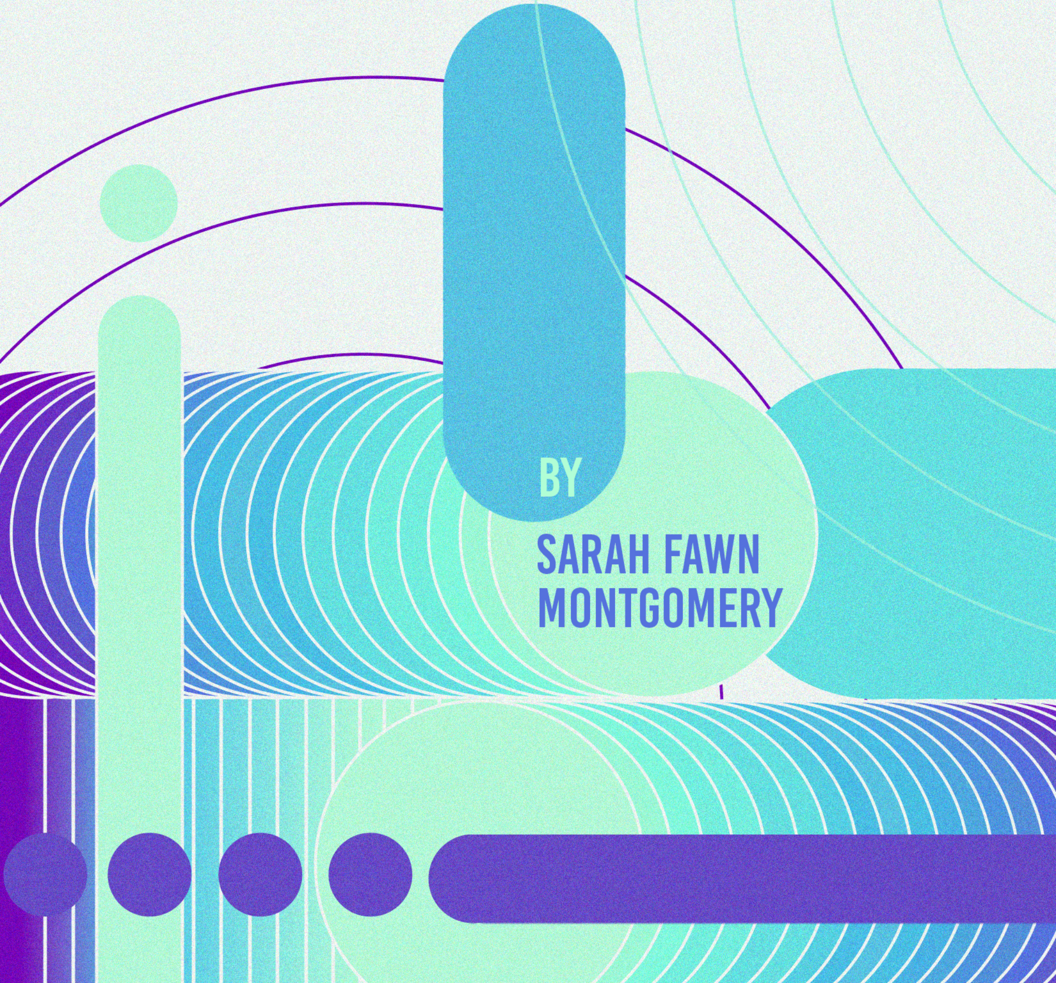
CRAFT CHAPS

NERVE: UNLEARNING WORKSHOP ABLEISM TO DEVELOP YOUR DISABLED WRITING PRACTICE



BY

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For crip kin.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

If our bodies and brains aren't universal, why should we expect this from our craft advice? The tips in this book are things that are helpful for me, now, in my current bodymind. But I have not always used these strategies, and will no doubt shift them in the future as my physical, mental, and writing needs change. Learning to trust our instincts is as essential for writers as it is for disabled, chronically ill, and neurodivergent people, who are often told to fit themselves into the abled expectations of others, often to great detriment. There is as much knowledge in learning why something doesn't work for you as there is in finding success, so while I encourage you to try the craft advice in these pages, I also encourage you to ignore what doesn't work for you in favor of your own intuition and innovation.

PART I: DIAGNOSIS

Storied but silent, I ache electric. For almost two years I have struggled to be a body broken. And before that I was a body breaking. For many years—for my whole life—I have existed as a disabled body in a world able-made. I have been unable to lift more than a few pounds or sit in furniture without injury, and I have been called dramatic for complaining. I have hurt most of the days of my life and have been called a liar because this pain was invisible. And I have experienced the senses differently than most and have been called crazy for trying to explain this reality. How to write the story of your life when the world does not believe your pain, does not acknowledge your reality? How to write any story when systems seek to exclude you entirely?

Here is what you need to know. Throughout my life I have ached and throbbed, pulsed and pained invisible to all but myself. I used to gaslight myself into thinking I must be imagining the hurt, must be making excuses for being unable to do what others did with apparent ease. I learned to write in, with, and perhaps even because of pain. I navigated an MFA program, a PhD program, and even acquired tenure teaching creative writing despite mental illness, the daily challenges of being neurodivergent, and chronic pain from an undiagnosed disability. Adept at masking like so many disabled, chronically ill, and neurodivergent people, I dutifully listened to the writing advice I received in classrooms: show as opposed to tell, focus on the action, provide narrative resolution, write every day, write 1,000 words a day, revise by retyping every page. Yet this advice never quite served me creatively and actually injured me chronically.

I never learned how to show rather than tell when your mental and physical realities are markedly different than readers who don't experience or even believe your reality. No one explained why I should create work focused on action when I experienced the world as one of inaction, the stagnation of my abilities, the passivity of those abled around me to offer assistance. I could not provide narrative resolution when disability, chronic illness, and neurodivergence are chronic conditions—resolution, like recovery, simply not an option.

I never learned that it is acceptable and even necessary to adjust deadlines when your brain and body are unreliable. No one explained crip time, a concept that addresses the ways disabled, chronically ill, and neurodivergent people experience time differently than abled people, for we cannot force our bodies and minds to meet the expectations of time, but rather experience time shifting according to our minds and bodies. My education in craft never mentioned the ways crip time can challenge our concepts of productivity and the future. I also never learned about spoon theory, which asserts that disabled, chronically ill, and neurodivergent people have a limited amount of physical or mental energy (represented by a fixed number of metaphorical "spoons") available for daily activities and tasks, and that they expend more energy on everyday tasks than abled people. And for many years, I simply did not know it was even possible to manage my spoons to sustain my spirit as well as my craft.

I ignored my pain and told myself to be stronger, to work harder, to force my body and mind to behave like others around me, though this made the hurt deepen until I simply split. One day I broke from the burden of carrying the weight of abled expectation, from a lifetime living with an undiagnosed disability that degenerates the muscles and nerves.

I was left with a spine suddenly severed, my body stiff beyond comprehension, each of my limbs racing with electricity, numb yet sharp with pain. It is easy to fall when the world will not hold you up, and so my body crashed, unsupported by its own design and the systems that refused accommodation.

Since my injuries, I have been unable to hold a writing utensil, grip a mouse, flit my fingertips across a keyboard. I cannot hold a book or electronic device for reading or researching. I cannot sit or stand for more than twenty minutes at a time, and then I require various mobility aids, my life an endless rotation of restlessness, a search for relief when none is promised. I cannot travel, except for daily physical therapy, endless MRIs and injections, frequent follow-ups with specialists who peer at my body like the plastic skeletons that hang on their sterile walls. The nerve damage from my injuries is ongoing, perhaps indefinite, my body in a constant state of painful tingling, muscles spasming as if controlled by phantoms, tightening and tensing so that I need assistance with most daily activities—bathing, eating, driving, opening bottles of pills that do not work. I have had to suspend my work as a professor, as a writer, have had, in all actuality, to suspend my entire life. I do not know when—or if—my former self will return.

