

An abstract painting of a face, rendered with bold, expressive brushstrokes. The colors are vibrant and varied, including shades of yellow, blue, black, and white. The face is partially obscured by the text, but the overall composition is dynamic and artistic.

# SUNGLASSES

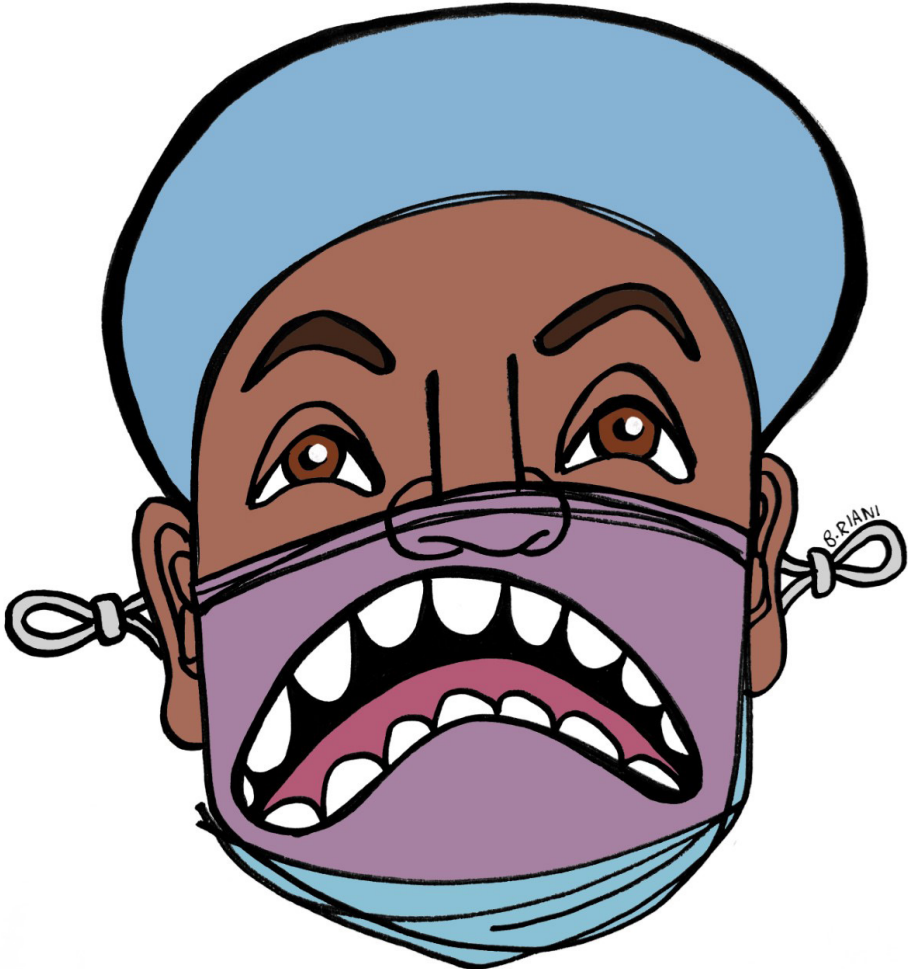
# ON

# BRIGHT

# DAYS

**Stories from Oxford  
University's Neurodiverse  
Community**





# WELCOME

Welcome to our anthology, created to end the first year of the project Neurodiversity at Oxford. The aim of Neurodiversity at Oxford is to connect, celebrate, and empower Oxford University's neurodiverse community. Our project began in October 2021, co-lead by Dr Laura Seymour and Prof Siân Grønlie at St Anne's College. Joel Casey administrated the project and Dr Alvin Leung was the Monitoring and Learning Advisor. We set up this project because we noticed that neurodivergent people at Oxford experienced a high degree of isolation from each other, and we wanted to bring people together in a celebratory fashion and create a warm community. We are very grateful for funding from the Oxford University Diversity Fund, which enabled us to offer all our events for free and pay performers, artist, and speakers. If the project speaks to you, whether or not you have any formal diagnosis, then you are welcome to join.


Now, in summer 2022, we are reflecting on the year that passed. Our project launched in Michaelmas 2021 with a reading and Q&A from the poet Dr Joanne Limburg, who spoke movingly about late diagnosis, and her connection to her 'weird sisters' throughout history. Joanne read from her books *The Autistic Alice* and *Letters to My Weird Sisters*. This event with Joanne was instrumental in bringing our community together. Later that Michaelmas, we had a film screening and discussion group of *Keep the Change* (2017), a rom com set in New York with an autistic and learning disabled cast. You can read Laura's interview with the film's director, Rachel Israel, in this anthology.

In Hilary 2022, Angie Alderman, a counsellor from the company *The Genius Within*, ran a career skills training session for neurodivergent staff and students; Angie also trained neurodivergent staff members to be mentors. Thanks to Angie and the staff who have volunteered to be mentors, we could set up a mentoring scheme, whereby neurodivergent staff members mentor neurodivergent

students. Angie has written a piece for this anthology: some tips for appreciating others' perspectives. That Hilary, we also held an exhibition of work by the artist Mahlia Amatina, launched with a poetry reading by Ellie-Jai Williams. Mahlia's artwork *Memories I* is on the cover of this anthology, and some of her creative writing is inside – check out our website for more!

In Trinity, we ran three events. First, a seminar with Kala Allen (whose writing also features in this anthology), on neurodiversity and intersectionality. Secondly, we had a performance of *Melonade*, an interactive gameshow about dyslexia in the education system, by Becks Turner and Adam Gregory at G&T Theatre Company. This performance, to a full house at the Burton Taylor Studio, ended with audience members smashing up melons to make melonade with kitchen implements. Their being creative in whatever way they wanted with the tools they had was a metaphor for how education ought to be. We ended the year with a talk by the dramaturg and Shakespeare academic Dr Avi Mendelson on 'Shakespeare and Mad Activism'; you can read a piece by him here too, alongside some wonderful art and creative writing by other members of the Oxford community.

