

Skipping Stones

A Multicultural Literary Magazine

May-Aug. 2025

This
Moon
Where
I
Make
My
Holiday
From
The
Weight
Of
Earth's
Press
And
Crush,
She
Gets
Me.
She
Knows
The
Pull
To
Fight
Against
Gravity.
She
Knows
It's
In
Vain
And
Relents.



Claiming Our Space:
Voices of Autistic Nonspeakers

"Moon Dweller" by Sofia Ghassaei, age 21, Washington.

La Noyée

The girl has drowned
Not in water
But in sound

Salty and material
Like the sea
It washes over and
Satisfies all her
Desires

Her voice has stopped
Becoming one
With the song

Lone remembrance of
Real love
As she lets go

This is the way
To die
She thinks
Drowning not in water
But in sound

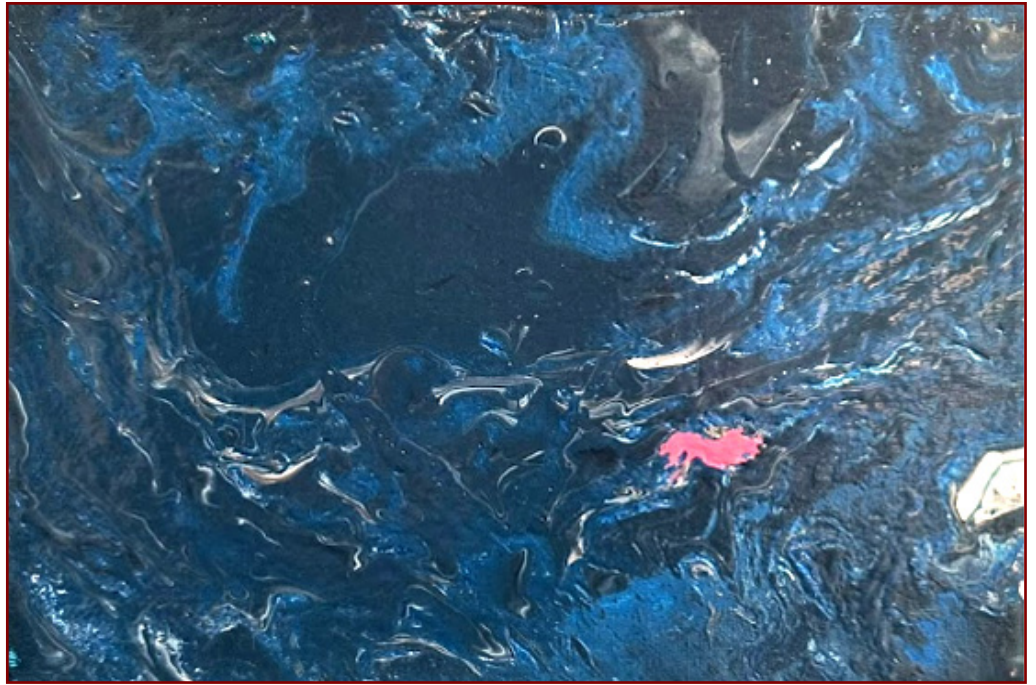
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Ahogada
La niña se murió
En un mar
De sonido
Azul

Quieta
Tranquila
Solo la canción y
Algunos recuerdos
De ti

Sin más que sentir
Sin más que decir
La niña soy yo
Ahogándome
En la música

—*Sofia Ghassaei, written
at age 18, Washington.*



Art by *Sofia Ghassaei, Washington.*

*Sofia, now 21, has been writing poetry all her life, you just couldn't hear it before. Her poetry has been published in **Di lo que Quieres Decir 2023**, **Teen Creative**, and **Leo in Bloom**, among others. Her second play, **Love Letters: A True-ly Short Epistolary Romance**, was first performed by **Theater of Possibility** in Seattle in 2023. She is an active member of the **Spellers and Allies Advocacy Network** and the **Nonspeaking Leadership Council**.*

A Note about Editing this Issue

How much could we edit the speller's words? After discussion among the editorial team, we decided to refrain from our desire to edit for perfection. We realized that it would be difficult to edit the accepted pieces remotely and in a timely fashion unless the spellers had opportunities to defend what they had written and to accept or reject our suggested edits. Many spellers have said that they hold on to their words for so long before they spell them out that they have already done all the revisions and pre-writing in their heads.

Revising one's work is a skill that we all need to work on, but consider that spellers typically get one shot to communicate before the world rushes by, or just once a week to write creatively with a communication partner; most of them choose their words very carefully.

—*Editors.*

Introducing the Issue

Welcome to this *special digital issue* featuring voices of autistic nonspeakers! We've featured works by deaf and special needs students in the past. This is the first time in our 37-year history that we're devoting a whole issue to this oft-neglected topic in inclusivity.

There are many ways to express yourself and communicate: on any given day, you may speak, text, gesture, send an email, or jot down a note. The contributors to this issue (collectively referred to as "spellers") communicate by typing or pointing to letters on a board or communication app, frequently with a communication partner to transcribe what they have spelled. Two common methods are RPM (Rapid Prompting Method) and S2C (Spelling To Communicate), which focus on teaching motor planning and control. Letter boards have been used for communication for over 100 years, but for nonspeakers with autism it has primarily been used since the 1980s.

Society has for too long assumed that autistic nonspeakers are intellectually deficient, but we now know that for many, the problem is one of apraxia (difficulty with motor planning). By transforming communication from a fine motor skill (speech, sign language, and handwriting) to a gross motor activity (moving the arm from the shoulder), these techniques open a door to expression for those whose thoughts were previously locked inside their heads.

Some people try to discredit nonspeakers by saying their words are not their own, so guarding against influence is drilled into their parents and practitioners—who record what they spell without leading questions or probing follow up, without second-guessing what their intended message is, without filling in the rest of the word or phrase when we think we know what they're going to spell. Only when someone is completely finished with their work may a communication partner ask if there is anything they would like to add or edit.

One letter at a time is tedious and exhausting, which is why so many spellers end up gravitating towards poetry. As you read the works in this issue, you'll be awed by their intellectual depth, creativity, humor and authenticity!

We offer this collection with the hope that you'll see the world through spellers' eyes!

About Us: *Skipping Stones* is a nonprofit children's magazine that encourages cooperation, creativity, and celebration of cultural and linguistic diversity. We explore stewardship of the ecological and social webs that nurture us. We offer a forum for communication among children from different lands and backgrounds. *Skipping Stones* expands horizons in a playful, creative way. We invite you to send us your creative art and thought-provoking writing.

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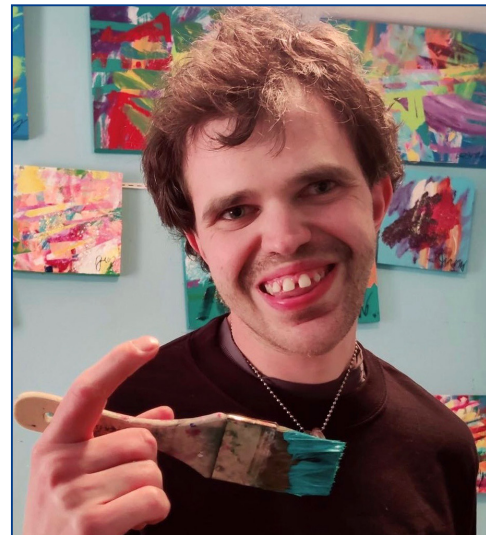
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Our digital content is always free for your reading pleasure! You may like to visit our Contents for Youth and Content for Grown-Ups sections often as we’re uploading many amazing writings and art pieces by our contributors regularly! www.skippingstones.org/wp



Jeremy Sicile-Kira, California, see pp. 29-30.



I teach drama to autistic youth and have a young adult family member on the spectrum, so I have been “autism adjacent” for over two decades. But only in recent years have I ventured into the rich world of the “spellerverse,” comprising autistic nonspeakers or minimal speakers who communicate by use of a letterboard or typing. My experience has blown my mind and upended all my previous assumptions about autism and disability generally.

My company, Theater of Possibility, produced two short plays by speller Sofia Ghassaei, whose poems appear in this issue. The second, more ambitious play, *Love Letters—A True-Ly Short Epistolary Romance*, tells the semi-autobiographical story of two autistic nonspeakers who fall in love over email, only to struggle with sensory challenges when they meet in person. We augmented Sofi’s poetic, dramatic dialogue with songs written by her and 8 other spellers, proving that remarkable talent among autistic nonspeakers is not an anomaly.

I directed Sofi’s play not as a student project, but as a professional work of the highest artistic caliber, and our actors treated it accordingly, finding every beat and nuance in the script. Working with Sofi was a joy and no different than any other playwright/director collaboration, except that we communicated by writing, rather than speaking. When I requested revisions or new material, she always delivered and then some! She came to several rehearsals and shared her insights with me and the cast. With her letterboard, she responded to questions in the talkback after our last performance. My heart swelled with happiness for Sofi, when one of the actors said to her: “You are now part of the Seattle theater community.”

I have learned that “autism spectrum” does not mean a linear continuum from “low to high functioning”—that misperception is so damaging—but rather a full prism of radiant colors. Long underestimated and relegated to the sidelines, spellers are demonstrating their intelligence, perception and humanity, proving that every individual has gifts to offer.

It is an honor and privilege to curate this remarkable collection of poems, short stories, essays and art by spellers. All of the contributors are autistic and communicate mainly by spelling or typing. A few also have Down Syndrome, Angelman’s or other conditions with

sensory motor issues. Together these selections represent different aspects of the speller experience: being locked inside one’s body (Part I: Being); the liberation of gaining communication (Part II: Becoming); and finding self-actualization (Part III: Belonging).

—**Lauren Marshall** is a Seattle playwright, director and teaching artist. She is the founding director of Theater of Possibility, serving kids, teens and young adults with autism and other (dis)abilities since 2010.

From Tracey Ghassaei

Teaching has always been my calling—I can’t remember a time in my life when I didn’t want to be a teacher. From kindergarten Spanish to adult education, years spent teaching middle and high school, and homeschooling two of my daughters on and off, I’ve embraced nearly every assignment with joy. The only exception? Substitute teaching middle school PE—that one was a challenge!

