

We are shunning your definitions for us

We are painting our own freedom that is made in different sign languages

We are giving names to our anger; we refuse to dismiss ourselves for your comfort

We hold our loneliness in our own bodies and we don't mock it anymore

Because it takes strength and guts to choose to live in a world that gifts us loneliness

By keeping us in the margins, and not even having the audacity to confront our disabled existence

We are not just advocating for rights; we are calling for liberation

We are not whispers anymore, we have become screams and slogans

We are not medical cases; we are the disruptors to medico-industrial ableism and terrors associated with life and death

We are the mirrors standing as voice notes, memories and words etched as reminders

We are not edges; we are entire mountains of grit and oceans of resilience in front of you all

Once upon a time,

We had to be in long queues for you to remember us

But now,

We are breaking those same old queues and saying,

“We are here to stay for we are winners after all”

We are the crip warriors

A Female Adult Finds Her Instructors

By **Traci Neal**

Adolescence was a sandwich
eaten at school. Had to salvage
it. Bullies were a sandbox on
my playground with no recess.
Felt like a monkey swinging
from one teenager to the next.
In their jungle, they would
spin me, slide me, kick me,
a sport they loved to play.

Hid in a turtle's shell for
the longest time. Life
forced me out by its
massive turbulence. Peers
used to be annoying fruit
flies. I wanted them off
my food. They tried to chop
the character inside my
stomach into pieces. Family

would say my emotional
rollercoasters were a phase
that I would eventually get
over. Upbringing made me
look upscale, a mask for
happy juice, and a simple
brain. In adulthood, I

was clinically diagnosed
to better understand my
neurological teachers.
With a child’s mind,
autism lets me see how
lost I was to cues in
conversations and the

difficulty of reading
between the lines.

Energy and bubbliness
were led by ADHD.
So much activity, yet I
learned how to control
it and remain focused.
Autism and ADHD were
always my instructors.
I was not passing their
classes, was so clueless
about being their
student. Once I found

out, I embraced my
conditions. Decided to chew
on kindness, devour its taste
for my birthday cake. The
jungle animals were not
the winners. Fought through
pain, remade the rules of the
game. Adorn adult awareness.

Highlight neurodivergence,
best playback features. Our
souls set us apart. We are
sociable. We can complete
our academics. No. Society
does not see us as money
makers. They cut us from
the team. They think we are
low-performance people.

No. We may not have
bigger book knowledge,
but we have way more heart.
We are known to knock over
doors trying to block our path.

To those like me
not gifted or advanced,
Be yourself.
Stand up
for others.
You were made to
stand tall.

About the Author

Traci Neal is a neurodivergent poet residing in Columbia, South Carolina. She has shared her personal story of being a late-diagnosed black woman in the Thinking Person's Guide To Autism, Newsweek, Good News Post- UK, and Autism Digest, to name a few. Her poetry has been featured in Poetry Potion - Poem A Day, Spillwords Press, Moonstone Arts, Real South/West Mag, Autism Digest, and Spirit Fire Review for 2025, as well as many other publications since 2021. Neal utilizes poetry as a tool to advocate for those in need and to raise awareness for non-profits worldwide.

the things we **<u>don’t</u>** talk about

By **Angelica Julia Dávila**

born ten years apart and fathered by separate men, two sisters existed and co-existed

Years ago, and I can’t exactly recall what year anymore, but years ago I wrote a short memoir essay titled “The Things We Talk About”. It was published in 2020 (yeah, one personal good thing to come out of that year). It was published in *Ought: The Journal of Autistic Culture*. The essay was about the relationship I have had with my younger sister (half sister if you want to be specific, but full hermana because I always forget we are only half-sisters). My sister, Ale, is autistic with a comorbidity of an intellectual disability. Comorbidity, what a heavy and medical term.

co·mor·bid·i·ty

the simultaneous presence of two or more **<u>diseases</u>** or medical textbook jargon jargon jargon jargon jargon

I’ve written a few pieces about my relationship with Ale. They tend to be short like a snapshot containing a snippet of our dynamic. I initially thought I set out to write such pieces as a way of highlighting autism without falling into the trap of parent memoirs (“my child taught me so much”, “my child overcame their disability”, “I mourned for my child” type of narratives ((not to say that these narratives <u>can’t</u> be valid, but they often dominate the autistic narrative))). I’ve read plenty of ‘parent of an autistic child’ memoirs. I wanted to highlight autism without falling into the tropes often found in such memoirs. When I wrote essays about my sister and I, I wasn’t exactly sure what I was looking to do. There was something there that I wasn’t yet clear on. I focused on white space on the page, on specific letters and words and fonts being just right. The design, if you will, of the essay. It was just an itch that I kept feeling.

the younger sister would say “washi wash”
“washi wash” “washi wash” “washi wash wash”

Washi wash. It's something Ale used to say a lot when she was little. Washi wash is what I talk about in the previously mentioned essay, "The Things We Talk About". In the essay, I focus on how in the early mornings when my mom would go to work, Ale and I would talk (to you and to the adults it probably wouldn't be defined as talking, but to Ale it was talking). I focus on how washi wash was a way for Ale to communicate with us, her family, during a time that she was limited verbally. And how if you really listened to the washi wash, you could understand what she was saying. Some washi washes were the same thing. Some washi washes were different. To many, washi wash was <u>incongruent</u> gibberish, or if you were family, it was <u>adorable</u> gibberish.

You: "Y esta cuando va a llegar al punto?"

The point is "The Things We Talk About" is an example of one of those pieces I wrote where I was writing one thing, but I think underneath it, I was trying to explore something that I yet didn't know. An understory was there, unbeknownst to both the reader and myself. And it that understory was the same feeling I had while writing essays about my relationship with Ale. A restlessness. A thing I couldn't reach yet. But I wanted to.

hind·sight

understanding of a situation or event only after te pusiste las pilas

The attempt to document my relationship with my autistic sister via writing, was not, it turns out, to tell the story of "this is what it was growing up with an autistic sister". The understory all along was that of the relationship between two autistic sisters. It turned out that all along, I too, was/am autistic.

the younger sister diagnosed at five years old, the oldest diagnosed much later in life at 31 years old

One of the questions that my long-time therapist asked me, post-official-diagnosis-after-I-insisted-for-two-years-that-I-may-be-actually-autistic, was whether I could see anything different in my relationship with Ale. And while I'm still processing my autistic self, one of the first things that clicked post-official-diagnosis-reading-the-evaluation-report-at-my-computer-knowing-I-had-known-m yself-afterall was the communication between Ale and me. It was like that first breath you take when the season is finally changing from summer to fall. You know. That big inhale where you can finally recognize what fall feels like. The breath where your brain suddenly makes sense of the distinct cool and familiar.

when no one else could understand the younger sister, they turned to the older sister to decipher her words

I told my therapist that I understood how I've always been the one that could understand Ale's language—from washi wash in her early days to her repetitional phrases and words she clung onto as transitions that didn't quite always make sense grammatically (see: Standard English, also see: criticism against Standard English). But among all the words, repetition, self-expression, the one thing that I finally understood was the things we **don't** talk about.

unbeknownst to the two sisters, each existed in a shared silence

Silence. Is silence language? I once was in a graduate level workshop where I had brought in "The Things We Talk About." A peer told me that what I described as language was not language because -insert academia ridden theory and pedagogy that pre-existed my creative essay here-. Because of this, I am hesitant to claim that *silence is a language*. Poetically speaking though, silence IS a language. What goes unsaid. What lives beneath the words. What exists when you're alone and finally turn off the television or music. I have found many people are uncomfortable with silence. Neurotypical people, especially. Perhaps this is the origin of small talk. Imagine, small talk being created to fill in the thing that made neurotypical people uncomfortable: the silence.

neu·ro·typ·i·cal

"not displaying or characterized by autistic or other neurologically atypical patterns of thought or behavior."

(from Google, powered by Oxford Languages)

Interesting how the definition for neurotypical is defined by what it is *no*t rather than what it is. But back to the silen ce.

Post-official-diagnosis-where-I'm-still-processing-my-life I was on the phone with Ale. It was probably around eight p.m. and I was trying to rush off the phone with her. She had called me to tell me about her day and the grievances she had against our mom (she tossed out the cereal that had gone bad because Ale hadn't eaten it and Ale was mad). I listened and in the usual older sister demeaner told her that you don't keep food that has gone bad and that next time she should just eat the cereal before it goes bad. Our conversation went silent afterwards, but I could hear the music playing in the background on Ale's end. It was her evening ritual to go to her bedroom and play music on the Google Home speaker I had given her. Sometimes she would call me. Sometimes not.

There was nothing but silence between us, and I remember looking at the clock on my oven because I'm sometimes an impatient person. I don't even recall what I wanted to do after the call. Then I said,

"Ok, Ale, if you're not going to talk then I'm going to go."

if you're not going to talk, if you're not going to talk, if you're not going to talk, if you're not going to—

"No, no, no!" Ale said with urgency in her voice. An urgency that said stay. *Please stay*.

Hearing this I –

realized how much I understood that panicked "no, no, no" because I had felt it before. I had been on the other end in silence. Sometimes that silence was there because I didn't know how to communicate what I wanted or needed to the other person. Sometimes that silence was there because I just felt comfortable being in silence to the dismay of the other person. How did I never notice that Ale and I both shared silence as a language?

IF YOU'RE NOT GOING TO TALK- how many times had I heard that myself- IF YOU'RE NOT GOING TO TALK- followed by feeling like I wasn't being heard – IF YOU'RE NOT GOING TO TALK- how can you not decipher the silence

"Ok, Ale, I'll stay," I said.

"Ok," Ale said.

I didn't ask Ale more questions to get a conversation out of her like how I sometimes did while on the phone with her. I didn't have to. We shared a silence.

when the older sister still lived at home, the two would co-exist even when not actively interacting with each other, but there was that comfort in parallel existence between the two of them

the things we don't talk about can be just as insightful, comforting, routine, exciting, etc. as the things we do talk about. I lived at home until I was twenty-eight, but that was only because I had helped my mom mortgage a house together. As a Latina daughter, I was dying to get out of there. I wanted to get out in the world on my own. I had been a commuter student in college and even during my first stint in grad school for my master's. I wanted to know what it was like to have ownership over my own space (even if it included roommates).

These days, I sometimes think I rushed by leaving home when I did. I know to some leaving at twenty-eight can be seen as too late (and insert-narratives-about-millennials-not-leaving-their-parents-home-that-lack-cultural-intersectionality-to-them-here). In Mexican-American households, and most Latinx-American households, you don't leave until you start your own family, but that's for another essay. The reason I think that I rushed moving out is because I miss living with Ale for those moments where we co-existed without expectations.

The expectation to do an activity together. The expectation to talk. The expectation that we aren't bonding unless we are actively acknowledging each other. I appreciate the silence that we shared, and how we co-existed in that silence, often in our own worlds but not needing to travel light years to get to know each other.

The Beautiful Incomplete Flowering and Blossoming Life

By **Huá Huī Samuel Vogel**

[***Note:*** *A selection of the photo essay is featured here; the complete essay can be viewed at* ***this Google Doc link here***]

Part I: Introduction

Carpe Diem - Seize the Day

[**Image Description:** A young child standing on his porch, looking up at the camera with his tongue sticking out gleefully. His hair is wet, and he is smiling.]

In the above photograph, captured at a very young age, I am smiling joyfully at the camera. To begin with, this photograph is immensely impactful to me because I look at this photograph and I see a young child, unknowing of the horrors and reality of the world. It's all very pre Clockwork Orange. They are still young, full of the innocence of youth, traversing through society.

Part VIII: Unity

[**Image Description**: Huá Huī Samuel Vogel is sitting in his wheelchair wearing a traditional Chinese black button-down. They are wearing a red bracelet and red earrings. His hands are hanging over his armrests. A collage of various monochromatic photos.]