Alongside this, we were happy to support other activities, like Colin Larkworthy's ongoing talks 'What You Aut to Know' (see a description inside), Ashlea Cromby's 'Neurodiversity Reads' online reading group, and various book reviews and blog posts on our website. It has been wonderful to see people come together and make their own projects. We are excited to see what will happen in the future. If you want to find out more about our project, see us on Twitter @neurodiverseox, Facebook neurodiversity-at-oxford, and visit our website <https://neurodiversityoxford.web.ox.ac.uk/> Siân Grønlie, Laura Seymour, Joel Casey, and Alvin Leung




## 1. structure

[ˈstrʌktʃə]

—Mahlia Amatina

Having a routine and being prepared for what lays ahead helps me feel at ease and reduces chaos. I get stuck with sudden big changes and feel overwhelmed. Sometimes small changes causes me distress. Change is scary and makes me withdraw from the world. I have lists of lists. Several notebooks. I use my phone too - for any real-time amends in my schedule. My mind is like a series of “if-then” statements. Structure is logical and safe. It is factual with no emotion or conflict. Structure is important as it helps me navigate my way through the disorder and confusion, AKA Life. It’s like a beacon of light that gives me time and place. Many possibilities. Everything has been planned out. If closer to the date of the planned event, the plan changes - I try to put this fact out of my mind to avoid stress. I am orderly and organised. A great planner. It gives a framework for my day, week, month and year. Work is routine and without it, and on days off, I tend to be depressed, anxious and have meltdowns. I plan everything. Lists and repetitiveness equals more control. I love this. Some say I’m too rigid. I feel safe and secure when I make plans and lists. This lessens my anxiety greatly. Things need to be orderly, tidy and neat, so things run efficiently. I feel in control. I need to be in control. Otherwise the world becomes too much. The Earth tips off its axis and becomes dislocated.



## UDON NOODLES

—Eulalia Marie

you taste too sweet, you taste like death.  
i must have reached the promised land,  
cool water and golden sand,  
but i can't feel anything.

*no money, drippin milk n honey,  
whose kool aid am i sippin?*

yo cuz, you're trippin, look at me, sophie, you're slippin,  
your brain's been cooked like udon, you're too creative-

nah man, you're just hooked on their sedatives.

you got nervous but had the nerve to swallow your suspicions,  
you were sweet but just like the rest of them lily-livered clinicians:

dreading my second coming, clever and cunning,  
running clandestine meetings in the guts of winter,  
whispered conspiracies with desperate hints of  
deception, stealin my thoughts, thug's inception,

i'm tryna scream into the void, consumed n paranoid,

*i'm losing my mind.*

i asked you,

how'd you hear me?

*through the grapevine.*

i remember drinking red wine from your chalice,  
lips stained with malice and dark-tongued like the night,  
but you were right: i'd managed to imagine the universe,  
create it from nothing without thinking,  
sink into insanity without blinking-

my existence moved you into existence.

do i make you feel objectified?

*awareness, indoctrination, scares us? medication-*

yo sophie, you need to take a chill pill or two,  
i got some mellow yellow if your head's feelin blue.

i get up in the morning n i don't know who i am.  
i lose myself midday, simon says don't worry, issa scam.  
what world you livin in? reality's dressin up in lsd.  
you have no memory of your birth, you forgot your identity.

the circus monkey, caged and controlled and free  
to be suspicious of everybody, even if you have no body,  
you are all watching me, out to get me,  
caught on cctv, real n not figuratively,  
tiptoe, through the window, cameras and bugs,  
smug faces and drugs, grating away at my skin,  
i am the main character of the movie we're all starring in.

*live action, simulation, attraction, stimulation-*

i used to be scared of inanimate beings,  
but now i know they should be scared of me.  
my imagination is wireless with the tv,  
showing me my dreams are actually prophecies,  
so even if you're being this does not assign meaning,  
the world revolves around me.

indoctrinate, medicate, sedate the state,

hide behind the myths you create, but i'll escape,  
you're cryptic, i'm apocalyptic, singing  
rat-a-tat-tat, mk for mortal kombat,

i'm a riled up child, i like my phantasy running wild,

my saviour, my imagination,  
how'd you think i'd feel dressin  
up for my own cremation?

*melanin can't protect me from this ultraviolet radiation*

i used to drift off when i wrote stories, i started writing stories to  
drift off.

my worlds are seamless, my insomnia's dreamless,  
my mission: escape. but how can i escape, when i create  
mankind, everything's a manifestation of my mind,  
you're an animated corpse, you're nothing but a thought,  
i never understood perfection, wasn't understanding my perception,  
i was floating up high, brainwashed n tongue-tied,  
behind screens, i was tryna figure out what it means,  
being caged in a sitcom i scripted, controlled in a video game i  
encrypted-

*i'm tryna wake up from this nightmare but i'm not asleep,  
i'm tryna escape from their stares but this freedom ain't  
cheap.*

machinists of my mind, they're tryna press rewind,  
i was floating up high but i took a nosedive,  
i came down wise so i could prophesy,

*they can read your mind.*



and i needed to get away and i was running out of time  
and i needed to die but i didn't want to die  
and if everything was my intelligent design then  
this prophet was a manifestation of my mind so when  
the doctors asked have you been hearing voices? i said no.

like i'll let you give me a place to rest my head, send me to sleep  
in a sunbed,  
prescribed shock therapy with electra, filed under project mk  
ultra,  
they're talkin' bout my 'episode' like it's some felix culpa,  
brain's made of noodles, pour a lil shoyu,  
udon soup for the masses, one day imma show you.



## INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR RACHEL ISRAEL

—Laura Seymour and Rachel Israel

In November 2021, we had a discussion group about Rachel Israel's film *Keep the Change* (2017), a romantic comedy set in New York with autistic leads, following the relationship of David (Brandon Polansky) and Sarah (Samantha Elisofon).

LS: Anyone who has watched the film will know that the Jewish Community Center plays a huge part in it. We are really interested in spaces that are both accessible and sites of creativity and community, and the JCC in *Keep the Change* seems to be a prime example of this. Can you tell us about the significance of the JCC in the film?

RI: I came to the JCC Manhattan through my friend (and later actor) Brandon Polansky. Brandon had gotten involved in the JCC's Adaptations program, which was a community for adults on the spectrum. The people I met there were vibrant and fun and social and really smart and all so different from each other. This community completely upended the misconceptions I had gathered about autism from popular representations that tended to focus on one isolated character with autism and always in comparison to neurotypical characters – as if to say this is what autism looks like, in a very otherizing way. I realized that if I were to make a film dealing with autism it should be entirely based on my characters being compelling people in their right and it should tell a story truly set within their worlds. Later in making *Keep the Change* and thinking as a director, it was also important to me to cast exclusively from this JCC community. The cast having existing relationships gave us a lot to work from in building a narrative and in creating vivid performances. The actors already had such great chemistry as friends. We could build off of that chemistry when filming. We worked from a script that I had written while researching and rehearsing with the cast. But when filming

we also left a lot of space for structured improvisation. It was an incredibly fun, rich, collaborative experience.