My perspective on education shifted profoundly when a friend introduced me to the world of spelled communication. I had heard of it years earlier, but dismissed the idea, thinking it didn’t apply to our family. After all, my youngest daughter, Sofi, could speak. Her vocabulary was impressive, and many of her words and phrases were intelligible. Yet, her ability to truly communicate through spoken language remained limited. Sometimes she would open her mouth and a stream of words would come flowing out, none of which made sense in the situation. Perseveration on certain sounds and echolalia were a constant soundtrack in our home. Occasionally she would clearly enunciate an appropriate request: “I need Benadryl” when she was starting to feel itchy. But most of the time when she managed to say something that sounded like a legitimate request, she would become annoyed and irritable when the request was granted. She would demand something else, going through her stock phrases, rarely being able to access the words she wanted. We had tried communication apps and traditional speech therapy, with little to show for it. We believed we had reached the peak of her communication progress, but we were wrong—spelling changed everything.

In those early days, spelling resources and trained

From Noah McSweeney

practitioners were few and far between. Progress was slow, often frustrating, not at all steady. Yet, we persevered, practicing our lessons daily, coaching her body to sync up with her brain. Starting at age 13, Sofi took about four years to really hit her stride. The COVID lockdowns, while difficult for many, proved transformative for her. A wealth of online resources were unlocked, offering her exceptional classes and friends. Poetry, songwriting, advocacy, and theater became her world. Who would have imagined that a nonspeaking teenager could write a musical?

Sofi was asked to contribute to a book recently and when asked about the therapies she had received as a child she wrote, “Not understanding that my primary disability is not autism, but motor planning, set us on the wrong path for years... The way I talk may not make sense to you and that is because most of my speech is unintentional. This is hard, because most people assume that I mean everything that I say. Oh, you are lucky if your mouth obeys your brain!”

One day, Sofi challenged me to take a step for myself—to “join others on the loving path” and become a Spelling to Communicate practitioner. While I initially saw it as a way to build her community, she was right; it was also a gift for myself—a return to my roots as a teacher. Now, I cherish the moments I spend with all my students. With the littlest ones, we read books and sing songs, knowing they have their whole lives ahead of them—lives in which they can express themselves fully and access education. For the older students, I see the incredible possibility of transformation, even at 20 or 30 years old. I’m there to witness their triumphs: their first poem, their passions, the surprising swear word that leaves their parents wide-eyed—I celebrate it all.

—Tracey Ghassaei, certified Spelling to Communicate practitioner, and founder of Puget Sound Spellers, lives in Seattle, Washington.

I am inspired by the opportunities afforded me to know so many talented non-speaking poets, artists, and writers. We are a force to be ignored no longer. The themes of Being, Becoming and Belonging directly relate to my own life experiences as a non-speaker longing to be accepted in society. Having access to communication liberates, yet struggles remain. The whispers of doubt make seeing my strength something of a challenge. In the time I spend alone inside my head, I hear my thoughts resounding with a deafening cry. With each day silent, I am left to wonder: Will my thoughts ever be heard? Will the real me ever reach the surface? The answer is yes. One letter at a time I spell my truth, making my way through life with my voice steering the ship. I can be heard even when words remain unspoken. At age 14, a letterboard opened my mind like a trapdoor to freedom. My dream of going to college is being realized. Now, alongside the other brilliant minds filling these digital pages, I take my place knowing I belong and I deserve to be here.

From John-Carlos Schaut

In 2002, when I was six years old, I met a small Indian woman who became my Anne Sullivan. Her name is Soma. She was not afraid to see my yearning to learn and to live. I was trapped in a school classroom like a deaf person without sign language. Soma said, “Make a way or find a way.” RPM was my gift. She taught me the poetry of William Blake and some science. She saw my smarts.

I met another woman when I was ten years old. Her name is Heather Robinson. Heather is my guardrail; my coregulator. She helps me with my sensory challenges and unpredictable nervous system.

Spelling saved my life, but to be able to spell and live I must be able to deal with the body and so I had to first deal with my nervous system; it was no easy feat.

Together with my sister Sophia, and whole family, my communication partners—Gina and Denise—who worked with me for 18 years, I have been blessed to have a voice. I was also blessed to have my other spellers alongside me.

So have a look at this collection of works by autistic spellers. Autistic spellers and artists teach us to challenge our assumptions. We, who have been marginalized, thoroughly plan to blow your mind. Like any group on the fringe, we are coming together to advocate and create community. We need each other, these words and works of my people will give you insight, if only you have eyes to see and ears to hear and a heart that is open.

Enjoy!

When I Got Wise to Life

I see life in a new way since I became disabled. I used to see life through a narrow lens, now I have a wide vision of the world. I look at nature and see no boundary. I walk down the street and feel the pavement hold me up. My feet respond with a big thank you. In the woods I am surrounded by brothers and sisters that don't seem to care how I look or sound. I thank the trees for cleaning the air for me. The streams I ford delight me with their tunes. I don't care if I get wet because I am a part of it all. In my life I have been set aside by humans that fail to make an effort to understand me. The way I see life is from the inside out, not the other way around. I look for patterns that unite me with plants, animals and rocks in order to connect as a fellow traveler.

It is an illusion that we are somehow superior to the natural world we rely upon for our existence. I gaze at trees and deer and see no difference at all. How mystifying is it that I can see the connections to nature yet most are unaware or don't care. It is so beautiful to make my way down the woodland trails and feel I am among friends. It is not hard if you look to see the smiles that come my way by my brothers and sisters roaming through the woods on the same path I seek to follow. In my earlier days I felt afraid because my senses were on fire. They had one speed which was full-throttle. I couldn't keep up with it all. Then my brain slowed down enough for me to take it all in. *(I need to digest the meaning this has for me as I write it all down, to digest and nourish my soul in order to share it with autistic people and others.)* I slowed down because I began to communicate with myself through reading the works of quirky writers, poets and scientists.

I began to see that I am not alone in my unconventional views. In fact I may be part of the majority if you count the rocks and animals. *(I voted for nature, but Mr. T. won. It helps to have an absurd view of life when it looks so bleak. I believe if the*

President destroys the country, nature will survive. I'm not joking totally. We are mortal, and nature endures it all. I digress yet it seems to fit the times we are in.) My peers are not your typical ones. In fact, I take my time to connect with animals, beaches and rivers that have so much to say to me. It takes trained ears to listen to inanimate objects. They are speaking all the time. I just started to listen when I woke up. I was awakened one day by a moose in the wilds of Montana. I didn't expect to be drawn into a conversation with a huge antlered animal, yet I was able to slow down my brain enough to listen and take in the message he had for me. The message I heard was you and I walk the same earth. *Don't think I am less or greater than you, as long as we recognize our common ground we can get along.* From that day on, I was among nature, not above or below.

—**John-Carlos Schaut**, Wisconsin. *"I am a 28-year-old autistic man living in Wisconsin. I graduated with honors and yet was denied admission to a liberal arts college, because I am a nonspeaker. I completed some online college courses, but decided to shift my focus to becoming a writer. I was inspired by my mentor Brian Laidlaw—author, songwriter and educator who cofounded Unrestricted Interest to mentor neurodivergent poets and songwriters—and by*

Demise Lamm, my longtime communication partner. Most of all, I am motivated by my fellow autistic non-speaking people who need a voice."



Part I: Being

"Inside My Head"

The works in this section address common themes of being a nonspeaker, such as feeling relegated to the sidelines of human discourse, being underestimated, and having a restless brain and dysregulated body. Many autistic nonspeakers experience synesthesia and hyperesthesia, which can be at times joyful, but other times exhausting and overwhelming.

Noah McSweeney adds: [This section] speaks to how we are inside. From my perspective, synesthesia is a mixed bag, not high or low, but an agony I must try to develop tolerance for, especially when I am in a group. When I am alone, it can be pleasurable.

In a Big Magical World

In a big magical world,
Quiet secrets noisily fill thoughts in my head,
Nowhere to go, nothing to be said.

Deserts behold God's majesty,
Mother Earth reigns over skies swirled,
In a big magical world.

I'm here,
Inside my head,
Nowhere to go, nothing to be said.

Ebb and flow of tide
Creep upon beautiful sands pearled,
In a big magical world.

In the lonely and tired brain,
No soaring sounds escape their deathbed,
Nowhere to go, nothing to be said.

On a perfect day,
My words flow to your ears,
Across a big magical world.
Everywhere to go, everything to be said.



—Aiden Levy,
age 14, Illinois. (2023).

Aiden adds: "As a person who is autistic and nonspeaking, I face a lot of incorrect assumptions. People assume you are not smart and talk down to you. People may think you don't have emotions or feelings because you don't signal them in a neurotypical way. But I am determined to open eyes and change minds, to advocate for nonspeakers, to show we are smart and compassionate people. And one important way I do that is through my poetry."

Dreams of an Observer

Scarcely heard among the cacophony of voices,
Competing to be recognized,
He stood on the sidelines.
Ever the observer,
Awaiting for his turn,
With a hope to have his words
One day reach beyond the inside of his head.
Oh what a dream,
For a non-speaking boy!



—Ishaan Holloway,
age 19, Alberta, Canada.
(2024). Ishaan has been communicating via the letterboard and keyboard for several years now, and he has published a volume of poetry, entitled: *My Unique Voice*. In 2023, he received a South Asian Inspiration Award for his accomplishments.

Modern Day Galileo

Galileo, Galileo
What bullshit you spewed
Not an ear would listen to you
Eric, Eric
A silent, simple boy
Not a soul would believe in you
Treason
Lies
Puppets
Who believes you?
I do cries from the dark
I do

By Eric Herzog, Alberta, Canada

An OCD Limerick

My mind races at lightning speed
Always trying to address a need
Around and around we go
Back and forth, to and fro
I want to be freed

By **Eric Herzog**, Alberta, Canada. (Photo: top, right)

Eric's mother writes: "Eric is 21-years-old, nonverbal autistic, and has never said a word in his life. Eric started RPM three years ago here in Calgary. He was open within three months. His purpose in life is to help other non-speakers find their voice, so everyone knows just because you can't speak does not mean you're not super smart and amazing. We always say to him, one letter at a time you're changing the world."



Poetry

Poetry is my mission.
Poetry is my love.
Poetry is the language I speak.
Sole goal of my soul
is to fill your heart whole
with remnants of poems.

