

Transcript of Disability Justice: A Reading

Jim Hicks: Hello, everybody, I'm Jim Hicks, the executive editor of the *Massachusetts Review*. My pronouns are he/his, and the editorial we. Welcome to our reading from the winter 2022 issue of the *Massachusetts Review* Disability Justice issue. We're really thrilled at how that issue turned out with the range and experience of the writers and artists that guest editors Khairani Barokla and Cyrée Jarelle Johnson selected for our publication.

It's a shame that the guest editors couldn't make it tonight. Okka is in London, where it's really late, and Cyrée Jarrelle was unable to make this work with his busy schedule. But we're excited to present on their behalf the poets and writers who are here tonight

As Okka and Cyrée Jarelle make clear in their introduction, writers like Audre Lorde were instrumental in the 1980s in creating work that pushed back against a paucity of first person, accounts of living with, in her case, cancer, or chronic illness or disability, records of voices and lives not mediated by doctors or scientists. Lorde's *The Cancer Journals* was, as the guest editors point out, followed by books from other poets who critically considered illness, such as Essex Hemphill's *Ceremonies*, Constance Merritt's *Protocol for Touch* and OwnVoices work like Keah Brown's *The Pretty One*, Kay Ulanday Barrett's *When the Chant Comes*, and Alice Wong's *Year of the Tiger* that would crystallize the arrival of a more defiant brand of sick and disabled literature.

The foundation these books provide for intersectional disability literature has allowed the *Massachusetts Review* to seek and publish work that, as the guest editors put it, pushes back against dominant depictions of disabled people as helpless, minor, or merely as patients and nothing more.

It is in this spirit that we present our readers tonight, writers whose work could be found in this issue. Theirs this poetry, prose, and art that reclaims the narrative of illness and disability from medical experts and scientists and centers the wisdom and expertise of those living painful lives, sick lives, disabled lives, neurodivergent lives, and insists that such lives are worth living, are beautiful, and are deserving of documentation.

So our readers tonight are Bhavna Mehta, Zefyr Lisowski, Claude Olson and Saleem Hue Penny. They present just a single cross section of the D/deaf and disabled writers we published, whose work, we believe, forms a hope for disability justice in the world., and shows the depth and breadth of literate and artistic work from our communities.

And before I begin, I want to note first that Closed Captioning will be edited and corrected before we post the recording online. We apologize for the mistakes that the technology makes tonight and second, the published pieces are available for download at [our website](#), and [links will provide in the chat](#).

Our first reader tonight is Bhavna Mehta, who goes by she/her pronouns, and as a visual artist working with paper and thread. She reads in English and her mother tongue, Gujarati, and writes to connect her experiences with a wide variety of ideas. She lives in San Diego with her husband, George.

Bhavna Mehta: Thank you. I'm going to read from my essay called "You are always entering your future." I will read the first three sections. The essay is much longer than that, but given the time, I will read the first three sections.

[You are always entering your future.](#) A small crushed garden snake lay belly up on the warm road. A baby, maybe. I was cruising downhill in my manual wheelchair on a gently winding road in upstate New York, when I encountered it. My very first road kill.

I passed it, then pushed back up a few yards to investigate. Bending down from my waist ribcage in my lap, my arms stretched out my ears tuned to the cars coming behind me. I dismissed the "No, no, no, don't touch it" to "Yes. let's see what happened here."

The squashed snake was dry, but intact. As I peeled it off the road, I could see the entire spine through the bluish, translucent skin flattened and spread laterally. The snake flaked like big bits of mica. Two brown ridges ran along the length of the body. A few minutes later I was taking the snake carcass to my Residency studio, where I had been pulling paper and fusing embroidery on freshly made sheets, then drying them on depression

Indoors, long parallel marks of my wheelchair tires tracking water on the studio floor—paper making is a very wet process—mapped my movement. Outside the studio, the wet forest had grown around and into an old cement factory; its stone walls rose from a jumble of ferns and tall wild flowers. For close to a week, flat thread snakes had emerged and started to twist and crawl around in my embroidery hoop. A topographical drawing of two feet in one image was surrounded by four blue snakes. Were they moving towards the feet or away? While the feet seem anchored to the land, the snakes were active, they were curious. Where a thread started or ended, I had pulled the needle out and let the thin cotton tails flow into and out of the stitching.

My first memory of snakes come from images. A moon calendar depicting Shiva, a serpent coiled around his neck, and another one in his voluminous hair, hung in our kitchen, marked with holidays, festivals, and birthdays. Later we learned that the serpent itself was a king with a brilliant gem on his head. When Shiva uncoiled his hair, a snake slid out along with a mighty sacred river flowing over the land far and wide, creating fertile fields and unprecedented prosperity. The serpent King also protected the Buddha, deep in penance under a majestic peepul tree, his body open to the elements, his mind pierced with light.

In other images a canopy of several hoods of cobra's appeared. They sheltered gods and goddesses and graced temple arches while keeping their long bodies under supreme control. Kali, the destroyer of evil forces, was never displayed in our home. When, as an adult, I saw an

image of her standing on Shiva's torso, her own neck garlanded with the heads of demons, I wondered if Shiva's serpent would now be free to become her guardian and companion.

Our adobe home in Ahmednagar was located next to an old circular fort, the rampart of which was black hewn stone, a moat around it was always full of vegetation and unseen animal presence. While parrots, mongooses, mosquitoes, and dragonflies were abundant in the fort, snakes and toads flourished in the dark waters around it. Children were constantly warned to stay away from the moat, and its wild and teeming life, and even now, decades and continents away. When I think of someone in my old neighborhood running to their death in despair, the moat is the first place my mind presents.