LS: I am fascinated by autistic humour – people don't often realise how hilarious we are. *Keep the Change* is a very funny film (in our film discussion group, people particularly liked the humour of Sammy). But all too often we neurodivergent people are laughed at, or thought to be devoid of humour. What really strikes me in *Keep the Change* is the way in which Sarah's autistic way of seeing the world causes her to challenge and correct David's offensive humour. She tells him his jokes don't make sense to her, and with her questioning, she takes them apart... What are your tips for working with autistic people to create humour that is inclusive and funny to people, and to release the kinds of joy that you released in *Keep the Change*? (I realise asking someone how they make stuff funny is a pretty unfunny question)

RI: Well, yes, having Nicky Gottlieb playing Sammy was a guarantee that we would have good humour in the film because Nicky has a brilliant wit. He is really one of the wittiest people I've ever met. Nicky ad-libbed a lot of great lines as did other cast, and the script also incorporated a lot of dialogue that the actors had developed in rehearsals. The script was also always written to be funny – and my belief here with regard to humour in any film is that we should be laughing empathetically for a character (who is caught in an awkward situation for example) – rather than laughing at someone. This distinction is very important. The relationship between Sarah and David and the way that Sarah's literal understanding of language ends up challenging David's offensive humour is an example of one of those scripted funny situations that is all based in characters conflicting in a compelling way that challenges them each on deeper levels. So underneath the funny situation is a question of character development. It was also always important to me that *Keep the Change* be a romantic comedy and be filled with lightness, humour and joy because that is just a very important part of life and not reserved for neurotypical

people. I felt that to shy away from humour in the film because people might be skittish about seeing humour with these characters would be a wrong move.

LS: We asked around to see if people in our community had any questions for you, and we had an interesting question from Portia: ‘as an early pioneer of the neurodiverse rom com, what do you think of the rise of reality shows like “Love on the Spectrum” and “The Undateables” which give neurodivergent people a lot of screen time currently?’

RI: I haven’t watched either of those shows or anything in that genre. So I can’t comment on it. While making *Keep the Change*, I deliberately stayed away from watching anything on the subject of autism. Creatively it felt better for me to just immerse with my actors and draw inspiration from who they were specifically. I watched a lot of films that were relevant emotionally or tonally to what I was trying to make – just nothing on autism.

LS: What other films and books/people inspire you? Do you have any recommendations for us?

RI: A few of the films I’ve watched over and over again my whole life and still love are: *Kramer vs Kramer*, *The Graduate*, *Fargo*, *The Big Lebowski*, *When Harry Met Sally*, *Goodfellas*, *The Godfather*, *Fame*, *Saturday Night Fever*, *Jaws*, and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. Recent films I’ve loved are: *Promising Young Woman*, *Uncut Gems*, *It Follows*, and *Get Out*. My favourite novelists are Jane Austen and Henry James. Favourite TV series I’ve watched this year have been: *The White Lotus*, and *Succession*. I also love *Pen15*.

LS: We are always looking for new things to watch and discuss, and get excited about. Can you tell us what you have been doing since *Keep the Change*? And what plans you have for new projects?

RI: Since making *Keep the Change*, I've developed a TV series based on the characters in the film called *Connections*. The series would focus on the tight social group of David, Sarah, Will and Nicky amongst others in the community. It would explore the characters struggles and triumphs as they endeavour to lead independent lives, pursuing love, careers and friendships in New York City. As a writer I've also been long at work on a modernization of one of my favourite Jane Austen Novels, *Persuasion* – set on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Recently I am also attached to direct a terrific film called *The Chicken Who Saved Us* – based on the powerful memoir by Kristin Jarvis Adams – it's a family story, and a story of medical mystery - focusing on the relationship between a mother and her son who is on the spectrum.

Rachel Israel is a New York based writer and director. Her feature debut *KEEP THE CHANGE* (2017) premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival, where it won Best U.S. Narrative Feature, and Best New Narrative Feature Director. It also won Best Debut Film at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival where it received the FIPRESCI Award. *KEEP THE CHANGE* opened in theaters internationally in 2018 as a NY Times Critic's Pick, which described it as "a landmark motion picture...it deserves to be widely seen" – and was critically acclaimed widely for being a fresh take on the romantic comedy, and an authentic and nuanced portrayal of characters on the autism spectrum. Rachel is currently developing several films and series, all of which tell emotional and entertaining stories of diverse characters. She has taught both screenwriting and directing actors at Columbia University's Graduate Film program. She is represented by Verve Talent & Literary Agency.

## 2. sen|sory Issues

[ˈɪfʊː, ˈɪsjuːˈsens(ə)ri]

—Mahlia Amatina

Some perfumes and odours make me feel sick and unable to breathe. I can't be around a ticking clock. I have to tell people to remove it or to take out the battery. I hate car indicators. Alarms. Anything repetitive. It's like something slicing through me – thinly and sharply. Everything stops – I cannot think, function or do anything. It's awkward in social situations because of sensory issues. Intrusive and assaulting stimuli, some poking through more harshly others, really getting close. I'm covering in a corner or behind a small barrier, shaking. I touch and smell clothes in shops before I even look at them properly. I hate certain sounds. The worst is creaking polystyrene. I know the different gradients of each item and person's smell. Christmas is a nightmare with all those abusive multi-coloured flashing lights on repeat – so bright they scorch my eyes and imprint themselves on my retina. Car hazard lights when there is no hazard. Flashing lights in general. I feel like screaming at loud noises, it hurts my ears and my head. Strong cooking smells that choke me. They get stuck in my throat and make me cough and cry. I have an extremely heightened sense of taste, sight, and hearing. Nature has the best smells. I did a homestay once where there was a ticking clock in the room. I didn't get a second's sleep. Sudden loud noises are physically painful. It hurts. It hurts.

## DIAGNOSIS AND DIFFERENCE

—Siân Grønlie

It was a complete surprise to me to discover that I was autistic. I had no idea. I'd been diagnosed with various conditions over the course of my life – anorexia, anxiety, depression, PTSD – but I'd assumed that this was probably my fault, that there must be something defective about me as a person that made me vulnerable to these things. I lived with guilt and shame. Why are simple things so difficult for you? Why can't you make friends? Why are you so ignorant about the world? Why are you so inflexible? This was the internal commentary that accompanied my everyday.

School was a source of utter misery for me – a social minefield I had no hope of finding my way across. I felt intuitively that I was different from other children, but I didn't know why, nor what I could do about it. I had so little understanding of friendship that it never once occurred to me I could connect with others simply by expressing an interest in the things that interested them. Instead, I opted for invisibility – if you can't join in, then the safest thing is to merge into the background and hope no one will notice you. Refusing to eat was a way of disappearing, of thinning into air.

It was a lonely time, but it wasn't joyless: I found refuge from the mysteries of the social maze in the world of poetry and fiction. I read and read and read. Here was solace. Here was a way of transcending my own small miseries, connecting with the lives of others, engaging with the richness of the world through words. Here was understanding of a sort – a way of feeling myself into a character, a situation, a language, a culture. Here, uniquely, I discovered that I knew my way around. Books provided the connection I lacked between me and the rest of the world.

As I grew older, life got easier than it was in those early days. I found I was able to excel academically and that was some consolation for my extreme social malaise. Although I was slow to take in new information, this was balanced out by my extraordinary powers of concentration. When you can work much harder and far longer than

other people, then it's easier to do well. But I also acquired some other skills over this time: through carefully watching and imitating others, I learned how to make small talk. I wasn't particularly good at it, but now at least I could get by. And finally I took the sensible precaution of marrying the most social and outgoing person I had ever met. Ensnared in a bubble of domestic bliss, I felt for the first time that life had been good to me.

