
“The future lives in our bodies”: Poetry & Disability Justice (A Lambda Literary x Woodland Pattern Event)

March 13, 2022 | 6 pm ET

Featuring Travis Chi Wing Lau, Cyrée Jarelle Johnson, Meg Day, and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha

DISABILITY JUSTICE

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"The future lives in our bodies"
Reading & Discussion

**MARCH 13TH
6PM ET**

Cyrée Jarelle Johnson **Meg Day** **Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-
Samarasinha** **Travis Chi Wing Lau**

Image Description: A textured white background with crimson and dark maroon layers. Text reads: “Disability Justice; Reading & Discussion; March 13th, 6 P.M. E.S.T.” There are four author photos, including Cyrée Jarelle Johnson, Meg Day, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, and Travis Chi Wing Lau. Cyrée’s photo is of a black trans person in a multicolored leopard print shirt and a hat smiling at the camera. He has short locs and light brown skin. Leah’s photo is of a middle aged mixed race Sri Lankan, Irish and Romani nonbinary femme, diagonally, in front of a wild river with lots of rocks. Leah has violet, brown and silver curly hair, sand colored skin and red lipstick (Stila Stay All Day lipstick in Beso, a.k.a. “the lipstick A.O.C. wears.”) Their clothes are mostly not visible except for a blue denim vest. You can see their sleeve of tattoos, including cosmos flowers, a motherwort plant and letters in Tamil. They are smiling with bashful pride and satisfaction.” Meg’s photo is a side profile of a white person with short, blonde hair wearing a blue button-up shirt. Travis’s photo is of an Asian person softly smiling into the camera in grayscale. The Lambda Literary and Woodland Pattern Book Center logos are in the upper right corner.

Cyrée Jarelle Johnson

Eating the Other

“Master . . . eated me when I was meat”—Vincent Woodard, from **The Delectable Negro**

Nat Turner’s body is long devoured
as were mummies and unfortunate men.
I’m sure some slave masters ate their own kin
—caught them off guard, lept up, overpowered

them with a group like some fucking cowards.
They tasted human blood. They killed again.
At the sight of black flesh, they eased a grin.
They interred the scraps beneath the flowers

that brightened the plantation door. A horror,
yet also a treat. A slave turned to meat.
If your ship fell no whale choose a martyr,
claim delusion, inhale all you can eat.

The perverse race record never falters:
As you wish it reads *but don’t waste the feet.*

Earth, Earth

If you love someone, tell them often
–the world is dying. Today, I am alone
the sun shatters all my eastern windows.

The earth herself is human: horny
singular, of changing nature, full of spite
so our love for her will not be perfect.

That was never the promise, for humans
love is never perfect, just trying again
and perhaps the try itself is perfection,

the feathered thing that does not fly. A gust
into the attic, not out from it. Today
I live in Brooklyn, Baltimore, Savannah

Tomorrow, alone in Oakland, in Jack
London Square, at the farmers market
holding bougie flowers, pondering over

wee bundles of spinach, too little for \$5
(well, maybe that's the fairest price, I don't
know, I am not perfect) or in Philadelphia

holding a restraining order and a clutch
of dreer images of my bitten limbs
and the poems torn down to their iambs

by hands I chose to hold me. Now,
I am buying an eight for that burnt out
memory. I am walking through a flood

in thrifted boots, their soles a maze of holes
praying on the good of the earth, the earth
who, if no one else, is perfect. Riley says

the earth is dying. I tell them that's why

I want children, black children who are close
to their mother, the earth. Who empathize

with her bitten limbs, who sort out problems
simmering in the muck of four burnt centuries
with the brilliance endemic to all black children.

Maybe they'll go to space, see from above
what must be done, maybe they won't have to go
it alone. Maybe they'll have company in other

people's children, or aliens, or the animals will rise
up against us and do it themselves, or the rocks.
(I heard they cry out under certain conditions, what

could they be waiting for now? And since we're on
the subject, surely Jesus cared about the earth?
I have to imagine the desert was a blur, and yet

the views!) I assume, however, they'll go to space.
From their round window in the dark, they may gaze
down at the walls and tracks studding her waist

and her vast salt wet cheeks, just a face in the dark
her wild green afro, unpicked for millenia, love
her perfectly, and save her with the words their elders

knew enough to pass along to me—the great chain sent
to heal the earth, though healing her imperfectly
as is the way of humans, healing only partially, after

every disaster, we straw up the oil, metabolize the soil
intended to kill our mothers, and poison our bloodline
but we, like cracked pearls, never wince at the break.

cadillac

Those dragged along earth's spine to Savannah
bolted back home with miraculous flight—
rose from the auction block, sweet falsetto
a howl that split a gold road through noon sun
that would never open their backs. Perhaps
my ancestor lost her dance steps into the air.

