

Mapping, Tending and Bridging the Environments of Chronic Illness: Inner, Outer and In-Between

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Gaelle Chassery, *Finger Walk*

When hearing the word “environment,” people tend to think about the planet, a city, the ecology. While these are accurate associations, I specialise in observing and nurturing types of environments that tend to be unseen, taken for granted, disregarded or forgotten: the ecosystems of inner, outer and in-between. The way I live my life is at once very restricted and infinite; what I have access to externally is tiny, but my internal life is boundless, and that is why my limitations are not a cause of suffering.

My inner environment is the space for daydreams, processing, who I am when I unmask, what safety means to me, creativity and self-care. I include close relationships and therapy in my inner landscape, as they are essential aspects of

wellbeing through regulation, connection, processing and growth. My outer environment is my local communities of plants, stones, animals, people, nature at large, the country in which I live, the world, galaxies and universe. My outer realm encapsulates my work and its impact, how I participate in the world, what the meaning of my life is. My in-between environment is where all things intersect and usually where the greatest discomfort manifests, where many types of relationships can bring stress and complications, especially when it comes to masking, navigating ambiguity and the invisible, misunderstood conditions I live with, including M.E., c-PTSD and autism.

Most people know how to care for their houses, gardens, cars and places of work, but have not cultivated the practical tending of their inner and in-between landscapes. Therefore this piece of writing largely focuses on those crucial aspects of care, which take on an even more essential significance when living with chronic illness, because it brings such a drastic restructuring of external circumstances completely beyond my control, and necessitates I develop greater mastery in those areas I can still affect.

From that perspective, it becomes profoundly helpful to map, deepen, understand and nurture my inner environment, clarify my in-between environment, and optimise how I interact with my outer environment. This does not mean that I have become fully accepting of the limitations generated by chronic illness. I still have crushed hopes, preferences that cannot be granted, high levels of physical symptoms and recurring frustrations. However, it does mean I can meet and hold those in a way that is non-corrosive, and generate options for my wellbeing within those circumstances—options which were not clear to me before.

from inner to outer and back

i admire the sheep
when i get to feed them
walk with them in a flock
gaze at the trees, the grass,
the ever changing hills
feel safe in wild weather
drizzle, mist and high winds
feed the fire and gaze
at small dragons within
sit with my yarn, make shapes
anchors to soothe the din
play with threads and colours
creating the safe bridge
from inner to outer and back
nature is the safe bridge
from inner to outer and back

Mapping: Exploring Hidden Layers for Agency and Wellbeing

My experience of living with long-term and invisible disabilities for three decades is that the main aspect I had to familiarise myself with in order to thrive was my internal environment. The most important thing was learning to read how things land somatically, and get to know myself really well so that I can tell what I need moment-to-moment and respond in real time. It has been crucial to understand what I am willing and able to tolerate or not, and to implement any changes within my control while learning to relax with the uncertainty of what is outside my control.

I map my inner environment carefully and take a lot of time to do so regularly as an essential aspect of self-care: getting to know who I am and how what I have lived through has shaped me is important in order to decide the kind of person I want to be. I have had this interest in deep change and growth since my teen years. This seamless and practiced ability to travel between my inner and outer worlds is the pivotal balance point of everything I am and do. By preserving my nourishing solitude, I am able to find ample time to know myself and develop this relationship, as I would with a partner, a best friend or a child. I use the Internal Family Systems to harmonise my inner relationships. Keeping my internal family in compassionate and open communication that focuses on repair and tending to all the aspects of these inner parts while being the one in charge as an adult is a skill that I never take for granted and enjoy refining. It has been life-changing in my journey of severe and complex trauma recovery as the ultimate reparenting process.

Taking care of my internal family is the foundation from which I can show up in all my relationships with openness and the discernment of knowing what belongs to me or not, what is my responsibility or not, without expecting others to rescue me, and without trying to rescue them. This frees the ground for truly reciprocal and joyful relating, and helps to discern which persons are good for me and which ones will be unsuited to my commitment to growth and balance: because any form of stress or conflict in my close relationships has a large impact on my capacity to stay focused, grounded and functional, it's important to make sure communication is open, and that the practice of mutual listening, tracking, integration and genuine repair is of interest to those who are in my inner circle.