I still have no idea how deep it was, but in my mind, one could slip, fall, or jump into it and never be found. Occasionally, a dark rat snake, or a brown viper would be found, curled in a damp space in a home, a whirl of panic would blow through the rooms, the snake man would be called to come and capture it, take it away in a small bag. Don't put it back in the moat, he would be told, before he exacted his fee. I don't believe I ever saw the snakes found in our home. I only heard about them, nestled in the cool corner of a bathroom, behind a bucket, or under the metal bed frames where odds and ends was stored in suitcases. The stories were full of awe in danger, the pull of dread so exciting that everyone who heard the tale but did not see the snake felt cheated

During the early 1970s, when polio was endemic in India, the country in its modern avatar had barely been formed; not even 30 years had gone by since the British ended the brutal colonial regime, leaving the region torn into. I was 7 years old and vaccinated, but was suddenly sick and weak with fever, then permanently paralyzed. The virus entered my spinal cord and demolished huge chunks of it overnight. I lost function in my legs and hips, my weakened torso muscles caused severe scoliosis, my pelvis would forever remain twisted and crooked. I was carried from home to emergency room to hospital to bathroom to examination room to X-ray, to communal, award, to operating room, to waiting room to physical therapy to brace fabrication and fitting clinic to rehab to taxis to back home. No iron lungs and not enough wheelchairs were available at the Children's Orthopedic Hospital in Mumbai, the premier hospital in one of the largest metropolitan cities where children with polio were being treated from all over the country. Children were simply carried everywhere by parents and ward-boys around the hospital for observations and appointments. Ward-boy: a colonial remnant.

Every morning I would wait in our rental apartment for Amichaud to arrive and carry me to the hospital. He was tall and lithe, warm and funny, strong and gentle, a nurse's helper and aide. My mother paid him to deliver me to the hospital so she could finish cooking and cleaning for the day, while I practiced rolling around on the floor with the other children, then strapped my braces on and stood in front of a set of parallel mirrors, relearning the ballet of walking and climbing a small step, then 2 steps. In khaki shorts and starched white shirt, Amichaud would stroll to our door, pick me up from the floor with one swoop, and we'd be off the 10 minutes it took him to go downstairs, enter a busy sidewalk, and then cross a large intersection—where I saw my first traffic lights—loom in my memory. All day long, Amichaud and others like him

carried children from one part of the hospital to another, or pushed a rolling stretcher with a child or a teenager in a cast around the wards.

While I was almost always with an adult, many parents were not equipped to leave work, and other obligations to accompany their children through the maze of treatments. In these cases a conscientious worker was indispensable to a child's care. They were the backbone of the institution.

After several months of Rehab my mother, and I took the train from Mumbai, back home to Ahmednagar, where I began the process of re-entering school and society. My extended family hadn't seen me through my transformation and there I was, either waiting to be carried, or walking with crutches, falling and waiting to be lifted back up, or dragging my ass across the floor. The story of my survival is almost entirely dependent on how quickly my family rallied around me. My parents, sister, aunts, uncles, cousins, neighbors had no prior experience with disability, but they stayed with the confusion and daily anxiety, they helped me while helping each other.

I must have been a sight as I moved from room to room, my arms behind me, palms flat on the tile, feet flopped to the sides, going some place in reverse. I learned to haul myself from floor to bed in a single motion, my active upper body and the limp lower one delineated in a single arc. I would slide from my room to the kitchen for the afternoon snack as the family walked around me, tall and perpendicular. Then someone would sit cross-legged on the floor, and we would eat from the same plate. I had seen kids in the hospital master the sideways slide, lifting and levitating, then moving. But I never managed it To clean the floor in the mornings I constantly pulled my knees close to my hips in a concertina motion, making room for the broom to sweep through. I was always dirty, sometimes wet, sometimes muddy. At some point I started wearing long pants, and I haven't stopped Four years later during a family trip to England, my uncle bought me my first wheelchair.

My wheelchair got me off the ground and helped me move with ease around the house and in the neighborhood, but I never used it to go to school, college, then university. There were steps everywhere, and I walked and climbed, assisted by braces, a frame built out of flat iron rods and leather straps, and several buckles, wrapped around my legs and hips. On coming home from school, I removed my braces and transferred to my wheelchair, then pushed to a neighbor's home for an evening stroll. She was my closest friend, and we could be together on the road, stopping and waiting for a truck to pass, talking about our day. I did not use my wheelchair to go to the bazaar to buy clothes, books, stationery, snacks, a cake for a birthday. In my early twenties I immigrated to America, and only now—with the distance of more than 30 years—do I see that in those formative years I did not associate my wheelchair with access or travel. Thank you.

Jim Hicks: Thank you. That was lovely. I think we'll switch from one interpreter to the other, give this guy a break. Justin's doing a wonderful job and I also wanted to apologize for not giving a visual description of myself: I am an old white guy with white hair, what's left of it, and I

think a tendency to turn red it every time I'm on Zoom, which is kind of embarrassing, but maybe comical.

Our next reader is Zefyr. She/her, and Zefyr is a poetry coeditor at [Apogee Journal](#), the author of the Lizzy Borden queer murder chapbook, [Blood Box](#), with Black Lawrence press, and winner of the 2022 Noemi Book prize for her full length collection *Girl Work*, forthcoming in 2024. Her poems and essays who appeared in *Catapult*, *The Offing*, and elsewhere. She's received support from Blue Mountain Center, Tin House summer writers' workshop and more. She grew up in the Great Dismal Swamp, North Carolina, and lives at [zeflisowski.com](#).

Zefyr Lisowski: Hey, everyone! Can you all hear me? All right. I can talk a little bit softly. I assume that's a Yes, I'm so excited to be here. I'm a white transfem with blonde chin-length, hair in kind of like shaggy bob, I would say. I'm wearing glasses, a red lip I'm in a kind of dimly lit room with golden and blue wallpaper behind me. So maybe you can't see the fact that I'm wearing lipstick. Maybe it just looks like me. I'm going to read a couple of poems.

The last one is kind of intense, so a content-warning beforehand. I hope you all are well. This one's new.