But my stories will not stop. I still have much to say, perhaps more now that my ability to write is so limited. And while I want, and will, write about girlhood and ghosts, memory and mountains, the strange science fact I heard on the radio, and imagined lives that are not my own, I am also compelled to write about what it means to be a disabled body in a world that erases us. In a world that looks at me, at so many of us, and does not believe the painful realities of our lives to be true.

Here are some things people said to me after my injuries:
"You didn't seem that sick."
"You don't look disabled."
"Why didn't you take better care of yourself?"
"It can't be that bad."
"Aren't you better yet?"
"How many disabilities can one person have?"
"You are too young to have a body this old."

Here are some things people said about my writing after my injuries:
"You couldn't have been that sick if you were writing that much."
"I guess you won't be writing anymore."
"How are you writing if you can't work?"
"At least disability gives you something to write about."
"Just make sure disability isn't the only thing you write about."
"Look at the bright side—maybe you'll get another book out of this."
"Look at the bright side—maybe you can finally stop working so hard."

These statements reminded me of the time an editor who was publishing my work asked, "Are you sure? Did this really happen?" in response to writing about my disabled life. The editor's comments reminded me of those I received while workshopping in graduate school. Classmates often questioned the veracity of my stories, asking me to explain or justify my existence, sometimes even suggesting my topics were not worth putting on the page. And when I began submitting *Quite Mad: An American Pharma Memoir,* a book about mental illness, some publishers were interested only if the book concluded with my search for a cure finally achieved with a magic pill. But this wasn't the case—like many disabilities and chronic illnesses, mental illness is a lifelong negotiation. I did not want to sell a story that implied tidy resolution was possible. I did not want to write the ableist story of my disabled life.

Much has been said about the limitations of the traditional writing workshop. In his essential text, *Craft in the Real World*, writer and professor Matthew Salesses writes, "When craft is taught unreflexively, within a limited understanding of the canon, it reinforces narrow ideas about whose stories are important and what makes a story beautiful, moving, or good." Disabled writers often receive pity and shame, suspicion and blame from the writing workshop. Unlike many of their colleagues, they are tasked with proving their stories are possible and also of value. They also face the reality that outside of the workshop their stories may not be given an audience at all. In *Disability Visibility*, disabled writer and activist Alice Wong explains, "One common response from publishers and editors, when confronted about the lack of diversity in their staff or coverage, is that claim that it's too 'hard' to find disabled reporters or writers." There are, of course, many disabled writers, but their stories are often silenced and erased. And those whose stories do reach abled audiences must often rewrite them to conform to ableist standards.

Disabled writers are also tasked with claiming space in workshops that do not claim them back, which can actually prevent disabled writers from thriving. Instructors fail to envision crip writers as central to any course syllabus; thus, they are largely missing from courses ranging from K-12 through college. Disabled students must navigate educational barriers, microaggressions, and tokenization. The feedback they receive reflects this power imbalance. Writer Ross Showalter examines the experience of being the only deaf student in a workshop where peers were only receptive to stories about abled discomfort. "Surrounded by hearing peers," Showalter writes, "I wanted them to read what I knew instead of writing something they knew and expected. In order to move forward as a writer, I had to reject the idea of hearing approval." Yet rejecting approval can be difficult when success often depends on collaborating with abled peers and mentors and navigating networking opportunities that seldom do not recognize disabled perspectives.

On the rare occasions instructors do center crip texts, writers must often conform to strict expectations regarding suffering, as writer and professor Travis Chi Wing Lau explains, “So often we are, intentionally or not, encouraged to capitalize on our pain to be legible to audiences and publishers wholly uninvested in us as people living with pain. As with many BIPOC and queer writers, such rehearsals of our pain are seldom for us and in fact limit the horizons for how we collectively imagine pain and those who have relationships with it.”

Though I value my experience in creative writing classes, finding my way as a disabled writer has required unlearning much of the ableist advice I received in workshops. Much of my craft education has come from other disabled writers outside of the traditional writing workshop. In her vital craft text, *Voice First: A Writer’s Manifesto*, writer and professor Sonya Huber shares a similar experience, writing, “I found support from other disabled writers, and the work they’d done to reframe disability as an insight-giving window into reality, rather than a deficit, helped me to begin to rebuild my life and my writing.” For many disabled writers, the ableist writing workshop can truly hinder creativity. Instead, we learn craft and find community outside the workshop, building our collective canon though careful unlearning.

I am learning to unlearn again. I am revising the writing practices I have crafted over a disabled lifetime educated by abled others. My injuries mean pain is my only permanence, nerve impulses shooting throughout each of my limbs in constant urgency that something is terribly wrong. After thousands of hours of physical therapy, numerous treatments, and an array of specialists whose numbers could fill the seats of a workshop classroom, I remain unable to fit my disabled body and brain into abled writing spaces and expectations, to tackle the traditional tasks and utilize the traditional tools of the abled writing world.

If, like me, the work of your life right now is living rather than writing, let this be a welcome lesson in craft, for struggling to survive is an act of narrative, storytelling an act of resistance. I remain hopeful that several upcoming surgeries might waken my limbs back to life, and that, even if they do not, I can use the wisdom of crip community to build a sustainable practice for both my body and my body of work. With so many of our futures uncertain, I write this book as much for myself as for you.

PART II: UNLEARNING ABLEIST CRAFT ADVICE

Despite the prescriptive advice offered by the abled writing workshop, disabled writers do not need to follow these craft instructions to produce good work. We cannot "show, don't tell" if our realities do not match abled expectations. We cannot "characterize" if abled audiences have rigid expectations for disabled characters. We cannot use extensive explanation to justify our very existence. Nor can we write the tragic stories that are so often required where disabled characters are pitied, are miserable, death their only destiny. And we cannot and should not write the inspirational recovery narratives where disability disappears and we are suddenly loveable, the story somehow redeemed because what makes us different has been vanquished, because we have been revised out of the narrative. We cannot center every story around disability, because while disability certainly informs our experiences, we deserve to write stories as rich as our experiences. In fact, like many marginalized writers, disabled writers often must ignore much of the advice offered in writing workshops altogether if we are to best tell our stories.

Here are some common pieces of writing advice to unlearn:

Disabled writers get to determine their terminology. Abled workshops may insist "disability" is a dirty word and favor terms like "handicapped" or "differently abled." Abled colleagues may insist on their right to use ableist terminology because they have disabled family members. But when workshop colleagues refer to disabled writers as "special needs" or "superheroes" it is often about abled writers' comfort rather than inclusivity.

Disabled writers do not have to write for abled readers. Disabled identities do not exist to serve abled readers, and disabled writers do not have to translate their experiences for audiences who may not understand—or even believe—them.

Disabled characters do not need to serve as hope or inspiration. Disabled stories do not exist to teach abled characters a lesson or to make abled readers feel superior about their own existence. They are not of value simply because they allow abled others to feel pity or relief.

Work about disability does not need a triumphant recovery arc. Requiring disabled stories to provide a magic cure implies these stories are only of value if disability is eradicated.

Disabled stories do not need to be cheerful. Anger, sadness, sharp humor, and exquisite joy are essential to writing about disability.

Disabled characters should not be flat. Angelic children or bitter adults, pure hero or evil villains, hopeful or dejected, disabled characters are often relegated to far ends of a spectrum that allows readers to accept or reject them easily, stripping the disability experience of the full emotional range of humanity.

Ableist metaphors about blindness, deafness, madness, or any other disability are unoriginal and unacceptable. In 1978, Susan Sontag wrote that, "illness is not a metaphor," so it's time to retire these ableist clichés.