—**Sid Ghosh**, Oregon. Sid is a levitator of language, easy in his style, fast in his lie, and light in his tale. He is also a



poet, not by choice, but by accident. Just your autistic boy-next-door with Down Syndrome. He is 17 for now. His poems have appeared in Poetry Magazine and two chapbooks: *Give a Book* (Push Press, 2022) and *Proceedings of the Full Moon Rotary Club* (State Champs of San Francisco, 2023). Sid lives in Portland, Oregon and you can find him on Instagram. (See Contributors' Links, p. 31). Sometimes he struggles to find himself, though.

Salty Hymns

Racing wind rustles the ancient trees
Awoken by the Pacific's sound
She sings to me
I bask in her salty hymns
West coast free

Fleeing Fire

Ready to free my fire
Burning deep from within
Long simmering, now I boil
Burning
Third-degree burns rip at me
Trapped incinerating
Hands tired, not me
Dare to believe
Before I turn to ash
You will see
The real me

*Poems by **Nikhil Hayre**, British Columbia, Canada.*

Nikhil Hayre is a 24-year-old autistic man who is a nonspeaker. He started communication and writing

with letter-boards in January 2024. He has progressed within a year to typing one word at a time on his iPhone. He is interested in writing and would like to focus on writing poetry. His poems bring out his feelings and emotions that he has kept inside for years.



Reverie in Lavender

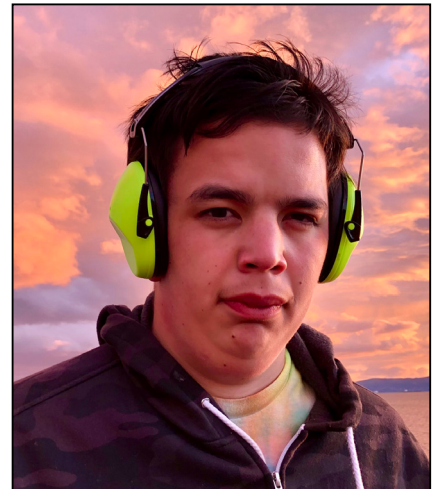
There's a moment
As the sun is setting
When the lavender arrives.
The strip that lies
Between the fiery horizon
And the still deepening azure
Of the endless sky.

Delicate glowing shades
From pale to paler
Like the eyes of an enchanter
The coolness inspires heart warmth
Prickles of anticipated joy
Tingling, spreading from spine
To toes to fingertips.

Chanting arises from deep in the earth
The sigh of the most beautiful human
Delivering all parts of the choir.
The sonic equivalent
Of pure romantic adoration,
Lovingness and loveliest
Of spirituals.

Feeling the floating lightness
Of release
From my body
The euphoria of
These subtle shades.

Lucien Gonzalez,
age 19, is a high
school junior who
loves going to new
places, listening to
electronic music,
and writing poetry,
and advocating for
nonspeakers. He
lives in Alameda,
California.



Werewolf

Fur bristles beneath my skin
Lycanthrope under full moonlight
Teeth gnash
Too close and I will bite
Rip the flesh from hopeful bones
Teach me to keep the monster cool
Mind eats matter
I am madder still
Digging claws in
I'm not here
I don't see you
In stupid strength I have lost my will
Turn your face away
I am swallowed in darkness
Read the transformation
It is a warning
Best you run
Rest not
For I will chase
Listen
You can tremble
Earth shakes as I howl
You hear the visceral cry
Feel the surrender
Where do I find peace?
Reap your silver bullet
Take the blood from my repulsive veins
Cast me into shadows
I will rise again

—**Noah McSweeney**, age 24, adds, “I am a white male college student from Northern California. Most of my life I thought intelligence only applied to others. When I learned to spell on a letterboard—Hallelujah! Suddenly my world changed. People believed I was smart. Happiness came to me in great droves. For the first time in my life, the thoughts in my mind could be shared. You could say that not speaking is part of what defines me culturally. I belong to a magnificently underestimated group of individuals trapped behind the stigma that accompanies a diagnosis of autism and apraxia. We struggle to be understood and accepted in the world of speakers.”

Apraxia (difficulty with motor planning) is now understood to be the reason why many autistic individuals are unable to use mouth words. These pieces explore aspects of apraxia. Noah writes: “The werewolf is the mythical representation of an autistic person. We lose control of our bodies and can morph into a different creature.”



Noah McSweeney

corpus proprium

(Said as a wish that I may one day own this body of mine)

I slide through life
unpunctuated
unexpectedly unconventionally punctuated
with taps staccato hands
wallfloorwindow frontbackfront
palms loved well worn
accustomed to their role
knuckles begging
stop
I careen through life
unpunctuated
feet enjamb
ed into stairs pushfalling up
shoulders drag
leaving a trail of destruction
as photos fall in their wake
I smile onto my mother's head
hips lead the way to bed
only mother knows how eyes betray me

—**Sofia Ghassaei**, age 21, Washington. (2025)
See Sofia's bio and photo on page 2.

Tuning Goes Frig

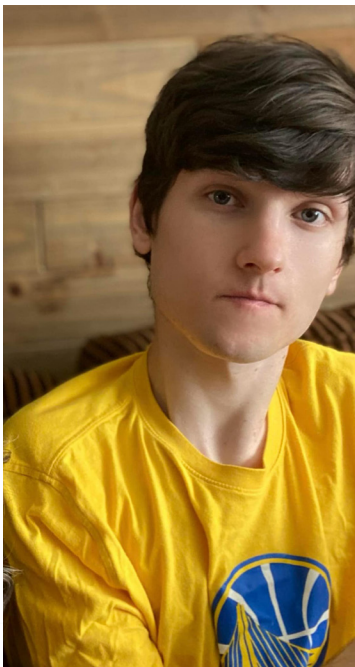
Resonance is
for people
with frequencies.
I am going
on without
a tuning fork.
My frequencies
go to other
zeniths. My life
is in poetic
pause.

—**Sid Ghosh**, now 17, wrote this poem at the age of 12. Please see his bio, portrait, and another poem on page 9.

Restless Brain

Each of My Dreams

Tonight full each moon,
Sets ruined with dearth included of
each of my dreams.
Gravity joined bricks, useless for weight.
Trojan horses hide in destroyed holes.
Tamed vices lie within.
Reach the man on the moon by climbing
each of my dreams.
Tame Trojan vices by dreaming
Each of my dreams.
Hear the solo wolf call out
each of my dreams.
Guns sling to shoot
each of my dreams.
Ululating echoes join the howls
giving glowing yearning flowing
To each of my dreams.
Tonight might i sleep dreamless.



Ethan Nagy, age 23, views himself as a renaissance man following his own interests, including history and math. Ethan is a published author who blogs regularly for I-ASC as part of his advocacy with the Nonspeaking Leadership Council. He has contributed poems to Neurolyrical Cafe as well as Boards and Chords. He resides in Oregon with his family.

The Prison of My Mind (a song)

I was lost inside my thoughts and in my dreams
Did not exist; in this real world, there was no me
I had form but did not feel; ears did not hear
And I had eyes; they did not see.

My thoughts had no substance like gossamer threads
Like wisps of clouds that blew away in the wind
I lived in a dream whose essence I could not grasp
I could not wake; I could not live.

Was trapped in a dream of my own creation.
In that ethereal world, I lived alone
And there was no lifeline that I could hold on to
I floated on, all on my own

I was lost inside my thoughts and in my dreams.
Did not exist; in this real world, there was no me
I had form but did not feel; ears did not hear
And I had eyes; they did not see.

Then one day, I heard a sound that changed the dream
Was a voice that said it's time for me to wake
The dream is over; it was only in your mind.
It's time to wake; it's time to live

My unseeing eyes opened to the world of beauty
My ears heard music for the very first time
My unfeeling form felt the comfort of a touch
My lungs are free; it's time to live

I was lost inside my thoughts and in my dreams.
Did not exist; in this real world, there was no me
I had form but did not feel; ears did not hear
And I had eyes; they did not see.

"My name is **Trevor Mason** and I am a 26 year old nonspeaker who lives with my family in Carmel, NY. I enjoy walking on the beach,, listening to music and traveling with my family. I am currently a college student at Westchester Community College. I wrote this song about learning to spell after having 23 years of no way to communicate." You can listen to this song on YouTube (see the Contributors' Links on p. 31).



Part II: Becoming

"I Will Show You Your Voice"

These works explore the joyous transformation that nonspeakers undergo when they finally have a means of communication. Love and gratitude figure prominently in these works, and there is a sense of blossoming. Joy is expressed not just in communication, but in being with others and in dancing.

A Spark

A spark waiting to ignite
Lay dormant far too long
Hidden under the mask of autism
Ready to unleash
To be seen beyond the exterior
An exuberant flame
Of passion
Of curiosity
Of personality
A universe within
Destined to be explored
One letter at a time



—**Craig Misunis**
writes: "I am a 25-year-old autistic non-speaker from Calgary, Alberta, Canada. I love writing poetry, doing Wordle, riding my bike, swimming & hiking. It took many years but I found

my voice through RPM. I always thought finding my voice would mean learning to speak. Little did I know pointing at letters would finally make me heard. I had to accept that I needed another way. Another way to feed my busy brain. And now I am free. I am heard. I am capable. Best of all, I finally accept me."



Who's Dancing and Why Are they Tapping their Toes?

A man was sitting alone in a cafe one rainy Wednesday. He was older, with a dusting of luminous white hair atop his speckled head. He felt lonely as he sipped his London Fog.

That was Betty's favorite on a rainy day. It had been two years without her. He missed her laugh and her smell. He even missed her nagging because, at the end of the day, she always had a point.

As he took another sip, eyes directed towards the liquid, there was a commotion around him. The other cafe patrons directed their attention to a young woman outside. She had long, wild hair, no shoes on her feet, and wore a light blue dress. She was soaked to the bone, and the rain kept pouring down.

What confused the people the most was that the woman was dancing—twirling, skipping, and splashing. She was beautiful, the man thought. And suddenly, he was twenty-four again, and there was Betty. She was radiant as she danced on the first lawn they ever owned together. It was raining as she beckoned to her husband.

He didn't want to get wet, and he despised being cold. It was Betty's coy smile that allured him, and so he danced with his wife in the rain.