Girl Work

Growing up I hungered for the taste
of sameness so I stayed hungry
I ran miles each day Petulant, I demanded gifts
but could not even love myself
Food turned to bark in my mouth
My dreams were thorned with ghosts
I sprouted hair & shaved off
hours in the bathroom willing my ribcage to shrink
I called this *care* but who hasn't
ever made a horrible mistake in naming
I called this *beauty* but who hasn't felt fear
instead of awe at something uncrushable

When I was younger I was a wolf

I trusted the man because he was pink

He was practiced in being pink

& I thought could teach me the same thing

(I meant to say I was a girl but am trying

to seem more menacing than I am)

He tied me to his lips He held my wrists & told me it was love

The man was cruel & that was the lesson too

Then I was forest-furred hungry & raw

now I love only the sea

from [Ghostdaughter](#)

The process of becoming sick may be familiar to you, or it may not. First, I had unexpected pain. This is not to be confused with previous unexpected pains. Actually, the unexpected pains had continued back for as long as I can remember.

This is how it happened: I was dating an Aries at the time. Her body was covered in vast mappings of tattoos, and I'd trace my tongue across them. I'd bury my nose in the musky center of her scent. My father had died a summer ago.

Once, on my way back from her house, I felt sharpness in my wrist. I thought it was an issue with my bike. I thought my handlebars were improperly adjusted.

I felt this as I biked through the deep park between her place in mine. This was what I did to calm myself down in periods of more profound agitation, when my grief suddenly built itself up. I would get on my bike and bike through the park. I would look at the moon.

This was the summer I lost all my work. It tumbled out of my canvas bag that I toted my jobs around in and suddenly I had no money. I thought of our bodies twining together like branches in assembly.

Overwhelmed with time, I took a day off to rest, then extended it to a week. Then a month. The Aries moved back to Massachusetts at the end of the summer, and we would text our little jokes back and forth.

My body, it takes the things that are given to it.

In the park, I dreamt of a phantom self, moving through walls without pause or pain. I dreamt of a me with all the freeness that I had become accustomed to. I spent all night there, but it still entered my dreams as well.

This is how it happened: first, my wrists felt ill. Then, my legs. Then, everything.

This last poem discusses suicidal ideation a little bit. If that's something that is overly triggering to you, feel free to leave the zoom room or feel free to step away from your computer for a little bit, especially now in a period of unprecedented, but unfortunately not unexpected genocidal policies from those in power.

I think every disabled life that stays living is a revolution. And regardless of what your own relationship to your life is, I'm grateful you're here. And this poem is kind of about that.

It's called Charybdis.

It began suddenly.

A balmy day in November. A shadowy tear on my mother's cheek.

I'm sorry, she said, it's happening again.

Her shoulders' shake against the blast of the Subaru's AC.

I was a child when I started to notice it: her daughter. The gradual training of my hand onto the place above her back.

If I were to do it, it would be in the ocean.

It would be warm, the sun unyielding.

A bouquet of bone-bleach coral, a handful of pills. I would be at ease.

When I first noticed, it wasn't even the ocean at all, but a seasonal creep.

I trained myself quickly.

Have you been involved in criminal activities? they asked as I filed for my passport the first time, and rejected me thrice for my answer.

I was nineteen when the riot cops shoved us to the ground at the BP protest, and everyone I knew from that day is disabled whether they say it or not.

At first, when my friend killed himself in the eleventh grade, he said he was in too much physical pain to live. I thought that was a good reason to do it.

But, as the sphinx said before she ate all those people, you have to draw the line somewhere.

When counting the years, it's not a question of *when*, but *how soon*.

Picture me as a child: passing out in the doctor's office, the middle of the night, a cramped amusement park, the bathroom, the bathroom, the bathroom, once at the moment of penetration, in strobe-lit lines, wherever it became too hard to breathe.

(My foster brother worked a shrimp boat in Biloxi but stopped after Katrina shoved him underwater and it became too hard to breathe. He's a Tampa gig worker now, fixing amplifiers in the AC as his state gets hotter.)

The biggest rush in a protest is the horizon that opens up: the sudden surf drawing away into the streets.

The biggest disappointment is the realization that the tide just comes back again.

After my sister died, my mother said she wanted to obliterate her loss in the sea.

Two years later, I was born.

In other words: if my mother did it, the water would be warm, and there would be no me.

For the past twenty-seven years, I've pictured the future my sister never saw: a hotter planet, a smaller beach.

I mainly keep living out of spite.

After the state shoved us to the ground, I told myself the repression meant we were doing something worthwhile. That doesn't mean the repression didn't work.

Now, when counting years, it's not a question of *when*, but *how soon*.

At nineteen, I masked up and sharpied the lawyer's guild # onto my sweat-slick stomach before heading into the streets.

And then, as an afterthought, in neat bubble letters below it:

KILL THE SELF THAT WANTS TO KILL YOURSELF.

As a child, I wondered why the ancient Greek navigators who knew about all those sphinxes and whirlwinds kept piloting to their deaths. But maybe that's it:

The joy of finding the least resistance for a way out. How if it happens to you, you don't have to do it yourself.

On the island, I'd dig into the dirt. Because we were below sea level, mud rose out until I was wet with slop.

My sister did the same thing, but pulled out scorpions on sticks, holding them up to crowds of children nearby.

There's nothing to be afraid of, she cooed. She was nineteen when the car crushed her to death.

An entire ecosystem echoes in the November heat until nothing is left.

Maybe the trees will do a better job of governing this planet, a friend says.

Our little boat circling downward, hefted open by the chop of the surf.

It is 1992 and my sister is not afraid. It is 2022 and I am not afraid.

To be disabled is to know your body has already been marked by its refusal to go along with the expected order of things.

When the lungs fill with water, the body rejects it at first. One scorpion, then the next, wriggling on the branch and dancing up my sister's arms.

Even if the repression worked, we're still left anyway. Bodies twined like branches in assembly.

A mouth opens first in protest, then hunger—then light.

We're here and that's resistance, too.

Living, at last, until we don't.

Thank you.

