

Writing the Missing
A River Cycle

(Un)reliable disabled narrator & agitator – Lisette Auton

Chorus – verbatim text taken from interviews with seven disabled artists from the North East

Glossary of terms

i) North East

- *places and things that are just us. It is forgotten and yet surviving*
- *perpetually struggling, to be seen, to be heard*
- *wild and beautiful, ugly and industrial, it means factories and open seas and plumes of smoke and rugged coastlines*
- *of crab bucket mentality, who do you think you are?*
- *better, innit?*

ii) Disability Arts

- *art created by disabled people that in some way expresses something about the disabled person's experience*
- *own what we do without limitations, without any form of holding back*
- *exceptional work, the drive to create, radical art, pushing the boundaries, political*
- *it's about being me, and not meaning that me or my work is somehow less than*

iii) Crip Culture

- *cultural expression by disabled people of concepts that the non-disabled world may find uncomfortable or even shocking*
- *what it means to be disabled in a way that only other crips understand*

Source I

Torn twixt Tees and Tyne

I am river. I am sea. Dialect lives in the bend.

Words rush in currents never breaking the surface.

Breaking. Broken. Emerge now. Become a missing.

image description: young girl – freckles, blue corduroy dungarees, homemade bowl haircut – sits perched on a rock by the side of a full-flowing river, small smooth pebble clutched in hand, wonders why her brain feels like it belongs to the river.

calls herself: lazy, worthless, fraud, unworthy of love and friendship, waste of space, burden

image description: slumps in her wheelchair, face pale and clammy, 12 minutes in to the tribunal the doctor halts it: 'I don't know why you're even here', awards full Disability Living Allowance.

The girl, the woman, what is she now, thinks maybe they're lying, she's lying, the world is lying, that she is full of river stones.

Stones weigh you down; drown.

Is the sea still there? If I can't check, does it still exist? Salt water runs through my ancestors to me. Are they flung ashore, desiccating in the air? My brain is never to be trusted.

Is any of this real?

Water seeps underground

I was twenty-one, at university, living hard, partying hard, when an insignificant marginally elevated white blood cell count caused a seismic shift. My life would never be the same again. And how I desperately, fought, railed, wailed, broke myself again and again and again and again trying to reclaim what was lost forever, who was lost forever. From 'world's your oyster' to 'here is the small box room in your parent's house and here are the drawn curtains and here is the silence and here it is to be one of the missing. Here you will spend years'.

Old river carries mud

- *I was not even aware there was a Disability Arts scene until about 12–18 months ago*
- *the 1990s, and up to International Year of Disabled People in 2003² would be my estimation of the golden period. It was magical*
- *I think there might have been before I was an artist but I don't really know*
- *it definitely ended*

Rivers can flood, drowning communities.

Rivers can be dammed, killing life.

Rivers can be redirected, missing the point.

Rivers can dry up, wither and die.

Once, there was support for emerging disabled artists to access funding. Once, there was community in which to learn and grow. Once, there were incredible takeovers of mainstream venues. Once, there were scratch nights and cabarets in which new work could be trialled, aired, perfected; where you could belong without explanation. (Raging torrent)

These are no more. (We reserve the right to withdraw funding without notice at any time. We will flood/dam/redirect/drown)

This vibrant scene in the North East died before I was re-born as a disabled creative in 2009. Many creative disabled people in the North East mourn its passing and feel completely isolated. Many creative disabled people in the North East do not know what once existed here; the heritage is lost. (It is spoken in whispered river-tongue. It is a forgotten. A missing)

I was lost. (Follow the river, Lisette, follow the river)

Work suffers as a result. (Drowning)

People suffer. (Die)

Austerity drops its stone on the bed

i) The impact of austerity

- *we're so busy trying to survive, we don't have the time or the resources to do the art*

- austerity gives the lowest common denominator – cheapest person wins kind of mentality and disabled people can't win in that environment because there are things outside our control that make us more expensive

*- disabled funding has been disproportionately slashed to the bone
- it fuels the anger and passion to create.*

Would you like to:

- a) eat
- b) go to the toilet
- c) wash
- d) fill in these forms to appeal loss of benefits
- e) beg
- f) create world-changing art

(Please choose one answer)

ii) 25% of the population in the North East are disabled¹. Do disabled people take up 25% of the cultural and artistic space in the North East?

