


Fiction/Creative Nonfiction Honorable Mention

We're All Strangers Here

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SUMMARY *This piece forms part of my linguistic ethnographic doctoral thesis, investigating the ways in which mutual understanding does and does not break down between autistic and non-autistic people. As an autistic researcher researching autistic language use, it became increasingly apparent throughout my research that I could not separate myself and my "insider perspective" from my work. Autoethnographic creative writing offers a way to reflect on my inter-relation with the subject matter as well as "giving voice" to those [autistic people more generally] who are often overlooked. Autism is heterogeneous in its nature and autistic people are diverse in ways that popular conventions and stereotypes don't often afford. In this piece I represent three very different characters—each autistic—to give some insight into the breadth of what "autistic-ness" can be. The first character is based on myself, exploring the tensions found in being an autistic within the academy. The two fictionalized characters are composites of my research participants, based on my ethnographic observations. [autism, autoethnography, ethnographic fiction, empirical pragmatics, loneliness]*

Do you want to [↑start=
[No YOU] you start off. d-DO the bottom one yeah
↑O↓kay (0.7) the one about strangers talking to each other.
£ er-yeah cos we're strangers aren't we £
£yeah cos we've never met before ↑have we £
(wheezing or laughing sound))
@ cos, we're, we're all strangers here, aren't we? @

The alarm—tinny, midi-harp compressed through my phone's small speaker—interferes with my dream about crayfish flooding in through the patio doors. It feels like the melody is etching itself onto the surface of my cerebellum with a pyrography pen this morning as I try, for several minutes, to slap out an arm from under the (two) duvet(s) to quell the noise. Singed brain smell. Lactic acid in my limbs. The top two-thirds of my head held tight in a wooden nutcracker. Not today.

I count upwards, internally, while I rub the inside of my left thigh against the sheet below me. One, tow, thr, one, wwwwon, one, tooo, three. The leg doesn't

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move much, just a few millimeters in each direction but the friction against cool Egyptian cotton sparks something inside of me. It touches my will. We're getting somewhere. I reach fourteen and feel like I'm about to stir and sit upright but the effort of garnering my muscles tumbles me back down to one. One. One-two. One. Something like forty minutes later I launch up in one swift movement, surprising myself. I swing my legs onto the sheepskin by the mattress, spray three types of vitamins onto the inside of my cheek (synthetic mint, plastic peach, sour grapes), and climb out of the hutch.

Andrew is up at 6 a.m. because he always wakes up at 6 a.m. Jess his dog is also up and is eating her breakfast out of her favorite bowl. She is a cheeky dog and will try to ask for more breakfast when she has finished, but he knows he can't give it to her because the vet told him she was getting too fat two years ago when he had to take her because she had a bad tooth taken out. It is a good job he isn't a dog because then somebody could say he was getting fat and stop him eating, but he is in charge of what he eats, and he is happy about it.

He fills his plastic Frosties bowl that he sent off for with some coupons he cut out from the sides of some packets of Frosties with Frosties almost to the top and then pours on some semi-skimmed milk on top of the Frosties. Frosties are Andrew's favorite. The clock is ticking, and it's a bit annoying, but it is also helpful so he knows what time it is. He usually has to be at work where he is a cleaner at 9 a.m., but today is not a normal day, and he feels a bit funny in his belly, but Jess comes and rubs her silly hairy head against his leg, and it makes him laugh and tell her that she is a good dog because she likes it when he says that. Anyway, he is waiting for Rob to arrive to take him to the meeting he is going to, which he has agreed with his boss about because it is for important research, and he is lucky because he works at the university cleaning the computer rooms, and he is lucky because his boss understands about important research and is very kind to him.

Katy's alarm has gone off and been snoozed three times. Mornings aren't really her thing. She prefers to sleep in; bed's her comfort place. It's stacked high with pillows, cushions, and plushies, and a brightly patterned velvet throw. She gets up and folds herself into a fleecy dressing gown, pulling thick socks up over her leggings. Padding along the hallway she sees her flatmate's door is closed. He will still be sleeping. He worked a late last night at the restaurant in which they both work.