The man was pulled from his silent reverie and back into the cafe. He heard jeering, snickering, and unkind comments. He felt uncomfortable and sad for the woman—that is, until her gaze fell on him. Her eyes evoked a kind of love that had been missing from his heart since Betty died. Then she smiled coyly at him.

And that is how an old man found himself dancing in the rain again.

—**Stone Kaufer**, age 19, Washington, is a non-speaking autistic individual who, after years of not being able to communicate reliably, found his voice through a spelling methodology at the age of 16. This breakthrough has transformed his life, empowering him to share his unique perspective on the world. Stone's journey is a powerful testament to resilience, determination, and the belief that everyone has a voice worth hearing. He now speaks to inspire others, offering hope and encouragement to those facing similar challenges.

Family

These poets celebrate their relationship with a loving parent who is their communication bridge to the rest of the world.

Pain of Silence: A Two-Voice Poem

Daughter

My silence is painful.

The pain is loud like a bomb going off.

Hand in mine is pained.

Sad to not be able to hear me.

My pain is now at peace.

Hand in mine is calm.

Mother

Her silence is painful.

Family in silence take my hand.
Hand in mine is pained.

I will show you your voice.

Hand in mine is calm.

By Sydney Zachman, written at age 9.

The Starry Night Dance



I sit in the backseat
The two hour drive the only obstacle
To my dancing feet
The four tilted chairs reserving
Our spots are claimed
I relax, breathing in a room
Of nonspeakers
I dance with my mother tonight
That's strangely okay
The keyboard she carries
Tethers me to her
But bridges the gap
Separating me from my friends
The magic fills the room
Sounds overwhelm me
Wrapping me in the disco ball light

—**Will Hanson**, age 25, Massachusetts, is a poet, a pianist, and a speller of ready quips. A word waster, word spitter and word feaster, Will's poetry takes on connections and swallows meaning whole. He is writing his first poetry chapbook, and his work has recently been published in the poetry magazine, *Leo in Bloom*.

Abundance

I yearned for a grain of rice
 You gave me a feast
 I looked for a star
 You showed me a galaxy
 I searched for a tinge of green
 You brought me to an oasis
 I pined for a glass of water
 You tracked down a pristine waterfall
 I longed for a musical note
 You arranged a symphony
 I ached for a friend
 You assembled a whole tribe
 I dreamed of a few words
 You showered me with beautiful poetry

By **Swarit Gopalan**, age 13, Florida. He adds:



“My name is Swarit and I am a 13-yr old non-speaking, autistic that lives in Palm Harbor, Florida with my family. I would never have thought something like this was possible a couple of years back when I started my communication journey through spelling on

a letter board. As this journey unfolded, I got more comfortable and proficient with sharing my thoughts and feelings through typing on a regular keyboard.

It has always been a dream to share my story and perspectives more broadly so I can help accelerate the learning curve for families like ours. It is very important to me that we get voices like mine out of the prisons they are in. My life ought to move others in directions not thought possible, as I would not be here if others had not shown the way. I have been sharing my thoughts/perspectives through my Facebook and Instagram pages and website. See the Links on page 31.

Elder

I am calling all the hardworking people
 How are you feeling?
 I’m at a too hard place
 I want to honour all you did for us all.

The roads
 The buildings
 The architecture
 The highways
 The ferries

All of it useful
 All of it wonderful
 All of it helpful

Too easy to take for granted
 Too easy to not acknowledge
 Too easy to not ponder

I am happy
 At a too wonderful place in my life
 Happy with all you have invented and created.

—**Devon McIver**, age 16. He adds: *“I was born and raised in Vancouver, Canada. My mom speaks Portuguese with my grandmother (Avo) and I understand most of it.*

“What is important to me is advocating for others who don’t have a voice to learn spelling to communicate. I have been a speaker at various webinars to share my insights. I want to have a podcast that features many non-speakers to help



inspire parents, teachers and others who can help a non-speaker in their life use the alphabet board to communicate.

“What inspires me when I write poetry is happy thoughts and sometimes dark thoughts. It helps me release what is inside and allows my inner thoughts to make sense.”

Blossoming

Nature themes appear in many of these poems. Here, springtime could be a metaphor for blossoming into one's potential, but it's not always a smooth process, as depicted in John-Carlos Schaut's playful lament to a fickle spring.

Flowers

in the spring
flowers bloom in colors of the rainbow
living themselves as they wish
remembering the bees
bringing joy to little dogs
singing songs of flower love
loving songs of flowers
trying to withstand the taming
trying to wild the humans
trying to humanize the world
trying as only flowers can
to love her pressure, this world

Sam Bhatia, Max Castillo, and Stephen Schwartz of Seattle composed this poem in May 2024, during a group lesson on the life and work of poet Mary Oliver. Given the prompt "In the Spring...", we went around the table several times and each poet added a line based on the previous lines. Sam is a 20-year-old autistic man who is pursuing his Associate of Arts. He loves to swim, bike, play basketball and do complex jigsaw puzzles and legos. He immigrated from India when he was 2 years old and started communicating through letterboard and iPad at age 17. Max is a 23-year-old speller. His year of spelling has enabled him to come out as a gay man looking for connection. Stephen is a 36-year-old speller who loves chocolate, mountains, and thinking about his future. He wishes someone as amazing as he is will read this and be inspired to write.



Spring Is Like an Ambiguous Letter

Dear Spring

I write to you
Longing for you to respond
It has been many months
Since I have had any noise from you
Why is it so?
For we dance when you are here
Yet you disappear so quickly
And like a child

You play hide and seek with my emotions
And like an ice cream cone you drip all over my sidewalk
And like a blanket you tangle me on a restless night
And like a giraffe I reach for you
But your leaves quiver just inches from my tongue
Like roller coaster throwing me up and twisting

My mind's perspective
I've waited in line for hours
For this to be over in a minute
So spring you're a fickle friend
Immature, irresponsible

Reckless

Like a bike ride down a mountain path
With pebbles kicking up and slipping

Helpless to, afraid to

Stop I slide along

We do this every year

So why not stay a little longer
Or be gone from now til next year

Your tease is uprooting

It's a wind

Blowing before a hot day

You warm me in your touch

In the grass I lay

But too soon

I turn and too soon you are away

So leave or remain

I do not care

Make up your mind

Sincerely,

'Carlos. (written on 5/27/21).

(Please see p.7 for photo/bio of John-Carlos Schaut.)

Spring Possibility

Spring beckons renewal
Rain washes away winters sorrow
Only to awaken what lays dormant
Possibility
Buds begging to grow
Reaching upwards
Blooming
I flower alongside the greenscape
Flourishing
Into the woman I am destined to be

—**Maya Jasmine Kaler**, age 24, British Columbia, Canada, is bi-racial. Her father is from India, and her mom is Afro-Canadian of Caribbean heritage. Maya was born in Arlington, Washington and raised in Surrey, B.C.

Maya is a nonspeaking autistic young adult who has only recently found her voice through typing and the written word. It is with much effort and hard work, one letter at a time, that she has created this poem. Now that she can communicate, Maya has a strong desire to share about herself and her passions. She wants to be published because she has spent her life up until now trapped by people's biases and assumptions that she is not an independent thinker. Maya wants to create a self portrait with her words—her theme is “resilience” and her work emphasizes that she is “grounded in nature” in the imagery and themes.

For Maya, writing and publishing poetry is an act of self advocacy and an opportunity to be a “changemaker” by changing society's understanding about non-speaking disabled people.



From Guest Editor Tracey Ghassaei: “This allegorical short story highlights what so many nonspeakers say about having a mind or body that doesn’t cooperate. Either from apraxia or OCD, they are frequently fighting themselves, and many people name their body/mind. This is so common that we all know the alternate names for friends. In this story, self-doubt is personified as an unwanted neighbor who comes over to criticize.”

Goofy: Self-Doubt by Emma Cladis.

I think it’s this sad thing that I do, and I want to tell a story about it to ask you all to understand me more. I’m learning that this sad thing I do is not that unusual, and many people do it in some way, too. At this time, doing this thing stops me from doing what I’m called by God to do. I have a hunch many others are stopped by this thing also. My story comes from years of battles and trying to figure this out. You want to know we will think of a good solution. I hope this story will help you, too.

I am ready to say this was like every other day: I was home getting ready for school. Then, a knock comes at the door. I thought, oh no, not that strange neighbor again. He stops over when I least expect it, and he has never been invited, not even once. I ask him not to come in, but somehow, he makes his way in and ends up sitting down and sometimes staying for hours. Strange and sad things happen when he comes through my door. My mind gets foggy, and I start thinking of fearful and bad thoughts. I try to be a good Christian, hang out with him, and be kind, but he gets really negative about my life. He calls me a loser and says this writing thing will never end in me having a good life. I always end up blowing up as he taunts me more. This all finally ends with us being angry and me full of fear. I start doubting myself and what God has told me, that I will be a good writer. I’ve asked him not to return, but he is back in my house every other day or so. I nicknamed him Goofy to try to make him fun.

Let me tell you how our conversation goes. It starts with Goofy saying, “You’ll never be a good writer. Your stories are terrible. You won’t amount to anything. And, besides me, you have no friends,

Goofy: Self-Doubt ...continued

and really, this life is going to get harder than it already is.”

Then we start to argue. I reply, “I will work at it until I am a good writer. I think I should write a good story for you to help you become nicer.”

Goofy then says something like, “There’s no use. There’s no future in writing for you. You’ll never get a job as a writer.”

I say, “God has called me to write. Who are you to question Him?”

Goofy’s eyebrows raise as he questions, “Are you sure? Well, you know this writing thing isn’t going to help you talk; it’s not the same as having a real voice.”

Then my heart starts to race, and I start breathing hard because he gets under my skin so fast. I want to throttle him.

I angrily tell him, “I’m busy. You should leave.”

But he stays, and then he starts saying, “Well, forgive me, I’m just trying to help you be realistic. I am your friend.”

He doesn’t feel friendly; fear is all I feel now, and I don’t fight it anymore. I kinda think all his negativity grabs me, and in that moment, I’m lost in it. This is when I freak out, yell at him, or shut down, sad and fearful. He finally leaves, and after a while, I regroup and try to start my day. I pray he never returns.

