# THARUNKA

04.

*Dear Abled Folk / Mission Unlocked: Navigating Mental Health and Intersecting Identities / Anomaly*

## disabilities

*Tharunka* acknowledges the traditional custodians of this land, the Gadigal and Bedegal people of the Eora nation, on which our university now stands.

## about the cover

My inspiration for the cover design is based on the “red tape” idiom. The idiom refers to additional layer(s) of bureaucracy that hinder an action in a government/corporate context. I decided to use this idiom to symbolize the barriers and bureaucracy that people with disabilities still face. The hand pulls back the red tape to reveal a quote on the back cover that says “Nothing about us without us”. This quote has a significance in the fight for the rights of people with disability, because it tells how direct participation should be taken into account when developing new changes. However, there are still instances of gatekeeping that limit people of disabilities, e.g. lack of accessible PDFs and little to no consultation on accessibility for buildings. The cover symbolises effort to dismantle the infuriating barriers in order to achieve rights and justice for people with disabilities.

*CJ Tulong*

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# Disabilities Editor Address

### Axel-Nathaniel Rose

**Red tape is everywhere for people with disabilities.** Limitations on what we do and how we live can be just as definitive in our experience of disability as the disabilities themselves. From:

- the lack of funding given to health sectors and disability research;
- lack of physical access to the lived environment;
- critical under-employment and abject poverty;
- arts and culture being gatekept;
- privatisation and corporate interference in the public health sector;
- to the lack of resources and support in education, preschool through to post doctoral;
- living with a disability is learning ways to live around the red tape.

UNSW has almost 60,000 undergraduate students. It is estimated that 12% to 20% of the population have some form of disability – which means 7,200-12,000 UNSW undergraduates are living with disabilities. Whether that statistic holds true is hard to say, particularly as students with disabilities are less likely to receive adequate support in school to get to tertiary education in the first place, and more likely to drop out or be unduly failed, largely due to the inaccessibility of campuses, educational resources, and convoluted bureaucracy. UNSW's Kensington campus remains largely inaccessible, and academic support remains limited. As a recent addition to the barriers we face at UNSW, trimesters have impacted students with disabilities particularly negatively, as have the newly imposed 'Fit to Sit' exam rules.

I was the Students With Disabilities Officer in 2018, and in that time had the honour of other UNSW students with disabilities sharing their stories, time, and struggles with me – amongst them was the current Officer, Donna Hogan. The integrity and tenacity with which she has fought for accessibility at UNSW and beyond, even before taking on this role, are beyond words. When she asked if I would represent her and the Students With Disabilities Collective in the production of this edition my enthusiasm was matched by an extraordinary fear of letting people down, but the strength and passion of these writers is so far beyond me.

There was no question for Donna and I in the planning of this edition that we wanted it to be red in the *Tharunka* colour series. For red tape, for the emergency cross, for the wholly necessary anger, for the extraordinary love in our community, and for the Red Instead movement. Red Instead is a push by Autistic people around the world to reclaim our right to our own voices. The most prevalent Autism-related foundation in the world is Autism Speaks. Despite their name, there is no respect for the basic human rights, let alone autonomy, of Autistic and neurodivergent people. Autism Speaks says “Light It Up Blue”, and the resounding chorus of Autistic and neurodivergent people say “Red Instead”.

This is the guiding force of the edition: nothing about us without us. For too long, people with disabilities have been violently silenced in the discussion of our own lives and disabilities. There is no-one qualified to give testimony to what it is like to live with a disability but for the person living that life – the solidarity that we find with each other as a cohort doesn’t change the fact that we are infinitely diverse, with independent voices and stories to tell. Key to the ethos of this edition is reflecting that.

*Tharunka* Red is a collection of works that are in equal parts immense and intimate in reach. Within it is reflected that there is no aspect of our lives that go untouched by our disabilities. And it’s not just the pain, fatigue, immobility, or anything about us – it’s that the bare minimum of accessibility hasn’t been met. This edition of *Tharunka* needed to be wholly accessible, more than anything else: its visual design is based around guidelines for dyslexia, reading disorders, and vision impairment; each piece has appropriate content warnings. A braille insert has been printed in 1000 copies, giving direction to a fully readable .PDF, available at [tharunka.arc.unsw.edu.au/disabilities.pdf], and a full, audio-described recording of this edition, available at [tharunka.arc.unsw.edu.au/disabilitiesaudio].

My infinite thanks to Lydia Morgan, who has worked with myself and Donna with the utmost integrity, compassion, and creativity. The work and time she has put into this edition has been extraordinary. Thank you to Mitchell McBurnie, who has been a driving force behind this edition, and the incredible *Tharunka* team – Lev, Lungol, and Sunny have not only done a superb job as editors, but been enthusiastic, patient and kind. Thanks to CJ Tulong, who designed the cover art, and all past Students With Disabilities Officers, especially Alex Linker. To foster accessibility is, at heart, a human right, practical, and necessary – and to share stories and create art is a persevering human drive. People with disabilities are all too often unmet in both, so the most important thanks goes to the contributors.

Red tape is everywhere – so here’s to tearing it down.

# The Gap: Social and Institutional Problems for Disability in China

**trigger warning**
ableism: euthanasia, structural, familial, medical

Jack Zhou

**The United Nations passed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2006, with China as one of its earliest signatories.** This was an addition to what seemed like a great track-record for disability protection by the Chinese government. On paper, China has introduced extensive legal protections for the civil rights of disabled persons. The Laws on the Protection of Persons with Disabilities was passed in 1990, guaranteeing a range of rights including equal participation in work and education.[1] These laws are amongst the best and most inclusive in the world, but there is still a significant gap in their implementation. The lived experience of people with disabilities remain challenging.

