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The Moon Is Especially Full: Notes on Poetry, Teaching, Tests, and [Autistic] Intelligence


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The Moon Is Especially Full: Notes on Poetry, Teaching, Tests, and [Autistic] Intelligence

Chris Martin

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On the eve of the Strawberry Moon, I asked my creative writing student Zach to look at the word MOON, all caps, and tell me what he noticed. With the help of his gracious aide Lindsee, Zach, age 21, slowly and deliberately hit the “O” key on his keyboard twice. “That’s what I see, too,” I said, our eyes meeting and not meeting across the virtual interface of Skype. MOON: two wide open eyes flanked by the erect, owlish ears of M and N. “Tonight,” I continued, “everyone will be looking up at the Strawberry Moon, but I wonder what the moon would see if it was looking back?”

I had met Zach several months before, having written and installed a creative writing curriculum at the private autism center for young adults that he attended. A few years before, I had co-founded an organization specifically aimed toward neurodivergent students like Zach, even and especially non-speaking writers. On this day I had come up with a poem form to suit Zach’s sensorimotor challenges, providing an essential structure that he could complete with only a few crucial words. There is, admittedly, a Mad Libs quality to this approach, but for someone who can only type, at best, a few words per minute, this kind of form can create opportunities for sophisticated expression that might otherwise become lost in the slog of relatively insignificant articles, conjunctions, and prepositions. (Side note: This is not to say that I am not fond of articles and conjunctions. I especially treasure prepositions.) In a poem like this, the moments of greatest import arrive in the form of nouns.

So I set up the first line: “I see the moon and the moon sees _____.” I wrote this on a Google Doc both Zach and I could see at once, magical

letters emerging in oracular fashion across the screen of his iPad. I was in Minneapolis and he was in Carbondale, but we'd both be under the Strawberry Moon later that night. Zach's face tightened into a grimace of concentration: "p...e...o...p...l...e." I read the line out loud, "I see the moon and the moon sees people," before silently typing in the next line: "The moon is full of _____." Again, Zach's placid, attentive expression became transformed by the labor of each letter: "l...o...v...e." My heart, as it often did in Zach's company, abruptly lightened. I read the stanza aloud: "I see the moon and the moon sees people / The moon is full of love." Both Lindsee and I beamed while Zach angled his head and looked off into the distance.

We repeated the structure for the second stanza: "I see the moon and moon sees blue and green / The moon is full of bugs." The moon, in its looking, has pivoted from people to insects, from love to bugs. Zach, whose autism prevents him from accurately producing the sound of words with his mouth, captured and carried the sonic texture of those same words through the arduous process of his typing. In rhyming love and bugs, Zach created a winning and comical slant rhyme, which reminded me of Emily Dickinson. His unexpected rhyme also gave me a delightful image, a vibrant blue and green love buzzing inside the moon on countless wings.

Zach's third stanza continued where the second left off: "I see the moon and moon sees purple gold red / The moon is full of stars." Love, which is often said to feel like butterflies, had become bugs, and then those bugs turned out to be lightning bugs, a panoply of multicolored stars filling the moon's pregnant belly. Love, bugs, stars: my ear imagined Zach's next noun would be something like go-karts. But Zach had a more drastic curveball in mind.

When I placed the first line of the final stanza into our Google Doc and Lindsee rerouted the cursor, Zach typed: "b...i...l...l." Bill's restive body had been orbiting Zach's desk during our Skype session, inconstantly popping in and out of the frame. Zach and Bill are not only classmates, but they are also housemates, both living in an historic home in downtown Carbondale renovated to suit the needs of people like Zach and Bill, complete with quiet LED lighting, radiant heat, and a profusion of bean bag chairs.

Zach and Bill spend nearly every minute of every day within fifty yards of each other, learning life skills and exploring the natural beauty of the Rocky Mountains. And through all the days and years they've spent together, despite their intimate and amiable companionship, I have never observed them sharing what neurotypicals might identify as a "normal" conversation. In fact, someone wholly unfamiliar with them (and unfamiliar with autism) might erroneously conclude that Zach and Bill barely take note of one another, much less know who the other person truly is in the world.

But that's where poetry comes in. Not only is poetry a crucial platform for exploring and expressing how we ourselves live and feel, but it can also function as a means to communicate what we perceive in others. I set up the final line of the poem, "The moon is full of..." and Zach, now smiling broadly, typed: "c...a...f...f...e...i...n...e." Both Lindsee and I burst out laughing and Zach made a high-pitched growling noise that meant he was likewise delighted. Bill, who may or may not have been paying attention to Zach's composition, continued to pace the room, bouncing slightly on his muscular calves. Knowing that part of Bill and Zach's day was spent perfecting the social exchange of buying a drink at the coffee shop downtown, I asked Lindsee if Bill was allowed to drink anything with caffeine in it and she said, definitively, "No way."