Oh well. Sometimes it be like that. The air
too hot to ride, she says. But Savannah
slid below the bodies of friends, perhaps
the women she slept near—but they could fly.
Lacking any reasonable plan, sun
glowering her way with pinched lips, a falsetto

voice walking from the kitchen, falsetto
through gap teeth, not stealing, sucking the air
forced through her mouth's pinprick, haloed by sun
glow that swole her life to ruins. Savannah
sold her child from under her skirts. To fly
seemed the pride of a kicked dream, but perhaps

there was something to want even here, perhaps
love or sex or god. Her man: falsetto
in the woods church. She likes that, but can't fly.
Heartbreak Day to gulf or grave, not the air
around her that hovers, spits Savannah
at her as her back bends. Low the red sun

with lips to her neck. Generations sun
shine grew into gold, into rain perhaps
down the windows of cars to Savannah.
A cadillac, breaks never falsetto
always shine like buffed leather, cheat the air
of ego. Lifting up to pilfered flight.

We were better than death, but worse than flight.
Sucking a tan from milder Northern suns,
but breath still beaten from our lungs. The air
too weak to hold us, still. We think perhaps
this year will change hope to fact. Falsetto
cry out pews from Philly to Savannah.

The coastal birds at falsetto pitch fly
to mock us but, perhaps, the reborn sun
o'er Savannah will lift us to the air.

Meg Day

1. “10AM is When You Come to Me.” Academy of American Poets Poem-a-Day, 2019 and *Beauty Is a Verb, Volume II: The New Disability Poetics Anthology*, forthcoming 2022.
2. “Portrait of My Gender as [Inaudible].” *POETRY Magazine*, 2020.
3. “Elegy in Translation.” *TYPO*, 2016 and *Academy of American Poets Video*, 2018.
4. “Reasonable Accommodation.” *Kenyon Review*, 2021.

10am is When You Come to Me
Louise Bourgeois, 2006

In some other life, I can hear you
breathing: a pale sound like running
fingers through tangled hair. I dreamt
again of swimming in the quarry
& surfaced here when you called for me
in a voice only my sleeping self could
know. Now the dapple of the aspen
respires on the wall & the shades cut
its song a staff of light. Leave me—
that me—in bed with the woman
who said all the sounds for pleasure
were made with vowels I couldn't
hear. Keep me instead with this small sun
that sips at the sky blue hem of our sheets
then dips & reappears: a drowsy penny
in the belt of Venus, your aureole nodding
slow & copper as it bobs against cotton
in cornflower or clay. What a waste
the groan of the mattress must be
when you backstroke into me & pull
the night up over our heads. Your eyes
are two moons I float beneath & my lungs
fill with a wet hum your hips return.
It's Sunday—or so you say with both hands
on my chest—& hot breath is the only hymn
whose refrain we can recall. And then you
reach for me like I could've been another
man. You make me sing without a sound.

Portrait of My Gender as [Inaudible]

I knew I was a god
when you could not
agree on my name

& still none you spoke
could force me to listen
closer. Is this the nothing

the antelope felt when
Adam, lit on his own
entitling, dubbed family,

genus, species? So many
descendants became
doctors, delivered

babies, bestowed bodies
names as if to say it is to make it
so. Can it be a comfort between

us, the fact of my creation?
I was made in the image
of a thing without

an image & silence, too,
is your invention. Who prays
for a god except to appear

with answers, but never
a body? A voice? If I told you
you wouldn't believe me

because I was the one
to say it. On the first day
there was no sound

worth mentioning. If I, too,
am a conductor of air, the only
praise I know is in stereo

(one pair—an open hand & closed
fist—will have to do). I made
a photograph of my name:

there was a shadow in a field
& I put my shadow in it. You
can't hear me, but I'm there.

Elegy in Translation

Forgive me my deafness now for your name on others' lips:
each mouth gathers then opens & I search for the wave

the fluke of their tongues should make with the blow
of your name in that mild darkness I recognize but cannot

explain as the same oblivious blue of *Hold the conch to your ear*
& hearing the highway loud & clear. My hands are bloated

with the name signs of my kin who have waited for water
to reach their ears. Or oil; grease from a fox with the gall

of a hare, bear fat melted in hot piss, peach kernels fried
in hog lard & tucked along the cavum for a cure; a sharp stick

even, a jagged rock; anything to wedge down deep to the drum
inside that kept them walking away from wives—old

or otherwise—& the tales they tell about our being too broken
for their bearing, & yet they bear on. Down. Forgive me

my deafness for my own sound, how I mistook it for a wound
you could heal. Forgive me the places your wasted words

could have saved us from going had I heard you with my hands.
I saw Joni live & still thought *a gay pair of guys put up a parking lot.*