While there is an employment quota which requires that 1.5 of a company's workforce be made up of disabled persons, efforts to fully integrate disabled workers have been poor. Workplace discrimination, especially at the interview stage, is an experience shared by many. While the burgeoning e-commerce industry has provided opportunities to work at home, unemployment is still generally higher.[2]

The laws have also created guidelines for disabled students taking China's national university admission exam. Disabled students are required to have adequate special considerations, but support for these students in the classroom is lacking.[3] Often their disability is not accounted for by teachers and organisers.  Some of the most vulnerable sections of Chinese society are disabled children. The implementation of the rights of disabled children is closely related to economic security for their families.[4] The key issue is the cost of medical care, when .[5] low median wages already make living expenses difficult. Coupled with the difficulties adjusting to school and social settings, disabled children live without adequate protection despite the legal framework. A disabled child's right to life may be precarious: parents consider abandoning the child if the prospect of sustaining them seems unfeasible.[6] In rural areas, the impact of poverty makes the situation significantly worse.

Even though, since the 2000s, rapid reforms to social welfare have emerged in both urban and rural sectors, 'few policies in China are specifically targeted at the disabled population'.[7] There is also a stronger correlation between poverty and disability.

> *Disabled people face additional difficulties finding employment, and though their households have a higher chance of receiving social welfare, it is generally not enough to offset the costs of medical or care expenses.[8]*

The primary organisation addressing the rights and status of disabled people is the China Disabled Person's Federation. Its founder, Deng Pufang, was caught amongst the chaos of the Cultural Revolution.
In 1968, he was thrown from a building by the Red Guards,

and refused admission into the emergency room, leaving him with paraplegia. The experience led him to devote his life to the advocacy and protection of other disabled people. The experience of disabled people during the Cultural Revolution were particularly devastating. On the Federation's webpage, the entry for this period is almost blank except for 'work for disabled people had come to a standstill during this period.' Beginning as small clubs for disabled youths scattered throughout China, it grew to an organisation absorbed into the larger bureaucracy of the Chinese government.[9] However, the Federation is not an actual government body: it faces administrative limitations and the number of disabled members have been dropping since the 1990s.

The lack of visibility in public life and the media contributes to the marginalisation of disabled people, much of which is due to physical barriers and lack of accessibility. The institutional perceptions of disabled people exacerbates this lack of visibility. The government media often portrays disabled people as either objects of pity, or examples of inspiration. There is a greater push by the disabled community to be portrayed accurately, living and working in the broader Chinese society.

Yet things are gradually improving: the 2018 report from the China Disabled Persons' Federation noted that over 10 million disabled people had access to basic health services, across physical, speech and intellectual disabilities.[10]
While progress is certainly being made, there are still chronic issues and obstacles. Institutional and social change has been, on the whole, slow and wanting; the struggle for life, for visibility, and for protection continues for the millions of disabled Chinese people living today.

> *"The government media often portrays disabled people as either objects of pity, or examples of inspiration. There is a greater push by the disabled community to be portrayed accurately, living and working in the broader Chinese society."*

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# Invisible Illness

Oh, this shroud that follows me
Looming beyond reach
I cannot remove it
I cannot look through it
For it obscures me

I walk always in the fog
Lost despairingly on the moor
And I cannot dispose
Of this demon
Who haunts me
Forever more

Ivana Marija Devcic

# A Better Perspective

**trigger warning**
suicide, suicidal ideation

**In an episode of the ABC series ‘You Can’t Ask That’ questions were asked to those who had tried to kill themselves.** One asker questioned the validity of suicide, and whether they thought that they were selfish - something that many of those answering reacted to negatively. Many said no way, while others were diplomatic, saying that they could understand how it could be seen as such. But it brings us to the question: what is at the root of this pandemic that’s existed forever?

My mental illness messed with my perception of the world. I honestly felt like I didn’t deserve to be cured. The mental disorders that can cause suicide are insidious. They are hard to fix. Why? Because it isn’t just a moment (unless you have reactive depression or other things going on in your life). I know I might never be well, no matter how much therapy and how much medication I undergo. Growing up, suicidal thoughts were a normal thing for me. It took more than six years to even come to terms with it. It wasn’t about coming to terms with my death. I was fine with dying. It wasn’t so much about my school friends and staff members. <u>I had become so negative that I believed that nothing would change if I died. Why? That’s how society is. We don’t get a break. We keep grinding until it’s over.</u>

I didn’t wake up one day wanting to kill myself.

Ciaran Farrell

It takes time. I had many obstacles to overcome. I put aside thought of everything I've ever done and everyone I had ever known. I gave up entirely, because despair had beat me down. It's at this point that people start to say that suicide is selfish; because I put myself above my family and friends; because I was too weak to work harder. But it's the opposite. I wanted to die because I couldn't face them anymore as a failure, and felt that if they came in contact with me anymore I'd only disappoint or inconvenience them. I loved my friends and family so much that I wanted to kill myself, so that they wouldn't have to deal with me.

But I also wanted to die because it hurt too badly. <u>I couldn't deal with it anymore. 'Working harder' simply wasn't an option, when I could barely work at all</u>. The thing that caused me the most mental torment and anguish was the thought of my parents. My family is somewhat weird, but we get through most things because we work well together. I'm an only child. If I died they wouldn't take it well, to say the least. And it hurt to see the reality, when my Mom and Dad cried after I admitted to the psychologist that I had planned to commit suicide when my parents went out for lunch that day. A spark of life relit itself inside me screaming out, 'HELP, GET ME ANYONE, PLEASE LISTEN TO ME'. My desire to live saved me that day. I couldn't stop blaming myself for making my parents cry. How horrible I was as a son. But I couldn't care. I was exhausted from telling them.

Building up the courage to seek the proper help or trying to help others is hard, and this is from the perspective of a Mental Health First Aid officer and someone who was suicidal. It's hard for either side to get through to the other, and while talking to parents and friends is good, professional help may be needed.

I believe that we can’t ‘see’ depression in someone. Most of the time we’re going to be wrong. We should prioritize giving people the courage to help themselves. Helping someone through this is hard; to dive into the psyche of those who are deep in suicidal thought feels dangerous, because it feels like you could end up the same way. They may not even want your help, they may completely disregard it.