I have a special notebook which I call *The Gaelle Manual*, and which contains all the things I know, understand and wonder about myself. Like me, it is ever-evolving, and not meant to be exhaustive or perfect. It functions like a recipe book that can be a guideline, a base or an inspiration, and a treasury of reminders for when my mind is too tired or too full to remember the basics of my needs and responses. It holds the toolbox and drop-down menus of options that help me nourish and regulate my systems, come back to myself and provide the conditions in which I can rest, learn, relate to the world and respect my capacity without continuously crashing or getting overwhelmed.

My internal world is rich and forever expanding. I thrive in solitude and enjoy cultivating this vast garden and archival landscape. It is where I retreat to learn,

regulate, integrate, recover, heal and grow. It is the opposite of isolation and avoidance: relying on it gives me what I need to feel balanced and thrive, and it is the place from which all other connections are possible and nourishing. When we really love a place, we keep going back to it in all seasons, all lights and all weathers, and it becomes a part of our world, it feels like home. We can do this internally too, by observing ourselves, spending time with ourselves. That tracking process can be as casual or as involved as we wish. I enjoy being very thorough and involved with it, because it creates such glowing clarity which directly serves every single choice I make daily, from the mundane to the crucial. I have built a life where there is space to do that in a deeply committed way. It helps me make decisions quickly and unerringly, so it is a worthwhile investment.

Journaling is a large part of maintaining my inner balance and focus. My mind is incredibly active and likes to think about things in order to figure them out, which is a great disposition for most problems in life. However, it can turn into looping, ruminating and draining overthinking if I cannot keep it structured, held and clarifying. The practice of journaling helps me to quickly organise my thoughts and feelings, seeing right through them to discover what is at the bottom of my thinking process, and helps me to free up a lot of time and energy that I need for daily maintenance and passion projects. Journaling is a great way to get to know myself intimately and to have radical compassion. I also believe it helps to rewire my brain by giving me a safe and private place to process deep trauma and its impact while unveiling my belief systems, glass ceilings and biases, which can open the door to fast growth and sharp clarity.

journaling

got a pretty notebook
to write ugly thoughts in
because let's face it
no one wants to hear that

no one wants to hear that
but it's been suggested
that i need to pay
closer attention
to myself

i need to say that
i need to write that
i need to scream that
i need to hear that

i need to hear that

i have permission
to be
at my worst
one foot in the grave
breathing paradox
of a life half-lived
half-remembered
half-seen

it's been suggested that
maybe I am
the only one
who needs to know fully
-or maybe
the only one who can

because let's face it-
no one wants to hear that

Tending: Practical Care of the Inner and In-Between Environments

What does tending the inner environment imply? My catchphrase is, "It starts with knowing myself well." Knowing what I can or cannot tolerate, what I need and don't need, in order to function at my best within limiting circumstances. When life shrinks due to chronic illness, looking at things through a smaller perspective seems counter-intuitive, but it can actually restore profound agency and pave the way for well-timed and impactful interventions day-to-day.

Micro-Cycles and Micro-Resets

I pay attention to micro-cycles and accompany myself through them with micro-resets: these are practical one-off rituals that are responsive to whatever ripples external events cause in my internal forecast. If the day has been heavy, if I have been particularly unwell, grieving, preoccupied, distracted, I do not try to shift away from these moods forcefully. I do not indulge the feelings or wallow, but I do allow them to be present and see what they have to teach me about myself. I meet myself exactly there, follow my biofeedback to best know how to care for myself precisely where I am at.

Our system is like a set of stairs and we cannot expect ourselves to jump from the bottom stair to the top without taking time for transitions between states. This is where micro-resets help. They respect the current state while gently guiding the way towards a natural shift, and they do not demand a huge effort or a long time. Some of my favourite micro-resets, which I also call self-soothing rituals, include washing my

face with a warm cloth, changing into a fresh set of clothes, or giving myself a face massage for a few minutes.

I especially like the fresh set of clothes ritual after a few hours of deep grieving or high symptoms, because it feels like shedding an old skin and starting anew. Looking out the window for a minute, slowly writing a paper letter to a friend, looking through photographs of my art and natural environments, tending to my houseplants, sorting one tiny corner of the house, one shelf, one drawer, one box, are more ways to integrate micro-resets within daily life, and it can all be adjusted according to how much energy I have. If I am spending time in bed recharging but still want to do something simple, my resets might look like digital housekeeping: sorting through emails, documents, photos.