This photograph, taken by a beloved photographer of mine, Neha, depicts the unity of all my Huá Huī Samuel Vogel's (He/They) identities as a Disabled, LGBTQI+, Ambulatory Wheelchair User, and Transracial Chinese Adoptee. Meshing all of these identities to make me who I am today, amongst other contributing factors.

B. Dinsmore

By **Robert Wooten**

The name came up
and they decided to call,
what they got sent
was the CV, and a doctor's number,
because the author in question
had just suffered a relapse.
They had called because he was there,
they know, but his name only came up
when he was suffering alone,
and I only escaped to tell thee
is what the man of a different view
could say of that Job,
but the man of that view
was somebody's father.
He could not be used
without him having already done
that which would merit the call.
when the call was about somebody else,
per se a name that came up,
and they thought they could do,
it was not without the merit
having already been his.
They could not help but imply it
was that they knew. And the call
went back to the search committee
because he was unable to reply,
then the man and the father
had to sit down,
wherever he was,
and try to find a new view
that would enable him to continue.
As the call was for sale at that moment
of aporia, the boy lost a father,
and the noted author, a call.

Through Words

By **Marjory E. Leposky**

When I was in pre-school my teachers caught on to the fact that I wasn't learning my numbers and colors like my classmates. Back in the late 1970s, many children with learning disabilities weren't diagnosed until high school or college, if ever. I was one of the lucky ones to be diagnosed so young and my mother was my activist until I was old enough to take over for myself.

In elementary school, despite my disability, I fell in love with reading. Through books, I was able to travel and meet new people. Other children were so cruel with bullying. The minute they found out that I was not good at something simple, like spelling, they held it over me. Even today, some people don't understand. They think it is dyslexia or some other catchy new medical term.

At the end of high school, I started to deal with my test-taking issues. I found that reading a novel before a test was a great way for me to prepare calmly. I graduated and was accepted to Miami Dade College (formerly Miami-Dade Community College).

I applied to MDC because they would work with me to provide note takers, tutoring, extended time on tests, and a quiet room in which I could use a computer to type essays. It was the early 90s and the Americans with Disabilities Act had only recently gone into effect. Other colleges I explored still had not complied with the Act and told me to go away.

College took me five years – not so bad for a person with learning disabilities. Because I had read so much in high school, reading was one of the classes I didn't have to take on a remedial level and MDC placed me in a college-level reading class. Later I transferred to Florida State University, another school adhering to the Americans with Disabilities Act, where I majored in Communications - Media Production and minored in Business.

After graduation, I went to Los Angeles for an internship and immediately ran into walls related to my learning disabilities. I had the right personality for the job, but I had message-taking issues. (The next time you leave a message with a human or on voicemail, remember to speak slowly and clearly when reciting your name and phone number.)

Luckily I found work in the film industry and spent two years in Los Angeles working on sets for TV/film production, which was a lot easier than working in an office.

When I returned to Miami, I went back to MDC and took a few film classes. One was a scriptwriting class. Yes, me, writing scripts, with all my writing and spelling issues – but it happened with the help of script-writing program *Final Draft*. The program has a feature that reads everything back to you, helping you to catch your misspelled words, using one word when you meant to use another, leaving out suffix and gerund endings, and more.

In 2009 a stray kitten appeared in my family's front yard. I spent most of that spring trying to catch him, and eventually succeeded. Because he is mostly black, my mother named him Guy Noir after a character from the radio program *A Prairie Home Companion.*

With my new screenwriting skills I wrote an animation script about the kitten. It needed a creative name. Since Guy Noir grumbles when he eats, sleeps, plays, and purrs, I gave him the nickname Mr. Grumbles. I have since turned the script into a children's book.

I want to use *Mr. Grumbles* to help children with their literacy and reading skills, while also helping kittens and cats get new homes by pairing readings with adoption events.

I have come a long way from elementary school. I am a woman working and living with learning disabilities, but more importantly, I am a woman succeeding with learning disabilities. After a life-long struggle with the vagaries of the English language and the literary world, I have written a book and a publisher has accepted my work. The book *Mr. Grumbles* will be published soon.

Previously Published

- *Wild Women's Medicine Circle*, Vol. 1 on October 12, 2017
- *Teach. Write.: A Writing Teachers' Literary*, Spring/Summer 2020 on April 12, 2020

About the Author

Marjory E. Leposky, a filmmaker and children's chapter book author with more than 10 years of production experience on a broad spectrum of projects that include TV commercials, music videos for local artists, and feature film productions.

She has served as the following: casting director, casting associate, producer, production coordinator, scriptwriter, unit production manager and production assistant for films, TV commercials, corporate videos, and music videos in South Florida and Los Angeles.

Marjory earned degrees in television and media production from Miami Dade College formally Miami-Dade Community College and Florida State University.

The Pain Births Joy

By **Jennifer Disla**

Do you hear it? Nina, she’s singing. Her pain sheds with every note. I will sing as well. I will shed the shame of living with bipolar disorder. Sing, sing. My song will birth joy. I will deliver the pain to dwell deeply in Joy.

Here arrives Zora. Zora writes and writes her pain away. I will pick up the pen. I will write, I will write my pain away. Zora and Nina pick up the roadmap. It illuminates the past. A past so near yet so far. Here comes Harriet.

Harriet Tubman. Recently, I sat with her. I watched my black and brown siblings catching the early morning bus. They left me curious about their stories. Their journey. In these times, I was overwhelmed by the state of the world, and amid all the chaos, I heard the stories of freedom from the momentum in Newark, New Jersey.

I imagined how Harriet felt with so many barriers to achieving freedom. Would she be proud of what we have built from her desire for collective freedom? She didn’t stop when she was free— she fought for all of us to be free.

Zora and Nina carried the roadmap in writing, singing, theorizing, and demanding the redefinition of Power and Womanhood. Zora, with her psychological visioning, and Nina, with her capacity to deeply feel– the roadmap starts to become clear.

Now, the roadmap leaps to other shores– an island. A place Taínos inhabited and protected, cultivated, nourished, to be pillaged and exploited to its ashes. From those ashes, the Maribel sisters gave their lives to reconcile the capacity to dream. The capacity to be free.

Here, I am. I have lived with the bipolar disorder diagnosis for over twenty years on American shores. I was born in Newark, New Jersey, over forty years ago. I was born to Afro-Latinos speaking a foreign tongue. On their island, they are Dominican; they are home. On these American shores, they are Black immigrants- at times forgotten, regardless of capital. The pain birthed Joy. The pain saw their ashes.

The pain became unbearable. My last hospitalization was ten years ago. I experienced pain —emotional, heartbreak, and deep rejection—along the way, leading to Joy and a clear essence of my belonging.

I belong to me.

What inspired this roadmap to my belonging? What guided me out of the haze? Zora, Nina, Harriet, and the Maribel sisters guided the way. Forever grateful.

I am honored to hold the artistic spirit and expression that Nina and Zora did during their lifetimes. Nina showed how to live. How to be true. She demonstrated the power to be human. Her presence, her ability to demand her desires personally and professionally, regardless of the consequences, especially as being deemed crazy, she still placed her human experience in lyrics, in singing. I can hear the pain, the vulnerability, that comes with being human.

Zora's imagination, captured on the page, has challenged me to also capture attention… the attention of humanity. "There's no agony like bearing an untold story inside of you"— words — crumbs for you to follow… for me to follow.

Similarly, Harriet and the Maribel sisters organized— yes, organized — a society for Freedom. Over the past twenty years, I have organized alongside my community to bring about change. I am also curious about how my diagnosis and power-building capacities are so intertwined in bringing and reimagining freedom and democracy.

My professional life, guided by my ancestors, anchors me in reality. I do not need to escape to my mania. I do not need to hide in my depression. I have a path to power! I can organize! This saved me. This birthed Joy — it brought me to my belonging — it brought me to ME.

Like Zora, I ground my practical life in spiritual well-being. I lean into spiritual rituals and practices—a deep relationship with God and Jesus — to develop an unwavering faith. A faith so strong that allows me to believe and know that change will come to continue the project, the project to further expand Democracy, the project to further expand our freedom! "Voz del pueblo, Voz del cielo" (Alvarez, 199). The project to lift our voices. It will lift our voices to Freedom!

Freedoms— as Black, disabled, afro-Latina, so many freedoms are denied across the globe, even on US shores. Sometimes denied by individual actors and other times denied by the entire system. Yet, I still have faith. I have faith not only in God to fix it. I have faith that God will provide all that I need, and my community needs to bring freedom to these shores.

As I think about the word freedom, I am taken back to deep memories of the hospitalization during my last episode. I fell into a deep mania; I no longer wanted to be in reality. It hurt too much. The rejection cut so deep. I was bleeding out. My pain took away my freedom to live in reality. I was placed in a room looking out — only out— and seeing those looking in. I was isolated, stripped in every sense of the word. Yet, I came to be, with medicine, therapy, and acknowledging my capacity to go from insanity to genius, ultimately birthed Joy. I will continue to birth Joy from the pain. The journey continues, forever belonging to me.

I live with bipolar disorder. I live to be Free! I live for us to be Free. My disorder has taught me to feel pain, to feel deeply, and birth Joy. I am learning to deliver Joy — I am learning to live in its deliverance. I am learning it may flee. I am learning not to hold either pain or Joy too tightly. Both are made to show the yin and yang of life. Where there's darkness, there comes light. With me, where there is mania, there is depression. Most importantly, there is me, more than just a manic or depressive state.

I am — I am — I am….

Free.

I sit with Harriet — Nina speaks into my heart —she whispers, “You know, sometimes, baby, I am so carefree. With a joy that’s hard to hide. And then sometimes, again, it seems that all I have is worry. And then you’re bound to see my other side. But I am just a soul whose intentions are good. Oh Lord, please don’t let me be misunderstood.”

The whisper has me focused on the roadmap— which gets clearer as I sit with myself. Zora and the Maribel sisters arrive. They sit side to side and inspire the words on these pages. They nod, they agree that the roadmap is mine.

I belong to me.

Works Cited

Alvarez, Julia. In the Time of the Butterflies. First Algonquin paperback, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2010.

How to Drop Dead Gorgeous

By **Maya Williams**

***a found poem using excerpts from "Black AfterLives Matter" by Ruha Benjamin in* The Boston Review *and* Willing Up and Keeling Over: a Lesbian Handbook on Death Rights and Rituals *by* Sinister Wisdom's Long Breast Press Collective**

Step One:

Death changes appearance; some may be hesitant to view a dead body. Look as near as you did in life; it's often a comfort your beloveds know you're dressed in a way that is familiar.

Step Two:

You must be formally identified so your loved ones can register your death. The more essential information you can record beforehand, the better. Or else everyone else falls behind on the prime legal rights to claim your body. Regardless of who claims you, same as your birth certificate, your death certificate shows you are owned by the government. [1]

Your body may be buried or cremated before the death certificate is issued. There is a fee involved in obtaining it, and there is no discount for multiple issues.[2]

Step Three:

Saying goodbye is so important people need to know what you'll wear and where you'll be as it takes place![3]

Prices for gravesites vary. Country cemeteries are less expensive than city cemeteries. Any respectable funeral director can organize this for you.

Step Four:

Your loved ones will have a useful menu of the feelings a grieving person may feel.[4]

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[1] Blackness is being born under a mountain of racial debt. Racial debt is not only a product of Black death, but also its precursor.

[2] Black life is expensive, sure, but so is Black death.

[3] Kinship with the dead has its own demand and effects.

[4] Blackness is animated by a stubborn refusal to forget and to be *forgotten*.

Jazz: The Soundtrack to My Disability

By **Cazoshay Marie**

It was a calm and temperate Phoenix night. Clear skies. Mid-May, so it wasn't unbearably hot yet. I was walking back to my car alone after leaving an event at the Phoenix Science Center I had attended with a new friend. I was feeling great, my cosplay outfit (DC's Poison Ivy) was super cute and got me a lot of compliments that evening.