Jim Hicks: Thanks, Zefyr, and apologies to everyone for the little technical glitches here and there. I guess that's what happens when you get editors trying to be techies to alter the expected order of things. I guess that's what we're trying to change. So our next reader is Claude Olson, She, they. Claude is a writer. activist. artist, an educator from Rochester, New York. Her work is informed by her experience living with achondroplasia, a form of dwarfism, and by her queer identity. She graduated from Smith College in 2022. At Smith she published the story, "A Guide to Swedish Death Cleaning," in the campus literary magazine, *Emulate*. and authored the zine *Organizing is for Everyone: A Guide for the Emerging Activist*. She currently lives in Washington, DC., and works for the PEN Faulkner Foundation as a member of the Education Programs team.

Claude Olson (she/they): Thank you so much.

Jim Hicks: Just a sec. I'll get you on the screen and get myself off. There you go. Thanks.

Claude Olson (she/they): perfect. Cool. Hello, everyone. I'm Claude, I guess. Visual description. I'm: a young white woman shoulder length hair, bangs, wearing a cream-colored sweater. And I'm very excited about this. So this piece does contain some explicit language, so just warning to any young children, that maybe in the audience. I'm also reclaiming an ableist slur. So just a warning about that.

Yeah, I'm going to get started. My piece is titled [13 Considerations of the Holy Bug](#).

One. I am often mistaken for a tiny, biting insect. No one cares to know my taxonomic name. The term midge will suffice. Any little 2-winged fly can be image. There are Highland midges and phantom midges, midges of affectionate nicknames like punkies and noseums. There are midges that spread bluetongue disease, midges that pollinate cocoa trees. Midges live in the mountains and mangrove swamps, among marsh marigolds and monkey flowers and spider lilies, on the margins standing fresh waters. A midge can be found just about anywhere aside from barren deserts and the frozen tundra.

And yet people are often surprised when they see me. Sometimes I am met with looks of fear, wide eyes, and a muttered *Sorry* before I've had a chance to get in the way. Other times. Astonishment. Children who ask how I can be so small, mothers who turn them away from my line of sight. Men who regard me as a rare and mythical creature.

2. All I wanted was a pack of sour gummy worms. All anyone wants when they go to a CVS is to leave as soon as possible. But I happen to look up at the man beside me in the candy aisle. His eyes were locked on me. It was disturbing how little fear I saw on them.

"I've ever seen a midget in real life before." I blinked "Only in Porno." My body might as well have been on the shelf, sandwiched between the bright yellow packets of Peanut M&Ms and the sacks of king-size KitKats. A fly amongst the sour worms. An animal just the same

3. The term midget returns 560 results on Pornhub. There is Midget Mouth and Midget Granny, Midget Tiny Texie and Midget Girl Mary Jane. Midget Fucks Her Pussy on Webcam, Midget Gets destroyed by a big black clock. A midget can be found doing just about anything.

Any little person can be a midget. It's not a medical term, but a convenient, albeit derogatory, catch all for any person of unusually short stature. Unusual as in a derivation from what is normal. Unusual as in a spectacular curiosity. Horny midget having a good fucking time clocking in at 5.9 million views

4. Our bodies were built to be worshiped. Before the Internet we were the stars of circus tours, and before the invention of the wheel we were among the ranks of Egyptian gods. Little people were seen as celestial gifts, bodies bestowed by the heavens. We were royalty, depicted on the walls of tombs and buried alongside mollified kings. We were actual gods, too. Bes was the dwarf god of childbirth and the protector of households, a squat man with a face so grotesque it could drive away evil spirits. Still, there is beauty in the body that can ward off all the world's sorrow.

Bes was indeed a symbol of all that was good in the world. He could be found rendered in stone, tattooed on the thighs of dancers, painted in the hopes of healing the sick and barren. He was fertility and music and sexual pleasure, a deity with a cult of devotees. A body indisputably holy.

5. I knew I would ever have trouble finding a man to worship me. I could open up tinder at any time, gather a few dozen matches, and wait for my inbox to fill with requests for explicit pictures, propositions for one-night stands and open confessions that the thought of me was enough to bring on an orgasm or 2.

The trouble comes when they begin to feel ashamed that they ever saw a body like mine as a sexual spectacle. I can lure them with my siren song, but I cannot keep them in a state of perpetual hypnosis. They inevitably wake in a moment of realization: I've drawn them to the Traveling Freak Show

6. The first time I was with a man he interrupted me mid-act." Are you legally able to consent?" He had a twinge of fear in his eyes like he suddenly snapped out of the spell I put him under. The ruse could only last for so long. My body was that of a goddess's, and then it was that of an insentient fly. I hadn't felt small until that moment.

I finished the act as a retaliation, some desperate attempt to reclaim whatever agency I had left. If I was a rational person, I would have kicked him out. No, if I was truly rational, I would

have left him behind earlier that afternoon, when I entered his car, and he asked if it was safe for me to ride in the passenger seat. I would have gone home alone and wished I stayed. Instead, he left, and I wished I didn't feel so satisfied

7. Growing up. I never imagined that I could have sex with a man. I was 4 feet tall, rather chubby, and a Lesbian, as far as I knew. Having unrestricted Internet access from an early age turned me off the idea of attracting men entirely. Google searches, acting as a sort of reverse form of conversion therapy.

It does not take long to find a man burdened by his attraction to our holy bodies. "How can I stop having a midget fetish?" One Quora user asks. "You need to slip growth hormone into the food of the midget you love," another responds.

8. The word *fetish* derives from the Latin *facere* and *facticius*, literally "to make artificial." In order to have a fetish, in this sense, you must believe that an ordinary object holds supernatural power over you. My holiness, then, may be a delusion entirely.

There is no official name for this certain fetish, only close approximations. Anasteemaphilia, an arousal to a person of extreme stature. Microphilia, a fetish for unrealistically tiny people Formicophilia, the pleasure derived from insects crawling over one's body

9. If you want to call a midge by its taxonomic name, you can look for the name of its family. Chironomidae, derived from the ancient Greek word for "pantomimist".

Perhaps my attempt at being attractive in the secular sense, is nothing more than an act of playing pretend. The men I hooked up with may only remember me as a fulfilled item of bucket list. They might talk about our time together like it was an encounter with the cryptid, along the likes of Bigfoot or Mothman. It is entirely possible. I was no more than a fetish to them. If so, should I be ashamed?