> *Never go it alone, whether you’re helping someone with suicidal ideas or having them yourself. You need someone to keep you grounded. Keep yourself safe first.*

Suicide is never painless. Seek medical advice, for yourself or the person you’re helping. You might want to tell your friends and family first. Personally, I was blown off many times - and the only time I got even a bit better was when I sought medical help.

The pain might never stop entirely, but if you can stop and take a step in the right direction, by going to a doctor or asking for help, the pain can fade. It’s like the saying goes: time doesn’t heal all wounds. It just gives you a better perspective.

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If this article has raised acute distress for you, please call **Lifeline**: 13 11 41.
If it has raised any other issues for you, please call **Beyond Blue**: 1300 224 636, or use Beyond Blue’s online chat, at beyondblue.org.au.
For more information on **Mental Health First Aid**, go to mhfa.com.au

# I Don't Look Disabled

People have the funniest ideas
Of what disabled people are
And aren't
And all too often I am told
I don't look disabled

*

I'm young, not even 30
And fit the stereotypes of Western beauty
And I wasn't born disabled
And all too often I am told
I'm too young and pretty to
be disabled

*

I wonder if they'd still say that if they could see
The days when I wake up in so much pain that I can not move
How it wracks my body
The convulsions, the tears
But I don't look disabled

*

I can walk, most days at least
I can sit and jump
And on good days I can even carry my laptop
And all too often I am told
I'm too mobile to be disabled

*

Anonymous

I wonder if they'd still say that if they could see

The lengths I have to go to,

the damage it does to me

I can walk to classes, but after

I can do nothing but collapse

But I don't look disabled

*

I'm a distinction average student

I achieve, I excel

Hell, I even out-perform many of my peers

And all to often I am told

I'm too smart to be disabled

*

I wonder if they'd still say that if they could see

The hours that I sacrifice to achieve the way they do

No job, no social life

The sleeplessness that comes from the irrational part of me

Telling me I've failed, that I'm stupid

That I can't do this degree

Even though I know it's wrong it doesn't stop

But I don't look disabled

*

I am truly blessed by the people in my life

My friends, my second family

I play games, go out for coffee

And all to often I am told

I'm too social to be disabled

*

I wonder if they'd still say that if they could see

The nights spent wondering if all my friends are talking about me

Behind my back - the constant fear of rejection

I sabotage my own relationships

Or smaller things

I can't make eye contact, or stop moving my hands

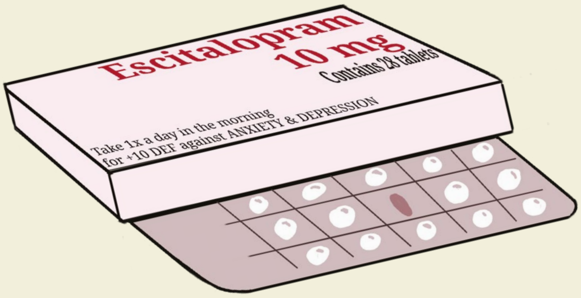
And I jump topics like a child on a sugar rush

But I don't look disabled

*

There are none so blind as those who choose not to see

And sometimes I wonder if they're really looking



# Mission Unlocked:

## Navigating Mental Health and Intersecting Identities

### Si Lexa

**trigger warning**
ableism against mentally ill people, including religious discrimination; queerphobia

**Salutations dear reader!** I want to take you on a tale of my ongoing quest of battling two major antagonists: Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) and panic disorder (PD). My quest has not always been a smooth sailing trip, as there have been other ‘mini bosses’ that I have encountered throughout the past year. You might gasp at the thought of battling multiple villains and possibly respond:

“B-but Main Character… what do you mean by ‘mini bosses’? I thought that you only have to fight two villains.” WRONG.

When you are trying to defeat your personal antagonists, there are some instances where you will encounter additional quests. This is the case for those who have lived experience of navigating intersecting identities. What could those additional villains be? I shall introduce you to three of the main ‘mini bosses’ in my quest: stigma, pitfalls, and queerphobia.

The first henchman that I encountered in my mission of fighting the dreadful GAD and PD monsters is stigma. This villain feeds itself on the remarks that demonize people with mental health issues through the use of labels that describe them as ‘sinners’ or as people who have been possessed by demons. The stigma monster also thrives in conservative communities that still perceive people with mental health issues as ‘lacking in faith’. Do not underestimate this villain’s power; at one point I was caught under its spell of internalised shame, which caused me to doubt my decision of equipping antidepressants to gain extra defense points against anxiety. In order to ward off the stigma’s internalised shame spell, one must always remind themselves that seeking help is not something to be ashamed of. If you are an ally in another person’s quest of fighting monsters, do not shame/belittle them otherwise you will only make the stigma monster’s attack a lot stronger.

What’s this? The anxiety monster has cast another spell. ANXIETY monster has released another henchman: PITFALLS.

Ah yes the ever dreadful pitfalls monster! Unfortunately, this particular being is invisible to some characters because it preys upon international students. Due to the fact that not everyone encounters this being, characters who battle this villain are often overlooked. One must obtain the scroll of Overseas Student Health Cover (OSHC) to unlock additional support from mental health professionals, and it does come with a price.

Finally, here comes the toughest mini boss in my quest: queerphobia. It is a wizard who has the power to cast a dangerous spell called hostility. The queerphobia monster also has another attack up its sleeve, it can shroud a person in a cloud of self-hatred towards their identity. You see… once the cloud of self-hatred is internalised, it seeps into the person’s mind, and in my case it has affected my current relationship. It often presents itself as a whisper that constantly tells me that I am less of a queer person because of my current relationship. It feeds itself on remarks that invalidate my identity such as ‘it’s just a phase’ or ‘why can’t you pick a side?’.