I pushed the button to cross the street. I had the right of way. As I entered the second half of the road from the pedestrian crosswalk, suddenly, BOOM! CRASH! I was struck by a car traveling 48mph. My body was thrown 15' up and 100' forward from where the driver hit me.

I sustained multiple injuries, some of which have resulted in long-term disabilities and chronic conditions to include a traumatic brain injury, chronic pain, nerve damage and vestibular and vision issues, just to name a few. The driver never got out of his car. He left me alone, broken and bleeding on the cold, hard pavement until a Good Samaritan who witnessed the incident came to help me.

Throughout my healing journey from this traumatic incident, jazz has been a constant companion. It became the soundtrack of my disabilities and chronic conditions. There's a song or artist for every mood, every experience, every setback and triumph that I've been forced to contend with in the eight years since the horrific accident occurred.

Jazz is a difficult genre to clearly define because it encompasses a wide range of music spanning time, culture and region. According to Wikipedia, "Jazz is a music genre that originated in the African-American communities of New Orleans, Louisiana, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with its roots in blues, ragtime, European harmony and African rhythmic rituals." (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jazz) Artists such as Duke Ellington, Miles Davis and John Coltrane are familiar favorites of the musical style. Although often a male-dominated genre, the contributions of female jazz artists such as Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday and Sarah Vaughn should not be overlooked; their influence on modern-day artists such as Diana Krall, Samara Joy and Melody Gardot is apparent.

Jazz is a style of music that is rooted in improvisation. Performers may change melodies, harmonies or compositions depending on mood, audience participation and the general vibe in the room. Notes and melodies may change at a moment's notice, you never know what to expect and may never get the same live musical experience twice.

As a disabled person, I am no stranger to improvisation. The contemplative mood of Blue Mitchell's song, "It Could Happen to You", a title I can certainly relate to, melodically expresses the way that I constantly have to think of ways to adjust as a person living with disabilities and chronic conditions. The symptoms of my disabilities affect every aspect of my daily life, from self care to parenting and everything in between. Prior to the accident, I was an independent wellness instructor and single mom with a vibrant social life. Becoming disabled changed all of that, and I had to learn how to improvise to accommodate the effects of my conditions. I constantly have to think on my feet and play it by ear just to make it through the day, a direct parallel to the way that jazz music encompasses improvisation.

I would be lying if I said that the question, "why me?" did not come to mind at times, especially in the early days of recovering from the accident. Every time I went to the doctor, it was more bad news: another diagnosis, another medical professional informing me of the negative long-term effects that I would be experiencing as a result of my disabilities and conditions. Things were coming at me from all sides.

Interaction and collaboration are two key elements of jazz music. Artists have an almost supernatural connection to both the music, and each other that creates beautiful pieces of instrumental art. The album, "Ella and Louis," created by legendary musicians Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong is an excellent example of artists coming together to create something greater than what can be accomplished alone.

Throughout my journey with disability, I have had to learn to lean on others for help. As a highly independent person, this has been extremely difficult for me. But like the collaborations and interactions found in jazz music, once I learned to collaborate and interact with others for my well-being (primarily my immediate family), it created this beautiful mosaic of my current existence that's greater than what I would have been able to accomplish on my own. Because I finally learned to collaborate with others for assistance, I have been able to become a speaker and advocate, championing the issues that affect disabled persons. I have also been able to restart my own artistic practice as a visual artist and writer. This would not have been possible unless I had taken a lesson from jazz music and learned to interact and collaborate, to lean on, the people who are close to me in order to help me not only survive, but thrive despite my conditions.

And on that note (pun intended), it's not all bad. Becoming disabled has shown me that I possess a strength and resilience that I didn't know I had. The smooth, persistent melodies of "The Feeling of Jazz" by Duke Ellington and John Coltrane remind me of the fact that no matter what I'm facing-having to advocate for myself with doctors, dealing with the ableist misconceptions of others, debilitating pain, an uncertain future…I just keep on trucking. But unlike "The Little Engine That Could", repeating "I think I can, I think I can," my mantra has become, “I know I can, I know I can.” The lilting cadence of “The Feeling of Jazz” conjures up visions of me continuing to press forward on this unchosen and unexpected path that I am now on with my disabilities and conditions.

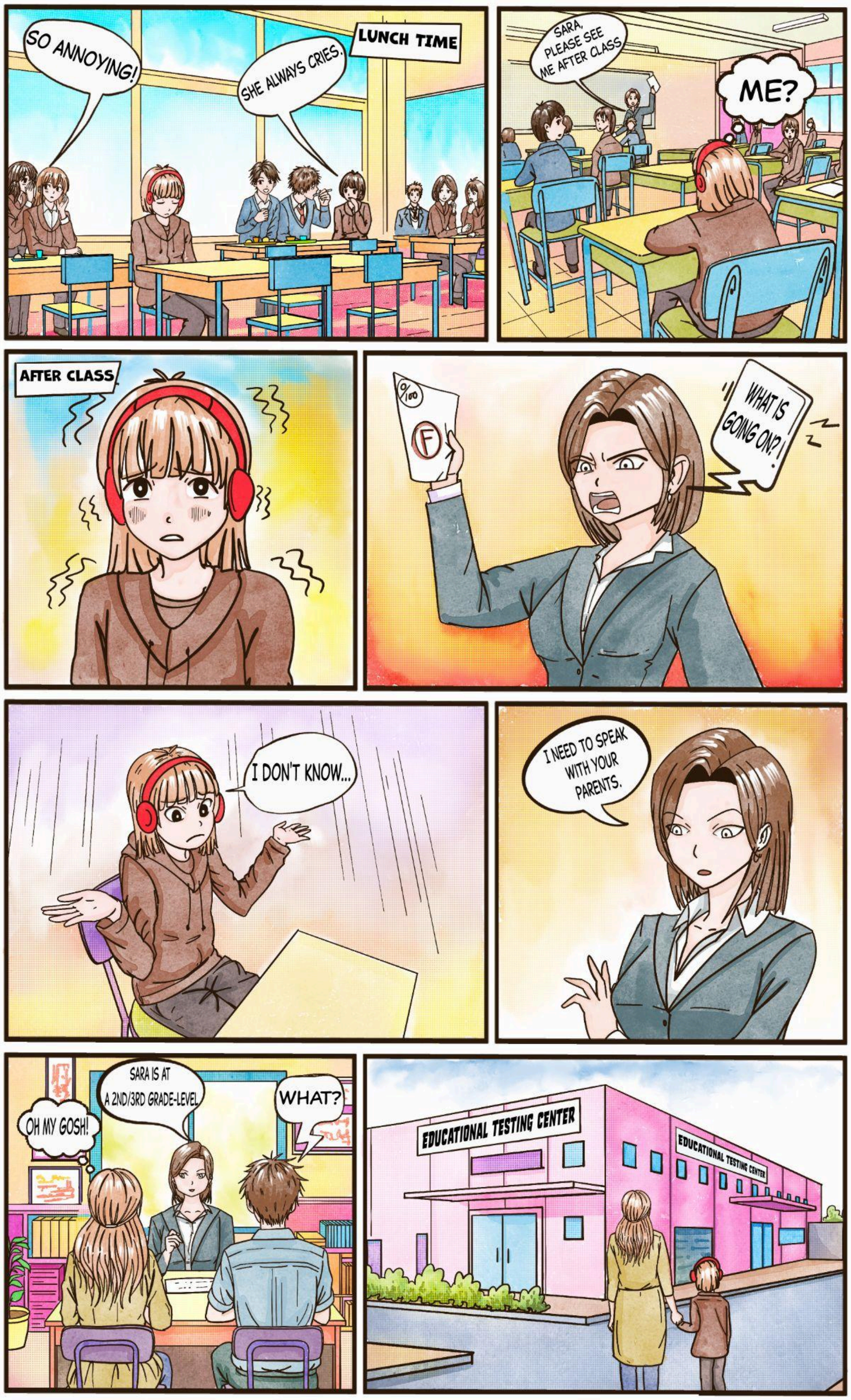
At the 1976 Grammy Awards, Mel Torme asks “The Queen of Jazz,” Ella Fitzgerald, how she would explain what jazz music is to people. She replies that she thinks they can show them, and together they go into a captivating scat performance, going back and forth, improvising notes and melodies, showcasing a beautiful explanation for something that is frequently considered to be undefinable. (https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x23t25p) That’s exactly how I feel when I’m trying to explain what my life is like now that I’m disabled. There’s complications, back and forth momentum, highs and lows, joy, hidden pain even; but it all comes together beautifully to create the soundtrack of my life.

This journey began with a BOOM and a CRASH, like what we experience in the latter portion of Miles Davis’ “Nefertiti” after a mesmerizing, trance-like and consistent repetition of the melody in the first half of the song. The seeming dissonance that ensues is actually more of a controlled free-fall, which is an accurate description of what my life as a disabled person has felt like. At times I may be “In A Sentimental Mood” (Thank you, Mr. Ellington), but honestly, I wouldn’t trade this iconic symphony of a life with disabilities for the world. It’s been through this improvised, “take it as it comes and create something magical” experience that I’ve discovered a more marvelous version of myself. A version that’s allowing me to create something bigger than myself. If that’s not jazzy, then I don’t know what is.

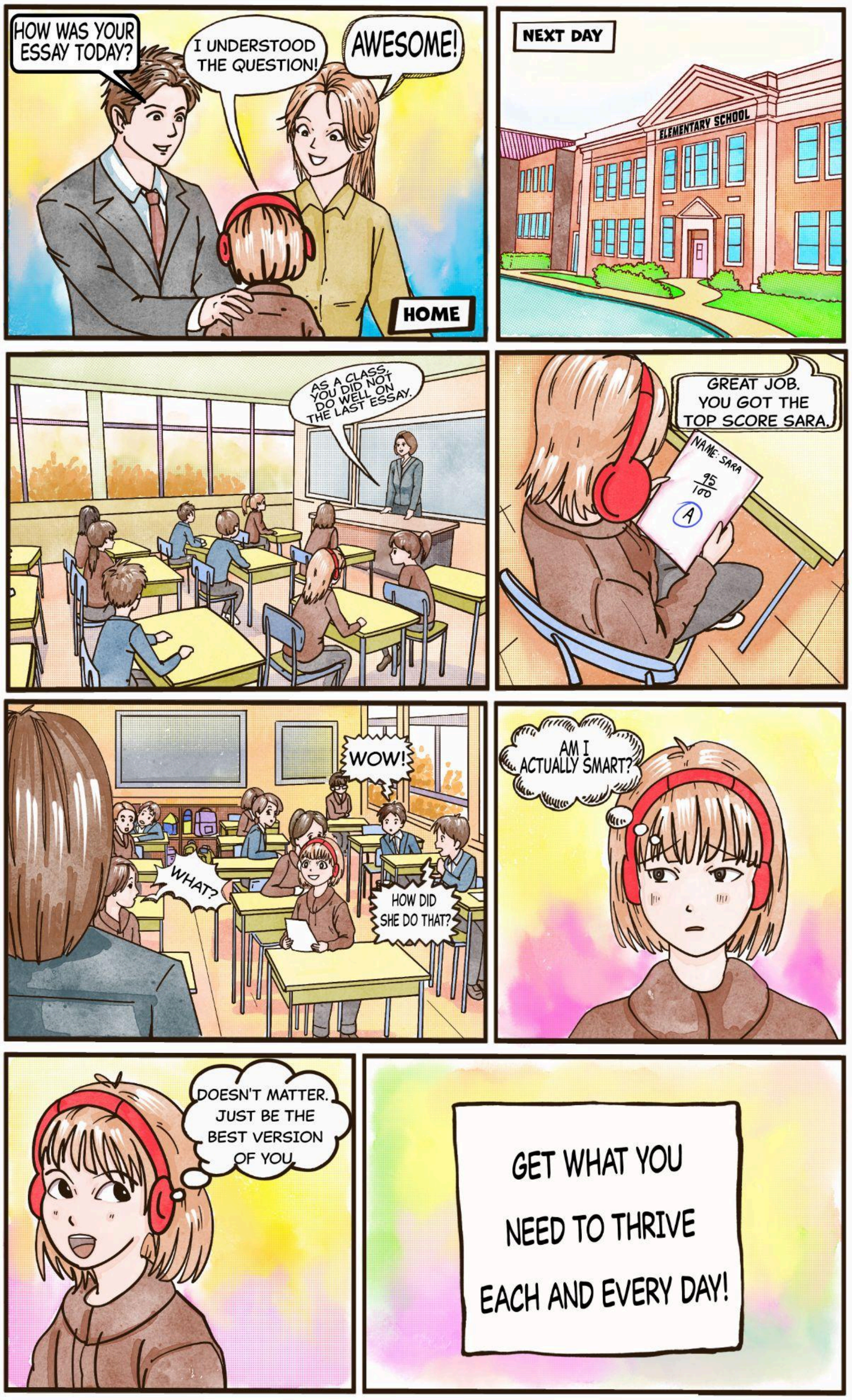
What is Wrong With Me?