How could I have known *You are worthless* sounds like *Should we*
do this, even with the lights on. You let me say *Yes*. So what

if Johnny Nash *can see clearly now Lorraine is gone*—I only wanted
to hear the sea. The audiologist asks *Does it seem like you're under*

water? & I think only of your name. I thought it was *you*
after *I love*, but memory proves nothing save my certainty—

the chapped round of your mouth was the same shape while at rest
or in thought or blowing smoke, & all three make a similar sound:

Reasonable Accommodation

You've met me halfway
between the door to our bedroom
 & the other I doubt

is real only because you
are always gesturing: *there it is*.
As if getting to an exit

is as simple as its existence;
as if your body, real or imagined,
 does not make a door

a taunt you can point to
but not touch. You touch me
 like I'm a door

that won't open. The first fight
ended here, too: my back to the wall
& your body keeping it

there, every hand & mouth
an act of contrition in an argument
I was sure I'd misheard

until you were kneeling
to beg me, *Stay*. Only then
 did I understand yours

was a language of secret
orders & mine a language
 of hidden sounds

you thought you had
to teach me yourself. Tonight
 my shoulders relax

into the dimples they make
in the drywall, the pair of them joining
 the others in repetition

down the hallway, a stampede
through snow. Look at the tracks

they've left, all the animals

my body didn't mean to be.
Tonight there is no feast. Tonight
you are only sorry

g-d's name is the one I choose
to say aloud when you touch me
like you believe

you could put a door anywhere
if you just push hard enough; like if I
wasn't so unreasonable

I could just accommodate
myself; like if it's so hard, *Why don't you
just leave:* there it is.

There I am: opening a door
in a wall with a body I should want
to exit. You touch me

like I'm an animal that needs
correcting. You touch me like it's for
my own good.

And wasn't this my request?
Didn't I ask you to speak to me
only with your hands?

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha

so good

I keep saying, *she was so good, but not like, Beth from Little Women good*
you know- noble tragic dying cripple good like the only us you get to see in a movie-
but like your regular imperfect crackass weirdo teehee giggle disabled good:

Stacey's dead and it's day 46 or something like that and day
126 of the pandemic or something like that and here I am
crying quietly on my toilet with my face screwed up silent
reading Danez Smith's poem saying *o the horrid friends that were*
just ships harboring me to you
the young part of me saying, *stacey's dead, she's dead?*
and the grown one remembering how you randomly emailed me one time at two in the morning,
I just wanted you to know, you are so good and right

: she loved me like that and like it wasn't a problem
it was barely a breath between asking her attendant to fork her some chicken
and finishing sending another organizing text on her phone-

I just keep thinking here we are, a greek tragedy, or shakespeare
doesn't he have a lot of those? Where two brother friends, one of them dies
and one is left alive, mourning to tell the tale?

Except we are two disabled Asian brother femmes, of different sorts
one hammershafted boobie shaved head ND limpie
left so fucking bewildered after someone who was arguably a Ella Baker of the movement DIES
UNEXPECTEDLY THE MORNING OF HER 33RD BIRTHDAY
in a way none of us were praying against, waiting worried for?

Being disabled means loving the shit out of all of us
that everyone else wants to die
like, love in a way most people never get to be loved,
and then watching them die
because suicide, or it just happens, or the doctor says *low quality of life*

or can't figure out where the accessible gurney is

You leave me notes tucked in all the library books of my house.
Pages fall open to a poem I wrote after we had jambalaya and bourbon cocktails
pour out a coffee urn by Ashby BART
a year ago where you said, *I promise if I'm going to die, I'll tell you*
Turns out to be a promise you meant but it's hard to keep.

We are sibling chapters in the same book
I pick up the side of the banner you dropped,
it falls out my hands you have me that shook.

Femme futures

Where does the future live in your body?

Touch it

1.

Sri Lankan radical women never come alone.

We have a tradition of coming in groups of three or four, minimum.

The Thiraganama sisters are the most famous and beloved,

but in the '20s my appamma and great-aunties were the Wild Alvis Girls.

Then there's your sister, your cousin, your great-aunties
everyone infamous and unknown.

We come in packs we argue

we sneak each other out of the house we have passionate agreements and disagreements

we love each other very much but can't stand to be in the same room or continent for years.

We do things like, oh, start the first rape crisis center in Jaffna in a war zone
in someone's living room with no funding.