She fills the stove-top coffee pot with water below, the Lavazza grounds and a cardamom pod above, before screwing on the lid and lighting the gas. She takes some yogurt from the fridge, pours it into a bowl, then stretches up on tiptoes to her shelf next to the extractor fan. She pours the flour—measured by eye—into the bowl, adds some bicarb, salt, dried Mediterranean herbs from the mix she made a couple of weeks ago, and a splash of olive oil. She kneads the dough together and splats some rounds onto the griddle pan, wrapping the rest in clingfilm and leaving it in the fridge for her flatmate Joe to find. She writes "EAT ME" next to a grinning smiley in pink biro on the face of a Post-it note and sticks it on the dough as an afterthought. While the flatbreads cook she chops vine tomatoes, shallots, a lime, and fresh cilantro to make a basic salsa, and decides, almost too late but not quite, that she might as well poach herself a couple of eggs too.

It's now a lot later than I'd planned, closer to seven than six, but outside the boat everything is still dark. Walking up the pontoon, in my plastic shower

shoes and nightshirt, an early-starter oyster catcher is disturbed on the silty edge where the river is beginning to recede and curls off toward the far bank. The abandoned warehouse, a hunched hulking shadow flashing goofy teeth, watches on. The wooden slats below my feet bounce and creek as I move along them, ropes groan and rusty metal opines. There's the faint laughter of gulls from downstream and high syrupy hiccups from a passerine family stirring in the buddleia bush.

Up the ramp—not too steep as the water is high—and across the gravelled forecourt, past the taps over-knitted with bindweed and ivy, past the propane gas cannisters piled up against the workshop wall, and finally the upturned, rotting skeleton of a small skiff before I arrive at the shower block. I feed tokens into the slot and pull the moldy curtain just partly across. I feel bad covering the floor with water but I can't face having the sticky, black-speckled plastic touch my skin. Ten minutes of hot jet. The tiny room, instantly filled with steam. I go through my ritual, rinsing and scrubbing in the correct order, keeping half of one squinting eye on the descending timer to make sure I'm not suddenly left with thirty seconds and a whole leg to shave. It has happened before.

I step out carefully, avoiding the woodlouse escapee making its way across the tiles. I won't have time for breakfast now, being so behind, but my costume is ready and waiting, planned weeks ago and hung out last night from the rail over the sliding doors. Dress (pink and blue tartan, below the knee and high-collared), tights (woolen, cerise, my lucky ones), pants (black, scalloped edges), bra (underwired, professional, black with pink roses), and shoes (patent magenta brogues) lined up below the dress. A proper person's costume, all matching colors. People think better of you when your colors match. You snag less.

Rob is Andrew's friend from work. He works in the computer rooms doing IT, and he is coming today because you need to bring somebody you know well, like a friend or a family member, and Andrew's sister and brother are both dead. Andrew's brother had learning difficulties like Andrew, but he needed lots of help, and he was in a home, but he also was schizo-something, and he killed himself. He was forty-six. Andrew thinks it was three years ago his brother died because it was the same day that the Batman movie came out, and he went to see it in the cinema and felt a bit sad. His sister had lots of things wrong. He isn't really sure what, but she died a long time ago, and Rob said he would come along, and Rob is a very nice man.

The doorbell rings and Andrew feels a bit worried because he doesn't know who the woman is who is doing the research, but he has seen her face on the letter she sent him and he has to sign, and she looks friendly because she is smiling. He is happy to be going to Reach because he knows the people there and the rooms, and they are very nice to him and helped him on a course for people with autism like he has got about understanding your feelings because that can be difficult sometimes. There is a lady on the reception who spoke to him about his dog Jess, and said she had a dog and they spoke about their dogs, and she was nice and he hopes she is working today so he can tell her about Jess.

Katy has to be at Reach for 9:30 a.m., and her catering course doesn't start until one, so she'll have time after to find a coffee shop to sit and read in. Sitting

quietly with a good book and the aroma of coffee while the world moves quickly around her is one of her favorite things. The noise just helps her phase out. She sifts through the pile at the bottom of her bed. Some clothes for the laundry, a stray red M&M cuddly toy with a chocolate-drunk expression and dangling white legs, the council-tax bill, some bus tickets, a limited edition OXO tin filled with jewelry (mostly a series of friendship bracelets she wove during a thread-craft phase), and, amid the books, *Salt* by Mark Kurlansky. She retrieves it and pushes it down into her bag, covered in mermaid sequins, making room between the pink metallic water bottle and the mirror ghost cube puzzle.

She hopes today might be a chance to meet people. She's been going to various meet-ups she found advertised online. The walk-and-talk rambling group, Café Scientifico where experts give talks before an open Q&A, the astrology enthusiast club, and even the monthly autistic social at Reach thinking it might be easier there, but each time it just seems really hard to talk to anyone about anything real. It's all the monotonous small-talk stuff, and anyway, there are so many people there, and it's difficult to edge into a group of people already chatting together.