10. It is not as if I could ever disentangle my conventional beauty from my physical deformities. I have a perfect button nose, virtually unblemished skin, and orthodontically corrected teeth, but none of that guarantees I will be seen as beautiful in my entirety. I will always have bowed legs, stunted arms, and uneven gait, and an unusually short stature. I will always be a spectacle. Maybe there is beauty in a body that can draw the attention of an audience.

11 in 2,009. Cheng Mingjing, an average size man, constructed a theme park in China to house and employ about 100 entertainers with dwarfism. He named it "Kingdom of Little People," envisioning it as a safe haven from the social and economic setbacks these performers faced.

While the organization Little People of America, among other human rights groups, condemned the park, its residents found within it confidence and community. They could spend their days dancing in elaborate costumes and singing on a stage designed to resemble a woodland garden. They could be spectacles on their own terms

12. I do not want to believe that there is something deeply wrong with those that admire our beauty. After all, our bodies have been worshipped for millennia. Our genetically mutated bones, are a sight to behold.

I'm. Reminded of Charles Sherwood Stratton, otherwise known as General Tom Thumb. At 3 feet and 4 inches tall, he was by far the most famous act of PT Barnum's traveling circus. Though his height was certainly an aspect of his appeal. Stratton was genuine showman, able to act, sing, dance, and perform comedy routines to such an outstanding degree that he was regarded as a professional entertainer beyond the ranks of the freak show circuit. He made a wildly successful career out of being an oddity.

13. The world still sees us as items in the Curio cabinet, so I choose to believe this means our beauty is truly otherworldly. I think we deserve to be showcased in that way. We may be unusual, but we are not common flies. We are oddities, possessing the type of beauty that is loud and thunderous, resonating like the footsteps of dancing gods.

Thank you very much.

Jim Hicks: Thank you, Claude. That's really wonderful. And now we'll remove that pin and we'll switch interpreters as well. Okay, almost got it. Well, as I said, one glitch after another. But we're working on it.

Our fourth and final reader is Saleem Hue Penny (He or him/Friend). Saleem is a Black, disabled, rural Hip Hop Blues poet, who punctuates his work with drum loops, Field Sounds, Gouache and Birch Bark. He's the Coordinator of Programs and Partnerships at *Zoeglossia*, an Assistant Poetry editor at *Bellevue Literary Review*, and a member of *Obsidian's* Inaugural "O Sessions Black Listening" 2022 cohort, which is doing wonderful things. I just listened to them a couple of days ago. And a proud Cave Canem fellow.

And I will get rid of myself again.

Saleem Hue Penny: I went ahead and pinned myself. Thanks so much, everyone. My name is Saleem Hue Penny, He/him and friend, by way of a visual description. Black man, mustache, kind of flower headband, glasses partially visible, right-sided cochlear implant. I saw that my little brother is on tonight, so I had to go out and get a gold chain from a Black-owned business. And a T-shirt that says "[Everything you love about America is because of black people](#)". Behind me are several Lego sets and a couple of plants.

So I have been listening and loving the space that everybody has been creating, and as much as Jim has been undercutting himself with a self-deprecating humor, the tone and the gentleness that was started is much appreciated, and not every reading needs to be a slam. So I've been trying to decide what to read, looking at clocks and changing times, and I think that I'm going to do something in a different order than I planned before.

My work that I'm going to share tonight has content warnings. Notes are: anti-Black violence, police brutality, Death of a child, references to peer bullying and references to violence against the disabled community. Whenever possible. I always will indicate which piece I'm talking about. But I wanted to get that general framework, as I said, to take care and give care to ourselves. So if that's not necessarily what you want to experience right now I totally understand, and we'll kick it some other time.

All right. I'm gonna toggle over to a document camera. As was already mentioned, the transcripts and all of the auto captions and stuff can be special.

This is a poem called **Sole Hearts**, and it begins with an epigraph. "The hopes and aspiration of our people are being smothered." That's from the Republican Party platform of 1,980, and the poem reads just a little bit. Yeah, thanks for your flexibility and grace.

The poem reads:

sweet black, beating soul back to God. Fact,-problem: young soles do feel: Don't get creased, no tears, pray for long stitches and some good strong glue.

The public child seems big, high, different. How sweet turns to thing part race, number, problem-fact. Black hearts make do just beating

strong. They are a group problem. Black Glue don't race, be sweet, Get your creased hands up to God

to stitch more Black years on you Fact: tears be of little use, pairs work

in time. Soles beating black into you different facts, same stitches.

Black hearts will race God again, pray

the soles last.

The next piece I'm going to share is one of the ones from the Massachusetts Review current issue, and I want to say, thanks to the editors for selecting it. I also want to thank one of my mentors, Gretchen Marquette, for encouraging me in this idea of welcoming the ghosts that are in the room, and the stories that you might not want to tell, where they keep presenting themselves, and I appreciate a journal that would roll with me and print a 5-page poem, because I know for a paper journal to do that. It takes a lot of resources and time. I just want to make sure that Tiree is still pinned. Okay, awesome.

All right. Let's get into this one. This one is titled. "[Then, again. all things \(\(being equal\)\)](#)" after Jasper "Ninn" Washington, (1937 to 2005), and Stacy "Tire man" Washington (1975 to 2021)

A quarter mile behind they see the popeye of the Cressida wagon's dusty tail light barreling down the road track Rods shot, power steering grunts now, maybe one quarter of a mile then she'll cut the wheel hard, clear the eroding covert pipe pull into the side yard grass that one parentally scorched diagonal patch

Let's move cuzzo, they back early from the store. Come on, push it y'all—turbo, boost time, big league chew Spit out like Mike, rookie tongues out, making whooshing sounds to go and faster still, like

Momma 'n' them gone whup us make us hold still like I don't wanna pick my own switch. Dire reminders signal muscle reserves fire we spin our pedals like egg beater like cotton gin like don't say nothing, better keep on stirring. You little boys weren't too tired of steal off to Mr. Joe's for candy?. No. so you better buck up quit looking at me with them puppy dog eyes. These beans ain't magic, and cain't shuck theyselves, and you ain't Jack...