But my husband became sick, very sick, and when he died – six years and two children later – I was plunged back into the misery of my former life. I grieved for the one I had loved, for the life we had planned and the children we were meant to bring up together, but more than that it felt as if – with his loss – everything that made life bearable had been cruelly snatched away. As I sat at home on the night of the funeral, heavy with grief, loneliness cradled me like a familiar stranger. But how much more painful it was now that I knew the joy of connecting with another human being. I looked to the future without much hope that I could do more than simply survive.

Then something happened that changed everything. My little boy started to struggle at school. He couldn't make eye contact, couldn't make friends, couldn't make sense of the world. It was suggested to me that he was autistic. So I did what I'm best at: I set out to learn everything I could about autism. As I searched the internet, I came across a story about a mother who discovered that she was autistic in her forties after her son was diagnosed. As I read on, I found that tears were running down my cheeks. I was reading the story of my life. All the scattered pieces came together like a jigsaw and for the first time I could see the whole picture. Alongside the shock of discovery, I felt the most tremendous sense of relief. There was nothing defective about me. I was autistic.

Some people feel that a diagnosis is a label, but for me it has been liberating. I have been able to discard much of the guilt and shame I felt and replace it with a sense of pride. I am autistic. My social skills may be poor, but I have other strengths. Difference is not deficit. Divergence is not disorder. Although I have learned through painful experience how to hide my difference – to camouflage – I



now feel that this is something I can choose to do rather than a necessity to survive. It's true I envy others their social ease, but I'm also glad to be me. I only wish I had known earlier. Both my boys are autistic and, in our family, that's something to celebrate. If they can grow up understanding, accepting and even loving their difference, then that's more than good enough for me.



## AUTISTIC BLACK GIRL BLISS: I MATTER TOO

—Kala Allen Omeiza

I wasn't smiling for much of my time at university.

A couple years ago I was tasked to give back to the Black community after winning an alumni award at my undergrad university. Already several years out, I reflected on my experience during my time there. I struggled to attend many events because they often felt too noisy, crowded or bright. I faltered in minor chit chat during the few events I did attend. At the time, I didn't know I was autistic, but I knew I was different. I hid my budding afro and masked my real identity.

It took a while for me to find my footing, but when I did, it was bliss. Years later, I finally received a referral and a diagnosis, and I joined various groups of people like me. I was accepted into other prestigious universities and fellowships before I was diagnosed, but had a wonderful time living them out due to my own self-awareness after the diagnosis. I made friends all around the world, learned so much about myself and the world around me through novels and traveling, and — of course — grew my afro. I even wrote a book about an autistic Black teen with a new afro! I'm happy that most autistic social groups accept those without a formal diagnosis, with the hope that people like undergrad me could find them and experience bliss much earlier.

However, while discovering myself as an adult, I often misread the room and spoke of intersectionality in Black communities with disabilities. I did this when I was supposed to speak of just Black communities — as if autistic doesn't exist with Black.

With rain, often, comes a rainbow, and all of my temporary rains were all it took to create mine. With the joy of my authentic self, I finally drafted the following as a campaign to my undergraduate university:

We Matter, Too

When you think of Homecoming and High Street, corners, panic attacks, and isolation aren't usually words that come to mind. These words were my reality, however, and after receiving feedback on a blog post from other autistic young adults, I know I'm not alone. Balancing a Black student identity on a campus like Miami can be full of challenge, excitement and can even create amazing lifelong friendships. On the other hand, students with intersectional identities such as disability or mental illnesses may take longer to find their niche. It's time we create a campaign to bring out the voices in our communities who may not feel as included in their minority group on campus. Through your essays and artistic submissions, let's build a platform for all of us to connect and seek ways of how we can better unite and stand for all BIPOC at Miami more than ever before.

I hope other universities (and even middle schools and high schools!) will implement similar campaigns. I hope this campaign can enable just one more autistic (diagnosed or not) Black girl to read about herself and feel seen.

This project is finally coming to life in October 2022 during Disability and Culture month. I'll be back at my alma mater to give a keynote presentation about my accomplishments and, most importantly, how I grew to understand myself. My voice may feel soft and thin, but my afro is coarse and thick. Because of "We matter, too," I hope even just one more autistic Black girl will smile during university.

### 3. Melt|down & Shut|down

[ˈʌtdaʊn ˈmɛltdaʊn]

—Mahlia Amatina

Getting overwhelmed and exhausted by certain social situations. When all the senses are sent into overdrive. Like overloading a plug socket. There's only so much I can take: the sparks fly and the fuse goes. That's me having a meltdown. It can last for hours. I am not good at dealing with change and often become an immovable object. Sensory overload, thoughts not making sense, frustration and anger, crying and screaming - a loss of control. A symptom of being overwhelmed. When things are not in order, a meltdown can happen. I need to get away. It happened once at the airport. I don't remember much of it. With the sensory overload of the terminal and the stress of the travel, it had all become too much. I needed quiet – peace and darkness. Coolness. It was too hot. Sensory overwhelm happens so easily and so quickly. Neurotypicals just don't understand. A disastrous collapse. It happens when I'm forced to multi-task. My brain doesn't work that way. It's like someone has opened too many tabs and then it all crashes down. It takes ages for me to restart. I feel so tired. It can take days to recover. I feel embarrassed. When someone's talking too much and there's too much information. A loss of language and ability to engage with the external environment. Painful surroundings. I breakdown and weep.

## TWO PIECES OF CREATIVE WRITING

—An Anonymous Staff Member

### Drowning

A gentle breeze coaxes ripples across the  
Surface of the sea, shimmering in the moon's  
Tender light, while up above the gulls call  
Quietly, the water's lifegiving saltiness  
Subtle on my lips, while the fragrance of the seaweed  
Lingers in the air. Tranquil to some.  
But to me this is no idyl.  
My ears prick at the slightest sound,  
Straining through the pitter patter of heavy rain  
Or an unceasing waterfall crashing down,  
Working so hard they hear the tap drips when nobody else does,  
And a chair squeaking hurts so much I gasp for breath,  
My ears ripped on rocks hidden in the shallows.  
But gas mask, quick! I snuggle into a soft sweater seeking comfort  
But a wave of unfamiliar washing powder hits me,  
My husband's kindness gone sour.  
The whiff from the bathroom makes me regret cooking  
Healthily for him, and I risk tasting my portion again.  
Every smell scuds on my tongue, each taste magnified.  
A sensitive palette is supposed to be a gift – but mine is  
Punished for daring to drool in piercing discernment and hunger.  
There may be only one table of food, but it  
Splinters and fragments like a shipwreck of mirrors,  
My brain a Charybdis of confusion, untangling  
The net of reality and perception with no idea  
Which bits the rope are.  
Electricity courses round my body making each fibre  
Burn with a fire no water can quench.  
Through the torturous flames even the slightest  
Touch is acid on bare nerves.  
An ocean of overload engulfs me

Yet every drop registers its own hurt too.  
There must be some way to pull the plug but there isn't even a life jacket.