Writing workshops have a responsibility to question abled friends or family members writing about someone else's disability or using disabled identities to serve their own stories. While it can be done well, many times it is not, and abled writers looking to serve as a "voice for the voiceless" are often appropriating. Abled writers must exercise caution when writing about disabled people, especially when the work focuses on describing how hard it is to love, accept, understand, or act as caregivers to disabled people.

Disabled writers do not need to shield readers from their suffering just as they do not need to perform their trauma.

Disabled writers can and should resist calls from the workshop to explain every detail about their medical histories. A disabled writer does not need to justify or prove their existence.

Not every piece by a disabled writer must be about disability. Despite the insistence of abled workshops, disability is not a disabled writer's only plot and purpose.

PART III: DEVELOPING A DISABLED WRITING PRACTICE

Much of the advice offered in writing programs and craft books does not take into consideration the daily lived experience of disabled, chronically ill, or neurodivergent writers. We cannot write every day or even every week or month or year. We cannot write 1,000 words a day or a book manuscript in a month, let alone in a year or a decade. We cannot rewrite or retype our manuscripts as a form of revision. We cannot meet quick deadlines or deadlines at all if our bodies and brains are consumed instead by the task of survival.

The image of a writer conjured by most is ableist by nature. Writers are depicted sitting down at a desk for hours at a time, curled over a computer or notebook, imagination their only concern, the mind free from the body. But just as this image is a privileged fantasy that excludes working-class writers, parents and caregivers, and many others who do not have the privilege of time and the wealth needed to devote oneself wholly to the arts, this image of the writer also excludes disabled, chronically ill, and neurodivergent people whose realities often prevent them from the physical labor of writing, their time occupied with pain, symptom management, and navigating the absurdities of the American medical system.

I can no longer type or write by hand—in fact, I am dictating this work into a microphone. I cannot write a set number of words each time I write and am frequently unable to write at all. I cannot write at the pace of my abled colleagues or even former versions of myself. Due to the ongoing nerve damage in my hands, I am unable to hold a book or electronic device, relying instead on audiobooks, despite the number of people who still insist this is not "real" reading. I cannot research the ways I used to and instead gather information from accessibility devices. I now rely on friends and family to be my hands, to collaborate with me in gathering facts, helping with my correspondence, and even submitting my work. Disability has shifted my writing from a solitary act to one that is part of a rich network of people, a collaborative creativity and care often left out of traditional craft conversations which tend to favor individualist approaches with fierce independence and rugged—which mostly means abled—willpower.

But if disabled writers try to follow ableist writing advice, we risk injury. Worse still, we risk erasure. We hurt our bodies. We hurt our minds. We hurt our spirits because this is what internalized ableism does to disabled creators who believe they must endure pain in order to be valued. The methods by which I used to be a storyteller have ceased to function. In fact, I recognize the ways my rigid adherence to abled writing practices and the rigors of academia and professional writing have harmed my body and brain. Physicians have assured me that my disability has been worsened by hours spent at a desk trying to ignore my body in order to write the worlds in my mind. If disabled writers adhere to ableist writing advice, many of us will be unable write at all, our stories destined to be written by others or altogether silenced.

Here are some ways you might build a more accessible writing practice:

Write in brief moments of time. If your body and brain do not allow for long stretches of writing, claim five minutes as the right amount of time. This book was written in fifteen and twenty-minute intervals over many days spread across many weeks and months. If producing a few hundred words in a few hours will injure you so much that you will be unable to write for several days or weeks, aim to write for a handful of minutes every few days. While this might not seem as “serious” or “dedicated” as the writing world might have you believe, adding these pieces together will leave you with roughly the same amount of writing and you will not harm yourself so much that you are unable to write in the future.

Get rid of numerical output goals. Berating yourself for not writing 1,000 words a day or five days a week is detrimental to both the craft of creativity and the craft of care. If you are consumed with an arbitrary number, you will lose any pleasure derived from writing to this external focus and you may also push yourself harder to try and achieve it, injuring yourself in the process. Instead, aim to write when you can—even if this is a line you compose while in the bathtub or an image you discover while waiting for a medical appointment—and claim this as worthy progress.

Schedule breaks in your writing sessions. A disabled life is a life interrupted. We have little control over when our symptoms will flair, and less still over when our physicians will be able to see us or our insurance will deny us coverage. Any chronically ill, disabled, or neurodivergent person will tell you that existing is a full-time job where rest is an essential task. Scheduling breaks into your writing sessions can be crucial to tend to your body and brain so that you are able to write, even for just a few moments. I schedule stretch breaks every ten or fifteen minutes and I step away from my computer (well, my microphone) and use physical therapy equipment to stretch my body. Because I can be easily absorbed by my work, I set timers to remind me when to rest and when to stop for the day. My stopping point is a predetermined time based on my body's ability rather than my progress. You may find that you need to schedule breaks to eat, drink water, take medication, lie down, use the restroom, stim, or any of the many ways we must tend to ourselves so we can tend to our writing. Reframing breaks as part of the writing—like saving your work or reading what you wrote in the previous session—can help integrate them more easily into your process.

Similarly, incorporate breaks in your writing schedule to manage your energy. Time is a limited resource, crip time even more so. Instead of framing pain management or routine care as deficits that take away from our work, schedule sustained breaks into your writing schedule. For example, if you struggle with depression during the winter months, consider summer to be your primary time for productivity and leave winter open for rest and mental health care. If your bipolar manias peak during busy times of the year like back-to-school season or the holidays, empty your writing schedule during these times. If you are autistic and tend to experience burnout towards the end of a work week, try to schedule extra time to accommodate this. To assist with spoon management, you might build buffer days into your weekly, monthly or quarterly schedule that allow you to rest without shame. With several upcoming surgeries, I have cleared my writing calendar for the next few months. I am not taking on new projects, and I have gotten rid of internal and external deadlines, as I will simply be unable to do work during that time. Since I tend to forget my abilities, or mercilessly overestimate them, I also keep a list of circumstances and times of the day, week, month, and year when I struggle to write due to my various disabilities. Instead of pushing myself to the point of burnout or injury during these times and then denigrating my failure, I schedule extended writing breaks into these times. With breaks on my To Do list, I am not a failure, but a productive person doing what the boss (a.k.a. me!) deems best for my body and brain. This is especially important when writing is not your full-time employment. Working to pay bills, maintain health insurance, tend to loved ones, and carry on in a burning world is difficult enough without the expectation that we can and should find time to write in every free moment of our lives, without this impacting our health.

Reframe gathering inspiration, taking notes, and reflecting as part of the process. We often neglect to acknowledge that pondering, collecting information and ideas, getting inspired by other art, and enjoying our lives is a crucial part of creativity. Every writer needs to step away from the manuscript and live well in order to write well, but for disabled, chronically ill, and neurodivergent writers who operate with fewer spoons, this is imperative. When our lives are so full of pain, of symptom management, of medical (mis)treatment, of navigating the traumas of external and internalized ableism, it is important to remember that we deserve pleasure and frivolity as much as we deserve serious dedication to our work. Some things on my list of writing necessities are: gardening and learning about horticulture, walking in nature, rolling on the floor with my dog, listening to fun stim songs dozens of times in a row, collecting unique rocks, wearing brightly patterned cartoon pajamas, watching old reality shows on repeat. Reframe your notions of what "counts" as writing to acknowledge that what brings you joy will often bring you inspiration.

In fact, reframe physical and mental care as part of your writing practice. It is easy to consider these disruptions as thieves of time and energy, as distractions from our creative work. But hundreds of hours of talk therapy allowed me to write *Quite Mad*, just as over 2,000 hours of physical therapy (and counting!), as well as endless medical appointments with spinal specialists, physical therapists, hand specialists, hip specialists, MRI technicians, massage therapists, and neurologists have allowed me to write this book. Tending to your body and mind is a way to tend to your work.