So they Yes, ma'am'ed stayed on task for almost a minute and a half hours await summer sadness blossoms from the bottomlessness of their buckets.

competing with cicada screeching across the creek. Their gaze keeps drifting, something summoning them to go back down the road see if auntie's mailbox really did get baseball batted in last night. The family used to all be here, but again and again kin keep going down the road, pulled, tugged, yanked. Who knows?

The unspoken we cannot hold how last week those crackers chased Uncle Jasper straight into that hairpin bald wheels too old to grip too broke for anti-lock brakes. So he just went into the ditch. This the script, the adults voted to tell the kids. the string bean boys slide their buckets close, lean in, like you think the grown-ups lying? they smirked like. Of course

they think we dumb, or they think they slick? Your uncle was just driving too fast and Fish tailed He must have forgot to downshift and dropped straight down to third gear. That's all we know. Y'all saw the tire tracks. The kids argue about how many of his tires left the ground, and when his truck hit the tree they reckon he had done, been, got free because see Yeah-yeah, because he pushed hisself up off the steering wheel and stretched hisself out real flat like Pancake flat, and slit hisself out through the little window between the seats, fresh out the back flap jacked off the tailgate

and the buckshot ricocheted off his chassis, is hollering "may the clouds rain blood red upon you forever more." And yeah, maybe, like

you reckon he circled over the field by Mama's house? headed toward Cousin Frank n them's place? pausing right quick about the propane tank kitchen side of the church where big kids made mischief, and little sisters Judas'ed on them, maybe through his busted lip, holy grin "Well, Jesus, I can't say for sure, if I'll see you around" he bottle rocketed

fast and faster, still like grandmama'n'them gone whup'up on him if he come home late again. So he spun his fresh from the pawn shop halo, like petals like eggbeater like cotton gin, kicked hard and harder still like even up there somehow he still wind up fighting a jet stream. Something he can't see. We live life hoping the next will be better just a little less struggle than down here. Just grant us a little mercy hot sauce, lucky dice an extra white lily biscuit to sop up this red eye gravy granddaddy'n'them didn't want much just to age with diligence and grace. Be deacon, if not Pastor

Black and Church Lady Funeral hat Black and good suit Black and old shoes be brand new after a shoe Shine Black and never crack Black, and every shut eye ain't sleep Black, and never let them see you sweat Black and baby Black, and Daddy never came back Black and better talk white and keep that good job Black

and still never cracked Black Behold:

cardboard-backed regality quilting uninsulated plywood walls, Afros, jheri curls, lace front weaves Dreadlocks high and tight chisholmed Shirley cards

a rainbow of Lowcountry Black Folk: poised in Greenbax stamp picture frames, and but crack came back white and Black. Jesus Christ, auntie's first born son got his third strike—but Shh! Black, don't tell grandmamma'n'them, we saved you a plate, yellow pound cake wrapped in the chest freezer. Just stay safe.

A week later the triflin' manager got tipped off on the missing case. We ain't snitched so he stops stocking them. He knows what our cousin'n'them make, and it ain't enough for a genuine glass frame, now arthritic elders strain to staple humid-heavy polaroids right on the particle board walls, see family is primer paint,

functioning as foundation and filigree, seemingly stripped of everything, even then, Blackness blooms, wallet photos, little matte scrolls carefully rolled, tenderly, tucked into the space behind the light switch plates, still like

granddaddy's, one Award.

Berkeley County Water and Sanitation, worker of the year, out of sight but he trusted the angels of the 4 PM Sunlight knew they unwind in the laundry room and would wing away the dust like washing day, protect his name. Supervisors' Signatures Fade

Granddaddy'n'them didn't want much, Just some swansong days surrounded by sweet someone's that love your face even on I'm sorry, honey, the boll weevils, they beat us to it Days soft someone's to remove worn boots again, your hands too chafed, to bend silent someone's who rub your feet smooth with vaseline, avert their eyes as you whisper. Lord grant me the

strength to bless the rice and broth upon this ironed tablecloth, Grant us a miracle or 2 loaves and some fish.

O' that these 11 catacombic stomachs might, for this meal know, give us this day our daily bread, and behold! a pot with enough food to pass around once more

spoons clinking like egg beaters like cotton gin like, baby don't let them kids see you tired. I'll tuck them in the Sunbeam Bread Store had half-off, day-old honey buns, see you round the back

beneath their oak. He unfolds two chairs and waits, still like Don't, worry yourself 'bout nothing, knowing (Damn well) your eyes will be pulled back down the road

Someone in this family always getting caught up

down the road, heat lightning, cuts of featherish slice east to west then left to right Shadow reminds him that Jasper say he heard the Murray farm been having the strangest storms, bloated bull frogs engorged crawfish, parasitic maggots, slithering white snakeroot,

coiling, curling, cocked back still, like stinging nettle shoot blood red this clay. smell this earth? stank up to high heaven, but the Black boy peaches—

the sweetest they ever been, baby, Go 'head, Eat your honeybun. I will, I will, i—baby! what you lookin' at—that's, what—that's fire!

honey go inside, Wake up, Junior and Jasper's boy. he almost old enough. Hurry, now have them run, Meet me at the church, and the end of the road.

Saleem Hue Penny: Thanks. I had an audio piece, but I'm not sure how we're doing on time, so I don't know if there's a way. Generally you could give me like a thumbs up, or like a thumbs down, or like a maybe we all come back later and do a rapid row. I just want to be respectful of the 10 minute window. Go for it. Okay, All right. Thanks. I appreciate that.

Okay. So this piece, this final piece is an erasure. It's called "[Guide for Law Enforcement Officers When in Contact with People who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing.](#)" And so just so folks are aware, an erasure is when you take a piece of an original document and you redact parts of it. I want to thank my good friend and mentor Joe for great conversations around the power of Black redaction, but I wanted to make this accessible. And how can you make an erasure accessible? I've just really been thinking about it. So the way that I'm gonna do this is I have an audio track that's going to be playing.