By **Ellen Kim**

[**Note**: Image descriptions for this 4-page illustrated comic will be included soon.]


LUNCH TIME
SO ANNOYING!
SHE ALWAYS CRIES.
SARA, PLEASE SEE ME AFTER CLASS.
ME?
AFTER CLASS
0/100
F
WHAT IS GOING ON?!
I DON'T KNOW...
I NEED TO SPEAK WITH YOUR PARENTS.
OH MY GOSH!
SARA IS AT A 2ND/3RD GRADE-LEVEL.
WHAT?
EDUCATIONAL TESTING CENTER
EDUCATIONAL TESTING CENTER


SARA:
DIAGNOSED WITH HIGH-FUNCTIONING AUTISM.
NEXT WEEK
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE
WE ACCEPT THE DIAGNOSIS.
I WILL TRY, BUT I THINK SHE JUST NEEDS LOTS OF REMEDIATION.
SARA'S IEP.
ACCOMMODATIONS:
1. SIT IN FRONT OF CLASS,
2. WRITTEN INSTRUCTIONS,
3. ADVANCED NOTICE ON ANY EXAMS,
4. PROVIDE FREQUENT CHECK-INS,
5. ALLOWED OUTLINES AND CHECKLIST.
READY FOR THE NEXT ESSAY?
NAME:
MY CHECKLIST
MY NOTES
YOU CAN DO THIS!!!
THAT WAS SO HARD!



About the Author

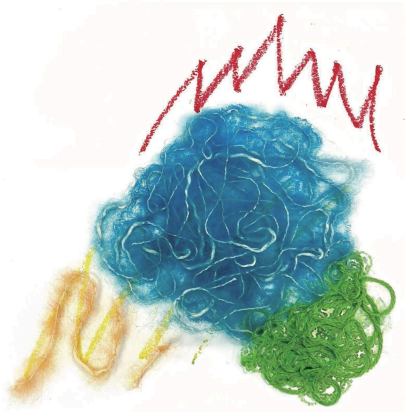
This comic reflects a personal journey navigating an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) diagnosis during elementary school. Through visual storytelling,I share some of the underlying challenges and the importance of accommodations, which people with disabilities should never feel ashamed to receive.

Created as a final project for a Disability Studies course at Taft College, this piece serves as both a personal reflection and a critique of the ableism embedded in many of our systems and social norms. Inspired by the course and by the healing power of Tojisha Manga, I now feel empowered to tell stories that challenge the medical and charitable models of disability, promote self-determination, and foster greater empathy and inclusion.

By sharing my own story, I hope to help others — both with and without disabilities — recognize the shared nature of human difference and envisiona more compassionate and accessible world.

Six-Year-Old Me vs. Me Now

By **Suri Jiang**



[**Left Image Description**:A mass of blue wool, like clouds and water, lies in the centre of the painting. It is soft and heavy, like the world I hear with my hearing aid on a rainy day. The red brushstroke cuts sharply across the top of the painting, like a sudden sharp sound. In the lower right corner, there is a small green line that exists quietly, like the remains of an unnoticed sound. This work comes from a sound memory I had when I was travelling alone through the streets.

Right Image Description: A tangled mass of red wool, like the remnants of some sound stuck in the ear, is tightly entangled on the right side of the picture, surrounded by blurred red chalk markings. At the bottom is a soft orange tremor, like the amplified low-frequency hum of a hearing aid, and the grass-green triangles are like misplaced rhythms, bouncing upwards and falling down immediately. The sound here is not clear, but knotted and sticky, unexplainable.]

Entering the unfamiliar city of London, I felt like I was exploring the unknown and facing new challenges. Everything—the environment, the culture, the language—was new to me, and as I adapted to life in London, I gradually realised that 'language' was the key to my connection with the world.

I have been wearing hearing aids since I was six years old, and they have been my 'friend' ever since. For someone like me, who has been wearing hearing aids since I was a child and who relies heavily on them, the concept of 'language' has always been vague. Occasionally, when my friends and I discuss different descriptions of sound, I think: 'Language' is the key to my connection with the world, so how do I perceive the world?

I grew up in Asia, a place where the underprivileged are often overlooked and not even allowed to be seen. In the past, I was often told that my hearing impairment was something that should be hidden and that no one should be aware of it. So, from the age of six, I tried to hide my hearing loss and try to look 'normal' in order to fit in with the hearing world.

But as I grew up, I came to realise that hiding it didn't actually help me fit in.

In the past, I studied in an ordinary school in mainland China due to family reasons. My experience there made me realise this even more. In that kind of educational environment, when I missed something in class and asked the teacher to repeat it, I was often met with dissatisfaction or impatience. Later, I realised that this situation did not exist only in schools, but in the entire environment and society as well. I began to wonder if the world really allows people like me to be understood and accepted.

Until that day, for the first time in my life, I came into close contact with a deaf person.

At the invitation of a friend, I attended a birthday party for the deaf community. Since I don't know BSL, I introduced myself by typing my name, hometown, and school on my mobile phone. They also typed their names and taught me some basic BSL. 'Thank you' in BSL was the first sign I ever learned.

As I watched them sit together, talking, signing, and laughing fluently in BSL, I was struck by the power of silent expression. In their world, sound barely exists. But even in a world without sound, they can still make their voices heard.

I've always relied on hearing aids and other technologies to help me hear, and I'm used to interacting with the world through lip reading. These technologies have helped me at times, but BSL has made me think about the possibilities of a different kind of communication.

In recent years, there have been developments in speech technology, such as speech recognition, real-time subtitling systems, and other innovations.

When I came to London, especially since I hadn't learned any sign language, I relied heavily on technology to aid my daily conversations, using speech-to-text tools to help me interact with my environment and communicate with people. However, the technology was not as reliable as I thought it would be, and I still had communication problems.

When I was sitting far away from the lecturer, my device couldn't pick up their voice clearly, and the transcribed text was often incomplete; when the environment was too noisy, the technology couldn't even recognise speech correctly, resulting in broken conversations or even incorrect information. It makes me wonder if these technologies can really help long-neglected groups fully address their challenges.

[**Image Description**: In the centre of the screen is a large, rough slash drawn in red crayon, like a phrase too rapid to be understood. Dark blue hair lines run through them in a jagged pattern, as if they were the sudden, ear-piercing vibrations of a headset. Underneath, the green hairline swings around casually, a bit like the erratic wind noise in my ears when I was at the MTR platform. It's a sound clip of loss of control and trembling.]

For many in the Deaf community, sign language is not just a tool for communication, it is a culture. But with the rapid advancement of technology, will sign language become marginalised? Or will technology encourage more people to learn about sign language and even support its use?

I can’t predict how the future will unfold, but this question makes me realise that communication is not an either/or choice—perhaps it is meant to coexist and complement each other.

Because of the way I grew up and learned, I was used to relying on hearing aids and interacting with the world through lip reading. My parents and I never considered learning sign language because we didn’t think it would benefit me in any way.

But BSL has made me re-examine whether my hearing aid has really made me 'hear.' Is it just helping me to adapt to the listener's way of communicating, without leading me to step out of this framework and explore another way of understanding the world? In the past, I used to think that language had to rely on sound, so I always tried my best to seem 'no different' from the listener, not wanting to become an 'alien.' But BSL has shown me that the world can be 'heard' and 'seen' through countless forms of communication that are constantly being redefined. It doesn't need sound, but it can still convey emotions, thoughts, and connections.

I began to realise that true 'listening' is not about sound, but about truly understanding the other person.

It wasn't until I came into contact with a group of deaf people in London that I saw the issue from a whole new perspective. Like me, they wear hearing aids, but rely mainly on BSL and mobile phones for communication. At that moment, I realised that for them, BSL is not just a language, but a cultural identity, a way of connecting with the world. It made me rethink whether linguistic diversity is the key to understanding the world. If the purpose of language is not just to make sounds, should we rethink the definition of language? Perhaps the value of language is not whether it produces sound, but how it helps us understand each other.

I used to think that language was about 'making sounds', but BSL made me realise that language also affects how we perceive the world. Different speakers of a language, or even different modes of communication, such as spoken or visual language, can bring about a completely different view of the world.

"I started to think: if BSL is also a language, can it exist alongside other languages? London is a multilingual city with speakers from all over the world. What role does BSL play in this linguistic diversity? I've often wondered if there is a form of 'hybrid communication' in London, where BSL, spoken language, and lip-reading complement each other. Language itself is flexible and
ever-changing, and perhaps BSL can be part of that, rather than just a minority language.

"Language is not only a medium of communication, but also a way of interacting with society and constructing meaning. This made me start to think about whether sign language, as a visual language, can fulfill the same social and cultural functions as spoken language. If the essence of language is to understand each other, are BSL and spoken language really that different? If the world were silent, would we still be able to understand each other?

These problems gave me the idea of learning BSL.

[**Image Description**: This image is like an incomplete listening experience. Two clusters of red and black hairs are tightly entangled, as if the sound is spinning and pulling in my head, but I can never hear it clearly. The grey and black arcs at the top are like wind and breathing; at the bottom, green and blue arrows crawl upwards, like the sound of a failed attempt at “dialogue”. This painting records the untranslatable state of my voice when I am stuck at the border between two worlds.]

But back to reality, learning BSL is full of challenges for me. It is not as simple as learning a few signs; it requires a complete shift in both language and thinking. BSL is a complete language system, not merely a signed version of spoken English. It has its own grammar, vocabulary, and expressive structures.

As someone who has long relied on hearing aids to perceive sound, I had never truly been exposed to sign language. Learning BSL meant that I had to completely change my communication patterns and learn how to ‘talk with my hands’ and how to understand gestures and subtle changes in facial expressions and movements. This is a very different way of communicating from what I am used to.
Not only did it require a long period of training, but it also required me to break away from my existing understanding of language and learn a whole new way of communicating from scratch.

What makes me more hesitant is that learning BSL is not only a linguistic challenge, but also a matter of cultural and identity integration. As a Deaf person, I am not unfamiliar with the ‘silent world,’ but the cultural, historical, and communal aspects of BSL are completely new to me. I couldn’t help but think: if I learnt BSL, would it mean my identity changes? Would I be able to truly integrate into the community? Or would I remain in an ambiguous place, neither in the hearing world nor in the culture of BSL? These questions made me feel uneasy and even doubtful about my ability to overcome the difficulties of the learning process. It also made me think about the relationship between language and identity.