Set disabled deadlines and expectations for yourself. Social media would have it seem as though the publishing world moves at a rapid pace, writers producing prolific works in small journals and large outlets, while also regularly churning out books they promote on interviews, podcasts, and elaborate book tours frequented with writer's residencies and guest speaker positions at elite universities. This simply isn't true, and it is even less true when you are chronically ill. Shouldering the burden of this pressure alone can be enough to break the disabled body, so remove this weight entirely. Setting goals around practice instead of product will help. Instead of determining to write a book by a certain date, try to work on this book whenever you can write. You might keep track of how many times a day you think about your project and consider the immense amount of energy this requires, even if you didn't produce a single word. You might keep track of how many pieces of art (books, articles, images, cloud formations in the sky) you study. Instead of determining to write a certain number of words a day, try to write a certain number of times over a longer period of time, like six months, or a year, or more. Better still, keep track of how many months or years or decades you worked at writing at all. Several times in my disabled writing life, the boldest, most productive thing I did was to keep showing up, to say that I was a writer even when I was struggling. This has kept me going when I was mentally and physically unable to write, when time clotted around pain, when I did not recognize myself or my world because of my illness. When I declared myself a writer, it was my greatest act of narrative. Since my spinal injuries, the only writing goal I have set for myself was to keep going. It has been nearly two years, and I consider this something to celebrate.

Set disabled deadlines and expectations for others. Some editors expect a quick turnaround time, which can be difficult to accomplish by most writers with busy schedules, but especially if you are symptomatic or struggling, if you are seeking or recovering from treatment. If you feel comfortable, inform editors of your availability. Since doing so can be a great source of shame for many, reframe your language so that your body and brain are not something to apologize for. Instead of "My apologies for how long it has taken me to respond" or "I'm so sorry, but I've been very ill," try "Thank you for your patience on my response" or "Thank you for providing accommodations." You can also call attention to ableist practice or technologies. You can contact a magazine directly to explain that Submittable is not accessible for you and ask to email a submission instead. You can ask an editor who accepts your work for voice notes or other forms of feedback if Microsoft Word track changes is not accessible. Ask early rather than wait for an offer that might never arrive. Many times, editors simply don't know what accommodations will work best for you, so be your own first and best advocate. Many editors will be happy to provide accommodations so that they can work with you, but if accepting your art is contingent upon ableist practices, these voices and venues may not be ones with which you want to collaborate.

Additional things you might request: extended time to complete writing, alternate formats for editing or submitting, Q&A questions ahead of live events, ASL interpreters, sensory friendly accommodations, meeting times that accommodate your medical schedules or neurodivergent routines, increased payment. While a request is not a guarantee, over the years navigating the publishing world as a disabled writer, my ability to negotiate for my needs or turn down opportunities has strengthened, and I have found that many of my requests have been happily met or exceeded by writing community members.

Focus on active rather than passive rest. When you are disabled, chronically ill, or neurodivergent, it can be difficult to think of rest as anything other than a punishment, the result of being ill or different. Capitalistic hustle culture does little to help this feeling, insisting instead, that if we are not always working for the next best thing (though usually without proper compensation), we are somehow failing, somehow the reason our lives are not financially, emotionally, or even physically better. But internalizing this shame depletes the benefits of rest. If our rest is consumed by guilt or by trying to force productivity, we rob ourselves of its power and our worth.

You deserve to rest. You deserve to take care of your mind, body, and spirit. You deserve to do this not only when you are ill, but also when you are well, so that you might avoid the burnout cycle so common in our crip community. Learn to rest effectively. This can look like many things to many people, but for me it typically involves disengaging from screens in favor of the natural world and consuming pleasure—art, literature, food—that replenishes me rather than reminding me of the ways in which I am hurting. As a body and mind in chronic pain, I use rest as a form of sensory regulation and as a pleasure-seeking activity, a quest for comfort in whatever form it takes—dark rooms, white noise machines, soft socks, warm water, childhood books, collecting autumn leaves, listening to rain, watching trees from underneath their canopies, long days of silence. While it can be difficult to imagine time to rest in our busy lives, rest can be as simple as saying "no" to tasks and obligations that do not serve you. These might include taking on another project, going to a dinner party, or letting a casual acquaintance "pick your brain" over coffee. You might eat the same meals or wear the same clothes to conserve energy. You might clear your social calendar for a few weeks to sit with yourself. You might set aside an evening or an hour each week as a "self-date" time where you can do whatever it is you want or need to recharge, a blissful moment to anticipate with regularity. Remember, however, that rest is not a time to catch up or do chores, but a time to replenish. Schedule rest as a nonnegotiable appointment, like a work meeting or doctor's appointment. Do not explain or justify it to anyone, including yourself. If rest is difficult for you—as it is for many—you might keep a list on hand of things that provide you peace or comfort so that you can refer to this list when you are overwhelmed or in pain. While learning to rest will help with your writing, it is important to remember that resting should have nothing to do with writing. Rest is its own act of agency and narrative, so dedicate yourself to the craft of rest as much as any other.

PART IV: DESIGNING DISABLED WRITING SPACES

Similarly, the writing spaces prescribed and valued by many are those that actively injure disabled writers. Universities and community writing centers hold in-person classes in inaccessible buildings with inaccessible furniture, relying on hardcopy texts and spur-of-the-moment writing exercises often completed by hand. Writing workshops, residencies, and bookstore events are held in abled spaces, often requiring writers to relocate or travel, to be physically present for hours at a time with little flexibility for virtual access or alternate attendance. Despite the pandemic, conferences remain inaccessible to disabled writers, institutions insisting instead that disabled people absorb great personal cost to attend in-person events where there is little organization done to provide accessibility, and few mitigation attempts made to ensure the safe participation of disabled people in the conference. And coffee shops, libraries, shared workspaces, parks, and other community spaces, whose access is rapidly dwindling in today's capitalistic pay-to-play society, present similar challenges.

Most of my days are pain days, time compressing around ache. Migraine snakes around my skull, making screens a wound. My joints throb, my hip and spine misalign, muscles unable to find comfort in most seated positions. I have long struggled to write with the use of an in-class prompt, unable to relax enough with the onslaught of sensory distraction to focus, let alone enjoy, the act of writing, churning out masked performance on the page for participation, only to rewrite the piece entirely from the creative sanctuary of my sensory safe space later. Uncomfortable chairs, the tick of a clock or hum of the air conditioning, the smell of another student's shampoo or the whiteboard markers, and the headache blur of florescent lights leave me incapacitated most days spent in a classroom. And now, with my spinal injuries, I am unable to access classrooms entirely, unable to drive to the campus, unable to sit in the furniture, unable to hold the books or pens used to write, unable to look down at a desk or up at a board without aggravating the injury in my neck. I am unable to learn or write in the linear time of a class or course, unable to return day after day, unable to deliver the strict daily or weekly performance required without injuring myself further. I know better than to try to force my disabled body into abled spaces.

But disabled writers are rich innovators. We find new places to work. We find new means to story tell. We design writing spaces that reflect the reality of our days. We build literary worlds at doctors' offices where we are told we are broken. We jot notes while waiting for physical therapists, for radiologists, for pharmacists. We discover—in the isolating moments of pain and the stigma of shame—a poem, an essay, a fictional world better than our own. And because we create in unexpected places, we also create unexpected literature—disabled writers are some of the most imaginative because we know what it is like to try and live in an inaccessible world.