When war forces our hands,

we all move to Australia or London or Thunder Bay together

or, if the border does not love us, we are what keeps Skype in business.

When one or more of us is murdered

by the state or a husband

we survive

whether we want to or not.

I am an only child

I may not have been born into siblinghood

but I went out and found mine

Made mine.

We come in packs

even when we are alone

Because sometimes the only ancestral sisterlove waiting for you

is people in books, dreams

aunties you made up

people waiting for you in the clouds ten years in the future

and when you get there

you make your pack

and you send that love
back.

2.

When the newly disabled come
they come bearing terror and desperate. Everyone else has left them
to drown on the *titanic*. They don't know that there is anyone
but the abled. They come asking for knowledge
that is common to me as breath, and exotic to them as, well,
being disabled and not hating yourself.
They ask about steroids and sleep. About asking for help.
About how they will ever possibly convince their friends and family
they are not lazy and useless.
I am generous—we crips always are.
They *were* me.
They don't know if they can call themselves *that*,
they would never use *that word*, but they see me calling myself *that*,
i.e., disabled, and the lens is blurring, maybe there is another world
they have never seen
where crips limp slowly, laugh, have shitty and good days
recalibrate the world to our bodies instead of sprinting trying to keep up.
Make everyone slow down to keep pace with us.

Sometimes, when I'm about to email the resource list,
the interpreter phone numbers, the hot chronic pain tips, the best place to rent a ramp,
my top five favorite medical cannabis strains, my extra dermal lidocaine patch—*it's about to
expire, but don't worry, it's still good*—I want to slip in a P.S. that says,
*remember back when I was a crip
and you weren't, how I had a flare and had to cancel our day trip
and when I told you, you looked confused
and all you knew how to say was, Booooooooooooo!*
as I was lying on the ground trying to breathe?
Do you even remember that?
Do your friends say that to you now?
Do you want to come join us, on the other side?
Is there a free future in this femme of color disabled body?

3.

When I hear my femme say, *When I'm old and am riding a motorcycle with white hair down my back.*

When I hear my femme say, *When I'm old and sex work paid off my house and my retirement.*

When I hear my femme/myself say, *When I get dementia and I am held with respect when I am between all worlds.*

When I see my femme packing it all in, because crip years are like dog years and you never know when they're going to shoot Old Yeller.

When I hear my femme say, *when I quit my teaching gig and never have to deal with white male academic nonsense again.*

When I hear us plan the wheelchair accessible femme of color trailer park,
the land we already have a plan to pay the taxes on
See the money in the bank and the ways we grip our thighs back to ourselves

When I hear us dream our futures,
believe we will make it to one,
We will make one.

The future lives in our bodies
Touch it.

Adaptive device

I want to give you a poem like an adaptive device
that will hold you just as good
as your favorite cane bed sling accessible toilet seat
rescue ventilator cigarette crushed pocket Xanax
blanket weight mad map sign.
Give you the words that are what I know how to do
Give you the words that will take meaning, make language
make a word house to hold you, open-doored and firm-roofed.
The steady tap tap thrum of your cane tip
The steady roll of the charged battery
of your chair, your brain, humming.

What does it mean to call a poem
an adaptive device? A piece of beautiful supportive tech
that puts in work to keep you alive?
Something your doctor will sneer at and never understand
you mean you just walk around with a cane all the time?
Something the newly crip say
I don't want to be, you know, pathetic, I just need a little help.

This poem will never be found in a packet of home care instructions.
This poem is not taught in med school.
This poem is not behind the counter at the pharmacy or OTC.

If poetry is a means of telling the truth, June,
and poetry is as sturdy butterfly as the steady tap of my cane's dance,
then poetry is crip. Then truth is crip.
Then this poem be a crip hand to hold you.

This poem is short enough for even my memory to memory it!
This poem can be whispered or signed.
This poem unspools from a drooling lip
This poem can be tapped in and sung from augmented communication!
This poem spoken from gesture and nuance
This poem is nonverbal
This poem is crip kindness
This poem thinks you are desirable and love is coming

Is here. This poem will help you get on and off the subway.
This poem is a reason to live.

Travis Chi Wing Lau

1. "A Lover Dead in His Twenties" (*Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, "Poets Resist Series, 2018; republished by Ghost City Press in the *My Loves* digital anthology, 2020)
2. "Elegy for Ken Meeks" (*A&U Magazine*, 2019; winner of the Christopher Hewitt Award for Poetry)
3. "Pithy" (from *Paring*, Finishing Line Press, 2020)

A Lover Dead in His Twenties

After Adrienne Rich

1.