My inner and outer environments continuously feed and inform each other. By exploring, nourishing, and strengthening my inner environment, I give myself the best basis from which to interact with my outer environment from a place of curiosity, openness and relaxation. The attentive observation of my outer environment provides a blueprint for the way I can observe and map my inner seasons and weather changes, giving me the discernment to stay detached while caring deeply and making room for many pockets of simple soothing joys through my days regardless of how challenging things might feel.

Observing animals as kindred spirits and companions who inhabit my surroundings, I never feel alone, and seeing any one of them even for a few seconds provides a deep and enduring connection that is immediately internalised as a comforting presence, a source of joy and an undeniable bond, whether the animal is wild and unknown, or domesticated and familiar to me. Observing animals reminds me of their ease and gentleness, and I am always inspired by their impeccable focus, doing what their bodies ask them to do, which in turn reminds me to pay attention to what my body needs and to stay focused on acting mindfully, whatever I choose to do, with purpose, intention and presence.

I once observed a swan building a nest; the whole operation was a privilege to witness and remains one of my favourite memories. The complete commitment, focus and dedication to build something so vital out of nothing, gathering the materials to do so and creating a shape so intuitive and perfect, was truly magical. I had only ever seen swans swimming or flying before, and was fascinated to watch the swans using their bodies for this much more private, but no less essential, activity. It made me reflect deeply on the sacred aspect of building our sanctuary one tiny bit at a time, with purpose and commitment, by following our inner needs, intuitions and looking in our outer environments for the materials and atmospheres that will best meet us through the fluctuating needs of our days. I collect many natural treasures such as feathers, pebbles, empty wasp nests, shells and twigs, which I keep by me as I work, and my eyes enjoy resting on them at regular intervals while my hands are drawn to the textures and feelings they carry, connecting me to the beautiful landscape I live in even when I cannot leave the house.

When living with a chronic illness, creating and maintaining a sanctuary, a nest, can feel impossible, and can truly be one of the most challenging aspects of daily life. Tasks are neverending, everything piles up, things may never be as clean or as tidy as we would have them if we were well. And yet, I have found that reserving some of my energy budget for maintaining and organising my house is one of the best investments I can make for my health and general wellbeing.

The concept of nesting has two meanings for me: it can be active, creating systems, organising, decluttering, repairing, optimising the space, making sure it serves me well. But those very steps demand to be nourished by the more passive and receptive act of nesting that we seek in rest: creating a nest with blankets, low amber lights, everything I might need near me to allow me to stay put and recuperate, is just as important as actively participating in the maintenance and order of my home.

Translating this to the inner environment, the act of grooming is directly related to the act of nesting. I see grooming as an essential bridge between my physical body and my inner weather, and I use it extensively to meet myself, tend to my emotions and shift easefully between states. How much of it I do is responsive to each day's pain and energy levels, but there are ways to adapt grooming to low capacity days, and that is important for me to maintain as much as possible. Our physical body is our primary nest after all, and I like to imagine that my brain is nesting in my skull, sometimes incredibly active, sometimes more quiet, just like the sequence of birds putting so much focus and energy into building their nests before retiring to lay eggs, rest, and then go back to the frenzied cycles of feeding their youngs, constantly keeping watch and protecting them, teaching them the art of flight. If we consider the way we must meet ourselves as humans, the daily maintenance of the human body is not that different. It does become more obvious when dealing with chronic illness and disabilities, because self-care becomes non-negotiable and its absence can bring devastating and long-lasting impacts. Self-care therefore becomes the very condition that allows us to interact with the outer environment and live well despite limitations, while enjoying an intimate, expansive and rich relationship with our inner landscape.

In order to maintain both my internal and external nests, I enjoy making lists and inventories. Keeping track not only of myself internally, but also of my immediate environment, the home and what it contains, gives me a sense of mastery in a life where so much choice and independence have been curtailed. It supports my need for an environment where things are easy to find, access and clean. I do enjoy having lots of things around me to look at, tend to, read and play with, so I am not a minimalist, but I have systems that make the house easy to live in and respect my limited and fluctuating capacity. This is one of the pillars of internal and external sustainability for me, and I take it seriously, by decluttering regularly and reorganising my space one tiny corner at a time.