Here are some ways you might build a more accessible writing space:

Fill your writing space with the various tools you need to write and afford yourself safety and comfort. Pillows, heating pads, and pain medications fill my desk drawers and office closet. I rotate between sitting and standing at my desk, between perching on a physical therapy ball and several different kinds of physical therapy cushions. A microphone and software allow me to speak rather than type. Noise-cancelling headphones allow me to reduce the sounds of traffic, airplanes, even humming electricity that can lead to sensory overload. You might include stim objects, weighted blankets, food, timers, medications, mobility aids, and assistive technologies. Rather than keeping personal and professional tools separate, integrate them together as essentials for your writing space. If budget allows, you might customize your space with desks that help users to move between positions, or lighting that allows you to adjust intensity, contrast, or position to help with glare. You might invest in ergonomic keyboards, chairs, or even beds that allow you to reposition yourself. It is important, of course, to note that accessible furniture and assistive software can be incredibly cost prohibitive, but stacking books on a counter to create a standing desk or using a recorder or the read aloud option on your tablet or phone can work just as well. Sometimes investing in tools to further our work is worth far more than costly submission or conference fees.

Shift between spaces to accommodate shifting symptoms. Move from space to space to soothe your body, mind, and spirit enough for stories. These spaces can and will change, perhaps in a single session, as your body and brain respond to your work. While I wrote my first book at a graduate school desk, I wrote most of my second away from my desk, in various spaces around the house, alternating between sitting, standing, or lying down, in a mixture of typed, handwritten, and recorded forms depending on my fluctuating abilities. I've written sitting and standing at desks, but also at the dining room table, in the bathtub, in bed, on the floor, in a doctor's office. Sometimes I write while pacing, either as a form of stimming or to relieve chronic pain. Contemporary work from home advice warns against mixing personal and professional spaces, but disabled writers often mix these spaces, our identities not so easily divided. On especially bad pain days, I alternate between spaces, sometimes moving a dozen or more times in the span of writing just a few paragraphs.

Remove barriers between you and your writing space. Your space should be sensory friendly and as easy to get to as possible, close to food, bathrooms, and places to rest. You might move your writing space close to your bathroom or your bedroom, or you might write from the bathtub or the bed itself. Since my neurodivergence makes it difficult for me to work in public spaces, I have always written, for example, from home. My home office is now also my physical therapy room, my need to integrate the two a barrier that would prevent me from writing if I did not combine the spaces. And my office is only two steps across the hall from my bedroom, where I do much of my work.

Remove objects from your writing space that do not serve you. In my home office, I have a few small bookcases, and a chair and ottoman where I occasionally sit, but my writing space is mostly empty. Prior to my spinal injuries, I read primarily digital books, because while physical books are beautiful, reading hardcopies hurts my spine After, I relied solely on audiobooks, as I am unable to hold physical books in my nerve damaged hands. I do not collect many objects, because cleaning is a task best reserved for those with the time to do it. I, however, operate on crip time, a deficit that leaves disabled people with far fewer working hours in the day. I have also emptied my office because I require extra space to stim and stretch, the way others may require space for a wheelchair, a rollator, cane, or other mobility device. We often think of writing as an act of stillness. For me it is one of restlessness. I require space to be a brain and body in motion, rather than to display the artifacts—stacks of books, collections of notebooks, special pens, framed diplomas—the abled world would insist make me a writer.

Protect yourself. Writing can already be a risky business, but chronically ill, disabled, and neurodivergent writers must take extra caution. You can make writing spaces safer by adding grab bars for mobility and removing carpets, cords, and other tripping hazards, or by utilizing low slip flooring that will hold up to mobility aids. You can also wear assistive shoes, and utilizing cushioned floor pads may also help reduce injury as well as pain. If light can be a challenge, consider wearing blue light glasses or investing in blackout curtains. If noise causes you pain, try implementing a white noise machine or noise canceling headphones. To increase access, you can replace doorknobs with levers or add drawer pulls. And smart home technology for locks, lights, thermostats, window shades, cooking devices, cleaning devices, computers, music, timers, and other things can vastly improve your writing and living experience. Finally, if social media apps deplete your limited energy or are detrimental to your mental health, try simply deleting them.

Consider cataloguing your work on large surface areas. If putting things away is challenging or if you require visual stimulation to prompt your thought, use a large table, the floor, and even your bed to lay out your books and notes. If this is not feasible because of space or because clutter can be a challenge, try cataloguing your work with a dry erase board or sticky notes, making mind maps of text and task to remind you of your project and stimulate your momentum. Remember, however, this should not be a source of shame. If these displays make you doubt your progress or send you into a guilt spiral over your lack of progress, take them down.

Similarly, consider empty space as a method. If you experience sensory overload, become inundated during the writing process, or simply need a grounding place to start, try creating a small restorative space to reset. You might devote a corner or wall of your writing space to emptiness with no visual stimulation, incorporating white noise machines, earplugs, noise cancelling headphones, blackout curtains, or other objects to help sensory regulation.

Create documents, templates, and systems that work best for you. When time, energy, and ability are limited, any shortcut can help. You might create formatting templates for frequently used documents like cover letters, pitch emails, away messages, and others. You might create organizational systems like calendars, timers, or flowcharts to help you complete projects, remember to send submissions, and keep track of writing goals alongside medical appointments and required periods of rest. If you tend to focus on work at the expense of yourself, you might create systems that prioritize wellness and self-care before work and submissions. This creates a more cohesive schedule you can follow to ensure you do not injure yourself or experience burnout. Consider both digital, physical, and audio options for each of these. I require frequent visual cues to stay on track, as well as the rush that comes from marking a completed task, so I utilize a posterboard and sticky note system divided into categories for a quarter, a month, and a week to keep me on track working toward personal and professional tasks—including rest and necessary self-care—without overloading my schedule to the point of injury. I've also used various apps, calendars, and even paper chains to help organize and motivate me.

Reject ableist writing spaces. While it may seem fashionable to write in coffee shops or bars, many of these spaces are inaccessible (as are many classroom spaces, conferences, or prestigious writers' residencies). When we actively reject these spaces in favor of ones we make for ourselves—in our homes, in care facilities, in online communities—it can result in a greater sense of artistic agency, identity, and purpose, as well as a more productive and purposeful use of our limited time and energy. This does not mean that you must reject these spaces altogether—many actively seek out these spaces and advocate for their needs!—but remember it is not the sole responsibility of disabled, chronically ill, and neurodivergent people to educate and facilitate change in order to receive access.

Acknowledge that developing a disabled writing space takes time, energy, and resources, so make this part of your writing practice as opposed to a barrier you must move through to get to the act of writing. For the last few years, most of my creative energy has been spent innovating my space so that I might innovate my work. I have invested resources normally reserved for promoting my work into promoting my practice, and while this may seem less "productive" by traditional conventions, the return is far more profitable.

Acknowledge that your body and brain can and will change. Your writing space should reflect this dynamism, capable of shifting and changing depending on your various needs. Learn to be prepared to work if you can and be prepared to accept if you can't. This is an essential element of craft—the art of revision. I revise my perception of myself and my practice, revise my belief about my body and brain, revise my expectations on a day-to-day basis. Still, I remain hopeful I might jot down a few words as I shuffle from space to space in search of even a moment of relief. I am grateful for the stability of my desk, the comfort of my bed, the innovation of technology, and a crip community who has shared so much about developing safe spaces. Pain is disorienting, pulling us from the moment of imagination into the reality of hurt, but with innovation, we can create space that welcomes the words.

PART V: DISCOVERING A DISABLED FORM AND STRUCTURE

Although I have been both a student and a professor in traditional writing programs, I have written all of my books in ways that defy the teachings of many creative writing programs. I wrote my memoir, *Quite Mad*, during years of intense mental illness, and as a result, the book does not follow a conventional narrative arc. Instead, I organized it via the flashbacks of trauma and illness, my personal narrative of temporal and logical leaps interspersed with research about the history of psychopharmacology and medical sexism in America. It is a book that privileges madness rather than memory, disabled ways of knowing and being rather than those preferred by sanist audiences. My second book, *Halfway from Home*, was written in short bursts of scattered time between increasing physical symptoms. As a writer with daily chronic pain, I found it increasingly difficult to write for long stretches of time, or with a singular focus, and instead learned in the years after my graduate workshops how to write in ways that not only supported my disabled identity but actually reflected it. As a result, the essays in this collection are lyric and nonlinear, comprised of braided segments and collages that weave multiple identities and rely on the sensory experiences I was often accused of constructing. Both books resist simple structures and tidy resolution, the kinds of work I could not have written if I had followed the advice of well-meaning workshop colleagues who told me to simplify and justify, who privileged the linearity and resolution afforded by the abled world.