At this point in the story, you might be thinking that that seems like a lot of side quests involving different mini bosses. However, I assure you that I am not alone in this fight. While there are some cases where my journey is dealt with in isolation, I’ve begun to gain support mainly from my sister and my friends, but now…

ALERT!

Dear MC, Player 2 has joined your quest!

If you click "YES", the following quest will be in 'Co-op' mode :
Defend your base(s) from Generalized Anxiety Disorder's (GAD) attack
(CAUTION : JOINT FORCES ATTRACT STRONGER FOES!)
Continue?

PLAYER 2 HAS ENTERED THE GAME!

I have gained a partner in battling the GAD monster. While it is true that the GAD monster has become a joint quest between my partner and I, bear in mind that we have our separate side quests and mini bosses. Sometimes our mini-bosses are invisible to each other, and we cannot be directly involved, but it’s important to keep in mind that we are allies and that we have each others’ backs.

As I look back on my quest over the past year, I vividly remember how the thought of sharing my story seemed impossible. I’ve slowly opened my doors to reach out to people with similar battles and to welcome allies into my quest. I have also taken the chance to be completely honest with myself. Perhaps this could be a stepping stone into a new branch in my quest? Who knows?

# Not Rolling With The Punches:

## This Crip's Fed Up With Trimesters

**trigger warning**
ableism: academic, structural, financial

**Lately, I've been thinking about Ed Roberts, a disabled rights pioneer in the US.** Ed was the first wheelchair-using student to graduate from UC Berkeley, acquiring his disability as a teenager after contracting polio. Ed passed away the year before I was born, we became disabled at around the same age, and I've been at university almost as long as he was during his first degree. I've been wondering what he and his group of radical disabled students, the Rolling Quads, would think about the state of disabled university students today. UNSW doesn't exactly have an illustrious history when it comes to looking after its disabled students—constantly cutting DSU staff and restricting special considerations—but UNSW Management wants us to believe that the recent change to trimesters is beneficial for disabled students. Two terms in, it is absolutely clear that this is a complete PR fabrication.

We've been told that because we can choose not to study during one of the three terms, trimesters are more flexible. Previously, you could skip a semester, but now, if you were to take advantage of the supposed 'flexibility' of

Gabriel H-L

trimesters, and skip three months of study, you no longer qualify for Youth Allowance. Applying for the Disability Support Pension and/or NDIS is practically a full-time job, so in the meantime I rely on Youth Allowance to survive. If I had to take a term off for health reasons, I would either have to forgo Youth Allowance for a whole year, or fill out pages of paperwork whilst still recovering. Unfortunately, chronic illness doesn't follow a university calendar.

As the transition to trimesters was rushed, the timetables leave much to be desired. I've looked at all of the Arts lectures offered in term two, and the majority of them have 9AM lectures. They were impossible to avoid, leaving me with two consecutive seven-hour days each week. I experience chronic fatigue as a symptom of my illnesses, so attending a 9AM lecture involves at least two days of preparation. I also have regular medical appointments to conserve energy for. During term two, I had twenty-eight preplanned appointments, some of which were booked this time last year. I have had to make the decision between attending a class one day, or attending a vital neurologist appointment the next.

UNSW is transitioning to "flipped classrooms", moving many courses partially or entirely online. Staff have been very clear that this is an attempt by the university to cut wages and cram more students into courses. A friend of mine with ADHD has said that he has difficulty concentrating on a recorded lecture. Even though he deliberately chose on-campus delivery, he still has several recorded lectures in his courses. Though my classes no longer have attendance requirements, I now have more content to memorise and the risk of failing weekly quizzes if I don't. For a General Education course, in place of a two hour lecture and one hour tutorial, I had a one hour lecture… four hours of films… and a quiz to prove I'd watched it all. In an ideal world, more access to online content would be beneficial to disabled students, but not when it is unjustly forced on them, means a larger workload, and comes at the expense of our valued academic staff members.

And, of course, no discussion of trimesters is complete without mentioning the cherry on the shit sundae: the Fit to Sit policy. This policy means that by sitting or submitting an exam or assessment, you are declaring that you are fit to do so, and forego your ability to request special consideration at a later date. If either of these instances had occurred under Fit to Sit, I would have to be marked on my paranoid scribblings or my illegible essay. Extenuating circumstances don't just disappear once you enter the exam room!

> *I live with schizoaffective disorder, of which hallucinations and delusions are a large part. I have penned an entirely nonsensical exam paper during a psychotic episode. I have submitted entire essays where, due to OCD, I removed every use of the letter "a".*

I don't want to just put up with trimesters, though. I'm buoyed by the protest of 800 staff and students, the biggest protest at UNSW in two decades. It's clear that staff and students are fed up with trimesters ruining their university, and disabled students are definitely part of that group.

Structural ableism is a massive obstacle, but not an insurmountable one. When his lecture theatres and campus roads lacked ramps and curb cuts, Ed Roberts's classmates got sledgehammers and cement and made their own paths. I'm hoping to see some of that energy in the fight against trimesters. I've got my sledgehammer ready, so don't forget the cement.

# Anomaly

**trigger warning**
ableism: medical, social, familial; food

He looked appropriately pleasant. I knew Eleanor would be irritated by my lack of details. A tanned face with a wide grin and dishevelled hair. Were his teeth straight? Were his eyes as green as his Tinder profile? Were his eyebrows symmetrical? These details were lost on me.

My cheeks were twitching from smiling for too long. I stared in the general direction of his face, hoping I had landed closer to attentive than creepy.

"So… what kind of things are you into?" he asked. He sounded nervous too, or maybe I was just projecting. I squeezed my fists a little, trying to calculate my response. The number of instances before today that I'd gone out with a complete stranger totalled an impressive zero.

"I take photos," I said a little too loudly. "I'm into photography. Mostly landscape because I like travelling." I was rambling. He doesn't scoff like most people, but then again, he doesn't really know yet... Eleanor had said that it didn't matter. But it does. It always seems to matter.