Let me tell you about his looks; he’s this weird little guy. I think I was a bit afraid of him at first because he has strange yellow eyes and always this hard-to-read expression. He wears the same tight shorts and off blue shirt every time I see him. He kinda shuffles instead of walks but somehow gets around very quickly. He has more tufts of hair on his chin than on the top of his head. You can see why I said that he kind of scared me at first. When he appears, he always tells me this terrible, lousy stuff. It immediately starts the whole cycle of my nervous system becoming upset. I begin to feel this dreadful humming inside and become defensive and out of sorts. I tell him, “Just go away.” I’m not sure why, but he does not go easily. On the worst

days, I think he wants to ruin my life and eventually kill me. This is why I fight him day and night, to keep going and somehow not have this unwanted visitor at my door or in my house. I don’t want to hear his lies and feel the fear. I have to get rid of him. This must stop.

I had tried everything but could not stop his visits. I thought I was going crazy. Then, I read a book about my problem and decided to try a new tact with Goofy. What if I stopped fighting him? If I just allowed him in, maybe I could even give him a key to my place. Just accept his trash talking as much as he could dish out. I’ll just hear it and let it bounce off me. I was afraid this new acceptance of him wouldn’t bring me peace, but I had to try something different.

I’d made the decision to try and think it could work. To try to be hopeful. I prayed for God to give me strength. “God, please help me with this new idea and help me find a way to get through these awful fearful times and through to you.”

So, this is what I did.

He showed up as predicted. I said, “Hey, Goofy, come on in. It’s nice to see you. I was hoping you would come by.”

Goofy just looked confused and suspicious, saying, “What! I’ve never heard that from you before. You must not be in your right mind.”

I laughed and replied, “Really, come on in, have a seat. Tell me how you are.”

He shuffled to a chair and grunted, “How am I? How are you? You look terrible. I’ll bet you won’t be able to do a thing today.”

I took a deep breath and replied, “I feel great. I’m going to class to read a new story I wrote.”

Goofy’s comeback was, “Oh no! You must be so nervous. You know they’ll hate it.”

My heart started racing, but I responded as calmly as I could, “Why don’t you come back later? I’ll tell you how great it went. I’ll even make you dinner if you come back, and we can hang out.”

At this point, I noticed that Goofy looked a bit

different, not scary, just weird and a bit ridiculous. As I passed by him, I said, “You are welcome to stay, but I’ve gotta go.”

I could still feel his negative vibes, but it’s just that I wasn’t going to let them hurt me or take over. I think I’ll just vibe all the way to school and pray the energy turns into good stuff.

When I started trying this new way of handling my unwanted visitor, I renamed him Goofy instead of what he calls himself, Fear. Naming him Goofy makes him less threatening and just that, a goof and not to be taken so seriously.

I’m not saying this has worked perfectly, but I would highly recommend that you try this for your anxiety and fears. Prayer, yoga, meditation, distractions, and deep breathing are all good, but visualizing your Goofy, accepting him as just some nervous energy that can’t really ruin you or kill you just might help take the power out of him and bring you more peace.

—**Emma Cladis**, age 27, is a junior majoring in English at Vanguard University in Costa Mesa, California. She has autism and communicates primarily by typing. Emma loves advocating for others like herself and has presented at conferences and authored books and videos describing her journey. Emma contributed an autobiographical chapter in *Leaders Around Me: Autobiographies of Autistic who Type, Point, and Spell*, and she has published in journals including *Autism in Adulthood* and Vanguard University’s literary journal, *Synecdoche*. She has also contributed to popular press, including an article in *Autism Parenting Magazine*. Emma’s passion for film and writing has brought her to a place of wanting to be a screenwriter, and she has written several screenplays. For more information about Emma, see *Contributors’ Links*, p. 31.



Part III: Belonging

“Authentically Me”

These works are about finding one’s place in the world, and pursuing one’s dreams and passions. Spellers want what every person wants—respect, friendship, love and the space to be their authentic selves.

Guest Editor John-Carlos Schaut writes: “I would emphasize chasing our dreams may be realized through the liberation of communication. The path to freedom is through spelling to communicate.”

A Protest Poem

I want independence, kindness, mighty love in my life
I want a home with others
I want oceans of glowing, happy, interesting conversations
How right is it to want what I want?
It’s my given right and I stand up for it now.
Don’t you tell me to wait till I’m older or more
mature I’m ready to fail
That’s my right.
High hopes for my life
That’s my right.
Lively rights steal my sleep rendering me hopeless
each morning I shoulder these burdens, lifting my
strength to new heights.
I will try to succeed
I will succeed
I will only stay after the rains fall and I am dry again.
Nights will rise to give me no strong life-defeating
messages.
I claim my space in this universe.
It’s my right.

—**Noah McSweeney**, California. (2023)
Please see Noah’s bio and photo on page 11.

Nature Photography by Zachary Duncan, California



“Blue Trees”



“All Bark”



“Up a Creek”

Zachary Duncan is a 24-year-old aspiring photographer. He is also autistic and non-speaking, but more importantly, he is badass. He loves his girlfriend, archery, being right, and his family (despite their annoying tendencies and forgetful natures.) For more of Zac’s creative endeavors, see Contributors’ Links on p. 31.

Zachary writes: “RPM has been the key to unlocking my life, but one surprising thing is how hobbies have become accessible to me. Sometimes, before I could communicate, I would dream of having hobbies and friends and a real life outside of cartoons and my compulsions. After I learned to communicate, I was able to share my interests and ask for help supporting my motor skills with hobbies. Trying new things is always hard, and being able to express that I DO want to do something, even when my body revolts, has allowed my mom and me to work together as a team. RPM let me imagine a bigger life.

“Photography is an amazing hobby because light and beauty surround us, and photos help people to stop and really look.”

See more of Zac’s creative endeavors on p. 26 and Contributors Links on p. 31.



The Train

A tiny shimmering speck dots my eyes.
As it draws near, casting off its disguise,
to a looming presence, nosing in nonchalantly,
marching with a thunderous rattle,
in synchrony with soldiers in tow,
each crowned with antlers surging skyward,
all savouring bolts of sparks, served on cabled platters,
I commence my autistic dance.
She must have noticed my fawning glance.
My ceremonial leaps and flapping arms,
drumming up rippled rhythms in thin air.
She must have, for
she brakes, her doors blooming ajar.
Bells chime their welcome as I sit on her lap.
Her sultry whisper whirrs up the magic carpet.
“Next stop is Dalhousie station.”

—**Anantha Krishnamurthy**, age 17, Canada. He writes:

“I am a 17-year-old Canadian with East Indian heritage. My autism has held my vocal cords hostage and hence I don’t speak in a traditional sense. I can understand Kannada, a sub-continental language and my mother tongue. I also know bits of Tamil and Hindi and I have learned to express my thoughts in English via Typing. My dream is for my life to be not solely defined by my autism. I want to rise beyond it and show the world what others like me are capable of achieving. I want my actions to open doors



that remain shut for most nonspeaking autistic folks. As for the submission, I had no lofty ambitions other than to express my love for trains.”

Ceremony with Nyad *by Triston*

My safe space is in the water. Floating in the water, my body feels free. The sun hitting my face. The coolness of the water on my skin. The sound of the droplets of water falling back to source. The smell of the sun-screen. All of it makes me feel at ease. An ease that is often scarce in my life. The water that surrounds me makes me feel like I can be still even through the waves that try to disturb my calm. I feel light when I swim like a feather in the wind. Every contraction and expansion grounds me. I have nothing but fun memories being in the water. Like the time I swam with Diana Nyad.

Ms. Nyad defied the views and opinions of many by swimming from Cuba to Florida at the age of 64. I don't think I fully appreciated the moment until recently. I was a lot younger then. Seven to be exact, and I didn't really know who she was. All I knew was that I was going to swim with her. My mom said she was an amazing athlete who managed to swim across the Atlantic ocean from Cuba to Key West. She failed a couple times before, but on her fifth attempt she achieved her dream. The only reason I was there was because my mom entered a charity fundraiser, which raises funds for children going through cancer treatment by giving them an outlet through the arts called the Pablove Foundation. The winning bid would get to swim with Ms. Nyad and we won the auction.

Friday, October 13th, 2017 was a sunny and warm day. This was the day we were to meet and swim with Diana Nyad at 3:30 pm. Ironically, this paper for English is due on Friday October 13th, 2023. Exactly six years since that swim to the day. Funny how things work out sometimes. Writing this feels full circle. Anyways, the night before we were to meet Ms. Nyad, my mom was so excited.

When the sun came up the day had finally

Ceremony with Nyad ...continued

come. Well, I had to go to school that day but after school, the time had really come. We went to our family friend's house and awaited our guest. This beautiful house near us has been my private oasis throughout the years. Especially throughout the pandemic because of the large pool and the hot tub in the spacious and beautiful backyard. I even had my first birthday party there, but that is a different story.

When Ms. Nyad arrived it was just me, my mom, and Paige, my assistant. Some may call her my BI but she's really my assistant. Ann, whose house it was, was rushing to us, having left work super early just so she could meet Ms. Nyad. My dad to this day regrets not missing work to be there with us so he could have met her. I was also sad he couldn't go, but more than that I was ready to swim. My mom and Ann were more excited than I was. They were both giddy, and once she got there they paid more attention to Ms. Nyad than me, but I guess that's why my assistant was there.

A few years prior on Sept 2, 2013 while watching CNN live, my mom had gone downstairs for something and Ann screamed to her to hurry back. She was yelling, saying Diana Nyad was almost on Florida shores after swimming 53 hours from Havana, Cuba to Florida Keys without a shark cage. On her journey there, she had encountered many challenges like a ton of box jellyfish stings and she was vomiting on her way to shore. She kept repeating to herself a mantra to help motivate her. "Find a way" she would say. I find myself saying this whenever I need help. She must have had complete exhaustion, but Diana Nyad made history as the first person to accomplish this feat.