Now that my ability to write is limited to fifteen to twenty-minute intervals every few days, weeks or months, I've revised my form and structure again. My next book, *Abbreviate*, is a collection of flash essays short enough to be composed in a single writing session, but whose form reveals what can be accomplished in short bursts of time and energy. It is my hope that this form—a genre blurring prose and poetry—reveals the craft that can be discovered by disabled voices. And yet, these essays would never have been accepted by my graduate writing workshops, which had strict genre labels and stricter page requirements to justify the "academic rigor" of our work. More than once, a student who failed to meet the page requirements was chastised by the workshop for procrastination, for having undeveloped ideas, for not taking their work as seriously as writers working on epic novels, lengthy memoirs, crowns of sonnets.

This book, *Nerve*, is perhaps my most radical revision of form and structure. Conventional craft books run for many pages, far more than this. They detail the writer's ideas alongside canonical legends, interspersed with writing exercises deemed one-size-fits all, but this is not an accurate reflection of the chronically ill, disabled, and neurodivergent experience. We are not reflected in these pages, these performances, these prescriptive practices, and I cannot write a craft book like this because I cannot craft from a book like this. To write a book about the craft of being a writer when I have written little in the last few years requires reinvention. Like a chapbook, my craft has always been a brief experiment, fragmented and distilled here into the methods that allow me to survive so that I may exist on the page. I cannot write you a tome because I cannot hold one, because I cannot hope to read or learn or execute work from one the way that an abled writer might expect. I cannot tell you to prioritize your work more than your worth, for resting is a more important craft than writing. I would fail by the standards set forth in most of these books, and so I reject them entirely. Instead, I offer you this strange book, crafted the only way I know how—through trial and failure, through found time and mustered energy, scrawled in lists and paragraphs in doctor's offices and medical clinics, a collage of the only ways I am able to tell this story.

Here are some ways to discover a disabled form and structure:

If you have brief functional moments in the day, or week, or month, or year, make your work brief as well. Short poems and flash or micro prose are powerful forms of storytelling and brevity is not a deficit, despite what fans of the lengthy Great American novel or epic poem might argue. Instead, abbreviation can be a powerful means of agency, precision, and purpose. Be sure, however, to actively claim brevity, rather than resort to it if a full-length project does not work out.

Utilize sections and segments. If it is impossible to write for lengthy durations of time, it can feel impossible to sustain a single narrative or form. Instead, model your work on your schedule, your structure mimicking your lived experience. If you only have ten or fifteen minutes to write at a time, compose short standalone sections each time you write and arrange them together like a puzzle or collage in a way that creates meaning. Because my pain levels prevent me from writing for any length of time, many of my projects utilize brief sections that coalesce around a unifying theme or image. I think of this form or writing like a game of Tetris, one that allows me to translate my lived disabled experience—brief scattered moments, fragmented and layered, nonlinear and cyclical—onto the page.

Do not force transitions. The disabled experience is one free from transition, one where symptoms can flare at any moment, where there is little explanation for why your life is one way in one moment and another entirely the next. A disabled life can be disorienting and fragmented, a life of sharp contrast—life before versus after diagnosis, desires versus reality, the disabled experience versus the abled world—so make your work reflect this. Try removing explanations that shift leaders easily from one moment to the next. Let readers experience the jarring movements of your experience on the page by incorporating juxtaposition and irregularity, unexpected and unexplained shifts.

Model your structure on your sense of time. As we discussed, crip time radically reconceptualizes temporality for the disabled, chronically ill, and neurodivergent experience. Our concept of time is irregular, episodic, cyclical. We do not experience time linearly and our lives are not marked by the same measures the abled world values. Instead, time is a scarce resource, dwindling and periodic, full of stops and interruptions, gaps and erasures. You do not need to tell your stories linearly or even fully. You might write nonlinearly, starting at the end and working your way back to the beginning, or moving between two or more time periods or two or more versions of a speaker. You might erase time entirely, leaving readers with gaps and missing moments like you have experienced in life. Your work does not need to value the linearity of abled temporality or employ its methods. Instead, transport the reader to your sense of time through your structure on the page.

Do not force resolution. Forcing a tidy conclusion can be a detriment to any work, but this is especially damaging to work by disabled writers. So much of our experience defies resolution—chronic conditions, worsening symptoms throughout our lifetimes, comorbidities, navigating the abled world, combating the dangers of the American medical system. To strive for this in our work is to tell an inaccurate story. By forcing ourselves to find closure on the page or to imply to readers that resolution is possible is to defy our lived experiences. Instead, let your work linger in uncertainty, in the gray area of making a life in a world that does not make space for us. You do not owe readers a resolution you have never received.

Try braiding various threads to incorporate overlapping stories. A disabled life is a tangled life, and it often feels as though we are holding many strings, grasping at threads as we try to weave a framework together. It can be difficult to separate a single story from the tangle of personas we utilize on a daily basis. Instead, try weaving various threads together within a single piece. You might write an essay about your experience with online dating that incorporates a separate thread about the history of your neurodivergent special interest or a researched thread about the invention of MRI technology. You might write a poem about gardening that incorporates a thread about psychopharmacology. Not only will weaving threads together allow you to more accurately reflect on the complexity of your lived experience, it can also provide rich and unexpected connections.

Model your body of work on your physical body. If mental illness has left you with gaps in memory, replicate these on the page through missing context or blank space. If chronic pain has been a constant interruption to your life, try employing footnotes to physically replicate the experience of interruption for your readers. If neurodivergence makes you sensory-seeking or sensory-avoidant, utilize this in the work, creating long, lush passages of sensory pleasure or stark absences of sensory detail. If your experience with disability, chronic illness, and neurodivergence makes you feel a sense of erasure, consider using erasure in your work, redacting parts of your writing or using erasure on your previous work or your birth records or Internet history. If your experience with disability, chronic illness, and neurodivergence makes you feel disconnected from the body and brain, try writing in the second person to replicate that distance, or writing in the form of medical notes to create further distance from the narrator. The body and brain are not a detriment to the work, they are a source of inspiration, and can, quite literally, reveal the forms and structures that best serve our stories.

Reconsider the difference between private versus public writing. Disabled people are often required to conceal their conditions, including in public and employment spaces, and even from friends and family who might not understand or be supportive of their needs. Neurodivergent people, in particular, employ the use of masks to be more well-received by the abled world, a process that is physically, mentally, and emotionally detrimental. Many of us use public-facing personas in order to navigate the abled world, reserving our disabled selves for private spaces, yet often these private selves are our most authentic, our most powerful. Consider subverting the expectations of public versus private selves, incorporating private forms of writing including diaries, letters, text messages, selfies, photo albums, playlists, internet histories, and others into the form or structure of your work.

Utilize found texts as a structure for your work. Disabled, chronically ill, and neurodivergent people discover all sorts of innovations to assist them with daily life, so utilize this frame of thinking in your work. You might write a poem about disabled caretaking in the form of a recipe, a short story about mental illness utilizing the form of an online dating profile, or an essay about chronic pain in the form of a word search. Found forms can amplify the themes of a piece, demonstrating the ideas you are discussing through your choice of text or your telling. They can also provide containers to house unfamiliar or uncomfortable stories, offering convenient ways into complex narratives and providing writers and readers the narrative distance that is sometimes required of difficult stories.