"That's amazing! You have to show me some of your shots," he responded. It was a textbook reply, but I allowed myself to indulge in the delusion that he cared.

Being in a moment, seeing the scene, and capturing details beyond what I could see; that was magical. There was something enchanting about sitting atop a cliff, clicking, and making the moment eternal. My photos were more

## Atia Fatimah

vivid than any real moment in my life. That's how I'd like to remember everything. In clear 4K HD, with brilliant gradients and infinite detail. From a photo I can hear the wind and smell the freedom and I forget just for a second. I forget that it's all an illusion.

We're interrupted by the menus. My heart drops. The measly piece of cardboard glares at me, the appetisers and mains blurring together in an infinite squiggle. Begrudgingly I hold the cardboard up. It's about thirty centimetres from my face and completely cryptic. I pull it closer ever so carefully… the menu rests three centimetres from my face; finally legible. A growing heat crawls onto my cheeks. I squint to focus, skirting around the mains desperately searching for something familiar. A burger! Yes, that'll do. Wait, no! Too messy for a first date. I was frazzled prey in uncharted territory and I was being outnumbered by the second.

"Maybe try holding it a little further, haha. How can you even see like that?"

My throat tightens slightly as I giggle nervously.

***

At age five I was knighted as a four-eyed freak.

At seven the ophthalmologist took over.

*He was just trying to be helpful in his own able-person misguided way, right? But I can't resist the misdirected and untamed rage growing inside me.*

At ten I was told I couldn't be a pilot. No one had ever asked me what I aspired to be.

At twelve I was informed I could never drive. My dreams of buying my first car, late night Maccas runs and owning a Porsche fizzled away with my vision.

At fifteen I was a self-declared anomaly: ‘A person or thing that is different from what is usual and therefore not satisfactory.’ An inadequate outlier. I resided in a limbo; my vision evidently deplorable, yet too good to be deemed blind.

At sixteen a blanket of helplessness had seized me.

Impairment seemed like a euphemism for disability. As if somehow deep down I was afraid to verbalise that something was inherently wrong with me.

Broken. Dis. Abled.

***

Here I sat opposite a perfectly fine man. By all accounts, he was a catch. But I knew how the narrative went. I could sense it in the way he sat a little straighter, darted his eyes and tapped his fingers. I had successfully unsettled him.

Would there be a second date? Perhaps. Perhaps even a third and fourth. But there was never going to be a forever. Not for someone like me.

***

“There are three copying mistakes in your DNA…” Dr. Hugh had reported. Darkness swallowed me whole.

My parents had begun to argue incredulously. But all our ancestors had perfect vision! I deserved this for not eating my greens! Carrots were my hamartia. And don’t get them started on how much TV I watched at five. Their shame manifested into denial and eventual resignation. My disability impairment had rendered me incapacitated. A failure by default.

How could I expect someone to love me? Perhaps there was a fourth date. Hell, perhaps there was a tenth. But at some point there was always the conversation.

It left me feeling almost as broken as the world believed I was. What about the kids? My condition was such unbearable torture that my hypothetical children were better off unimagined.

At eighteen I was told that wanting to have a family was offensive.

At nineteen I picked up a camera.

***

I sit next to Eleanor, closing her car door with too much force. She smiles knowingly.

“Tinder was a stupid idea anyway!” she claims, convincing herself more than me. There were two people in the world I felt whole around and they were both in this car. I didn’t have to pretend to be more than I was. I was human and that was okay. It wasn’t okay to everyone. I wasn’t okay always. But in these moments between us, it was more than okay.

“Hey, look at this video,” Eleanor says in her unsubtle attempt to change topics. I laugh at the appropriate moments, staring at the bright blurry screen she held up.

At twenty I had become impeccable at pretending.

# Don’t Know Why

You wake up in a cold, dark room.
You have no idea how you got here.
You’re aware that your whole body feels heavy.
It’s harder to breathe, harder to move.
You don’t know why.

You see a window, letting the sun’s rays in.
You’re drawn to it, curiously.
The sunlight doesn’t feel warm on your skin.
You don’t know why.

You stare through the window.
It’s bright outside. You see cheerful and
happy people.
You see someone looking at you. You wave.
They don’t see you. They seem to be looking
past you.
You don’t know why.

Karan Kaushik

You long to join them.
Away from the unpleasant and dark room.
You spot a door. You go outside.
It feels no different. Your body still feels heavy.
You don’t know why.

You’re surrounded by a dark aura.
It reminds you of the room.
It feels uncomfortable, yet, familiar.
Everyone outside has a different aura.
A bright and radiant one.
You don’t know why.

You think they hold the key to dispelling your aura.
You try to join them.
They don’t seem to notice the darkness around you.
Their pockets hold no keys. Your aura just becomes stronger.
You don’t know why.
Your aura, so unrelenting, never ceases to grow.
Forcing you to stop inflicting yourself onto

the world.
You long for the room. You long for its familiarity.
You go back, even though you don’t like it there.
You don’t know why.

What is it about this room that beckons you?
Sanctuary to your fears, your regrets.
Reminding you of all your past mistakes.
Lest you forget.
Telling you you’re worthless.
Nothing but a faded memory.
You think it will make you stronger.
But all it does is shatter you.
Yet, you keep coming back.
You don’t know why.

Some days, you stare out of the window.
Looking back on the times when your aura
shined bright.
You wonder what happened.
You look back, trying to remember your aura. But

you can’t.
You don’t know why.

Some days, you hope someone comes inside.
Maybe they can share their aura with you.
Brightening the room, dispelling the darkness.
But nobody else can see the room.
You don’t know why.

Some days, you cannot bear to look outside.
You just sit in a corner, silently.
Hoping that things get better.
But they never do.
You don’t know why.

# A Windmill in a Hurricane

**trigger warning**
suicidal ideation, suicide, institutionalisation

It is the sun setting one final time, a hurricane spinning a windmill. You see the objects in the world without their telos and everything fades into bland singularity. It seems less real—the world—because there is no animus, and as far as you are concerned, there never was.