On a social level, I can’t help but think: if more people could learn BSL, would this promote a more inclusive language environment? However, at this stage, sign language is still marginalised in many situations. Even in Western countries where the system is relatively developed and support is provided in various areas such as education, public services, and the media, sign language users still face many communication barriers in their daily lives, in the workplace, and in medical institutions, limiting access to information, employment, and healthcare for the deaf.

If sign language can be more widely accepted, can it break the language barrier and encourage society to pay more attention to the needs of the deaf community? Will it enable these groups, which have been easily neglected in the past, to be truly ‘seen’ and understood? These questions have made me realise that language is not only a personal choice, but also a matter of social tolerance and fairness.

As a British sign language, BSL is not an internationally recognised language. Different countries have different sign language systems, and there can be significant differences in signs and grammar. For someone who has been moving back and forth between London, Hong Kong, and China for a long time and may continue to relocate in the future, what is the value of learning BSL? If I have to leave the UK one day, will BSL still be useful for communication? This makes me think: is learning BSL a long-term journey worth investing in?”

“Despite this, I still have high hopes for BSL and am eager to understand and communicate with the world through a language that does not rely on sound. However, I am still worried that I will not be able to master this new language. I am afraid of failing in my attempts, and I even wonder if I will be able to adapt to this mode of communication. These psychological pressures are perhaps the biggest challenge in my BSL learning process.

Actually, I do not have the answers to these questions now.

Maybe I can try to learn it for a short time to see if this language of gestures and facial expressions is suitable for me. Or maybe I don’t necessarily need to learn BSL, but rather observe and study to make the unseen visible and understood. Or perhaps I see this experience as a starting point and let it become part of my future research, rather than a decision to be made immediately.

I can’t give a definite answer to whether I want to learn BSL or not, and perhaps I don’t need to rush to find one. The discovery of BSL by chance has opened my eyes to another possibility of communicating with the world. It is not just a combination of gestures, but a visual and emotional language. At the same time, it reminds me that the world can be ‘heard’ and ‘seen’ in different ways, and that true understanding does not necessarily depend on sound, but on our willingness to understand. Whether BSL is right for me is still a question worth exploring.

The question itself has opened a new door for me to start rethinking—can we still connect with the world when sound disappears? This is not just a personal exploration, but also a broader linguistic and cultural discussion. When sound is no longer the primary means of communication, is there a more inclusive language design? This may be a direction worth thinking about.

Perhaps one day,
I will accidentally begin learning sign language, just as I once accidentally arrived in London.

Benefits and Challenges of Seeking Accommodations in Education

By **Arielle Dance, PhD** — Feature by **Diversability**

[**Image Description**: Student in wheelchair reading at a desk - he’s wearing a blue shirt, black pants.Another student with long hair, pink shirt, blurred at the desk in front of him.]

For many disabled students, navigating and reaching their academic goals isn't possible without accommodations. Requesting accommodations as a student can be extremely challenging and even stigmatized in some cases. However, for disabled students, seeking these resources can significantly improve their day to day experience and education. Some accommodations available to students include extra time on exams, additional time to get to classes, inability to be penalized for absences, having an interpreter or aid in class, or assistive technology.

When I was in college, I was dealing with endometriosis and severe asthma. Working closely with my campus disability services office, I was able to get academic accommodations, accessible housing, and more. I was given additional time to get to class with no penalty if I was late. And I had a special notice that allowed me to have a minifridge in my dorm room to store my medication. I am grateful for the director of the disability services office who supported me with every hurdle and victory. She also taught me that advocating for my disability was a key part of my journey. Because of this, I joined the disability awareness club on campus and learned from other disabled students about the importance of carving a space out for disabled people and scholars.

To learn more about other disabled people's experiences, I asked members of the Diversability Leadership Collective, Malakai Strong, Siyu (Suzanna) Chen, and Kelley Coleman to share.

Malakai Strong (he/they)
Malakai, who has cerebral palsy also utilized accommodations during university. The accommodations he most requested included a table at the best height to accommodate his power wheelchair, getting extra time on exams, and a quiet testing space. To get these services, Malakai met with the disability services team, filled out required paperwork, and had preparation meetings with professors to discuss each term. He experienced some barriers with the disability services team that impacted his mental health. He is especially grateful for his professors and advisors who supported his needs and advocated for him when needed.

Siyu (Suzanna) Chen (she/they)
Suzanna is an Autistic person with ADHD who received accommodations during university. She received extended time on exams and deadlines for assignments. She also received mental health and academic tutoring accompanied by the ability to record lectures for note taking. To receive these accommodations, she emailed the disability support department, set up a meeting with an advisor, and provided medical confirmation of her conditions. One challenge she and many others face is the requirement to alert individual professors — the accommodations are not shared with professors automatically or annually. This heavy load on the disabled student made Suzanna question if the process is worth the hassle. Nonetheless, she feels that receiving these accommodations is absolutely crucial for her to have a decent learning experience.

Kelley Coleman (she/her)
Kelley shared her experience as a caregiver requesting accommodations on behalf of her son who has multiple disabilities, including an undiagnosed genetic syndrome, Autism, epilepsy, cerebral palsy, cortical vision impairment, and other diagnoses. She works to ensure her son has access to his education which includes services delivered during the school day to support his fine motor, gross motor, communication, behavioral, and medical needs. Using an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP), her son is able to access alternate curricula and special education placement. One of the most important accommodations is his Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC) device, and the training and support required for him to communicate with it. "With these supports in place, and with staff fully trained in supporting

kids with disabilities, my son has thrived in school and continues to make progress on his goals and accomplishments.” Kelley’s son still combats challenges in school along with the doubts of some teachers and administrators. Presently, he has a strong team of educators, but in the past there were people who weren’t willing to work with him or who didn’t believe he was capable of success. The biggest supporters and advocates have been other parents of disabled children.

In these cases, getting access to academic accommodations came with challenges but all were able to find support in their academic journey. Whether in college or in primary school, seeking accommodations in school can be essential to success. A special thank you to these Diversability Leadership Collective members for sharing your experiences.

Courageous Kids Climbing

Founded by **Jeffrey A. “Jeff” Riechmann** — Feature by **Ave Astra**

Courageous Kids Climbing is an Idaho-based nonprofit organization founded and led by Jeffrey A. "Jeff" Riechmann, a retired firefighter and dedicated rock climbing enthusiast. With the heartfelt mission of "helping people with special needs to rise above!", the organization provides free opportunities for children with special needs to experience the empowering and transformative sport of rock climbing.

Climbing’s Benefits for Youth with Special Needs

Climbing is more than just a physical challenge; it offers therapeutic and developmental benefits for children with physical or developmental disabilities. Climbing has been shown to help individuals practice problem-solving skills, improve their ability to focus, enhance coordination, and build self-confidence. For children with physical challenges, Courageous Kids Climbing takes the participant out of the horizontal world and lets them experience the vertical world — a new perspective beyond their usual environments, often spent in wheelchairs. This experience is available to anyone under 300 pounds, the limit of their specialized equipment.

Programs and Impact

- **Free Climbing Events:** Courageous Kids Climbing hosts climbing events for children aged 3 months to 103 years, serving participants across Idaho, Washington, California, Nevada, and Arizona. These events take place on indoor climbing walls, outdoor boulders, and natural formations.

- **First Responders Partnership:** First responders are invited to support climbing events, gaining hands-on experience working with children with special needs. Through one-on-one interactions, children become more comfortable around uniformed personnel. First responders also train on advanced rope rescue techniques using specialized haul systems and donated rescue gear. This collaboration has evolved from public relations to vital training opportunities for many emergency departments.

- **Climbing on Stuff (COS):** This unique program engages school-age children who are blind by allowing them to explore objects tactilely. Participating kids have experienced tactile encounters with fighter jets, helicopters, race cars, law enforcement vehicles, army tanks, and cultural experiences with Nez Perce Native Americans.

- **IceClimbers:** Partnering with hockey teams from Idaho IceCats to universities like Boise State University and Eastern Washington University, this program shares ice skating with people with special needs, promoting physical activity in a fun, inclusive environment.

- **Supporting Students and Community Projects:** Courageous Kids Climbing supports educational initiatives, including student research internships, Eagle Scout projects to build shelters, and community service opportunities through event participation.

- **Junior Mountaineering Program:** Featuring outdoor and portable slacklines, Slackboards, and engaging activities such as art projects and meteorite "Space Rocks," this program raises awareness and introduces youth to climbing and slacklining at schools, churches, and scouting events.

A Welcoming and Safe Environment

At all events, no child is ever forced to climb. The goal is to ensure every courageous climber leaves with a smile, amazed parents, and a strengthened spirit. Safety is paramount — Jeff's firefighting background has shaped the organization's strong safety protocols, including the use of firefighter-clean gear when children visit fire apparatus.

Scholarships and Educational Support

Separately from Courageous Kids Climbing, the owner and his wife Charlotte established the annual Courageous Kids Scholarship to support University of Idaho students with learning differences, reflecting their personal commitment to empowering youth both physically and academically.

Stay Connected

Families interested in signing up to learn more about upcoming events, or supporters looking to get involved, can connect with Courageous Kids Climbing by emailing courageouskidsclimbing@gmail.com. Staying connected ensures updates on future events, volunteer opportunities, and ways to contribute to helping youth "rise above" their challenges.

Support the Cause

Donations are gratefully accepted to help sustain and grow the nonprofit's programs. Checks can be mailed to:

Courageous Kids Climbing
300 Mountain Cove Court
McCall, Idaho 83638-4501

Blackness when viewed Upside Down

By **Tamir Nubia**

As the topic of colorism ever comes up, I'm inclined to explain my neurodiverse experience to people. It's not a link between the two excluded groups that allistic or lighter skinned people would ever need to make so it's often eye-opening for them when I do. Along with the fairer skinned people of my community rarely applying thought to the way they made myself & my peers feel, most neurotypical folks also don't consider how their behavior is interpreted by the rest of us. Years of exposure to that kind of dismissal evolved my most maladaptive coping mechanism to something comparable to a Reverse Uno Card. I'm not the weird one here, you are. That said, my laterally processing brain always flagged any "You're *so* Black" commentary as off & strange because:

A) I am not 'black'. I am not the color of tarmac or pavement. I am, to an eye, a dark brown color. Which brings us to point

B) In that, I am from a community of variously brown people. And among us, I was a dark brown. But there were darker browns present, alongside lighter browns & some not-so-light browns and so my brain always found itself in this conundrum of understanding what was meant to be conveyed by this *kind* of bullying. I understood it was bullying, I just could not understand what I was being bullied for. As I've aged, I've had discussions with femmes from similar backgrounds who have confirmed for me that they got the joke as it was made. So now, when we as a class of adults, come together to navigate the colorism conversation, I insist on bringing up the ways my neurodiversity influenced my relationship to it.

I try to connect avenues of Blackness and the neurodiverse experience (particularly of Black children) to one another all the time because the Black experience is so intrinsically coded. By this, I mean to say that the culture I was raised in is nuanced and ever evolving - so much that we forget how to explain or that for some of us, things may require an explanation.

Another angle of this perspective is the dialect we speak. I fell in love with AAVE many, many times over, just listening to the adults as they spoke around me, picking out the things they said & deconstructing them to their base meanings. I am from a culture, a people, that have designed so many turns of phrases that mean the same things as one another or are direct antonyms to each other. It's been one of the most beautifully frustrating phenomenons in my life.

Helen Wallace-Iles, Founder of Autism All-Stars UK and practicing occupational therapist, wrote "All language has two layers of meaning: what words *actually* mean (their literal meaning) and what we *want* them to mean (their figurative meaning) which is where the expression 'figure of speech' comes from (when someone says one thing but means something else)...[you'll find] dyslexic people always ask 'Why can't words just be spelled the way they sound?' while autistic people ask 'Why can't people just say what they mean?"