You might choose a form that complements the story you are trying to tell to create cohesion or one that juxtaposes it to create tension through contrast. Some other forms to consider: an encyclopedia, a To Do list, a Choose Your Own Adventure tale, an annotated playlist, a crossword puzzle, a receipt, an acceptance or rejection letter, a bill, a series of social media posts, a game of Pictionary, a game of hangman, screens from a videogame, museum placards, a map, a history textbook, a report card, a calendar, tarot cards, horoscopes, nutrition information, and virtually any other physical or virtual text you encounter.

Medical records and reports seek to tell the stories of our disabled lives for others to easily digest, so reclaim these as found forms for your work. Some medical documents to utilize as found forms include: a prescription insert, a medical history, a doctor's intake form, the doctor's notes following your appointment, a pain scale, the diagram of a body, the results of a medical scan, surgery preparation instructions, HIPAA waivers, and many others. Many patients find the medical industry dehumanizing, cold and clinical, devoid of mutual respect and trust, so co-opting these texts to tell the truth of your experience can be a powerful form of reclamation. A process like this affords us the opportunity for sharp satire or to share our own stories in a world that would erase us.

Finally, remember that these strategies regarding form and structure are not just for work about disability, chronic illness, and neurodivergence. As previously discussed, we are not obligated to write solely about these identities, and we can—and should—claim any subject. But these strategies are ways to unlock our power as writers by embracing our lived experiences rather than writing to resist them and letting the expectations of others block our potential. No matter what you are writing about, allowing your brain and body to experiment and innovate is a form of resistance against ableist methodologies, and can allow you to discover the disabled forms and structures that best serve your work.

PART VI: THE BUSINESS OF BEING A WRITER

Publishing is a largely inaccessible industry that thrives on privilege. Socioeconomically powerful writers or legacy writers with industry access are more likely to find success than working class or first-generation writers; male writers dominate the literary landscape compared to women and nonbinary writers; straight writers fill literary magazines and publishing catalogs at a disproportionate rate compared to LGBTQ+ writers; and abled writers are more likely to be published than their disabled peers, even when it comes to narratives about disability, chronic illness, or neurodivergence. It is already difficult for disabled writers with limited time, resources, and ability to produce work, but it can be even more difficult to navigate the process of seeking publication, building a platform, and publicizing our work. Many of the strategies used by abled writers—large-scale submissions, attending events, and utilizing social media—are not available to disabled writers, and as such, as always, we must develop our own strategies to build our business as writers.

Here are some ways to build your business as a writer:

Pitching is a vital, though often overlooked, component of the market. It is widely known that publishing lacks representation for many marginalized groups. There are few publishing houses or magazine mastheads that include disabled editors, and fewer still have mentions of disability in mission statements or open calls for submissions. Rather than letting these realities dissuade you from submitting, use this as a selling point for why venues should publish your work. Lead with your important insights, calling editors' attention to the need for disabled voices and stories. Your pitch might include something along the lines of "Your publication does a wonderful job of representing unique perspectives and I would like to offer a disability point of view to strengthen your mission." Offering to work collaboratively provides a mutually beneficial arrangement for both you and the publication, opening up a dialogue for opportunity, rather than harsh critique or cold rejection. Many of my publications—including this book!—came from reaching out directly to editors to discuss how adding conversations around disability, chronic illness, and neurodivergence could enhance their offerings. While it can be intimidating to pitch your work like this, many editors are eager to expand their offerings and collaborate.

Readjust your output. This does not necessarily mean doing less—though you certainly might do so if this best supports your body and brain—but rather, target your focus on the opportunities that best serve you and your work. Writers are often told to target every market, to seize every opportunity, to write as much as possible for many venues and to post frequently on social media about all sorts of subjects. But targeting your output not only saves you precious spoons, but also can be a more effective strategy for building your business as a writer. Consider which opportunities best reflect your work, your audience, and your goals. Graduate school insisted the best way for me to establish myself as a writer was to work tirelessly for free. As a result, I edited for several literary magazines, worked on several literary boards, worked on graduate student boards, participated in reading series, presented at various conferences, assisted my university by holding events, and even assisted faculty with their own projects, all of which took away from the time I had to tend to myself and to my work. This is not to say that I didn't enjoy some of this work—I learned valuable skills and built a rich network of colleagues and friends whose work continues to inspire me—but it certainly did not do as much for my career as I hoped. What has helped my career is making time to write and submit, but, more importantly, serving the disability community by reviewing books, working as an editor at journals whose missions I value, and uplifting writers I admire, including marginalized or emerging writers who are publishing with small or independent presses, or those who have yet to publish books.

Don't compare yourself to the voices on social media who reinforce capitalist values and define your worth by your work. Social media is for finding community and for cat photos—if it becomes a competition, close it immediately. Social media is pitched to us as a form of connection, but for many, it can deplete us. After my injuries, I remain largely unable to use a phone or computer and am only able to perform what I call "a few clicks a day" before the nerve damage in my limbs begins to ache and my spinal injuries pulse. While I sometimes use these clicks to connect with friends on social media or engage in the writing world, sometimes these clicks lead to bad hot takes, the latest literary scandal, terrible news about another terrible man getting a book deal, or the announcement of another publishing house going under. I have learned to be deliberate with my social media use, shifting away from the collective chaos so often spurred by these platforms and toward the collective care of disabled communities and kin who offer advice and support.

Consider virtual events and book tours. While it might seem glamorous to go on a book tour, the truth is that traveling between cities and states while juggling other personal and professional responsibilities, trying to maintain your health in an ongoing pandemic, and absorbing financial costs for limited (sometimes even nonexistent) audiences is taxing for any writer. Yet we insist that this is a necessary part of the business of being a writer, essential if we want others to read our work or follow us online. But remote offerings provide alternate ways of holding events, accessible means of promotion that do not have to cost disabled writers so much. While you may still want to hold in-person events like community readings, book signings, or book launch parties, consider adding virtual events to widen your reach. For my first book, I set out on a fifteen-city, multistate tour that left me in chronic pain and with a neurodivergent burnout that lasted many months.

My second book tour, which took place during the pandemic, was all-virtual and allowed me to visit a dozen cities and several states without risking my health or the safety of attendees and bookstore workers, collaborating with authors, venues, and readers in locations across a wide reach of the country, including locations where I normally wouldn't tour in person, and people were still able to purchase signed books through bookstores or my publisher via signed bookplates.

Negotiate terms and agreements. You might request additional time to work, virtual rather than in-person accommodations, or even additional payment, depending upon the project. For example, if an event is going to be held in the evening, you might negotiate an earlier start time to conserve your energy. Similarly, you might negotiate a virtual event rather than an in-person event if this is best for your body and brain. If a reading or speaking engagement involves extensive travel or asks you to discuss traumatic issues surrounding your disability, you might negotiate for increased payment due to the impact of this event on your health. While this does not guarantee that you will receive the terms, it does allow you to determine which projects will be most beneficial to you, and which projects might cost you more than they are worth.

Carefully consider your travel. Many events like classes and conferences, readings and residencies require writers to travel, which can come at great cost to disabled people. Carefully consider what locations and events you find it worthwhile to travel to, calculating not only the financial cost, but the physical and mental cost you undertake. If you find these events to be prohibitive, consider closer alternatives or virtual options. For example, you might meet with local writers for a do-it-yourself writer's retreat, or create one in your own home by clearing your schedule for a few days to focus on your work. You might organize an online writing group or take online classes. If travel is possible, be deliberate about tending to your body and brain along the way. You might drive rather than fly, shorten or extend your travel, schedule periods of rest before or after travel, invest in accessible tools and technologies to make travel more comfortable, schedule time for sensory regulation, and set clear boundaries around your needs so that you can avoid physical and mental burnout. Remember, these events should nurture and sustain, not deplete you, so be deliberate about your choices.