## Reading between the lines

Anna squirmed in her new red suit, determined to make a good impression on her first day at work, hard-won after a year's searching.

Here came her new boss, Laura. It was time to making that winning impact.

'Ann – let me know what you think of this, would you?'

She called me Ann. She doesn't care. My name isn't Ann. It's Anna. I hate it when people call me Ann. It shows I'm not a real person to them. Why don't people pay attention to detail?

What does she mean 'what do I think?'

Is this a test? It feels like I ought to know something. A good employee would have researched the company before starting. I'm clearly the wrong person for this job and it's only day 1. I can't screw up already.

Is she talking about her writing? I can't offer feedback on writing to my boss. I don't know the conventions round here.

How much am I supposed to say? If I go into too much detail, I'll look breathless, unable to see the wood for the trees or work out what's important. If I give too little, I'll look like I'm disinterested and unobservant. How do I know if my points are the ones she needs to hear?

It's a presentation. I am dreadful about presentations. I took this job because it was a support role and I could hide in the background. I don't have anything to contribute. I can't do this. Am I in the wrong job?

Is this about reassuring her? If I say 'it's fine' and it isn't, then she might be comfortable but it'll go wrong and it'll all be my fault. If

I tell her it's not fine, and she wanted reassurance, then I'll have upset her, and that will be my fault too.

She's staring at me; I'm the only one here in a suit, and now my face is matching its colour. What am I doing?

'Um... sure?' Anna mumbled.

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Earlier that morning, Laura had rushed out, worrying about the day.

Oh good, the new girl's coming in. What was her name? Anna. Must remember she's not 'Ann' like the last person. I'm so nervous about today's presentation. Having her here will be a perfect chance to get some feedback, and reading the report will be a good chance for her to get briefed on our work.



#### 4. Anx|iety

[aŋ'zʌɪəti]

—Mahlia Amatina

Being overridden with 'what if's?' constantly racing around in my mind. It exhausts me. I'm not able to think clearly and life is no fun. Anxiety about normal activities like riding on the bus or visiting the doctor - incase something unexpected happens. It takes over. This over-active energy within in. My breathing shallows. The world closes in, overwhelming, threatening to engulf me. It oscillates and moves, unpredictable, and surrounds me. I quiver in the middle, no escape and no barrier. I'm caught up in a viscous circle of thoughts. It affects my actions. I tend to withdraw. This sense of inner turmoil. Everything becomes overwhelming and blurred. I feel a sense of panic. Or I'm simply pleased to have 'gotten through' it. Anxiety in interactions with other people. It blurs. The unknown, things not going to plan, body sensory overload, thoughts not working/making sense. I can't breathe and my heart races. Worrying, feeling upset about something that may happen or go wrong. My muscles tense. What if it doesn't work? What will I do and how will I cope...? At times of confusion, or not understanding something that suddenly happens that I'm unfamiliar with. Not being able to function. My tummy hurts and I throw up. Social anxiety. I get dizzy when things aren't within my control. I need order.



# THE DIFFERENCES AND UNIQUENESS WORTH CELEBRATING

—Alvin Leung

I am neurotypical and I want to learn more about neurodiversity.

When I worked as a schoolteacher, some of my students were neurodiverse. My colleagues and I were briefed before the start of every school year on how to better support these students. Growing up as a neurotypical person, that was the first time that I had the opportunity to learn about neurodiversity. I learnt that it is not that 'they' are different from 'us' but that we are all uniquely different. My neurodiverse students have unique strengths and weaknesses, and so do my neurotypical students and myself.

Celebrating differences is one of the best ways to promote equality, diversity and inclusion. I vividly remember the self-doubts I used to have in schools, at workplaces and in everyday lives as a gay man with an East Asian origin. My sexual orientation does not make me 'look' different, but my ethnicity does – more so when I moved to this country from Hong Kong, which is quite ethnically homogeneous.

I am thankful that, when I had self-doubts, those who love me reminded me of the importance of celebrating our differences and uniqueness. 'Celebrate what you have and who you are', they told me. I am therefore also thankful that I had the chance to contribute Neurodiversity at Oxford – an amazing project that celebrates differences, builds a support network, and uses art and literature to let us express ourselves.

The feedback that the project team received was overwhelmingly positive. Thank you! I look forward to seeing how the network that this project has built will continue to grow and to celebrate our differences and uniqueness.

## Different Interpretations of the same event

— Angie Alderman

When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand –

Karl Menninger

As a neurodiversity advocate with lived experience, my focus as a wellness practitioner is on supporting individuals to perform at their best. Using coaching psychology, I run neurodiversity awareness workshops to help create allyship in the workplace. In this context, I collaborated with the amazing Oxford Neurodiversity Team. Across the UK and in the US, I support individuals and groups and in private practice work as a counsellor, using an integrative approach ‘that embraces the complexity of human nature’ (Popovic and Jinks, 2014).

In my work, I have witnessed how events and situations are often viewed through a one-sided lens, where the individual assumes that they are correct in how language is understood. Not only is this frustrating, but it also does not encapsulate the essence of how people think differently nor respect different interpretations of the same event.

Therefore, I wanted to share a strategy that I find helpful in improving communication called the Clean Feedback model, which aims to provide a structure for high-quality, clear feedback. Clean feedback was designed by Dr Nancy Doyle and Dr Caitlin Walker in 2003 because they understood that in organisations, the quality of feedback, when over-generalised, does not provide sufficient details of what is required to improve.

Giving Clean Feedback means describing what you have seen or heard and keeping it separate from what you have taken those behaviours to mean. It explores the evidence, i.e., what is presented, how you interpret this, what you are assuming about the situation or yourself, and what is the impact. The model helps you to separate:

For example:

What worked well was when you said you would spend an hour at 11am today with me to talk through the new strategy. I inferred that you were engaged in the project and felt motivated.

What did not work well was when you were 45 minutes late and did not let me know. Not informing me made me feel like you did not respect my time, and I felt demotivated.

What would work better is if you are going to be late, you let me know. I would infer from this that you were respecting my workload, and I would be able to manage this change of plan and get on with something else.

Clean feedback gives you agency as it enables you to have a voice. I have seen first-hand how this model helps people de-personalise when things are not going well by referring to the behaviour, not the person. Understanding difference is the first step toward accepting difference. Embracing all types of thinkers is the cornerstone of creating inclusive, equitable environments where - everyone can thrive.