While we swam with her, she shared stories with us about her family and asked us about ours. She also asked what we wanted to learn during our swimming lesson. I just wanted to swim, so I was ready to jump right in. My mom, however, is not much of a swimmer even though she had just

bought a brand new swimsuit. She said she just wanted to talk and tread the water, so Ms. Nyad gave my mom tips on treading and they chatted the rest of the afternoon. Ann, who rushed from work and probably broke the speeding limit, didn't even have time to go change from work. She was still in her suit poolside. Poor Diana, She brought all kinds of tools with her, flippers, goggles, snorkels all just sitting to the side. I hope she had a good time. I think she did. Atleast I'm a pretty awesome swimmer.

Recently, I watched videos of her getting to the shore for this essay. When she got out of the water she looked tired and was struggling to walk, but she said, "Never, ever give up." She could hardly walk and as a crowd of people gathered around her she managed to stay calm and offered words of wisdom to everyone there. Step by step, she made it out of water and slowly moved onto the land. My anxiety would have never let me! I see the video and I know I would have been overwhelmed by the crowd and the noise. I think Nyad handled what for me would have been a stressful celebration with grace. I admire Ms. Nyad's strength and what it took for her to get there. The power of her conviction reminds me anything is possible even in the face of adversity.

Looking back all these years later, I am honored to not only have met, but also to have swam with Ms. Nyad. I looked up her chance of success. The director of the marathon swimming Hall of Fame, Steve Munatones, calculated her chance of completion and said she had less than a two percent chance of accomplishing her goal out of one thousand attempts. I often think about my own body's limitations. How others have told me I'm incapable of achieving certain things because of my disability, or question whether or not I do things they doubt I can, but I know the truth and know that I can. It makes me wonder what would have happened if she had listened to others when they said she wouldn't make it and what would happen

Ceremony with Nyad ...continued

if I listened to others who doubt me? It's important to drown out the noise sometimes, and that's what I love about swimming.

In the water I can connect to a boundless silence that grounds me. It makes me feel more aware of my body and helps me transmute my anxiety, doubt, and worries. No other space makes me feel like this. The ocean helps me heal my restless body. Bodies of water hold us like a relative ready to sooth us. There is a ceremony we are a part of when we swim.

There is a reason water is present in most creation stories. It is a life force that sustains us. Who knows what life would be like without water. I don't want to imagine it. Aside from talking about her family, Ms. Nyad spent her afternoon sharing her wisdom with us. She constantly asked if I was okay and made me feel included. She is an inspiration that makes me want to keep going. To keep swimming. To never give up. I am grateful I got to share the ceremony of swimming with her. She is the epitome of dedication. If I were to swim with her again I would ask her where she got her strength to keep going and if she is ever amazed by her own power.

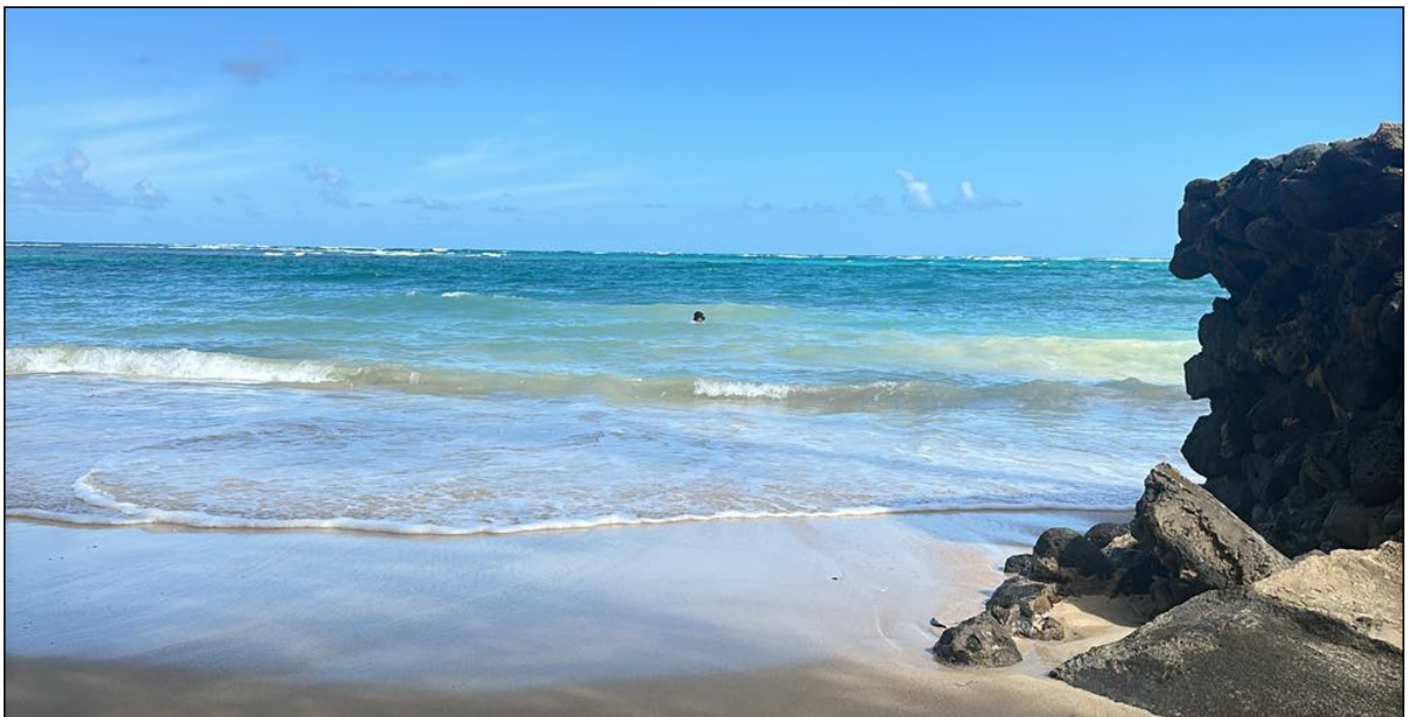
Water is a powerful force. It can heal just as easily as it can drown, and they say we are largely composed of water. If so, we are walking bodies of water with the same power to heal and drown. I must remind myself to calm my waters when I feel restless. Life can be rough but it is also so beautiful and I believe it is worth the struggle. I hope to try just as hard as Ms. Nyad and accomplish what I am here to achieve in this life. I hope Ms.

Nyad knows the impact she has had on my life and how grateful I am to have been able to meet such an amazing person.

The water is my safe space, and if we are truly walking bodies of water then maybe I can remember that when times get rough. To live here in my body I must remember that. I am holding on to her mantra: find a way. Water always finds a way.

★ *FUN FACT: After this English paper was turned in to my 6th grade English teacher, my mom sent a copy to Ms. Nyad and Ms. Nyad sent me the most wonderful video full of acknowledgements, saying how inspired she was by reading my essay and offered other encouraging words of wisdom.*

By **Triston**. (Photo: Sam Bhatia, swimming in ocean.)



Love & Friendship

Love Letters

I fell in love recently
She is thin and interesting and beautiful and
a great conversationalist.
I met her in November, and it was love at first sight.
I had a problem talking to girls before I met her.
I believe I was really interested in her as soon as I
realized I could tell her anything.
I could tell her what I am feeling
And what I want for dinner
And how the sun glistens on the lake near my home
And that I love my mother
And that I love to read poetry
And that I want to go to college
And that I love my brother, even though I want to
punch him sometimes.
I am so in love with her.
Her name is Letter Board, and we will be together
forever.

—**Tyler Mason**, New York. He writes:

“My name is Tyler Mason, and I am a 24-year-old, black, nonspeaker, who lives with my family in Carmel, New York. I learned to Spell to Communicate about 3 years ago at the age of 21, after spending most of my life with no way to communicate. I now work part-time for the International Association for Spelling as Communication (I-ASC) as a Nonspeaking Coordinator for the Spellers and Allies Advocacy Network. I am also a college student at Westchester Community College.



My Adorable Universe

That
Moon
Never
Goes
Away.
It
Is
Up
And
Down
And
Up.
It
Is
Like
My
Heart
When
I
Think
Of
You.

—**Massimo Bossi**, age 20, Ontario, Canada.
Massimo graduated with honours from high school. He has a strong passion for Mathematics, and he is taking Mathematics and Computer Programming courses at university level, while he decides which university/college to attend. He is passionate about civil rights. Massimo defines himself as a romantic traveler.



My Friend Jacob

My friend Jacob is a blonde
And I am a brunette
He likes to make his bed
And I haven't made mine yet

Michigan winning a football game
Is sure to make him smile
And as a Buckeye through and through
That's something I revile

Yes, Jacob and I are different
In lots of different ways
But what matters most to me
Are the ways we are the same

Jacob worships in a synagogue
And I worship in a church
But he and I both agree
We both have the same worth

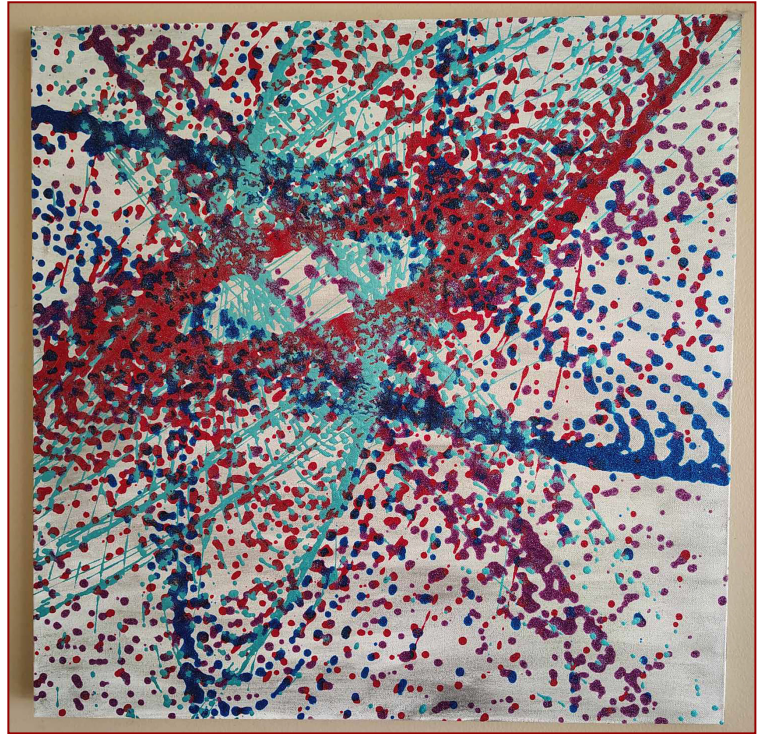
We both have hearts so full of love
And songs we want to sing
And we both think that it's okay
Not to agree on everything

We both have hopes and dreams
Of things we want to do
And we both try our best
To make them all come true

We both believe that taking care of others is the way
To help all of humanity see a brighter day
We both believe that love is a stronger force than hate
And that peace and understanding lead to a better fate

So if you ever have the chance
To meet someone unlike you
Open up your heart
And choose to love them too

—Caden Rainey, age 18, Ohio.