My body is vibrating as we idle at the lights. I let all my cells rattle in unison. It's calming. I close my eyes and let the sun, now hanging bright above the sea, batik shapes on the inside of my lids. Turquoise, lime, brown, slow-moving like grass. I rock a little in my seat, in the back. Just a little. This coast road gets slow in the mornings but I've left plenty of time. The taxi was there waiting for me on the mini roundabout, if a little perplexed at his pick-up point. Me, weighed down with bags, worried what the folk making their homes in the broken boats stacked up on the edge of the boat graveyard, under tarpaulins, might think of the excess of hailing a cab. I creep past them and close the gate lightly. Today is important. I need all the help I can get to make sure I am a reliable and real person right through until ... what time is the last session? I think we finish at 4:45.

The cab lurches back into motion and the thought, the *imagining* of the "sessions" that are soon to take place coils down my throat and around my waist, squeezing until the air inside my lungs is white electric. My bowels sizzle and my ears ring. I see my left hand has locked into a curled claw with the nails from the index and adjacent finger cutting into my palm, which, of course, is wet with cold sweat. Behind my sunglasses, I glance slowly up to the rearview mirror to evaluate whether the driver has noticed. He has not. I discreetly shake my arm from the shoulder, which I can still move, and use my right hand to unpeel the fingers. "Everything will be okay," I tell myself, on loop, fifteen times, in my kind voice (inside my head). "The day will be over soon, and you will have done a good thing" (eight times). I hope I will have done a good thing. Until I've done it I won't know if it's good. These people. I want so much for them to get something meaningful out of it. It's such a responsibility.

I'm excited about today. I've rehearsed it in my mind so many times and had the various information packs, consent forms, and hand-made thank you cards (with custom badges and sachets of tea inside) divided up into the various plastic wallets into the various card folders and laid out on the boat floor for the past two weeks. I have two digital recorders (one to run as back up) and refreshments to

cater for every configuration of allergy or preference possible. There are not many things that could go wrong, except the worst thing of all: someone not turning up.

In terms of my data, I have recruited enough participants: I have more than enough. If everyone shows and no one withdraws afterwards, I will have, across the three days, around 300 minutes of naturalistic conversation data from autistic adults. It's wild. The thought of it makes me fizz like sherbet. But today is not really about the data anymore. The data are a happy byproduct. Today (and the other two dates) are about *Talking Together*. It's about bringing autistic people and young people from the university together to talk about their experiences of loneliness. It's about listening to people who don't get heard. It's about making human connections. I cannot bear the idea of someone making the trip all the way in to the center of town, anxious, excited, ready to talk with an interested stranger about loneliness and be met, finally, with: no one.

I take my phone from my rucksack and make a new memo note. I should record these reflections to put somewhere in my thesis. When I first thought of framing the data collection this way, around conversations about loneliness, my reasoning felt very simple. If I was asking autistic people for their time and their expertise (in the lived experience of being autistic), then I wanted them to get something valuable out of the exercise, beyond the potential longer term benefit of improved understanding around autistic communication. When I discovered the university ethics panel would not allow me to pay them for their time, my conviction was even stronger. I heard a BBC radio program about the loneliness epidemic in the UK one morning, over my eggs, and thought: bingo. I can make the conversations part of a community engagement project. Young people and autistic people, both prone to loneliness, can come together to share experiences and think about ways of tackling it in the local community. Hell, maybe I can find a small pot of funding to facilitate participants co-producing a pilot of whatever they come up with. Why wouldn't the university want to support that? What I realize now though, an hour away from the first conversation, and what I type into my phone is that loneliness is absolutely, fundamentally related to communication. When you are habitually misunderstood, habitually othered, and habitually locked out of mutual understanding and the human connection that it engenders, chronic, soul-eating loneliness becomes a bit of an inevitability. I know this to be true. This is probably why I am doing this research in the first place, beyond my fascination with language. If you can talk about it, and you can feel heard, maybe it's a way out.

In Reach there are lots of people. There is Gemma, who is the woman from the letter, and she looks young and is laughing a lot; and an older man who is her professor; and lots of biscuits on the table; and Andrew says can he have a cup of tea please? Bianca and Lee from Reach are walking through, and Andrew is saying hello to everybody. Gemma the woman from the letter says she is autistic, and Andrew doesn't think it is true because she is very clever and looks normal, but Gemma is laughing saying she isn't normal and she lives on a boat, and Andrew thinks that must be really exciting and wants to know what kind of boat and does she have a dog? Gemma is very busy keeping coming and going, and she has said Andrew and Rob can wait here with the cups of tea and she will come and get him in a minute, but Andrew isn't sure exactly

what is happening, but it is nice to be at Reach and the tea is a bit weak, but the professor man is talking about the university and asking Andrew about his job.