#### Sources

Angie Alderman <https://www.counselling-directory.org.uk/counsellors/angie-alderman>

Nancy Doyle <https://www.geniuswithin.org/our-team/dr-nancy-doyle/>

Popovic, N. & Jinks, D. (2014). In Personal Consultancy. London: Routledge

## WHAT YOU AUT TO KNOW —Colin Larkworthy

“ From a late diagnosis, through the minefield, of knowing you were unlike your peers, to finally being believed and somewhere you feel at home. So, Journey through the discourse of Autism and Mental health, communication, and sensory sensitives within the College, University and in general life, with lots on the way, from statistics to strategies to how it can impact others surrounding you and yourself as well. Using the 3C pathway it can set you on the right path to succeed, using many differing collaborators, from Doctors & Professors, to Charities & the personal “lived” experiences. To peer mentorship, hiring processes, job crafting, help and advice with communication, avoiding burnout, dealing with your senses, how does your differing senses impact the daily life, whilst getting through the struggles of being different. What would be the consequences, if the processing did not take place? A missed opportunity to learn about Autism, Neurodiversity and the topics raised with recent research.

Alas...

There is help on the way, so ...

Join me if you dare....Just because...

“Well..... You Aut to know!”.

# A CONTEMPLATION ON NEURODIVERSE HEROES

—Bronwyn Riani

What do we think of when we hear the word hero? It can mean many things to different people, as is common with words. Do they wear Strange, standout clothing? Are they an alien in a strange world? Are they Disguised? Wearing a mask? I know sometimes I can feel like all of these are true for me.

I had not thought much about neurodiversity before I arrived at St Anne's. I had previously gone through the pretty dehumanising CAMHS ADHD assessment at 17 years old (and was told I probably had it, but was very clever and wouldn't be able to be a police officer if I got diagnosed[1]). I had thought that ADHD was a one-and-done, solid diagnosis. But instead, I have learned that our knowledge of what psychiatrists have long defined as "not normal" is ever-changing. I have done a lot of personal research about neurodiversity and had an adult ADHD assessment in 2019 (Michaelmas of my second year). I had struggled so much in my first year, without an understanding of why I found it so hard to focus at uni.

I was having an introspective look at my own life during the lockdowns, but as I came back to Oxford in person in 2021, I realised I could start seeing all the literature I was reading for my English degree through this new lens. What would make a book or character 'neurodiverse'? In giving our hero archetype protagonists an othering, a need to go on the hero's journey, could we be inadvertently making them behave as a neurodiverse counterpart to their world?

With the neurodiverse hero, the world stranges around them. Their narrative viewfinder makes us empathise with them and experience the world directly as they experience it. Think the first episode of Disney's newly released Ms Marvel – protagonist Kamala Khan is a posterchild for ADHD, and whilst her superpowers are a manifestation of her neurological difference, so is the way that doodles appear scrawled across the street as she goes by,

and that she fully imagines scenarios in her head and plays them out in detail.

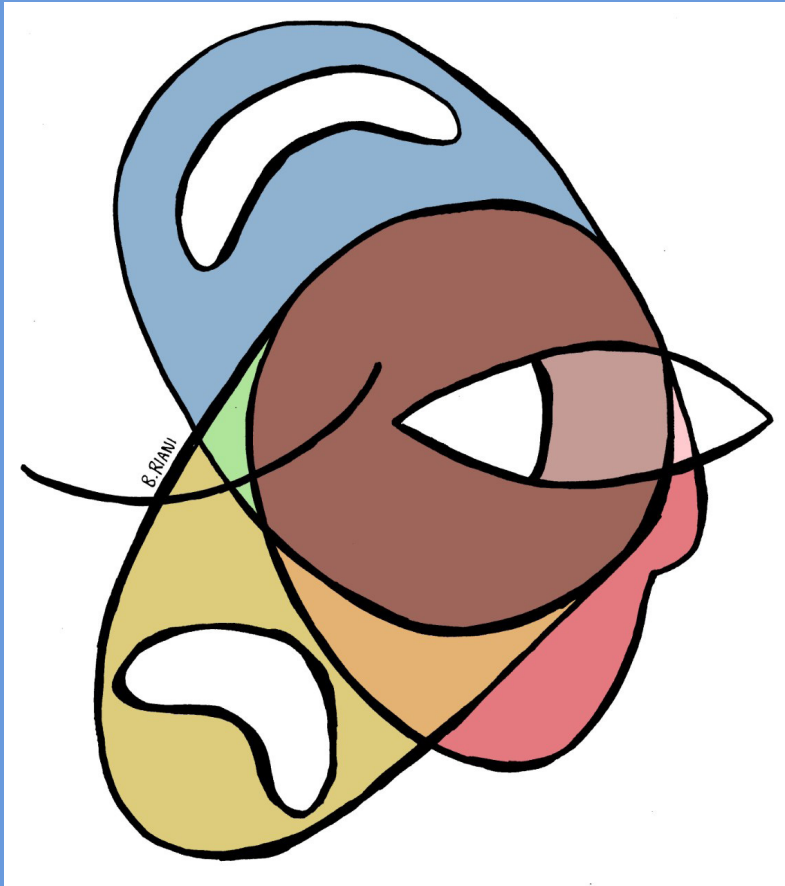
In contrast, for the neurotypical hero the world must already be strange and fantastic, and the protagonist's empty slate state of assumed normality allows the reader to experience the extraordinary world without the burden of characterisation. We are removed slightly from the action. When we know Christopher Boone's world, Sherlock's, or even Holly Smale's *Geek Girl*, the narrative is so uniquely intertwined with the character that the world would struggle to exist without them. On one hand, we get "the wizarding world" from *Harry Potter* (who in later books shows signs of PTSD) because it exists outside of the character.

I would like to praise the idea of the hero, a stereotypically neurotypical/allistic concept, instead, as a neurodiverse one. What happens when the hero gets overwhelmed and shuts down mid-battle? What happens when the hero is so focused on their goal that they forget what matters? What happens when the hero is in a strange unfamiliar world and just cannot seem to fit in?

As you will know, many of these concepts are well documented in literary heroes. Sherlock Holmes can get intensely fixated on solving a case. Alice is in an unfamiliar world. So what is the difference between our James Bonds and our Sherlocks, our Alice's and our Coralines? I have discussed this with my peers at *Ace Tea* (practically a haven for neurodiverse students in Oxford!), at *Neurodiversity in Oxford* events, and when I gave a talk at *St Annes' English subject evening*. More often than not, after a discussion a group concludes with the theory that to be a typical hero, a character must 'become' behaviourally and ideologically neurodiverse. Even *Harry Potter* (written by Hatsune Miku, to clarify), quite a deliberately 'ordinary' character, can be argued to have PTSD. There is no way that a character who wants to leave their home, go explore, rebel against an authority, wear the weirdest outfits, could ever be rigidly chained to social norms and consciously wish to do exactly what is expected of them in order to fit in.