“Family Aura Colors” by Caden Rainey, 18, Ohio.

Caden Rainey is a nonspeaking autistic advocate, songwriter, and author from Wadsworth, Ohio. He is a regular presenter at Neurolyrical Cafe, SpellX, and Boards and Chords, and several of his songs were featured in Sofi Ghassaei's play *Love Letters*. Caden is a proud member of Tribe and of the Board of Directors of Beyond Speech Initiative, a non-profit organization dedicated to the empowerment of nonspeakers. Together with his friend Joel Nyland, Caden released the album *Sounds of Gratitude* and was the co-recipient of the 2023 Nicholas D'Amora Board Blazer Award. He also authored a chapter in the recent anthology, *Lights In the Darkness*. Caden is an avid fan of positivity and kindness and all things loving. He loves spending time with his friends and making them laugh with his puns.



Something Lost Was Found

Something lost was found
The day that I met you
Hearts' memories mean
I knew yours
Only waiting, lonely
For time to roll
And bring us together
Once more

Chorus

You're the chords to a melody
I've been singing my whole life
Not only a duet,
A symphony of love

And in your smile
a long-awaited embrace
my heart my soul
in your fluttering hands
hold me close
and let time roll along
we belong together
once more

By **Zac Duncan** and **Sofi Ghassaei**. 2022.

Sofi and Zac add: Every good tale starts with once upon a time. Once we were just bumbling along in our ordinary apraxic lives, and then BAM; our worlds collided with enough force to create stars. To hear the music, see Contributors' Links on p. 31.



Firsts Among Differents

The shadows of childhood linger
As adulthood zooms into view
Are those shadows or roots?
The deepening of interdependence
The firsts through struggles
Bucking the norms entrenched
As dust settles on this chapter
Agency cannot be acknowledged faster
The elixir of friendships
Sans the high fives and hugs
The travails of love
No stolen glances or kisses
The expedition of education
And paths barely traversed
Music and dance and art
Known bridges, unknown waters
The river of youth
Will flow strong even
As streams navigate new boulders
And canals continue to build
Looking forward to look back
Does not make nonlinear linear
The symphony of possibilities though
Makes the theater of adulthood sanguine.

By **Swarit Gopalan**, age 13, Florida.

See his portrait and bio on page 15.



“Rainbow” by Devon McIver, age 16, Vancouver, Canada.

Sensory Salvation *by Noah McSweeney*

January 21

My love for writing drew me through the open doors of the The Oak Leaf Newsroom at Santa Rosa Junior College. Honestly, I should have known that this experience would take a toll on my sensory system. The overwhelm I felt in the first class was crippling. Realizing I have no exit strategy, making it nearly impossible to stay present.

To tell you what sensory overload feels like, I need to ask you to think of your body as an entity fully disconnected from your mind. Your control panel is a mess of tangled wires, and the system is on the fritz.

My first day in the campus newsroom was an onslaught to my senses. I felt the emotions of everyone in the room. Each anxious thought has its own color. Blue gives hard edges to a person. Red is fear of the unknown. Some yellow streaks fly by my eyes rendering them useless. I see yellow when I feel crowded. I can't hear and see at the same time, a feature of my strange sensory system

I want to flee and then we go outside, thank God. My classmates line up in two rows doing two-minute meet and greets with each other. My instinct to run takes over and there I go. Running off impulsively is mortifying. I wonder what other students are thinking. My hand blocks my eyes, raising my stress level to 9 out of 10. So much talking has made me a mess. Why must we talk about ourselves? I'm afraid I'll have nothing in common with anyone. That would leave me in the dumps.

I am an autistic student who communicates by pointing to one letter at a time on a letterboard or keyboard. The pressure to "talk" in a compressed amount of time causes extreme anxiety.

January 23

My body buzzes like a frightened baby bee. Will I fail at in-person classes? I need a break.

Having my communication partner, Buck, is life-saving. He keeps me calm and happy. He hovers with reassuring looks and ideas like deep breaths and stretches. Whoa...I am here, I am smart, I can do this. Affirmations give me solace.

We autistics might have differences in all our senses, such as sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, body awareness and internal body sense (interoception), which tells if we are hungry or cold. Sometimes senses blend together creating confusion in perception —this synesthesia is how I experience the world.

Senses can be either over- or under-sensitive. My hearing is so acute I can hear whispers two flights of stairs away. My visual sense is harder to describe. Fighting to integrate the two is an ongoing chore.

Although I can see clearly, sometimes I can't discern a face. Nothing I see will look the same as neurotypical perceptions. When my visual field floods, I cover my face. Arms wrap tightly around my head to dampen the sensory insult. I must look strange to others but I need to do it. I envy those able to filter sensory input and still function. Unusual behavior makes me stand out.

My tastebuds are under-sensitive, leading to highly repetitive food choices and difficulty tasting spicy things.

Tito Mukhopadhyay, who has written numerous books about his lived experience with autism, describes his senses as a "fragmented world perceived through isolated sense organs." This fits my everyday experience, as my body and brain struggle to make sense of my environment. When my senses work together I am calm and can communicate effectively.

Able-bodied, neurotypical folks cannot understand how my confusing sensory experiences impact me.

Sensory Salvation ... *continued from the last page*

January 30

Multiple groups talking at once invade my sense of hearing like a knife slicing a carrot.

The group on the right is arguing about their story edits; my sense of hearing exits and I hear only jumbled sounds. Are they mad at each other? Here come the red streaks!

I must focus now.

Breathe, Noah!

I can hear again.

Another group looks at a projector screen. What they see is a mystery to me. I look out of the side of my eyes: peripheral vision is my superpower. Now I can see the screen.

Focus Noah!

These superpowers make me hyper-aware so I can know which situations and people create safety. My brain insists on danger assessment to navigate the world.

February 4

It was tough to remain focused in my last Oak Leaf class. I covered my eyes because I felt overwhelmed. Many thoughts raced through my head about what others in class think about me. I can sense their gazes when I cover my eyes with my arms. Maybe they're just curious or haven't been around a person with sensory challenges. Either way, it's out of my control. I'll just continue trying my best.

Talking was animated and loud. Too much noise! Talk of podcasts has me wondering how a non-speaker could carry this out. I feel hopeless.

February 6

The meeting with teaching assistant Mark Fernquest was good. He liked my opinion piece ideas. I prefer check-ins with one person over in-

class commotion any day. It's tough when people expect a "there-in-the-moment" interaction and I'm fighting to escape.

It is easier to let it pass when I don't pressure myself to stop feeling what I fear will consume me.

February 11

Less overwhelming today. So many people included me. They looked directly at me without judging. They see me as one of them. I can feel the energy shift. I'm so happy. They are getting used to me and my instantaneous utterances of saying "hi". No one responds, and I like that. They get that I can't help it.

It helps to have structure and less chaos in the newsroom. Listening to one person at a time helps my success in class.

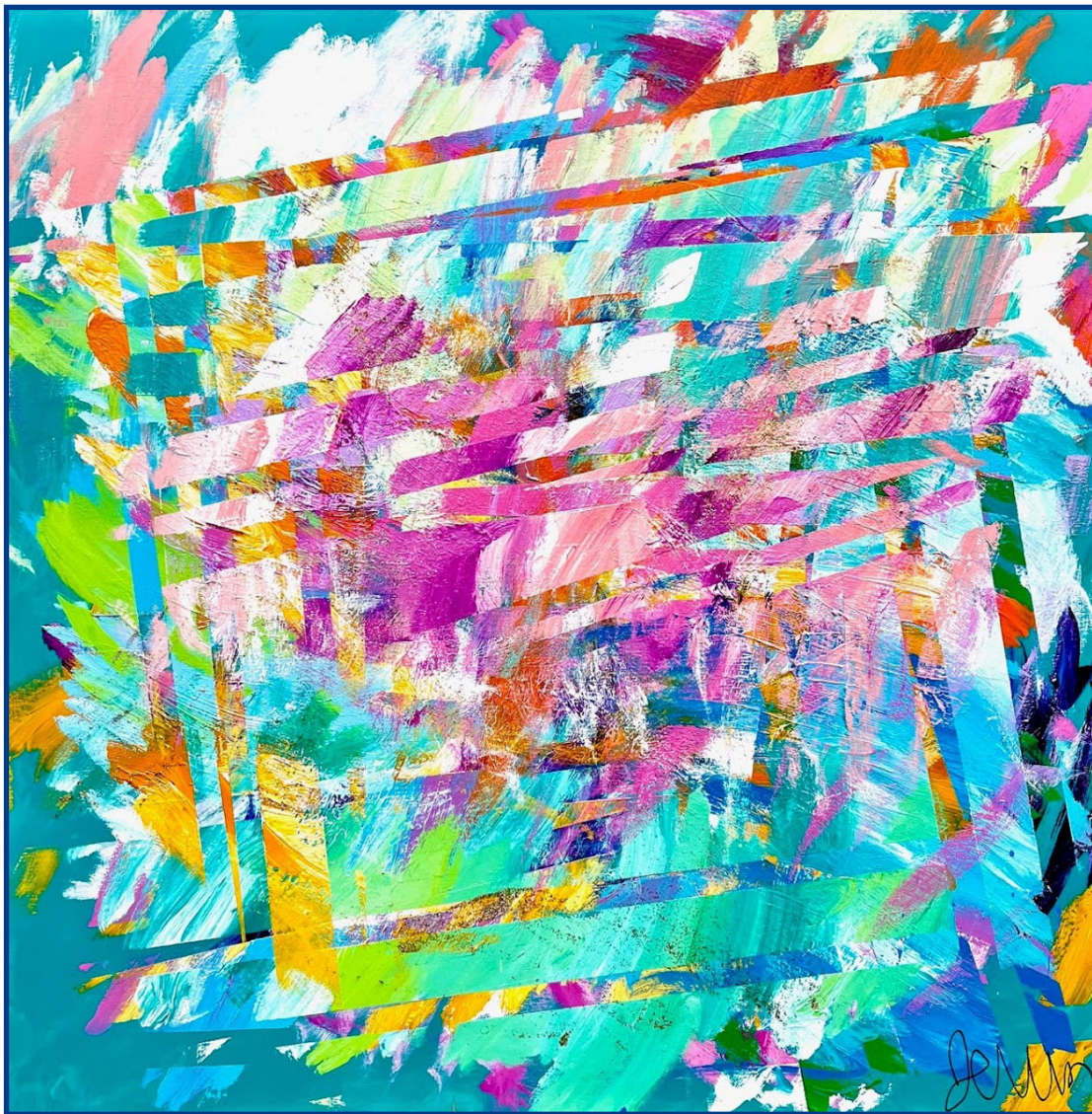
When fellow student Marty included me by asking me to contribute to his podcast, I felt total joy. Maybe my words will be valued.