You're going to visually be able to see the document with the reductions, the redactions, and every space that is blacked out. There is going to be a sound accompanying that. However, if you're not able to hear this evening for any reason, there is a [screen reader friendly version](#) of

this piece as well, and I'm going to drop that link down in the chat. So you're able to have your screen reader.

I think it's actually a pretty cool experience on the screen or your version, and I think it captures the similar feeling. But that's really important, I mean, as we talk about disability justice, that we don't leave anyone behind.

Okay. Oh, thanks, Eddie. All right. I'm gonna go ahead and pivot the camera. And Eddie, whenever you are ready to start that volume, I am ready to rock and roll. I'm going to mute myself, so we can hear the audio.

Us. Department of Justice. Civil Rights, Division, Disability Rights Section.
Guide for Law Enforcement officers when in contact with people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

As a law enforcement officer you can expect contact.

Americans with disabilities are hard. Become familiar with this. Interacting with such people.

How do you ensure you are ...

[Interruption]

I'm sorry I was trying to just make sure that I could pin my visual, so I'm sorry I didn't. I said I was with you, but I wasn't pinned, so I just wanna make sure I can pin my screen and so folks can be able to still see. Okay, currently, Are we seeing? Okay, right now? We're seeing. Okay, Eddie, we're seeing your screen. I thought we were able to do this a minute ago. Okay. I just wanna make sure that the—that my camera can be seen on the screen.

So let's see. Okay, here we go. So I'm just, yeah, that's perfect. Thank you so much. All right. Are you able to stay here and rewind? Are you able to start that again, Eddie, I really appreciate it. Thank you so much. Yeah, If you're able to start the audio, I think that we'll be, we'll be good to go. I appreciate everybody's patience is important that we get it accessible, though, for everyone. The other thing I can do is I can simply play it through my desktop speaker, and then see if the volume suffices. So that's another option. We could try it, if you're having a hard time. Yeah, that might be easier. All right, let's try this, and I appreciate your role in it.

Us. Department of Justice. Civil rights division. Disability Rights Section.
Guide for law Enforcement officers When in Contact with People who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing.

As a law enforcement office, you can expect contact.

Americans with Disabilities are hard. Become familiar with this.

Interacting with such people

How do you? Ensure you are

Speaking loudly

Or use a typewriter.

The law requires the person to communicate.

For example, an individual who lip reads,

Should ensure that the communication takes place in a well-lighted area.

Remember hearing persons understand you

Immediately.

You are communicating clearly who is deaf? Ask the

Person. Test his or her understanding.

In a simple encounter,

Gestures will normally be sufficient.

Interrogations and arrests will often be necessary.

If the legality of a conversation will be questioned

You should be careful

A nod of the head may be

The

Weapon

An officer responds. The husband the wife

Their children The wife The officer

A lack of comprehension and poor grammar.

In this situation,

DO you take a sign language interpreter?

No. stabilize the situation.

Make an arrest and call for an interpreter to be available later at the booking station.

Contact numbers for your local sign language interpreters:

Americans with Disabilities

Have responsibilities

To assist you in understanding the ADA

Beyond what is required

Or encouraged.

Cool thanks so much, everyone.

Jim Hicks: Thank you, Saleem. It's really wonderful. And just in case people didn't remember what's at stake now, they'll never forget it. I'm gonna open up the gallery view here and invite

our fantastic readers, artists to come back, and we'll talk a bit about the work. Feel free to send a question in the Q. A. Box.

But maybe I'll get us started by asking a really obvious but a question that's of interest, at least to me, and that's: I was wondering from all of you, what made you decide to send your work to the Massachusetts Review for this special issue? And you know, could you say a bit about that, and maybe a bit about the process for the work that got published in our issue. Suppose I should probably pick somebody to start right? Why don't we do the same? Or again.

Bhavna Mehta: Thank you, Jim. I'm so—I'm still thinking about Saleem's reading. So I'm still in those thoughts, I'm really drawn to the fact that the Review decided to make a special issue about Disability Justice. I think that is very rare in the literary world. After reading [Disability, Visibility](#) by Alice Wong, and seeing how the voices that are published there can come together to kind of make more noise, to say, to just have a variety of stories. I think. when I saw the call. That's what I was thinking about, and I really, I think that has happened quite wonderfully, and I love that the editors chose the work that they did.

And I think my own story, I feel—I think I felt really weird about writing this essay, and after I read the work in the Review, and seeing all the different ways bodies are—bodies are manifesting themselves on the page, I feel I feel like I belong. You know I, that weirdness belongs, and I appreciate being able to say that to you guys, thank you for the question.

Zefyr Lisowski: So I guess Zefyr here next Cyrée Jarelle Johnson, who is one of the editors, a good friend and a writer, who, I look up to immensely, solicited me alongside a couple of other folks for the issue. So that was how I became aware of it.

So from the start it was very much kind of a process of community of collective care and everything that that means, and that's been reading through the issue, which has been incredible. By the way, if one of like, if you don't have a copy—anyone in the audience—please run out and get one. It's one of the best single issues of a literary magazine I've had the privilege of reading, let alone being a part of. That was my main like Entry Point into it, was this solicitation. But I think I've been working for a while, writing about intersections of disability and grief, a conversation that I was like sort of starting on before the pandemic, but I think the past several years have exacerbated the necessity and volume of that conversation, and I can't think of a place that I would be happier to have my work be than in the company of everyone. It's helped big time.

Claude Olson: Yeah. So for me it really was just like a miracle and timing this whole thing, because basically right before I think the call went out, I was working on doing a creative nonfiction unit at Smith, that was being taught by Franny Choi at the time, who is the one of the poetry editors for the Mass Review. And so I was going to share it with my class, with mostly non-disabled classmates. and I was thinking that I wanted to highlight my experience, and I knew that if I was going to write something, and I wanted it to be good, I would have to really dig deep and really make it personal, and I knew that talking about my disability and

talking about all the biases and all the stigma that people put on it would be kind of the way in. And so I shared it with the class. I got some great feedback, and then I kept revising it, and I just wanted to work on it, and I wanted to make it even better.