- we're constantly battling to even be in the room in the first place
- disabled people are 'too complicated'; 'too emotional'; 'create a poor product'; 'would benefit from more community engagement'; 'aren't well known enough for the big stages'
- what we need is 100% accessibility and not a clause within the Equality Act for 'reasonable adjustment'. Fuck reasonable adjustment. What we need is absolute access right
- of course we don't

Feel the anger. Feel the weary. Feel the fight. Feel the fear.
Feel the weary. Feel the fight drip, drip, dripping away.
Evaporating.

iii) The Table

There is no place at the Table. The Table is not accessible or of your making. You were not consulted when the meeting to purchase the Table was held. The Table that was high enough for wheelchair access and wide enough to incorporate BSL interpreters and PAs was out of stock, and the deadline meant we could not wait for it to be re-stocked. [~~Did anyone know we should have bought that Table?~~ – redacted] The Table was placed in a noisy building with steps and no hearing loop, no funding for Audio Description and bright white strips of flashing lights. Please come to the Table and tick boxes and then leave. We have heard your comments about the Table. Please provide comments about the Table. We have taken on board your comments about the Table. There is no budget/will/need/legal requirement to change the Table [delete as appropriate]. We are working on a mentoring scheme to let you glimpse the Table. The Table box has been ticked, comments have been assessed by those who bought the Table. The time for consultation has now passed.³

The hardness of the land dictates the shape

- originally it was coal mining. Ship building. Steel and glass works... What now, the car industry?

- call centres, shop work, public sector, education – 9-to-5

- it's this idea of extracting capital from abusing people's bodies in the North East... and I don't have a body that would let me

The timbre of the Tyne rushed through the voices of my parents, rushed helter-skelter to the sea from Shields North and South, and love flowed. The sea held their hearts together, beating, sounding with the gulls and the waves and the striking of the hammers in the shipyards where my grandad was always cold. The cold leached into him from ships of iron, climbing dark inside an airborne hull, making it watertight.

Humans aren't watertight.

Grandad hated the cold, the wet, the damp. Then the hammers fell silent and there was nothing left to hate.

Silence.

Once, men handed over pound notes to be given pocket money coins from a pinny-pocket. Once, little boys and girls sat on their front walls with bread and dripping. Once, the little boys and girls waited for the sound of the siren to send their daddies home.

Silence.

Fell like darkness.

Fell like scrimping, not saving. Fell like flames on communities turned to ash.

Figure 1. Water Table. Validity of Lisette Auton as a working member of society as gauged by external/internal sources.

Year	Job	Reason for leaving
1994-1996	Sell knock-off Take That merchandise on a market stall	Turn 18
1996-1999	Barmaid	Leave for Bretton Hall University – Theatre Acting: Devised Performance
2000-2001	Telesales	Final year – infection – body begins to break – return home
2002	Call Centre	Body breaks – diagnosis
2002-2005	Darkness	Curtains open – able to sit up & work in bed for an hour a day
2005	Volunteer & Msc Youth Work & Community Development	I pretend my new body is not mine
2006-2007	Senior Community Development Worker for the Army Welfare Service	Body breaks – brain breaks – diagnosis
2007-2009	Darkness	All hope for creativity is lost – the world says my

		body is not allowed to participate
2009-2019	Sales Person – part-time	Discover Disability Arts and activism. Say ‘Fuck you. I will carve my own river bed.’
2017-Now	Disabled Creative Practitioner – freelance	Flowing. Never stopping. I am river. Carve own course. I am sea. Waves crash. Free

Source II

Torn twixt Tees and Tyne

I am river. I am sea. Dialect lives in the bend.

Words rush in currents never breaking the surface.

Breaking. Broken. Emerge now. I am a missing.

image description: woman – freckles, black sparkly dress and purple Doctor Marten boots dotted with ladybirds, long hair with hidden undercut – sits on a stool in front of a spellbound audience, her purple stick resting against her thigh, small smooth pebble in pocket, knows why her brain belongs to the river.

sign name: freckles

image description: lies in bed, it is not night, it is not a lie-in, it is not choice, it is maintenance of body and mind, it is not pleasant, but she gives into it like a current and it carries her.