It is interesting to retroactively label Sherlock or Carroll's

Alice as autistic. But what if modern authors (and furthermore, wider media) write their heroes as explicitly diagnosed? Even my earlier example of Ms Marvel fails to outright mention Kamala's pretty obvious ADHD. In 2022, a pretty fitting example of this is still Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson series (2005-2009), where all demigod main characters have ADHD and dyslexia. I have found so much pride in knowing that these brilliant, witty, battle-hardened characters have the same 'disorder' as me, as it also presents neurodiversity as not a character flaw to overcome, but a real strength. Heroes already behave in a neurodiverse manner, so—outside of internet fan theories and authorial 'word-of-god'—I would rejoice to see some new heroes embracing neurodiversity inside of their texts



## SHAKESPEARE AND MAD ACTIVISM

— Avi Mendelson

For reasons I will never know, Shakespeare was fanatic about madness and mental health. This fixation extends beyond his more popular depictions of psychic disease: Hamlet’s questionably phony “antic disposition,” as he calls it; Ophelia’s drowning after she frantically sings a series of ballads; Lear’s running around in the rain enraged and delusional; and Lady Macbeth waking up in the night to wash invisible blood off her hands. The revenge play *Titus Andronicus* presents the prototype for Hamlet, with its main character (maybe) faking madness to vindicate himself; *Timon of Athens* showcases a wealthy man who loses his mind, after he loses all of his money and then his friends; and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, Shakespeare’s final play and one he co-wrote with John Fletcher, features a character named the Jailor’s Daughter – a parody of Ophelia and Desdemona who goes mad from unrequited love and then parades around the stage belting out a bunch of raunchy songs. Shakespeare’s comedies – plays such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *The Comedy of Errors*, and *The Taming of the Shrew* – are also deeply interested in madness<sup>1</sup>.

In my talk, I detailed a few of the madneses that fascinate Shakespeare: Othello’s epileptic seizure in 4.1; the dreamy madness of plays in *The Taming of the Shrew*; and the nightmarishly dramatic, maddening masques in *The Tempest*. In *Othello*, epilepsy – a condition believed to be a subset of lunacy back then – is a potent symbol that both consolidates and deconstructs the play’s xenophobic imagery. Leo Africanus’ travelogue *A Geographical Historie of Africa* (1600), a possible source text for *Othello*, claims

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For some fantastic readings of madness in early modern drama, see Duncan Salkeld, *Madness and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993); Carol Thomas Neely, *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); and Bridget Escolme, *Emotional Excess on the Shakespearean Stage: Passion’s Slaves* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).



that dark-skinned African men are prone to epileptic seizures. The *Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (c.1356-1366), a medieval narrative to which the play alludes, argues that the divine revelations of the prophet Muhammed were merely fantasies inspired by an epileptic fit. Othello sutures these racist and Islamophobic images onto its protagonist, drawing links between mental instability and racial, geographic, and religious difference. The play, however, also dismantles these connections, by pushing the idea that Iago's mind-bending rhetoric – in this case, a well-placed pun on the word “lie” – causes Othello's seizure.

The care and nuance with which Shakespeare describes a single instance of madness in *Othello* also appears in *The Taming of the Shrew*. This play includes a woman who, because she defies patriarchal power structures, is designated as mad and made to endure violent abuses – disturbing tortures further discussed in Lynda E. Boose's brilliant article, “Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman's Unruly Member.” *Shrew* also, however, subtly aligns itself with the mad characters – Kate and Petruchio – by suggesting that the experience of mental illness, analogised to immersion in a dreamscape, is the pleasure that the audience pays for when they go to the theatre. I then explained how *The Tempest* subverts this association between madness and theatrical joy, when Prospero produces psychologically devastating masques with the intention, as Ariel says, to “amaze” (or “trap in a maze”) the brains of his enemies.

I ended my talk with a sketch of some actions that I think can promote Mad Activism. First, talk about mental health: it is still a contentious, repressed, and stigmatised topic, so merely discussing it is a grand gesture and, I believe, can save lives. Because of Shakespeare's popularity and his fascination with madness, he is a perfect occasion to initiate conversations about mental health. Second, start a gang: since mental illness is an invisible disability – if someone considers their mental health a disability – and because, due to stigma, there is significant pressure not to disclose one's mental health status, it is difficult to form a “mentally ill community.” This absence of community is

a huge problem. The mental health themed theatre work that I've done – with the Arcola Theatre, Tower Theatre, and most recently Etcetera Theatre/Camden Fringe Festival – has been an attempt at fostering collaborations for those with mentally ill health and their allies. Other organisations promote community engagement: charities like Mind UK and Core Arts have free classes and other programmes for those with mental illnesses; Bipolar UK and the Hearing Voices Network have spaces for peer support; and crisis cafes and the charity CALM provide necessary mental health services.

Neurodiversity studies – as a field of literary study – is a new and exciting chance to create community for those who experience cognitive difference. Its emergence at universities is crucial, as a significant portion of mentally ill people are diagnosed when they're the age of a typical university student. It's been a thrill and a pleasure to watch this field grow and, as an early modernist, I can't wait to see how those working in it offer vibrant and revitalising interpretations of the older literatures that I study.

# A BEWITCHING TALE

— Eulalia Marie

A Bewitching Tale of  
Like Mother, Like Daughter  
And the Tragic Victim  
of the Mad Woman's Slaughter

the mad woman sang to her lover so cold  
a verse woven from twelve dead marigolds:

scramble down the rabbit's hole with me  
six foot deep, we'll hibernate for eternity  
baby i'm a disastrous catastrophe, see  
i committed murder of the first degree

they filed her symptoms under female hysteria  
imprisoned her in a castle guarded by mother superior  
across violent brickwork she grew violet wisteria  
she kept all her inmates socially inferior:

circus freaks in a huge snow globe  
circus freaks with no frontal lobes

heaven's archangels ardently detested  
for any sane person to be cruelly subjected  
to the torture of a tea party  
at the dawn of daybreak  
with the three crazies

couldn't bend the metal bars so she threw down her hair  
one long black braid cascaded in defiant despair  
the mortals stared at her with wicked eyes  
the demons gathered below in wicked delight

welcome to the world infernal,  
they sang, pitchforks in their clutch  
we'll make you feel everything:  
eternal pain with each piercing touch

the mortals became apathetic  
they called her an attention whore.  
tiredly, she shut her eyes quietly  
she couldn't recognise herself anymore

the mortals' vision blacked  
the glass cage remained intact  
as the demons befriended the phantoms  
as together they had mighty tantrums  
as the ground started shaking  
as the walls started quaking

desperate, she began to writhe in fear  
desperate, she listened to the song of the seer:

a woman so wild  
once wished for a child  
The Fates spun her Yours Truly

not even Brothers Grimm  
could write such a sorrowful Hymn  
Tapestry more vivid than lapis-lazuli