Zach's observation was not only witty and sophisticated, but in my view, it was also gloriously metaphorical, as if Zach was a brimming latte the moon was sipping from afar. Stars and caffeine do possess a slant logic of energy to connect them, not unlike the relationship between love and bugs. The stars are electric, they buzz and twinkle like one's brain high on caffeine. Looking at the final lines in another way, we might observe that Bill is a kind of buzzing star in Zach's galaxy. And now all that naïve and hypothetical observer needs to do is read Zach's poem to understand how much of Bill Zach sees and knows. They might not share normative conversations, but through poetry Bill and Zach can engage on levels that are much deeper. While transactional exchanges may play an important role in society, a poem has the potential to communicate much more. The types of conversations engendered by poems can be poignant and profound.

mOOn

I see the moon and the moon sees people
The moon is full of love

I see the moon and the moon sees blue and green
The moon is full of bugs

I see the moon and the moon sees purple gold red
The moon is full of stars

I see the moon and the moon sees Bill
The moon is full of caffeine

One way I like to facilitate and encourage these deeper conversations is to share poem forms from one student to another. The form itself is like a handshake, or a question. It asks, “How would you respond?” And stepping into another person’s poem form is like stepping inside their mind, noticing how the contours of their choices resonate or diverge from yours. In essence it weds creative writing to creative reading, adopting and adapting the literature of another to communicate one’s own experience. It allows autistic writers to practice artistic and social literacy at the same time, helping to bolster the pathways that constitute theory of mind.

As such, I’d like to share another MOON poem with you, this time composed by students at public school where I was in residence a few years after my work with Zach was complete. On this particular day I was working with three young adult writers in a high school program focused on autistic students. I had worked extensively with one of those students, Meghana, in private one-on-one sessions, and her burgeoning poetic abilities had already dramatically transformed her classroom and the expectations of her peers. Meghana, who is non-speaking and types with assistance, was especially excited to bring her fellow non-speaking typer Daniel into the fold. In asking these students to write their own collaborative version of Zach’s poem, I decided to hone in on Zach’s observation of Bill, building that into the form itself. In the first stanzas I

asked the students to self-reflect and in the subsequent stanzas I asked them to turn the moon's gaze on someone else in the classroom.

I began with Khalil, a soft-spoken young man with a penchant for listening to Prince. He wrote: "I see the moon and the moon sees Khalil / the moon is full of calm." The atmosphere in the classroom was indeed calm, though I'd been told it had been a rocky afternoon and shouldn't expect the students to be calm enough to write anything in our session. Meghana's teacher Katie often remarked on this phenomenon. Days when I was to visit their classroom were tumultuous, perhaps because I was visiting. The students might have felt nervous or excited or both. They also may have been reserving crucial energy that was usually spent suppressing overstimulated behaviors. Either way, Katie noticed that minutes before I was to arrive, a kind of buzzing and contagious equanimity would settle over the class. Often Khalil would be reclining on a mat with his headphones on, returning to "Purple Rain" when I walked through the door.

Next came Meghana, who in her graceful way was particularly animated. I could tell that she was thrilled about the participation of Daniel, a nonspeaking classmate who I'd never been able coax into writing before. Meghana herself told me several times that Daniel could and would write, so I was feeling excited as well. It had been a year since I'd first started working with Meghana and she had become very adept at recognizing and subverting the forms I suggested:

I see the moon
and the moon sees Meghana
the moon is laughing
at an asteroid looking
at me

I'd asked the class to self-reflect and Meghana had complicated that self-reflection through a third party: the moon looking at an asteroid looking at her. It can easily be read as a meta-commentary about Meghana's own role in bringing Daniel into expression. She'd been conspiring to triangulate the three of us for several weeks and now it was finally happening, with Khalil joining the mix as well. She was setting the stage for Daniel, who she'd also been encouraging toward self-advocacy. This

was a fundamental aspect of their relationship, typing back and forth about the systemic indignities of a non-speaking life, where there's always someone watching over you, often with the ironclad presumption that an autistic person's sometimes encumbered corporeal experience is synonymous with (or proof of) a meager intellectual capacity.

Daniel, whose time had been routinely and savagely wasted by a system demanding proof of his cognitive vigor in ways his body couldn't navigate, wasn't going to waste any time in speaking out:

I see the moon
and the moon sees Daniel
the moon is especially full
of less testing
of our intelligence

An excoriating combination of rhetoric and lyricism. What I love most about this stanza, which, remember, was the first one Daniel had ever written, is the assonance of the cascade of short “e” sounds—especially, less, testing, intelligence—all packed in to three of Daniel's short lines. I also love how Daniel chooses the pronoun “our,” which enlarges his indictment to include not only his classmates, but all the non-speaking autists out there suffering the indignity of misguided testing. Perhaps the “we” implied by Daniel's “our” includes everyone on the spectrum who has been underestimated and undermined. He's speaking, in a sense, for his tribe. Perhaps you, reader, are a member of this tribe, and Daniel is speaking for you as well.