The girl, the woman, freckles, who she is now, knows they’re lying, while she’s lying there, the world is lying, that it is full of river stones.

Stones weigh you down; drown.

Stones skim. Stones contain old bones. Stones can hold your old bones.

Stones stack up, wedge open, throw, splosh. Stepping stones.

Stones are a canvas.

The sea is still there. Even if I can’t check it still exists. Salt water runs through my ancestors to me. They are far from shore, dancing in the tides.

My brain is never to be trusted. My brain carves rivers, carves out land; it is a youthful stream, it is an old man river.

Brains less disordered become trapped once they have carved out a valley.

My brain zooms into hyperfocus, makes minute hyperspeed connections, zooms back out to hyperwidescreen, makes hyperreactivity stepping stones from my own hyperbole, hyperenergetically gushes towards the sea.

Is any of this real?
Does it matter?

No apologies.

Water becomes river

To become the person you were meant to become should not take years and years and years and years of hiding, of being scared, of not accepting this strange and wonderful new you; of cowering from it, wishing to be gone, being a missing. Feeling like a failure for not fighting harder, stronger, longer, when all you had to do all along was just to follow the flow.

The arts is a reflection of self, of the world, but if no one looks like you, how do you know you are allowed to dive in? How do you know you are wanted and needed and that the words you must ink into existence, write upon skimming stones, will find a home if there is no place that says, 'Here, this is where you begin'.

I found a beginning, by chance. By serendipity. I was lucky. I will not let others be unlucky. There should be no luck. There should be joyous opportunity and welcome and your voice is needed, tell us your access needs and we will meet them today. Because my story is one of power and quiet and might and rage and torrent.

You should want to hear it.

Because our stories are stories of power and quiet and might and rage and torrent.

You should want to hear them.

Droplets, bigger, heavier

- *disability arts and crip culture is really the only space that is accepting of me being me*
- *I shunned it originally because I thought to label myself disabled was to shut doors... which is true but those doors shut anyway*
- *I never feel so accepted as when I'm with a bunch of disabled artists, even though some of them may be arseholes, we're there with a shared goal and an understanding of who we are collectively and separately*

How do we grow in strength? How do we bring battle-weary old-timers together with new-blood upstarts? How do we share our past, learn, listen, grow?

Do we have the strength to begin again? To begin?

(Water seeps underground. Water becomes river. River becomes sea. Endless cycle.)

How do we say; you are wanted, you are important?

(How do multiple tributaries find the same river bed?)

Towards the sea

- *I think this is maybe going to be the explosion point where everything comes together*
- *Fuck yeah, I found my tribe*

There are whispered new beginnings. North East disabled artists, after years of isolation, are coming together. They have come together. It has happened already.

One tributary is named Disconsortia⁴. We grow in strength. We keep control.

We are a collective. There is no collective noun for river. We will

sing/devise/paint/photograph/perform/create/make/write/invent

a collective noun for river which will be subtitled, BSL-interpreted and audio-described.

We watch for rivers of allies to flow alongside, add strength, not interrupt our course.

We are carving out land.

Streams converging, river, estuary, mouth, sea.

We are making our own table and will invite you to it on our terms. You will be welcome.

- you can put that in writing if you want. I don't care

Notes

1. Papworth Trust, 2018, 'Facts and Figures 2018 – Disability in the United Kingdom'
2. 2003 was the 'European Year of People with Disabilities'
3. One long incessant uninterrupted chunk of text is hard to read. Welcome to the world of access.
4. Disconsortia, 2020, 'Disconsortia is a disabled artist-led consortium currently focussing on developing a vibrant community of disabled artists who are seeking and creating platforms from which to share our work. We are aiming to influence regional and national arts policy and practice in relation to disabled people as artists, leaders in the arts, audiences, and participants, and to ensure we have a relevant voice both invited and included equally in the arts ecology of our region and our country.' <https://www.littlecog.co.uk/disconsortia.html>