Just before they signed away
your right to

life,

you thought to hide hints
behind your
gasps

because you knew
I loved to lean
into you,

to listen actively
as it was the closest
we could ever be.

2.

The grain of your voice:
I did not know that
memorials bore
such textures.

(The ivy has already
strangled your
name.)

3.

The planes of you
were changing,

but you chose never
to make much of it

because that wasn't how
you were raised:

to outline yourself in
enough green
to be envied,
enough red
to be a target.

A shot
in the back is
the present's
plain language.

I learned from you
that being a cipher
could be a powerful

desire.

4.
Wojnarowicz said
when it was all over,

he wanted us to
just drop
his body
on the steps
of the fucking FDA,

but I don't know
if I have the
heart
to do that to you,
you,

you
(who I failed to
love with any
grace)

even as your body is something
sharper now than it ever was in life

because you refuse the right to
amnesia,

the linchpin of
home and country

reddened rusty
by your and our brothers'
tainted blood,

for our touching
needed to be untouching

until they were distant forms
that only became

hard fact
in the flows of longing.

5.
How am I supposed to
cast this flower upon your soil,
how do I tell the truth of you

when the very words I need

were the ones that once
bound you,
hurt you,
stole away your name?

eulogy:
true praise.

6.
By the time you could not move,
you no longer bothered with

the headlines,
cheap pundits

because the story
still eludes

the dainty fingers
of press and camera:

you were already
too busy
cleaving hard
to that imperceptible
space beyond
their line of sight.

7.

A warrior
burying
 a warrior:

(no, that's not right.)

you would want
me to write,

however inexact
or exacting,

about a life
beyond reproach

so that none of us
must apologize

for doing nothing
wrong.

Elegy for Ken Meeks

**After Paul Monette*

sanitary white meant i had crossed the threshold into the
kingdom of the sick where court is held to an arrhythmia paced
to the syllable count of medications dressed in primary colors
the intonation of infections that should not coalesce into
names flattened into names which claim you replace you
slowly with what gets scratched in the remarks of your chart that
i read in secret but this is how you learn a thing by broken heart
a mnemonics of pain tapped out to the beat you set on the
ventilator that i may one day have to silence with my own hands
along with the phrases of skin that go to join dead conversations
flowering in the damp corners of the room more lonely in company
longing for a night full-blooded when we werent afraid of bodies breaking
into sweats but only the glisten of youth replaced too early by the
fluorescence that now crowns you like a debtor for dealing too honestly
in whole hearts and borrowed time measured in cell counts that I track
in my notebook to determine whether im supposed to gather the best of us
for mourning another brother another son another father another lover
another form inscribed by legacies nobody wanted but find on their bodies
when it is too late for cosseting by beside for that breath will soon extend
long enough to be called a parting a deliverance a grievance a war cry

Pithy

All day, all night the body intervenes.

—Virginia Woolf

1. I shrug off my messenger onto the floor and forget to kiss you when I walk through the door.

Pith: the pain has its steel hoop around my lumbar.

2. I catch myself tottering—a deformation of my walk.

Pith: a family resemblance: the curvature progresses faster than any other before me. I am not yet thirty.

3. I take a tumble after I miss the curb.

Pith: had you not caught me by the arm, I would have finally broken my first bone.

4. I switch positions before I even alight.

Pith: I never thought pain would claim intimacy for its own.

5. I crack three different places. It annoys you. It worries you.

Pith: they said it would make my knuckles bigger, but it is one of my most futile of pleasures.

6. I submerge myself in an epsom bath.

Pith: smelling like eucalyptus and lavender is the closest to relief because you can fool at least one of your senses.

7. I lay against you as we watch the ship go into warp.

Pith: I laid this way while doing homework all through high school, and my case silently went from light to moderate.

8. I cannot form sentences. Non-sequitur, organic hesitancy.

Pith: I would never wish upon anyone a life in the thickness of fog. The shame of being lost in it.

9. I can't make it up the stairs while cradling the box.

Pith: I hate admitting that I will have to depend on you more and more. That you will have to lie to me that it's okay.

10. I am cold and distant.

Pith: pain is subterranean, a geography to which you will forever be foreign. To be present is to also be far away.

11. I will myself to take deeper breaths. You think something is wrong.

Pith: the shallowest part of me is my breath. Some days feel breathless in all the wrong ways.

12. I look perpetually exhausted.

Pith: pain redefines what labor means.

13. I look unhappy.

Pith: joy so often feels remote, but you are teaching me that it never left me.

14. I wish it were otherwise.

Pith: magical thinking can really be cruel optimism.

15. I choose not to operate.

Pith: why should a boy ever have to choose between a life in motion or recumbence?