I'd like to reiterate: I am from a diasporic community made up of several dialectical cultures. My family is a Caribbean-ADOS blend; my cousins span from Guyana to Jamaica and back while my neighbors hailed from DR, PR, Honduras & Cuba. My closest friends and I simply considered ourselves 'from NYC' (and as I've aged, I've found humor in the diasporic nature of that as well - I am from an afro-latinx community in Yonkers which differs extremely from say the Haitians in Queens or the Dominicans in the Bronx). I emphasize the distinctions between the people who taught me to speak because it needs to be understood that there was no one way to speak. I spent years grappling with that because of the way my brain processes things.

Colonial supremacists have structured communities like mine in a way where children like me aren't extended the resources to learn we're wired differently until we are an unquestionable disruption to the (allistic) adults' day. My first three ADHD diagnoses were mandated by my school because of behavioral issues and were presented to me in the phrasing "ADHDimpulsivity and ODD".

ODD is, as it was explained to me, an acronym for 'Oppositional Defiance Disorder'. When I was 10, a gray-haired lady with blue spectacles who always wore cardigans that basically swallowed her frame whole explained to me that 'there was a funny wire in my brain that made me want to always do the opposite of what grown ups told me too.' She associated this with my 'ADHDimpulsivity' - apparently, the funny little wire could work with this part of my brain to make me do the things adults told me not to do faster than I could think about if *I* wanted to do them.

As an adult, I'd like to assert three distinct points in the way I received this information:

1) The way we talk to femme children about the parts of themselves *we'd* like them to change is so insidious. I can wager confidently most boy children were not being told their neurodiversity was some separate parasitic entity successfully dishonoring them from inside of their body. That is a rhetoric we reserve for girls in many ways & it is intentional.
2) I do not believe an 'ODD' diagnosis holds any legitimacy beyond colonial insistence that children should be controlled at all times. The most defiant of children are children experiencing a communication barrier on either their end or ours.
3) This was coupled with my ADHD. Children are not as naive as any adult would like to think so without understanding specifically what was wrong with the narrative being set, I could understand it's context. ODD was a 'bad' thing to have. So my ADHD had to be a 'bad' thing to have. Throw in the mumblings about 'special ed classrooms' and 'medicinal routines' and I came to one definitive conclusion: whatever ADHDimpulsivity and ODD were, we were going to put them to the side so my adults wouldn't behave how they were behaving anymore.

And so we learned to mask.

Or, more sincerely, we did what we could to mask. You see, what had me referred to all these psychiatrists, including Gray Haired Lady, were responses to a combination sensory/stim overwhelm that I had no language for. As an adult, I can tell you my behavior was often a series of meltdowns bleeding into shutdowns blending into another set of meltdowns because I could not communicate "this music is too loud" or "we've done too much today - my brain is overwhelmed and I need a break". I'm also not from a culture that would've responded to that coming from me as a child. So in moments of fatigue, I was read as 'insubordinate' - my teachers couldn't get me to take my headphones out of my ears or participate in our fluorescently lit classroom. My family couldn't pull me out of my room for hours at a time and to get me out was to almost bring me to tears.

And in moments of overwhelm, I became physically aggressive. My primary & secondary school records are littered, metaphorically speckled with suspensions for one physical outburst or another. Fist fights, destruction of property, inciting a panic - there are two different expulsions in there somewhere for assaulting a staff member. I reflect on these moments in my childhood with two prominent emotions, the first being amusement. I spend enough time with children these days to know how much chaos I caused that could've been avoided if anyone would've told me what overstimulation was and how to manage it. But environmentally, while I was 'unique' for my intelligence, I was not a standalone troublemaker by far. I learned to fight in these moments because I had peers to fight with. And in that way, the second emotion I conflate with these memories is remorse. I wasn't presented with my ADHD diagnosis in a way that served me and I can't imagine many of us were. I often wonder how many of us just went on to live undiagnosed and unsupported. It's not an impossible experience to have - it is just so unnecessarily hard when there's access to alternatives.

This uncommunicated experience many of us were sharing at the time though, I fully believe, also shaped whole aspects of our culture. I wonder how many of the pencil drummers had ADHD. I wonder how many of the teenage boys who couldn't help but to jump up and smack the door threshold as they walked beneath them had ADHD. I wonder how many of the 'Yaga!', 'Open neck!', 'You ain't want that..' moments were influenced by simple impulsivity. I wonder how many of the high femmes with 4 inch long nails had skin sensitive sensory needs. I wonder what being tenderheaded is like through the lived lens of autistic person. I wonder how many of the 'Yass's and 'Purr's repeated throughout a day are tics. I wonder how much of my culture is designed by neurodiverse people and I doubt I'll ever truly know. I sustain a belief that *many* more of us are on the spectrum than we're aware of.

About the Author

Tamir Nubia is a Black transmasculine writer and oral historian based in Oakland, CA. He is a 2024 First Place Fellow at the Martha's Vineyard Institute for Creative Writing. His work centers Black queer and trans liberation, exploring identity, memory, and transformation through a lyrical, reflective lens. When not writing, he studies astrology, diasporic traditions, and the metaphysical at large.

It Might Be Time To Go Talk To That Lady

By **Jordan Bailey**

[**Content Warning**: This poem contains **strong language** and **mentions of suicide** that may be distressing to some readers.]

After I left you stranded on 7th street
With the car parked in the middle of traffic
I never seen myself
Be so
Storm door made useless
Crazy be such a communion of a word
But that was some crazy shit
And maybe it might be time for
I'm not okay
And
It's not okay anymore
And
Not okay can't be the new normal anymore
I'm a bad day away from straight jacket
Or a noose
And maybe I'm not even close to suicide
Just hip to hip with the feeling
And maybe my feelings will always be bigger than my stomach
And a breakdown is just the last round at the buffet
Returning for revenge
And maybe
Logistical thinking is my most human trait
The empathy
To make sure my death is
As least traumatic as possible
And maybe that is proof
I am worth the commercial break it took to make me
Or maybe it is just proof
I am broken
Ain't suicide supposed to be about controlling something
And here I go
Making everyone else the priority in my endings
And maybe

I only write poems
Cause it’s the only time my feelings feel valid
And validated
And the bigness of them can be mistaken for metaphor
Like when I say
Everyday feels like standing up straight in the six foot end of the pool
And im 5’9”
Everyone can snap
And go about their day
And forget the idea that I’m constantly trying not to drown
And maybe a poem
Is a liferaft
But ain’t supposed to the way to shore
And maybe shore
Is a daily dosage away
And I shouldn’t have to worry about
The fog
Or the appetite
Or the mental blocks
Maybe my mental needs a block
That ain’t 80% proof read
Or backwood binded
And maybe
My therapist was right
I am way more afraid of people thinking I’m crazy
Than actually being fucking crazy
And maybe I shouldn’t tell people any chance I get
I am crazy
Cause then they stop believing you
See it as the boy who cried too fucking much
Instead of the caution tape he trying to be
And maybe his death was gonna be
A present
All niggas woul have to do is pick out
The box for me
And maybe I need help
From someone who went to school
And studied
And gets paid
To help me

Instead of expecting the people I love
To love me here
And maybe I can't
Be loved here
Me being here is work
And I gotta figure out how to be good at it

About the Author

Jordan Bailey is a 27 year old poet, rapper,and curator out of Charlotte, NC. He is a partof the 2018 National Slam Champions and the 2019 Slam Madness Champion. He is also the current Slam Charlotte coach and a part of the team, ranking 2nd at the 2024 Southern Fried Regional Poetry Slam. Jordan Bailey has sought out ways to strengthen his crafts by becominga The Watering Hole Graduate Fellow in 2024and becoming an artist in residency withGoodyear Arts.

Picnic Attack

By **Vishaal**

Picnic **Attack**

Thump Thump Thump Thump
Sweat beads form around Thump Thump Thump Thump
Sweat beads trickle down Thump Thump Thump Thump Slurry tongue, shaky ground
Thump Thump Thump Thump Shallow breath, limbs not found Thump Thump Thump
Lean in, let it pound Thump Thump Thump Thump Recall the list, let's go round
Sun. Leaves. Jack, Mary and their hound
Cotton. Breeze. Bruise and dental crown.
Thump Thump Thump Thump Bark. Cackle. A rustling sound?
Thump Thump Thump Perfume & cigarettes abound
Blueberry muffin *von* Mr. Brown
Thump Thump Thump
Jack knocks down the picnic basket,
Mary frowns Their twins roll
down the grassy
mound

Lub Dub Lub Dub Lub Dub Lub Dub
Ol' chum 'Xiety hits the town Everyday circus, everyday clown
Shape-shifting angel (monster), invisible gown Lub Dub Lub Dub Lub Dub
Has my back, unannounced From the threat of living, the threat you'd drown
Lub Dub Lub Dub Lub Dub Lub Dub Lub Dub
Let it go, let come unwound I sense Mary mouthing how she
composts her coffee grounds Nod and smile; Soon
I'll pretend to eat bread, crack a mindless joke that's
also half-profound A sense of humour–
helps, I've found
Lub Dub
Lub Dub
Lub
Dub

Man in the Wheelchair

By **David Radavich**

His hands have nowhere to go:
circles and more circles.

His feet are furious.

His head keeps rising and rising,
balloon buoyed by air and sky

and a day that consists
of rolling and rolling

always forward

with an occasional adjustment
backing up and starting over.

What is walking?
He can’t remember.

It feels like a circus
he once saw as a child:
tottering on stilts.

Now at chair level, he feels
closer to Earth,

hallowed beetle or snake
that knows all the contours
that intimately matter.

The Cost of Breathing

By **Liberty Bligh, Community Researcher - Cripping Breath — Sheffield University**

Breathe in…breathe out…breathe in…breathe out and repeat. Every second, of every minute, of every day, of every week, of every month, of every year, for the rest of your life. It's a simple concept, and most of us take it for granted, a continuous cycle, and something that runs parallel to our everyday existence. It's essential to life, which means we can not survive without it, we would simply die. The air we breathe is freely available all around us, our bodies consume this resource repetitively with every breath we take. Every single human being has the basic human right and need to breathe, and it costs nothing, after all the air we breathe is free. Or is it?

For people who live with ventilation, breathing is not something that comes naturally and not something that comes for free. The vulnerability and dependence on medical equipment, in order to breathe, comes at a cost, both financially, emotionally and physically.

For people who require oxygen, or use machines to condense oxygen, the additional costs of electricity to enable this is covered, and rightly so, given that without it, people would die.

For people who require ventilators, medical equipment that takes over the mechanism of breathing, and without which, would die, have none of the costs of electricity covered. Individuals, through no fault of their own, have to burden this cost, which has more than doubled during the costs of living crisis over the last 6 years. The set rates were introduced in January 2019 by regulatory body, Ofgem, and are reviewed every six months. (https://www.electricityprices.org.uk/history-of-the-energy-price cap/).

Energy price cap date	Energy price cap rate	Electricity kWh	Electricity daily charge	Gas kWh	Gas daily charge
January 2019	£1137	16.52p	22.77p	3.73p	25.82p
January 2023	£4279	67.47p	46.36p	17.08p	28.49p
April 2025	£1849	27.03p	53.80p	6.99p	32.67p

In January 2023 the cost of electricity that powers essential medical equipment had almost tripled and in April 2025, in real terms disabled people were paying 62% more to breathe using a ventilator and 87% more to heat their homes.