The bus was late and she hadn't been able to remember what stop to get off at so when she finally arrives Katy is a bit flustered. Inside the Reach building there's a paper sign taped onto the wall as she enters—"Talking Together: On the first floor" and a large arrow pointing the way. She climbs the stairs. She thinks about taking the lift as her Ehlers-Danlos was threatening a flare yesterday, but her hip joints seem okay today, plus, she's impatient to arrive and see what's what. At the top of the stairs another sign: "Talking Together- in here!" Katy presses on the door the sign is attached to and slowly recognizes the waiting room she's been in before when she first came to register with Reach after her diagnosis. That was a couple of years ago now, when she was twenty-two. Apparently girls often get missed as children, that's what they told her. She's heard it's changing now though. She'd thought, once she'd adjusted to the idea of herself as autistic, once she'd learned what it all meant, that maybe having the diagnosis might help her somehow. It might make life easier. It hasn't really, yet. Sometimes it makes her feel even more alien. There's a reason why she's different, and she can't change it.

The room is quite busy. Three men, all older, and one woman dressed in bright colors. The colors make Katy smile. The woman is also wearing a badge made by a local disability designer she likes; she recognizes it by the bold background color and handwriting on the white speech bubble in the middle. This one says "fancy a chinwag?" She doesn't think she's seen that one on the website. "Hi I'm Katy. I like your badge," she says, quietly but quickly. The woman smiles like the Cheshire Cat (actually, her dress is quite Cheshire Cat-like) and extends a hand in an oddly formal handshake. "Hi I'm Gemma, nice to meet you! Thank you for coming!"

Katy follows Gemma down the short corridor into the meeting room, with Andrew, her first conversation partner, behind her. Gemma is bending the fingers on her left hand, clicking the joints. You wouldn't immediately notice it as a stim if you weren't looking for it, she thinks, but Katy recognizes the repetitive action and somehow it makes her feel more relaxed. There's something nice about being around other autistic people, especially now. It might have felt weird if the researcher wasn't autistic—a bit like she was a specimen under observation.

In the room she sits down and looks at Andrew sideways. He isn't quite what she was expecting but he seems sweet. And friendly. That's what's important. Gemma is asking about the light ("Is it too bright?") and the temperature ("Are you too hot?"), and telling them both what is going to happen. They have some prompts they can use on a small slip of paper, if they want, but really all they have to do is talk about whatever they'd like to share about loneliness. Katy wonders what she's going to say as she hasn't prepared anything and the instructions seem quite loose, but at least this isn't boring small talk. "Are you ready?" asks Gemma, looking up and to the left as she speaks but then directly into Katy's face, and Andrew's. She nods. Andrew says he's ready too.

Andrew follows Gemma and another lady in a silver jacket and shiny bag into the small room where you talk about benefits if you need help with them

where he spoke with Lee one time. He sits down on the chair with its back to the window and looks at the small pieces of paper on the table and worries that he will have to read them because he is not very good at reading, but Gemma is reading it for them and showing them how to stop the recorder if they want to stop it, and he wonders why he will want to stop it and if Jess is okay. The other lady and Andrew are going to talk about loneliness, and he knows a lot about loneliness because one time about three years ago he was very lonely and he thought about ending it but he didn't want to make a mistake, and now he has Jess and she would be lonely without him so he is okay now but he has a lot of things he can say that he hopes will be good for the research.

"Once I've pressed record I'll leave the room and come back in about ten minutes. Okay! Conversation Number 1, recording ... now!"

"Do you want to start?" asks Katy, suddenly feeling a bit awkward in the silence with a stranger.

"No you, you start off. d-Do the bottom one, yeah," says Andrew, remembering that the last one was the one that sounded like a good one.

"Okay, the one about strangers talking to each other?"

"Yeah cos we're strangers, aren't we? Yeah cos we've never met before have we, you and me? Cos, we're, we're all strangers here, aren't we? Heheheh."

Outside the room in the hallway, my back propped up against a wall taking my weight, I hear them both chuckling. I set my phone timer for ten minutes. I can't quite believe it all seems to be working. A flash of elation.

I pace up and down, tidying piles of paperwork, checking my schedule, keeping an eye on the clock, wishing somewhere in the back of my mind that I could be in there with them, talking together.