It was clear that Meghana felt seen and spoken for. She was clapping the insides of her wrists together and smiling brightly, bouncing a little in her seat. I could tell she wanted to respond. With Katie's assistance, she restrained her excitement enough to type: “I see the moon / and the moon sees Daniel / the moon is full of pride.” What a joy it is to be in a classroom where students like Daniel and Meghana are beaming, where they not only feel seen, but feel heard as well. This is the power of poetic expression.

In my experience, I feel the most human when I bring some part of myself out into the open, where I can be known and valued. Daniel and Meghana never ceased to be fully human, of course, but I wondered how many hours and days and even years they had spent waiting for the full scope of that humanity to be grasped by more than a handful of family and a few teachers. I was here because their teacher Katie had come to a talk I gave at a local library. She advocated for me to give the same talk at her school. That led to a month-long residency, which finally led to her classroom, where she sensed Meghana and Daniel's yearning to be heard. That led to a year of discovery with Meghana and, finally, this day, where Daniel, who had been so loathe to participate, finally risked the vulnerability of making himself seen and heard, of bringing a rightfully indignant part of himself out into the open. Week after week, Meghana kept typing messages to him. "Chris knows you are intelligent." "Chris doesn't doubt you." "I will help you." And all her and Katie's perseverance had finally paid off.

Khalil, swept up in the resplendence of the moment, wrote:

I see the moon
and the moon sees Meghana
the moon is full
with the bright light
of six stars

Why six stars? It's hard to say. There were three other students missing or unable to participate that day. It could have been the full retinue of the classroom. Or it could have symbolized the three writers and the three teachers present that day. Or the six stanzas Khalil knew the poem would possess. Or it could simply mean that Meghana has an otherworldly glow best captured in multiplicity and alliteration. Or, and this might seem far-fetched unless you knew how much Khalil listens to Prince, it might be a reference to "Baby I'm a Star," a song off Prince's most famous (and Khalil's most favorite) album, *Purple Rain*. Here is the chorus:

Baby, I'm a star
Might not know it now
Baby, but I are, I'm a star

I don't want to stop, till I reach the top
Sing it, we all are a star

It's hard to imagine anyone overlooking Prince, but these lyrics certainly resonate with Meghana, Daniel, and Khalil's poem. I especially like how Prince, in his pursuit of lyricism, alters the pronoun of the third stanza to become plural. Not only is Prince multiple, but we are all, in our glorious discrepancy, stellar; we are all part of the same star.

Daniel brought the poem full circle in his final stanza, reasserting his previous claim through a look at Khalil:

I see the moon
and the moon sees Khalil
the moon is sad
about testing his intelligence

In speaking of autism, it is always crucial to emphasize the vast difference among the members of its tribe. Though they share the same classroom, Daniel and Khalil do not share the same challenges. Khalil, though minimally expressive, is verbal. He has significant sensorimotor challenges, but they pale in comparison to Daniel's. And nonetheless, Daniel is here asserting that their plight is the same. Khalil's ability to speak doesn't protect him from prejudice and it certainly doesn't exempt him from the indignities of neurotypically designed one-size-fits-all testing. And, in fact, no one is exempt from those indignities, even and especially the teachers. I read Daniel's sad moon as a stand in for Katie and for all teachers who are required to administer tests they know don't accurately reflect the intelligence and vibrancy of their students.

The moon alone can't make light. It can only catch and reflect what the sun gives it. The moon is receptive and reflective. We must all function like the moon sometimes, finding the right angle to best reflect a reluctant sun. Students like Meghana, having claimed the mantle of expression, do their best to shine what they can from their peers. Teachers like Katie search tirelessly for the right conditions, the proper alignment that can allow their students' bright lights to be seen. And sometimes students seek out a willing sun that can illuminate their true faces, not a

perpetually new and meager grin, but a full-to-bursting orb in perpetual wax. State-obligated tests have proven to be a poor and prejudiced option. They occlude, in equal measure, both the student's radiance and the teacher's own luminosity, blocking whatever rich and responsive faculties each might otherwise shine forth. As we move further into this new millennium, the neurodiversity movement is changing the way we think about difference and ability. Its light, bright with the contributions of young writers like Khalil, Meghana, and Daniel, is growing especially full.

The Moon Sees Me

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the moon is full of calm

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and the moon sees Meghana
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Chris Martin's fourth book of poetry, *Things to Do in Hell*, will be published by Coffee House Press in 2020. He is the recipient of grants from the Mellon Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Minnesota State Arts Board. He is the co-founder and executive director of Unrestricted Interest, an organization dedicated to helping neurodivergent learners transform their lives through writing. He lives in Minneapolis, where he occasionally professes at Hamline University and Carleton College.



Never Present, Pernille Fraser, 2019. Oil on canvas.

Pernille Fraser is an autistic artist who resides in the UK. Ten years ago, Pernille returned to her creative roots as a multidiscipline artist, after initially working in fashion and textiles, finance, and teaching. She writes this about her work: “My practice sits between place and system, in the realm of sensory experience. It harvests from interactions with both internal and external space(s).”