So the story of your life is a meandering circle. All of this happens at once, these thoughts so natural now. A bespoke dread tailored in the depths of your own personal horror. A straightjacket disguised as fine livery, because the illness has the beauty of the grotesque.

These are just some thoughts on mental illness. My mood is usually stable but sometimes it truly feels like I have a mainline to the profound disquiet that is the subtext for our existence. What do I mean to communicate with this windmill image? In a word, ‘madness’; the frenetic gales of psychosis and the whipped dirt of depressive lethargy. This dirt forms a grimy film over your eyes and you see everything through the frame of the illness. Your epistemology becomes tainted. The windmill spins for no purpose in a maelstrom that takes no rest.

A problem that I’ve always had is reconciling myself with the illness. People talk of the ‘black dog’ and other

## Rhys Rushton

such motifs, but for me I think of Prufrock's eternal footman. My footman is not eternal, though, rather he is bound by my own mortality, a companion of sorts. I use this image because <u>depression is a type of death. It kills you.</u> Not just in the psychological sense, we know now that severe episodes of mental illness can permanently change the structure of the brain and also have physiological effects. My footman snickers too. From the shadows I will hear him, always there and always waiting.

I've heard people say that they would not get rid of their illness even if they had the option. For me, if given the chance, I would happily eradicate it from my life.

However, this does not mean I don't accept who I am, and this has been important for my recovery. For a time, I was in denial about what I was dealing with. What changed was a period of my being unwell and then being hospitalized.

For a time, I lived in a psychiatric facility for young people. Upon checking in, anything that could be used to harm myself was taken from me. Objects that I had never thought of as tools to be used in such a way were held by the nurses until they were confident it was safe for me to have them.

None of the doors locked and the bar from which I could hang clothes in my room was magnetic, meaning that if more than a certain amount of weight was applied it would fall out of place. It was here that I realised I had a problem, but also that I was nowhere near as bad as I could be. A lot of the people I met had it far worse than I did.

They were good to talk to. Being able to chat with someone in a natural manner about the voices you sometimes hear or your desire to drive into oncoming traffic on the motorway was something I hadn't been able to do before. This isn't because of any fault of my family or friends. To be talked about in a nonchalant fashion, that extremity has to be experienced, and in the hospital I didn't have to worry that I was freaking anyone out.

There was one thing that disturbed me though. In Thomas Mann's novel 'Magic Mountain' the protagonist goes to a sanatorium to visit his cousin for three weeks. He ends up staying for seven years. A feverish phantasmagoria keeps him there, and at least in the way I understood it, Hans—like the other patients—is partially in love with his illness. A lot of the people I met had this type of relationship with their illness. This has something to do with identity. <u>We all look for belonging and definition, and mental illness allows for that.</u> I used to think of myself principally as someone prone to periods of elevated mood, a few months a year of severe depression and the occasional bouts of psychosis. It was comforting. However, in the hospital I saw what this could lead to: a semi-permanent residency in different psychiatric wards and a total acceptance of how things are.

In hospital I changed my relationship with my illness. I don't treat it as something to be endured. So yes, the windmill still spins, and there are a few months of the year when I'm not at my best. But I've stopped my macabre infatuation with an illness that would destroy me if left unchecked.

# Dear abled folk:

## stop questioning disabilities and be a real ally

**trigger warning**
ableism: academic

It took a long time for me to become comfortable using the term ‘disabled’ for myself. So that we’re on the same page, I’m using the term disabled as defined by Disability Works Australia: “A disability may be generally defined as a condition which may restrict a person’s mental, sensory, or mobility functions to undertake or perform a task in the same way as a person who does not have a disability.”

I’m a short person (160cm, to be precise), and as a shorter person, I also have small hands. In all honesty, my hands look appropriately proportioned to the rest of my body. However, I have a physical impairment called Brachydactyly. Every case of Brachydactyly is different, but the general issue is an underdevelopment of bones in the hands and/or feet. In my case, my metacarpals stopped growing when I was very young. As a result, my handwriting is slow, not always legible, and causes extreme fatigue and pain in my hand, wrist, arm and shoulder. If writing for extended periods of time, which I’ve avoided as much as possible since 2016, I sometimes need to lie down afterwards to reduce the consequential pain in my body.

Sometimes, the physical nature of this condition is classified as a disability by doctors and surgeons, other times it is not. Due to this ambiguity, and the fairly invisible

### Imogen Barker

nature of the condition and its impact, I always felt like an imposter when claiming I had a disability or needed extra provisions. I mean, so many people have it worse. I've found that this is a common experience in the disabled community; internalised ableism is difficult to dismantle when you have a largely inaccessible world telling you that, unless you have a visible disability or impairment, you should be coping in your day-to-day life.

As a result of my disability, I've always struggled to complete tasks that involve fine-motor skills or handwork, and I adopted a claw-like grip for pens and pencils from preschool. Thankfully, in the early stages of education, colouring-in, handwriting exercises and building tasks are more often for enjoyment, and not a necessity. We did not learn that I had the condition until I was in my first year of high school. Before that, teachers always blamed daydreaming and poor time management for my ever-growing pile of incomplete classwork and assessments.

Over the years, I've tried occupational therapy and had numerous doctor and hospital appointments to see if surgery was a viable option. Eventually, my hands 'peaked'; I was told I would not be able to write faster at any point in my life. My handwriting speed currently matches that of a person aged 14-16 years. My legibility matches someone around 14 years of age, when writing at my fastest speed. I am 20 years old. For my final years of high school, when my speed and legibility was around that of a 12-year-old, I was refused disability provisions because a number of teachers felt it would provide an 'unfair advantage' in completing assessments should I be granted extra time, a laptop, or a scribe. I was told for seventeen years that I had 'so much potential', but that I 'just needed to try harder'.