And then I just happened to see the call, and I was like, this is gonna be perfect. I know it's my passion to write about disability, and that's what this whole issue would be highlighting it. I didn't think I'd be in the issue, but I was like. Well, I might as well submit and try. And so now, yeah, it's just a massive honor to be here and to be among all these great writers in this really awesome compiled magazine that I agree. It's like, I don't know, one of the best issues of literary magazine I've had the privilege of having, not that I'm biased or anything

Jim Hicks: right.

Saleem Hue Penny: I'd like to answer a question that just came up in the in the chat from Xavier. My answer to the question is that I'm compelled by the beautiful and complex geographies present in all of your work, this place, landscapes, impact your writing practice, and does it show up in your work. It's actually when you kind of tie an answer with that into the why I submitted? And it's actually kind of ridiculous. I don't think I knew that it was a disability justice issue when I submitted. I was just—I love the Massachusetts Review, and it's one of the few that I'm like, okay, I can sit here and read cover to cover, and there's not any sort of like, okay, I see why they put this one in here, you know it's just like genuine literature.

And so then, you know, seeing the, just reading that back cover of names, it's just like, Wow! How is it—It's the honor, even within that. But the I think about geography is within everybody's reading tonight like geographies. The body geographies of place, and really like navigating how disabled bodies, whether disabled by society or elsewhere, have to navigate space in very particular way. It's like it's such a mindful process, like the 10 steps just to go from like lying in bed to like fill in the blank. You know what I mean, and so I've just been thinking a lot about it also like, how do we present work that's about our identities and not exhaust ourselves? You know how do we still take care of ourselves, and kind of not let our experience, you know, be, performative. Be kind of reduced to simply, you know, that poet who always writes about that disability. Right? So just something I've been thinking about.

Jim Hicks: Hmm. That's great. We probably should wrap up pretty quick. But we got a great question in the in the Q&A box so I'll I'll ask it of everybody so they could answer. And you know, maybe nothing immediately comes to mind. But here's the question. What was an early experience where you learned that language had power?

Saleem Hue Penny: I'll just answer my really briefly, because it made me so happy that it was my brother who typed that question. I still remember the moment we were at a theater camp—I think it was eighth grade. We're on the break from the theater camp. We're at Burger King. It was me and you and these 2 girls chilling at a booth, as you do at Burger King, and you started—my brother, I'm talking to you—started riffing, and I started saying something, and then, like they both laugh. And it was this moment where I was like. Wait! They're not laughing

at me like they're laughing with me. I'm used to people laughing at me. I'm used to being teased. I'm used to knowing the feeling of being on the receiving end of that joke. And that was so amazing. You know. I think 13—by that moment it could just be like Wow! Like stories and language, and all this combined can move a person in a joyful way.

Jim Hicks: Anybody else want to jump in?

Claude Olson: I can share. I have more of a general answer to this question than like a specific moment. But I have been thinking about this idea a lot of like language and power, especially because a lot of my piece focuses on like a specific slur, and how for a lot of my life, I felt that just one particular word, I think had a lot of power over me. Someone could just say it. And then, all of a sudden, you know, I could just not really be there anymore. And I kind of dissociate and like, feel like this object like I was kind of writing about in my piece.

So it was really powerful experience right this, and to really fully reclaim a lot of this language and replay my own story. I think I'm always going to in some way. The language had power since I was a little kid. I'd love to, you know, read and write, and I kind of implicitly knew that was my path towards success, and towards being able to make up for my like physical difficulties that I had growing up. Yeah, but it was really fun to be able to explore this whole idea in my piece.

Zefyr Lisowski: Yeah, I can chime in as well. I think that I grew up with a father who is an English professor, and with sort of poetry served to me in a way that was both very loving, and also was kind of using this language as a cudgel, using it as a way to kind of a sort of dominance, the way that some fathers tend to do.

And I think that in terms of—so like, I saw this interaction between language and power, where language was being used to exert power, which also mirrored sort of insults, teasing as Saleem talked about as well all these other different ways of reinforcing hegemony, and I think that there were 2 turning points I realized I could kind of narrate my own experiences. I could tell stories. I could kind of exaggerate details and tales that I was telling about things that happened to me. and I would be able to kind of use that to strengthen relationships, use that to make my friends laugh or make people show a real interest in what I was saying, and that became a sort of power that felt more neutral, less rooted in ego.

And then also, when I discovered it in undergrad June Jordan, whose work is immensely, immensely powerful in this incredibly encompassing way She had a program called Poetry for the People. And there's like this great revolutionary care and love throughout all of her work. That kind of made me realize that language can be a way to practice care, to practice community building as well, and that's kind of supplanted these other forms of power in terms of what I'm most concerned with, what language can do.

Jim Hicks: So Bhavna, are you gonna take us out? Have you been, you know, telling the story since birth or well, it's a great question. Thank you, Michael, for asking it.

Bhavna Mehta: I grew up surrounded by 4 different languages: my mother tongue, Gujarati; the language of the state I was born in, which was Maharashtra and the languages Marathi, and then the language of the films that we watched on TV and in the theaters, which was Hindi.

And then English was the language we studied, and I went to an English middle school, and so I think the idea that language has power, and the fact that English was, and became the language that became predominant in my life. It just feels that you know that was power, and that was a way to be in the world, and to also communicate. but to also sort of forget where we came from, forget the ancestral trunk towns. So that was a power of a different kind, and I'm still in that weird space of being in all these languages. but still having English as sort of the most. and the one that grabs me most, and I'm still there.

Thank you for that question.

Jim Hicks: Well, I think we probably should wrap it up, and but before we do, I just wanna, thank one more time our fantastic artists and I include the interpreters absolutely in that definition. In zoom world, you can't hear the snapping and clapping in the hands raised. but I you know they're out there, and I just really wanted to thank you all, and thank the audience for coming and hearing us listening. and keep reading, and keep writing. Thanks, folks, and and stay tuned.