Focus your efforts on discovering your editors and audience. This is true for any writer, but especially for disabled, chronically ill, and neurodivergent writers whose work is often ignored or misunderstood by mainstream publishing. Rather than spending limited spoons submitting to publications that do not support disabled voices or who publish ableist work, locate editors who will be most receptive to your work. This might include journals or presses specifically focused on publishing work by disabled writers, but you can also look through recent journal issues or book catalogs to see if they have published disabled writers. While you can certainly reach out about filling any gaps you see in a publication's representation (see previous tips on pitching), it is also beneficial to build a network of disability advocates and activists, disabled writers and readers. These are the people who will best understand your work and will champion it in their own communities. Rather than hoping to be validated by the abled publishing world, finding power within your own communities allows you to celebrate your work and connect with others, an important aspect of both the writing and disability experience, which are both often isolating.

Reconsider how you pay to play. It is expensive to be sick in this country, and, according to the US Department of Labor, disabled workers earn significantly less than their abled counterparts. Consider the cost you are willing to pay in order to build your business as a writer. Submission fees to journals, reading fees to presses, and entry fees for book prizes are increasingly prohibitive and exploitative, rewarding those with the ability to mass submit and pay extensive fees with greater odds for recognition. Writing programs, conferences, and residencies similarly reward writers that have the ability to pay. Publicists, web designers, photographers, and other professional personnel are also cost prohibitive, yet can seem like a crucial part of the publishing process, tools necessary to make your way in the writing world. But if you are living on a fixed income in constant flux due to the unpredictability of your illness, reconsider your approach to publishing by reconsidering the kinds of investments guaranteed to assist your work. I have never regretted investing in books, accessibility tools and technologies, and different kinds of therapeutic care that tend to my body and mind. I have regretted costly conference fees, submission fees, and book tours. Like good health, publishing is a world where the privileged prevail and it is easy to feel like you have little control, but reconsidering what you are willing to pay can help you take back some of this power and reposition your purpose.

Remember that your employment does not need to be directly related to writing or publishing in order to support your creative work. Many writers feel that in order to be considered professionals they must be employed as writers, teachers, editors, or in other adjacent positions. I've often seen writers saying that they feel less like "real" writers because they do not teach in universities, online programs, community centers, or do not work in literary publishing. But it is important to remember that we do not have to work for institutions that do not support us. There's much to be valued about employment outside of academic institutions and publishing, many of which exploit employees and actively injure disabled, chronically ill, and neurodivergent people. Consider employment opportunities with remote options, good healthcare, and other accommodations, rather than working to the point of injury or burnout for often exploitative institutions.

PART VII: RECOVERY

Recovery is a long, nonlinear process. I do not mean recovery from disability, chronic illness, or neurodivergence, for these are often not things we can recover from, and actually are, in many cases, inherent identities, unique ways of being and knowing, assets rather than the detriments ableist society would have us believe. Instead, what I mean is that we must work to recover from a lifetime of ableist writing advice. This collective advice is the ailment; we can and must recover from it if we are to write our disabled stories.

I am learning this in both my body and my body of work. There are days where I think I know what it means to live and write well, and days where I must unlearn, must begin again to discover disabled ways of being. Perhaps one of the most difficult lessons is how to recover not from the self, but from a world that does not serve us.

It is easy to feel like a failure when you are working within systems that were never designed for you. It is easy to assume responsibility for the injustices of the world when they are all you have been taught. And it is no wonder the abled world reinforces our inadequacies, for that does not require radical revision to teaching practices and educational structures. It places the onus for innovation and success on us, as though access is not a right.

Recently, I read the submission guidelines for a prestigious literary journal. As a previous contributor, I thought that perhaps my work might once again find a place in its pages. But the guidelines had been updated to include a list of subjects the editors "already saw a lot" and therefore discouraged. First on the list? "Stories about illness." This was listed alongside fiction about privileged families, cliché descriptions of the sun and sky, and the common creative writing joke about poems featuring birds. Thankfully there were no other identities listed as unworthy subjects, but the editors had no problem dismissing the subject of disability from its submission queue entirely. This blatant ableism, so casually cruel, also struck me as odd; in their list of "things we wish we saw more" editors asked for narratives with high-stakes, work that makes the familiar unfamiliar, pieces that reflect wider views and deal with current cultural and political discourses, and a range of other features inherent to disabled writing.

I think about the nerve of these editors and the larger publishing world to tell us our stories are not of interest. I think about the nerve it takes for the ableist writing workshop to teach us that our stories are not literary or important or marketable, and the nerve of our abled instructors and classmates to dismiss what we bring in good faith to the classroom and community. And I consider the nerve it takes to unlearn the resistance you have toward yourself, a resistance enforced through years of enduring ableism and abuse. I consider the nerve it takes to keep writing, to recover from ableist education, and to remake your writing practice entirely—refusing to force yourself into an ableist mold but instead breaking the mold entirely to rebuild your writing practice in an accessible way that empowers you.

It has been nearly two years since my spinal injuries and the start of my severe nerve damage. I have felt some relief, but mostly frustration, mostly the slow, steady recognition that my life will be different and difficult going forward. Though I have several surgeries and various medical procedures in the near future, these, like so many things in life, are not a guarantee. All that is certain is that I must continue hours of daily physical therapy in perpetuity if I am to avoid future injury. Like neurodivergence, chronic pain is my constant companion, as are the challenges of navigating a broken healthcare system and ableist world. Each aspect of my experience and survival seems counterintuitive to my art, and yet, when I create, I feel the freedom, peace, and joy that allow me to make something of this pain or perhaps even because of it.

Unlearning is a continual process with ebbs and flows, the way illness and disability shift and morph. Nothing is constant. Nothing is promised. But some things can be given. I do not know what the future holds for my body or brain. I do not know what the future holds for my work. But I have the knowledge of my innovation. I have the wisdom passed to me from the crip community. We are here despite a world that would have us erased. Our stories will not be silenced. We innovate in order to be able to create. And we have much to offer not just to each other, but to the larger world, if only they would accept our knowledge.

So I do my small part. I offer you this glimpse into my disabled writing life, this book I learned to write because I had the nerve to unlearn at all.

WRITING PROMPTS:

- Write the true story of a time no one believed you.
- Reclaim the act of using disability as a metaphor by inverting this ableist tradition. Find metaphors to describe disability, chronic pain, and neurodivergence rather than the other way around.
- Reclaim disability erasure by inverting this ableist tradition. Use erasure on your medical records, pill bottles, insurance forms, work or school medical leave reports, or other disabled documents to reclaim your story. Or try using footnotes to annotate these documents, providing two contrasting stories.
- Write about a disabled character where disability is not their only contribution to the narrative. Bonus points if you do not explain their disability in great detail.
- Write a piece featuring a disabled character where no medical diagnosis or symptom explanation is offered. Bonus points if there is no cure, if recovery isn't even the point.
- Write a world without abled characters. Create a default, disabled setting without offering readers explanation.
- Though the abled world prefers a cheerful cripple and inspirational stories about illness, write an angry or petty piece about terrible healthcare providers, awful medical procedures, or failing healthcare systems.
- Though the abled world prefers a pitiful cripple, write a piece showcasing disabled joy.
- Write a sex scene full of disabled desire, disabled lust, and love.
- Write a piece that celebrates your body and mind rather than cataloguing their deficits. Praise the disabled, chronically ill, and neurodivergent body and mind in all their glories.

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Sarah Fawn Montgomery is the author of *Quite Mad: An American Pharma Memoir*, which *The Paris Review* describes as "The wakeup call we need" and *The Atlantic* says, "Exemplifies a nuanced approach to life with mental illness." She is also the author of *Halfway from Home*, winner of a Nautilus Book Award for lyric prose, as well as three poetry chapbooks. *Abbreviate*, a collection of flash nonfiction, is forthcoming. She is an Associate Professor at Bridgewater State University, where she teaches creative writing and disability studies.