I never completed a timed, handwritten assessment in all my school years until my Trial HSC exams, when the school finally conceded and supported a scribe assisting in the examinations.

While it's easy for me to avoid handwriting now, as I use a laptop for all my work and am proficient in touch-typing, I've gradually learnt that Brachydactyly still impacts my day-to-day life in weird and surprising ways. For example, I take a much longer time to tie shoelaces, and getting dressed is generally a struggle made more arduous if the clothing involves buttons, zips or ties of any sort. Preparing food, such as chopping fruit or vegetables, whisking or kneading is tedious and pain-inducing. Needless to say, I don't enjoy clothes shopping or cooking often. I still love colouring-in, for my mental health, which feels like an act of rebellion to all my primary school teachers whenever I complete a piece.

However, I'm very privileged. I do not face the same discrimination and abuse that many with disabilities do, invisible or visible. Often, able-bodied people have told me what they think will improve my disability, or how to navigate the world around my disability. Any member of the disabled community will undoubtedly report similar instances of microaggressions, regardless of the nature of their disability. How we choose to navigate the world is our business; we have the experience of living with our disability, and it's exhausting to constantly prove our validity and ability when able-bodied people are in positions of power. Accessibility isn't at the forefront of their decision-making. I'm fighting. I'm working with disability communities to fight the stigma, but also to help educate abled people how inaccessible the world is right now. We can't keep living like this. But this fight needs to be taken up by abled people, abled people who are free of the stigma and fatigue that comes from living with a disability.

This is a call to action. Stop being a performative ally and stop talking over disabled voices; *we* know what works best for our bodies and minds; *we* know how to improve our circumstances; *we* know what needs to be done. So listen, and help us create this change so that disabled people can also exist in a state of comfort and safety.

# Navigating Internships

## as a student with disabilities

Krystal Lim

**Getting an internship is hard enough as it is, but why is it so much harder for people with disabilities?** As a penultimate student twice over (having to extend my degree twice because of my disability), I've had a lot of experience going through the regular recruitment processes of some very large companies. I'll tell you straight up: almost none of them were as disability friendly as they claimed to be on their website.

You've probably seen or heard what I'm talking about - the diversity page where they tell you about how much they want to hire minority groups, sometimes including us with disabilities (not always, which is a bit disheartening). Personally, I use it as a vetting system. Any organisation without one of these pages is automatically taken off my list. But, that isn't to say that just because they have that web page that it will all go smoothly.

The regular recruitment process starts with uploading your resume, filling in a couple of details about yourself, maybe sending a cover letter and answering some questions. The next step is usually online testing and that's the part that gets me. Using a computer and handwriting are pretty difficult for me, so how do I get around this? How do you get adjustments?

### 1. Email them.

The best out of the Big Four firms (shout out to Deloitte) gave me a call the day after I emailed them about adjustments and had it all fixed for me. Pro-tip: give them your phone number for a faster response and easier conversation if that is accessible for you.

The worst had me waiting three weeks for a reply. I even called, but was passed on and then sent to voicemail twice without a call back. What made it worse was that when I had gone through to the next stage, all the systems were down which meant another back-and-forth email for about a week. Keep in mind, computers are not my friend.

### 2. Be really specific about what you need and don't be scared to ask.

The worst thing that can happen is that they can say they don't have that adjustment or they take a longer time to get back to you.

One of the online tests for the Big Four requires the applicant to press the spacebar as many times as possible in about 60 seconds and that wasn't something I could do, but sometimes the people on the other end can't read between the lines of your disability. The person thought that just giving me extra time would be okay until I got specific and said that mashing keys would not work for me. Make sure that you ask the recruiter to be very specific about the actual tasks before you say that you're okay with them.

Something else that I had to learn was asking for adjustments in a way that gets to the point and sometimes might sound demanding. <u>It's okay to sound demanding when that is what you need. I wasn't going to give up my health for a company that might not hire me, even if it might give me a better shot.</u> For assessment centres I add "no handwriting".

### 3. Network.

This part sucks the most for me because, as an introvert, I hate talking to people without a goal and I don't like the idea of talking to someone just to get something out of them.

However, the easiest way to get adjustments seems to be through networking. Get the email of the recruitment people and seriously, use it to your advantage. You can ask for part-time work, you can ask for your adjustments, and you can ask how to do better in x-y-z. Network if you can. It was the only time I found networking to be worth the introvert strain, but it really is worth it.

### 4. Keep asking.

Sometimes, they won't get back to you, like one of the bad Big Four I applied to. But you have to remember to keep asking. <u>Send an email every week if you have to and be that annoying person instead of compromising on something that you shouldn't have to compromise on.</u>

I'm yet to get an internship for this summer, but out of the six I've applied to, I've had the best experience with IBM, then Deloitte and Telstra. I hope that this has helped you become more confident in asking for adjustments, and remember to never give up on asking for them!

# Tonic

To think of the past is to think of the
blurry remains of the future which entrances us
in its desperate and fitful glory.
To wish for the imagined could-have-beens,
should-have-beens, is to count
the clouds between your fingers,
and to count the stars you tried to name.

The present, although brutal and arguably
banal in nature, offers overly ripe opportunities.
Think of the swollen, weeping nectar
you sucked from when you weaned yourself
off the acrid bitterness of a life imagined,
and instead swallowed the glowing nebula
of an emboldened future.

Daisy Roux

# contributors

### ATIA FATIMAH

Atia Fatimah is a third-year Psychology student who is a self-proclaimed workaholic. When she's not working, you can spot her at over-hyped, over-priced restaurants where she takes on her alternate food-blogger personality. She enjoys shedding a fresh perspective on issues, being overly critical of films (unless they're Marvel) and plotting exquisite yet impractical plans to travel the world.

### CIARAN FARRELL

Ciaran loves birds, especially his two cockatiels. Even when they scream at him at 5am. Or 12pm. Experience and exposure to the dangerous and inexplicable nature of mental health issues have given him an obsession, pushing him to learn all he can and promote awareness about them.