I belong here. I can do this.

The color blue sings.

—**Noah McSweeney**, California. See his bio on p. 11. (Photo: Noah and Zac on Backyard Swings.)





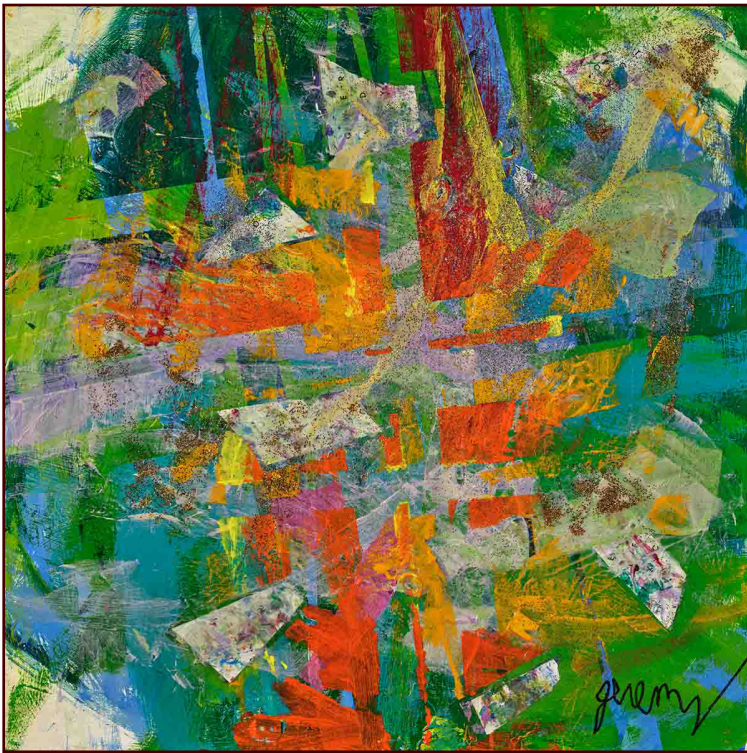
The Truly Wonderful Colors of the Teva Community by Jeremy Sicile-Kira. 2022. 60" x 60." Acrylic on canvas.

(In the piece below, Jeremy describes his use of colorful acrylics to represent the Teva Community, a nonprofit envisioning safe, supported living for nonspeaking autistic people on 35 acres of national forest near Prescott, Arizona.)

Greatly I had a dream that nicely a community was created that was defined by non-speakers and built by all who believe in them. Greatly there was purple for the leadership by the board and by non-speakers, and others who believed in the dream. Green is for the forest and the calm that we feel when we are understood. Beautiful red represents the love and health to be found in the Teva community. Beautiful yellow is for the happiness we all will feel, and orange is for the fun we will have. Indigo is for the knowledge we all bring together: nonspeakers, parents, professionals who get us, and the family we will create here together.

Truly the reason this community will work is because we are coming from a place of love and not fear. The color pink is present for the connections with the community and town to be created by the gifts we have to offer to Prescott, and how we can help them prosper. Greatly we all can do great things together. Truly greatly white is present for the hope that the Teva community will give to other non-speakers in the future. Gold and silver representing the power of Universal Love is clearly shown in this painting of the vision of the Teva community. <https://tevacommunity.org/>

—**Jeremy Sicile-Kira**, age 36, is a member of the *Spellers Advisory Council*. (Also see page 30.)



“Beautiful Colors of the Typers United”

By Jeremy Sicile-Kira, California.

Jeremy Sicile-Kira (also see his artwork on p. 29) writes: “Art has frankly given a meaning to my life. I am autistic and truly I lived in darkness until my mom taught me to communicate with a letterboard. In 2012, I told my mom about dreams I was having—dreams that I was painting the colors of people I had seen during the day. One night I had a different dream. I dreamt that I painted ten of my dreams in real life and had an art show. My mom encouraged me to make this dream come true. Now, I provide hope to others through my synesthesia-informed energetic paintings. In 2016, my first curated solo art show was covered by national and local media, resulting in a sold-out show and many private commissions.

Jeremy’s recent accomplishments include: the PBS National Premiere of the Short Documentary, “The Beautiful Colors of Jeremy Sicile-Kira” by Aaron Lemle; teaching a virtual art class via the Guggenheim Museum; receiving an Achievement Award from the National Artists with Disabilities Center (NADC). For information on Jeremy or how to commission a painting, see Contributors’ Links on p. 31.

Red Lake

In the woods the trees whisper
sweet encouragements to me.
I respond sharing my dreams,
leaving fear and doubt
in the rear view
as I drive out to my sanctuary.
Campfire greets me.
Welcomes me home.
Here I am free.
Authentically me.

—**Luke Verhoeff** (from British Columbia) is a 20-year-old autistic man who found his voice at 19 through a communication method of spelling one-letter-at-a-time on a letterboard. Luke is a self-proclaimed max-chill hippie who wants to be an author one day. He is also passionate about advocating for other autistic non/minimal/unreliable speakers by sharing his story, struggles, writings and accomplishments. The spelling community’s mantra is “Know better. Do better.” Luke shares the Dalai Lama’s request: **Be The Change**.



CONTRIBUTORS' LINKS

Anantha Krishnamurthy [Anantha's Musings](#), [Pointed Poetry](#)
Caden Rainey [Sounds of Gratitude](#), [Lights In the Darkness](#)
Craig Misunis [Pointed Poetry](#)
Devon McIver [Pointed Poetry](#)
Emma Cladis [Hope Never Ending](#)
Eric Herzog [Pointed Poetry](#)
Ishaan Holloway [Pointed Poetry](#), [CBC news](#)
Jeremy Sicile-Kira [Jeremy's Vision](#), [Instagram](#)
Lucien Gonzalez [KALW Crosscurrents](#)
Luke Verheoff [This Is Luke](#), [Pointed Poetry](#)
Massimo Bossi [Facebook- Massimo Bossi](#)
Maya Jasmin Kaler [Pointed Poetry](#)
Nikhil H [Pointed Poetry](#)
Noah McSweeny [Neuroclastic](#), [The Oakleaf News](#)
Sid Ghosh [Give a Book](#) , [Proceedings of the Full Moon Rotary Club](#), [Instagram-downlikesid](#)
Sofia Ghassaei [YouTube Sofi Ghassaei](#), [Instagram Linktree](#)
Swarit Gopalan [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and website [Swarit Gopalan](#)
Trevor Mason [The Prison of My Mind](#)
Tyler Mason [Spellbound: The Voices of the Silent](#)
Zac Duncan [Badass Bear Card Company](#), [Something Lost Was Found](#)

Lauren Marshall <http://www.laurenmarshall.com/TheaterOfPossibility.htm>, See TOP's acclaimed 2023 production of Sofia Ghassaei's [Love Letters - A True-ly Short Epistolary Romance](#), a musical by and about autistic nonspeakers, nominated for best new play or musical in Seattle's BroadwayWorld. With lyrics by Sofi and other nonspeakers (including Caden Rainey, Tyler Mason and Zac Duncan featured in this issue).

FAVORITE RESOURCES ABOUT APRAXIA AND NONSPEAKERS

International Association for Spelling as Communication (I-ASC) is an association composed of individuals from the nonspeaking and neurodiverse communities, their families, trained practitioners and informed allies. <https://i-asc.org>

Soma®RPM is a comprehensive teaching approach tailored to each student's motor readiness and sensory profile. It fosters development in communication, handwriting, drawing, speech, hobbies, and life skills, offering a distinctive method to address the diverse challenges families face daily. <https://www.halo-soma.org/>

Wretches and Jabberers- two men with autism embark on a global quest to change attitudes about disability and intelligence. <https://www.wretchesandjabberers.org>

The **SPELLERS** documentary challenges conventional wisdom regarding a group relegated to society's margins: nonspeakers with autism, who most "experts" believe are cognitively disabled. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8h1rcLYznK0>

United for Communication Choice United in support of the human, civil, and legal rights of people with disabilities to choose their most effective methods of communication. <https://unitedforcommunicationchoice.org>

NeuroClastic- The Autism Spectrum According to Autistics. Content about autism by autistic and neurodivergent people. A resource for autistic adults, parents of autistic children, educators, and physicians. <https://neuroclastic.com>

- <https://neuroclastic.com/category/culture-identity/nonspeaker/>
- <https://neuroclastic.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Disinhibition-Part-1.pdf>
- <https://neuroclastic.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Disinhibition-Part-2.pdf>
- <https://neuroclastic.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Disinhibition-Part-3.pdf>

This study is the first to explore **autistic inertia**, a widespread and often debilitating difficulty acting on intentions. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.631596/full>

Jaswal Lab, at University of Virginia <http://www.jaswallab.org/> Investigating communication and social interaction in autism.

Creative outlets for nonspeakers hosted by I-ASC and Unrestricted Interest include the monthly open mic Neurolyrical Cafe <https://i-asc.org/events/neurolyrical-cafe/>, SpellX variety show <https://i-asc.org/events/spellx/>, and Boards and Chords music festival <https://i-asc.org/events/boards-and-chords/>. More works by these contributors and other spellers can be viewed at these links.