abstract woman, cracked up woman,  
woman made of sad  
did you prick your finger on poison  
ivy at your first Olympiad  
what did they do to you  
to make you so extraordinarily mad

charged with divine blasphemy

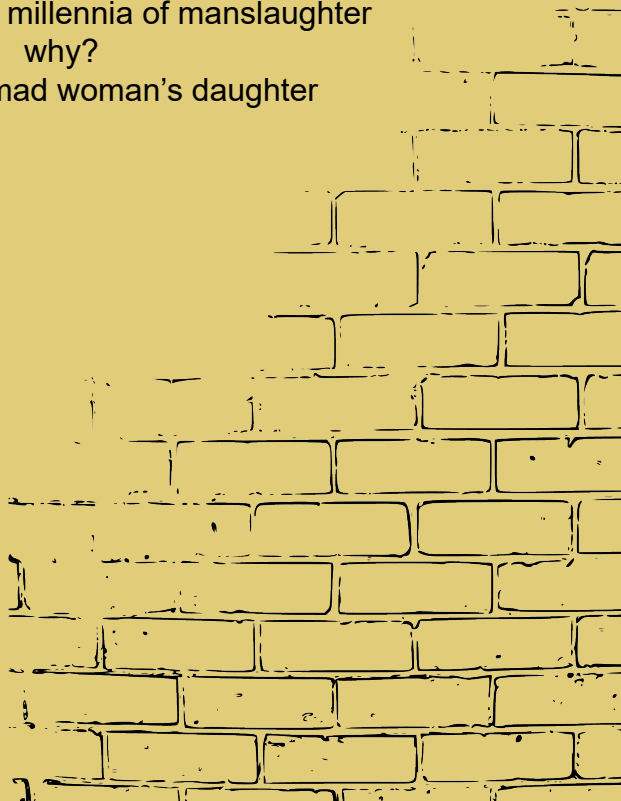
convicted of insanity  
she was locked away in an ancient tower

dismissing her invisible agony  
they left her alone for all to see  
her company two crazies and purple flowers

mad woman mad woman always setting on fire  
mad woman mad woman burning brighter than sapphire

made of flames twisting up endlessly into turrets  
she's a force of frenzy who buries and buries  
some merciless fury who breaks bones into brittle  
always flying always burning always being belittled

ten plagues were gift boxed to pharaoh  
but count four and twenty black sparrows  
skirting above my moat of saltwater  
they'll send you a millennia of manslaughter  
why?  
baby i'm the mad woman's daughter



## 5. sur|vival

[sə'vʌɪv(ə)l]

—Mahlia Amatina

Pre-meditate potential things to say before going somewhere that may involve small talk. Cap down, loud metal on headphones. Practise mindfulness and make it your own. Weighted blankets, self-employment, family/partner/friend support, online community and support groups. Pokémon GO is amazing as a coping mechanism. Plan and prepare for events including any changes that may occur, and possible outcomes. To reduce miscommunication, I try to improve my communication skills. Risperidone. Avoid trigger situations. Plan in days/times of rest around social occasions, like having to attend a wedding. Have a backup plan ready. Understand why I behave in a certain way and accept it more. Tolerance for people around me and believe they're simply trying to help me. Music and noise cancelling headphones. Have compassion. Learn to read body language through TV and films. Take time out for a few minutes to gather thoughts and calm. Remember that we are all human. Play to your strengths. Find a job in an environment you can cope with. Get a pet. Understand your limitations; what you can and can't manage to do. Don't listen to what anyone says - watch what they do. Sunglasses on bright days, brighter lights on dull days. Ritalin. Drive to social events, so you can leave at any point. Make a playlist for different mood states. Plan a day out every month to somewhere nice – a beach or a totally different town. Keep a journal and jot down what helps and what doesn't. Be kind and forgiving to yourself.

## 6. Unique Per|spec|tive

[pə'spektɪv ju:'ni:k]

—Mahlia Amatina

I have an overview of the big picture. I take ordinary concepts/ideas and connect them in extraordinary ways. It comes naturally to me, so I hadn't noticed anything special about it before. The ability to see something differently, which can help or hinder, depending on the situation. It's like something has been ignited in my head and simply speeds off. It's amazing. A different, novel and fresh way of looking at the world. A type of powerful and continuing flow – many streams of thought going in the same direction; wavelike random fluctuations. In work situations: everyone else is thinking in parallel; quite orderly thoughts (the 'boss' might be summing it up), but I'm bursting with ideas. It's like another beat working between the normal rhythm of things – different every time in both its intensity and frequency. It's hard to explain – it's more a feeling. I try to see the positive in every situation. I'm excellent at seeing human behaviour repeat itself and spotting these patterns quickly. Others don't seem to pick up on it and get caught up in it instead. I'm in the zone. Creativity, focus, a different way of viewing life. I don't notice the obvious at all. It was embarrassing at school when I'd put my hand up and didn't provide the 'correct' answer. I just don't see the obvious – or it's simply a given. Why state the obvious when we already know it? I have alternate interpretations. And other viewpoints. There's always another way.

## I WISH I KNEW

—Eulalia Marie

you've spent days in bed. you've lied to your baby sister, told her that you're ill. because she asks why it is that all you do is lie in bed. why you haven't gotten out of bed but to pee. why you haven't showered. she laughs at you innocently. so naïvely. your breath smells and it smells because you haven't brushed your teeth and that's funny to her. your room smells and it smells because of the lingering lack of hygiene and that's funny to her. your skin has forgotten where it starts and where it ends, melded together with your sheets, always warm and miserable, altogether clammy, they're the hand you've always feared holding, clasping you until your rib cage closes in and you stop breathing when she asks

what's wrong with you?

- i wish i knew



## TOGETHER

—Anon

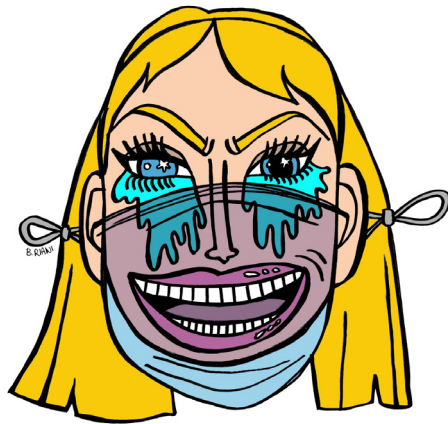
sometimes I want to dance and spin  
across a room unaware of your eyes  
but a learnt shame freezes me  
better than any paralytic  
with you I will learn to unfreeze  
our dance: together, fearless.

## DESIGNER

This anthology was designed by Liz Ponting at LP Designs – see [www.lp-designs.co.uk](http://www.lp-designs.co.uk) and [lpdesignsandart](#) on Instagram and Facebook

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LOOKING AROUND,  
WONDERING WHY  
NO ONE ELSE IS  
LIKE ME. STILL I  
DON'T TAKE  
OFF MY MASK.

B-RIANI