### GABRIEL H-L

Gabriel is a non-binary Wiradjuri person living on Bidjigal land. They live with hypermobility EDS, MS, and schizoaffective disorder. They are a semi-professional cripple, an alleged writer, and a sempiternal student. Gabriel's interests include socialism, collecting unique woodwinds, drunkenly testing strangers' joints Beighton Scores, and the West Virginia Mothman.

### IMOGEN BARKER

Imogen is a third-year Bachelor of Arts student majoring in Theatre and Performance, minoring in Politics and IR. She's an active member of the Student Representative Council and theatre society (NUTS), and is also completing a part-time course at NIDA. Imogen can often be found around the theatres on campus, dancing to Lizzo.

### IVANA DEVCIC

Usually cleaning that annoying smudge on her glasses. Regularly having existential crises (if they are consistent, can they be called crises?). Typically found with a book in front of her face – a standard sign of an INTJ in their natural habitat. If lost, look near the cats or salted crisps.

## JACK ZHOU

Jack is an Arts/Law student with an enormous passion for history, literature, and politics. His main interests are pre-modern Asia and Europe. An ardent believer that we can learn from history, he has tried to make it the subject of deeper conversation.

## KARAN KAUSHIK

Part-time coder, part-time poet, full-time tired. Loves cooking, gaming, and playing pretend. Can usually be found running late to classes and complaining about all the things he has to do while doing nothing. Is funny sometimes. Would sell his soul for a burrito.

*

## KRYSTAL LIM

Krystal is a penultimate student studying a Bachelor of Commerce with a major in human resource and a minor in marketing. She loves making videos about health, student life and assistive technology, and loves hanging out with her two dogs and going travelling!

## RHYS RUSHTON

Rhys is currently recovering from his experiences in ACCT1501. Following the resultant agony he switched from economics to philosophy and is now is his third year. He enjoys reading and attempting to write. His favourite books are *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, *The Aleph and Other Stories*, *Culture and Value*, and *Le Grande Meaulnes*.

## SI LEXA

Si Lexa is your cat-loving queer nerd with an immense love of social justice and puns. Si Lexa uses she/they pronouns and is currently paving their way through final year of an English/Linguistics degree. You can find her/them on Instagram at @lethargiclexaproleftie.

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# SRC Report

Angela Griffin

**Hey it's me! Ange! Your SRC President!** I hope your term is travelling ok and that you are all stoking that anger about trimesters – your SRC is going to use that anger to get some great outcomes.

First, I'd like to congratulate the SRC Disabilities Collective and *Tharunka* team on their incredible work pulling together this special edition of *Tharunka*. Many a time I have heard our amazing Students With Disabilities Officer, Donna, say "never about us without us" and this edition is a fantastic testament to that.

This term, there is so much that's happening! Get involved with:

**1. The SRC Trimester Survey** – Remember that little survey your SRC begged you to fill in at the end of T1? Well, we've got some updates: from the responses of UNSW students, we have created a list of ten recommendations for issues that need to be immediately addressed. These issues include special considerations, lack of mid-term break, and over-assessment amongst many others. For more information on these recommendations, see the SRC website and like the SRC Facebook page for regular updates.

**2. NUS Climate Strike** – There are no new jobs on a dead planet, nor will there be universities. This is something the National Union of Students understands fundamentally so come along to this NUS protest at 5pm on August 9th at Sydney Town Hall to demand no new coal or gas, stop Adani, sustainable jobs and a just transition to a green economy, and 100% renewable energy.

**3. Pandora's Box** – The UNSW Women's Collective is currently seeking contributors to their autonomous zine named 'Pandora's Box'. If you are a staunch feminist with something important to say, send your pitch to the Women's Collective! You don't need to be a collective member to contribute, just contact the Women's Officer Ruby at womens@arc.unsw.edu.au to make your pitch today!

**4. Queer Writes** – The UNSW Queer Collective have begun a regular newsletter that houses the creativity of students wanting to explore queer content. They accept artwork, creative writing, thought pieces and reviews and can be contacted at: queer@arc.unsw.edu.au

**5. UNSW Climate Walk Off** – The next date for the Global Climate Strike has been set, and we need to stand up and show our support together! Following the school strikes that have swept the world, everyone - students and more - are now raising the bar and striking together.

On Friday September 20th (T3, W1), the UNSW Enviro Collective will be organizing a mass walk-off to draw attention to the issue and encourage others to join in the strike. Meet on the Library Lawn at 10:30 where we will hold a speak-out and you will hear from student and staff climate strikers. Afterwards, we will march down to Anzac Parade where we will take buses to the city and join the main body of the Sydney climate strike!

**Want to join an SRC Collective?**

SRC Collectives meet once a week to discuss issues on campus specific to that collective and plan action to make UNSW a better place. Come along and have your voice heard.

Find out more at:
arc.unsw.edu.au/voice/src

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# Tharunka wants YOU!

***Keen to get your work published but not sure where to start?***
As UNSW's longest-running student publication, *Tharunka* is the political, social, and cultural journal for all students on campus and we are always looking for a wide range of fresh content for both our print and online platforms.

**We're looking for non-fiction essays, UNSW campus reports & updates, social commentary, opinion pieces, reviews, short fiction, poetry, online columns, drawings, comics, photography and everything in between.**

**How to pitch:**
Do you have a killer idea but need some editorial guidance?
E-mail us at tharunka@arc.unsw.edu.au with the following info:

1. Your name:
2. Your pitch in 100 - 200 words: what do you want to write/make?
3. Word count/medium/platform
4. Include any examples of previous work (optional)

**Stay in the loop:**

Make sure to join our THARUNKA 2019 CONTRIBUTORS Facebook group to keep up to date with call-outs for the next issue.
Facebook: www.facebook.com/Tharunka
Instagram: @tharunkaunsw

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# NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US

RECYCLED