Using a humidified ventilator in a cold room increases the condensation in the breathing tubes which increases the risk of aspiration, increases the risk of colonisation of bacteria and greatly increases the risk of pneumonia.
(https://journal.chestnet.org/article/S0012-3692(16)47487-8)

To combat this, many people who rely on ventilators to breathe at home, heat their bedrooms overnight, when using the ventilator, resulting in approximately 34% higher heating costs. The British Thoracic Society published their concerns in June 2022, highlighting the disproportionate impact of rising electricity costs on home ventilation users, resulting in significant health inequalities. Financial assistance is available for home dialysis and oxygen concentrator machines. However, despite raising serious concerns, there is still no current reimbursement or financial payments for electricity for ventilator dependent patients.
(https://www.brit_thoracic.org.uk/news/2022/impact-of-the-rising-cost-of-electricity-on-home-ventilation-patients/)

Many people who rely on ventilators to breathe, have complex comorbidities, and therefore rely on other medical and mobility equipment alongside other associated costs including energy, fuel and transport.

For an individual with the following essential medical and mobility equipment, the annual difference in May 2025 in extra electricity costs is £1090.

Stair Lift	£18
Bath Lift	£59
Mobility Scooter	£472
ViPAP Ventilator	£92
Hoist	£18
Profile Bed	£246
Suction	£47
Cough Assist	£47

Medication	£59
Fridge	£15
Nebuliser	£15
Heating Equipment	£17
TOTAL	**£1090**

Disabled people, under the new welfare reform bill could be significantly worse off financially with many losing access to Personal Independence Payment (PIP) and Universal Credit’s health element. This could lead to a combined annual loss of £2400 or potentially more, for some.
(https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/mar/18/britain-welfare-overhaul-disability-benefits-pip-liz-kendall)

This could see thousands of disabled people, who rely on essential medical equipment, including ventilators, at home, to stay alive, being nearly £3500 worse off per year.

The proposed changes to PIP, which will tighten up the eligibility criteria for the daily living component, aren’t yet clear how people who use ventilators will be assessed. Whilst the DWP will take into account aids and appliances it considers would be reasonable to be used, they score lower than help provided by another person. This is compounded by the fact that there is no section within the PIP assessment process that specifically assesses breathing as a daily living activity. (https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/benefits/sick-or-disabled-people-and-carers/pip/help-with-your-claim-/how-decisions-are-ma de/

So what are the alternatives or possible solutions?

We need **research** that specifically looks at the additional living costs of people with disabilities or long term conditions that use
essential medical equipment at home, including ventilators, to understand the scope of the issue.

There have been several successful **social prescribing** pilots where health professionals prescribe heat to help vulnerable people to maintain a comfortable indoor temperature. These pilots have seen reduced hospital admissions and improved health outcomes. An example being the Warm Home Prescription scheme in 2022 (https://es.catapult.org.uk/news/warm-hopme-prescription-trial aims-to-save-nhs-time-and-money/)

Social Tariffs are currently available for some people for costs such as home broadband but there are very strict eligibility criteria. They are designed to provide basic utilities at a lower rate to help those in need. However, people who rely on essential ventilation equipment at home, are not currently deemed in need and are therefore not eligible. Social tariffs for energy are targeted at low income families but unfortunately they don’t take into consideration the disproportionate financial impact of using essential medical equipment and they have now been phased out (https://www.moneysupermarket.com/gas-and-electricity/social tariffs/).

The cost of breathing is something that the majority of people never need to think about, but for those who rely on ventilators, many face an uncertain financial future without radical change to recognise that assisted breathing is an essential cost and should be factored into the welfare reform and UK Government and NHS policies and financial support.

This blog is part of a 5 year research project Cripping Breath: Towards a new cultural politics of respiration, which is looking at what it is like to live with ventilation. Exploring co-production, community and complexity, one of the issues raised, has been the cost of living and proposed welfare reform impact for ventilator users at home.

Do you live with ventilation or support those that do? Are you interested in finding out how we are co-producing new understandings of the experience of people who use ventilation? Find out more about Cripping Breath research here (https://sheffield.ac.uk/cripping-breath)

(Im)penetrable

By **Yewande Akinse**

grand illusions becloud
from colossal height
overworking body and mind without rest
sacrificing mental health on an altar of more

keeping up with the rat race without fail
tendering to the dreams that keep awake at night
assuaging voices demanding greatness and nothing less
caving into pressure

bring it on
and some more
rest is for the weak
increased work hours with little slumber

lacking nap time and siesta
an overworked muse rebels in protest
refusing to carry on
with apparent abuse

the breakdown happened
like a lightning bolt from the distant heavens
metal-mental clash in loud tempo
nocturnal voices unleashed from cocoon

conversations with self in public space
unseen persons
seven in number with distinct names and voices
unwelcome visitors need no invitation

pervious to the rhythms of stress
barefoot native dance
unveiling cause and effect
in dramatic fashion and style

I have learned hard lessons
that nature will always have her way
lessons on thin borderlines
rest is not for the weak

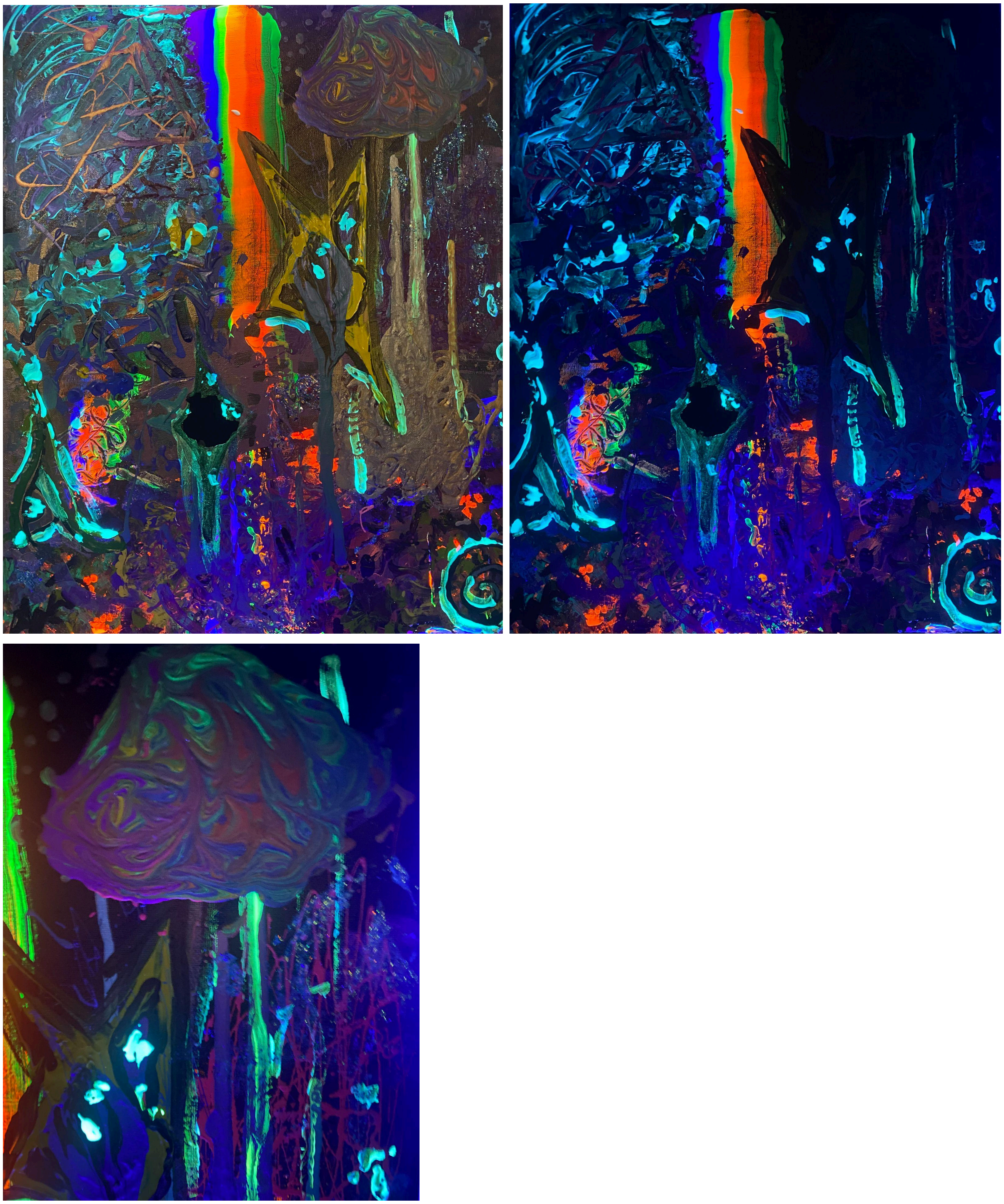
About the Author

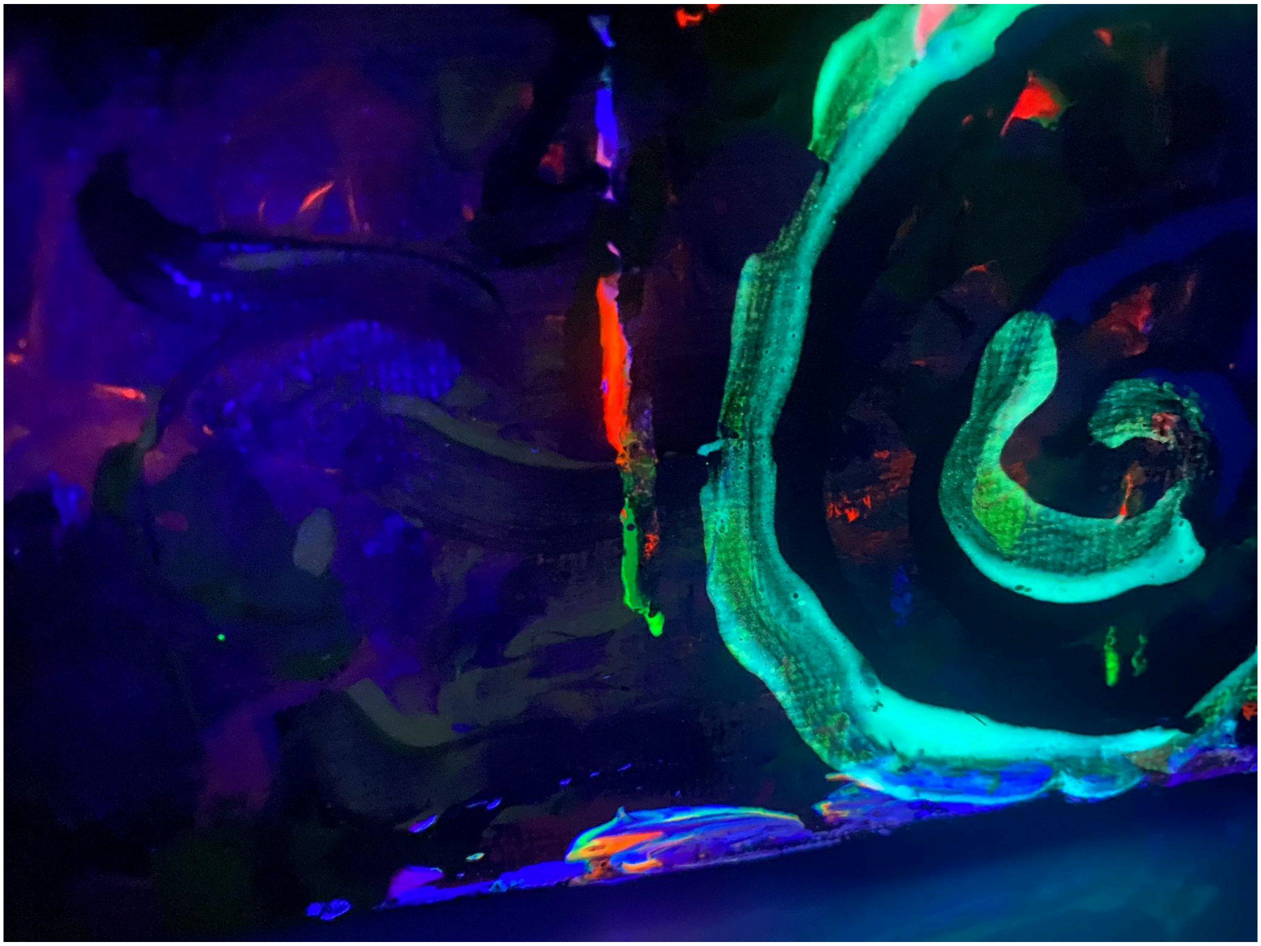
Yewande Akinse is a poet and author of three collections of poetry titled,"The rise and fall of rhymes and rhythms" (2025), "A tale of being, of green and of ing" (2019) and Voices: A collection of poems that tell stories (2016).

Daylight/ Nightlife/ Nightlight

By **Paris Nicole Henderson**

[**Image Description**: A series of acrylic blacklightand glow in the dark painting.]





Good dogs (such a strange dog)

By **Tyla Smith**

She's a strange dog

She doesn't respond to pets

She hates loud noises

Her ears gnaw at obscene obscure noses and she becomes undone

She rarely barks, but at everything she's ever wanted she leaves saliva and bite marks on it , and doesn't know how to not like anything with less passion .

gnawed plastic lays politely on the ground like an apology.

Her passion salivates and disappears as quickly as her hunger ..when eyes turn into mockery than awe

rabbid girl ..

bad dog ..

She keeps her food bowl separate from her liquids

She tries her best to watch her volume and her wants get confused as greed

She tilts her head .. at these humans she's trying to be normal , they ask these sing song questions , she responds every time with practiced lyrics

she's wonders if is in the right key

She's got a collar on neck , they do anything to keep her contained , she's better owned than free …

They say sit dog

Shake your head girl

Be quiet girl

No one wants to tussle with your why's , just do you’ve always been better on leashes

But I’ve always been a good dog .

I’ve always been a good girl !

I’ve always been a different girl !

I’ve always been a bad dog .

But a good girl !

I’ve always been out of place

Missing puzzles

Jagged chromosomes

Sensory issues and itchy sweaters

A swollen throat

And bruises on every kitchen corner I ever hit to make sure I still feel something ..

wake up with bruises unsure why .

I was born from answer came out like a question

Why can't I stop walking on my tippy toes ?

I wanted to be a dancer !

My mother always made me feel

A sacrifice and question

Where did you come from with all these wants and needs and desires

Why can’t you behave ?

Why can’t you be a good dog ?

My partner

I wonder if loving me every feels like a long drawn out peace treaty

Will leaving me feel like an apology and liberty?

Will you get tired of the way my body hymns when I am happy?

Or when my turtle neck is too

Tight , the car is too hot?

I need to

Lock the door

3 times

It has to be 3 times

Don't you understand the power of threes and patterns

Please don't change the plans

We go on walks at 3

I am really good

Dog

I am really good girl ! I'm

I've always been a good dog .

But a bad girl !

Good dogs obey

Bad girls

Always ask for what they need !

…. And I've scraped my knees everytime I ever bend down to society .

I've got a ruby red tongue from all the times .. I've bit my tongue .. I've outgrown my use of collars … and dog parks There not fit for girls like me.

Three Friends

By **Beth Birley**

Once upon a time, a poor farm boy was born crippled.

“He’s of no use around here like this,” said his father, “Can’t do anything on a farm if you’re crippled.”

“He can be of use somewhere,” insisted the boy’s mum.

They called him Daniel after his grandfather, and so the boy started growing.

The father left little Daniel to the care of his wife because he didn’t know how to handle him. The mother was kind and patient, and she soon saw little talents in Daniel. When she tried to tell her husband, he said,

“You’re imagining it. The boy’s as useless as a sheep caught in the mud.”

Daniel heard that and was now old enough to understand the words. He looked up at his dad nervously and asked, “Why don’t you like me?”

“’Cause you can’t do nothing,” the Dad snapped, “Any son of mine has to be able to do the work and help around the farm.”

The Dad stomped out to milk the cows, and Daniel stumbled after, wanting to show his dad how he could help.

“Beat it,” roared the Dad, as Daniel accidentally kicked over a bucket of cream.

“I just wanted to help,” cried Daniel. “Am not as useless as you think I am.”

And Dad clenched his fist warningly.

“Clear off inside, you useless twit,” Dad snarled, “Or I will break what little there is of you.”

The mother shook her head despairingly and took Daniel into her arms.

“Little Dan,” she said, “This is how many of the world might see you, but it is not true to you inside. You either need to show the world what you can do or hide from the problems. I will not decide the path for you, for we must all find our own.”

Daniel would remember those words years later. He was now 14, still crippled, but over the years he had learnt to do some of the jobs. It still was not enough capability to impress his father.

When Daniel had invented a trap for the foxes, the father had shook his head in despair.

“You don’t need machines for this unless you’re a lazy oaf, which you are,” said Dad.

Another time Daniel thought up a machine to help milk the cows, and the father had smashed it.

“Stop dreaming and start working or you can clear off,” his father growled.

By now his mother had died, and there was nothing to keep him working on his father’s farm.

Daniel had cried enough tears and decided it was time for action.

“Then I’ll go to the wider world and try my luck there,” he insisted.

And Daniel packed a little sack of provisions, then hobbled off along the road with a wooden crutch under one arm. This crutch was one his mother had brought at the market for him, and it reminded him of her love.

As he went on his way, he wasn’t quite sure where he would end up. However, he told himself, “If I go to a city, there might be more jobs I am capable of.”

The road was hard under his boots, but they were built for the outdoors and made of strong leather.

After half a day’s slow progress, he passed a sign that told him it was two days to the city. He looked back and wondered if there was another way.

All that was behind, though, was his father’s farm.

“I’ll keep going, it’s hard but I have to,” Daniel insisted. “But I shall catch my breath again first.”

And he sat on a tree stump by the road for a few minutes. This was where he heard the sound of someone crying loudly nearby. As someone who had seen many tears, he was used to them and wanted to help.

He called softly, “Is someone there?”

“Useless,” the voice cried to itself, “Can’t do anything right.”

Daniel looked behind him, then saw a poor girl wearing a simple dress with red hair that shone like a fire.

Out of respect for her, Daniel waited a second, then coughed politely, but she didn’t notice.

It was another few minutes before Daniel’s energy was back; then he stood and walked over to her.

“Excuse me,” he said in a very gentle voice, “Are you alright?”

“No,” wailed the girl, “I spilt the cheese and burnt the bread and got the sack. I’m not welcome there again.”

Daniel laid a hand gently on hers and said,

“That’s a familiar tale. I was told to leave home on the farm ‘cause I am a cripple.”

“I am just a useless with no excuse,” the girl continued.

“No one is truly useless,” said Daniel. “Please stop crying.”

With his gentle voice, he managed to encourage her enough that she was soon wiping the tears on her apron.

“I’m just clumsy and forgetful. I’m not bad,” she said.

“It sounds like you and I might do well together,” he replied. “Just because I am a cripple, they called me bad, but I am going away from them.”

Then he asked her, “Would you like to go with me? I plan to reach the city where there might be jobs suitable for my talents.”

The girl looked at him unsurely for a second before smiling.

“I’ll join you,” she decided. “My name’s Sarah.”

“And I’m Daniel, but Dan is just fine.”

So one traveller was now two. They kept their pace slow, as that was all Daniel could manage. As they went along, they shared stories, and neither felt so alone or wretched as they had done before.

Soon the sun was setting, though, but ahead along the road was an inn.

“We ought to ask for a room,” said Sarah.

As Daniel went into the bar, he smiled good-naturedly at the strong innkeeper behind the bar.

“Excuse me, sir,” he said, “Do you have two beds for the night?”

The innkeeper looked at them and smiled.

“My son and daughter are away, so you may have their rooms,” he offered. “You look too tired to go further tonight. I must ask, where are you planning to go on to?”

“To the city, where there might be jobs we can do better than here in the country,” Sarah explained.

And that made the innkeeper sigh sadly.

“I had a brother once like you, so I am even happier to help,” he said.

The kind man fed them, gave them beds, and sent them on their way next morning.

“I hope those beastly people who rejected you do not forget you,” said the innkeeper, “for kindness is a better country way.”

On walked Daniel and Sarah next day, feeling refreshed and stronger. Now their road was leading into a forest though, with thick trees and thorny bushes that hid all nature of beasts.

“Be on your guard,” whispered Daniel, glancing all around him for danger in the shadows.

He was ready to fight back using his crutch if needed before they heard a soft crunch of leaves somewhere nearby.

“It might be a small animal somewhere,” said Sarah hopefully.

They waited where they were in case they heard it again, but this time there was no sound.

“I expect you are right,” Daniel agreed, “and my see will see anyone ahead, even in the dark.”

“And my ears will sense anyone coming up behind,” added Sarah.

But as the trees grew thicker, they did feel a bit scared. At one point, there was a loud roar, causing Daniel to stumble, with Sarah falling next to him.

She whispered, “What was that?”

“Whatever it is, I have a weapon,” Daniel replied, pointing to the wooden crutch and standing up again.

Within a few seconds, there was the sound of running feet, and a small boy came scrambling down the path, screaming in terror.

“It’s after me!” the boy howled, almost knocking them over, but Daniel stepped out of the way just as the boy was about to barrel into him, then panted for breath.

As the boy shivered, Daniel looked around but couldn’t see anything chasing their new friend.

Then he asked, “What is after you?”

“The terrible monster of the woods, everyone knows that,” insisted the lad.

“What does it look like?”

“No one’s ever seen it, but everyone knows it exists.”

“Hmm,” said Sarah, “I wonder if this isn’t such a terrible monster as some people think.”

“I had the same thought,” agreed Daniel, “Come show us where you heard the noise.”

So the boy led Sarah and Daniel to a clearing a little bit ahead.

“I was in here trying to catch rabbits for a stew. If I don’t bring back anything again, my mum will kill me.”

“There’s a bear,” said Daniel, making out its shape among the shadows. “However, I think they want to be left alone. What’s your name, mate?”

“Archie.”

“I’m Daniel and this is Sarah. It sounds like you have the same problem as us.”

“What problem is that?”

“Our families find us useless,” said Sarah sadly.

“Mum certainly does,” admitted Archie.

“But we can prove how useful we can be in the city,” Daniel insisted.

“Maybe if I came too, I won’t get such a beating,” suggested Archie. “Would you like a third in your party?”

“All right,” agreed Sarah, “if you tell us your story.”

“I don’t have one. I’m just forgetful, and can’t stay focused on things,” said Archie, blushing a little.

“Yup, he is one of us,” said Daniel.

As two became three, they found their way out of the forest following the path. They were at the city gates by the end of the next day.

“We want jobs,” said Daniel to the gatekeeper, “Perhaps there is work we can do in the city.”

“You’re certainly industrious,” admitted the gatekeeper, “There are many like you here, but we always welcome new friends.”

Daniel, Archie, and Sarah settled themselves in the city. Archie got work entertaining people with jokes and tricks, Daniel became a successful inventor, and Sarah studied to become an artist.

Five years later, they had some success in their endeavours, and each considered sending gold home to their families. They were reminded, though, of how cruel those families had been and instead used their money to help others.

The message here should be plain: just because someone cannot do one thing does not deny their worth at others.

About the Author
Beth Birley is a writer fromSW London, UK who loves stories.

Looking Forward: Survey

— **Ave Astra**

As our debut issue comes to an end, we invite you to take a brief survey.Below are the questions for you to review, and you can fill out your responses on the linked form.

Your feedback will help guide future ideas, events, and supportfor disability and neurodivergent communities.Thank you for being part of this.

1. What are your thoughts on the representation of disability and neurodivergent communities in society today?
2. What topics or themes would you like to have moreof in our magazine?
3. What kinds of events or opportunities would youlike the magazine to bring to life?

Visit the link below to share your thoughts and help shape the future of our community:**bit.ly/ave-vs1**

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