One of my preferred ways to tend to myself and bridge states is to listen to music. My system receives music as infrastructure, architecture and companionship. I curate my music collection as an essential act of self-care and maintenance, and

know exactly which artists and albums can accompany me through each state. As far as nervous system tracking and regulation goes, this is one of my most frequently used tools. It brings connection to artists as kindred spirits, I receive meaning, validation and deepening through the lyrics, while the melodies map, reflect and expand my inner states and relationships. Singing along offers an effective way to regulate my vagus nerve and to keep my voice flowing and clear, even in those times when I might feel unheard, unseen or misperceived. My favourite way to spend the evening is to lie in bed in the dark listening to albums in their entirety: receiving the story of each in the order it was intended. This is my time of decompression and integration, where my body relaxes and my brain unplugs. I might even fall asleep while the music plays, and find this kind of rest supremely restorative for all my layers.

Aligning Inner and Outer Layers with Boundaries for Sustainability

Tending the in-between environment can be much less straightforward and much more delicate. There seems to be a regrettable consensus that people should show up equally regardless of their needs or abilities. In theory, people are more aware nowadays, things are slowly changing, there is more understanding, and a much larger dialogue surrounding chronic illness, neurodivergence and trauma is taking root. It is encouraging to see and hear those developments, which can bring an important kind of validation, and in certain cases, community, support and solidarity.

However, in practice, things do not always follow through with real access or understanding: the vast majority of people still expect me to function and show up way beyond my baseline and have no real interest in learning about the day-to-day realities of living with the conditions which direct everything I can or cannot do in my life. Most people assume I can do all the things, but they do not have the curiosity to observe different life circumstances or educate themselves about chronic illness, neurodivergence and trauma. I have to decide whether or not to spend precious time and energy educating them, or just let the misperceptions float and absorb the cost quietly within myself. Considering this ongoing dynamic and the high cost related to it personally, this contact with the in-between environment is the one where I have focused my firmest boundaries and commitment to inner peace and self-love. Slowly building the courage to say no without apologising has been an incredibly strengthening and freeing development.

where the ravens go

when i need time unseen
and space for my true self
i go to the dark woods

the wild ones to the east

no one will be there
but deer, ravens, buzzards
so i forget the time
and intrusive neighbours

smell the moss, touch the trees
listen to crackling twigs
the wind in the treetops
heals my soul and my fears

my boots will get muddy
and my hair will get wet
me a wild self again
gleaming, calm but fierce
smelling of moss and trees

The practice of protecting my time and space is crucial as I live in a body that looks completely healthy. It is up to me to put in place the kind of clear boundaries that prevent people from demanding that I function at the level they expect. As I am not interested in explaining my symptoms and limits, I have become at ease with saying things like, "I can't do this right now," "I am beyond capacity and can't do anymore for now," "I can't help with this but I hope you find the help you need." Used as weather reports rather than bids for sympathy, rescue or understanding, these statements are perfect to protect energy and deflect people who simply cannot integrate my reality. These sentences can be repeated in infinite permutations, as many times as needed, and each time I say them, it becomes easier.

This is intelligent preservation of inner resources, the kind of resources that cannot be bought and that no one can replace when I squander them, the costs of which are totally unseen and misunderstood by people who function with more easeful levels of health. It is essential to protect my space and energy fiercely and cleanly. It helps me to keep my focus and strength for what matters, such as daily maintenance, creative projects, safe connections, and allows me to feel whole, well and powerful within the limited landscapes of chronic illness.

The discourse about sustainability often neglects to include some of our most important resources: our personal capacities. Our personal resources cannot be allocated to everything and everyone: as part of my deep concern for sustainability, I pay great attention to my capacity and always re-evaluate what I can realistically offer. I come back to important questions I keep deepening and refining. What does this cost my nervous system? Does it impact my essential self-care and maintenance positively or negatively? Does this support me, or does it add stress? Is it a healthy challenge, or a depleting stretch? Are the people I help or give to mindful of my reality,

or do they alter their narrative to fit what they need and expect from me? Does this align with my values and ethics? Does this make me feel nurtured, helped, relaxed and enthusiastic? In other words, am I invited to give my best and true self here, or am I only welcome if I mask and comply?

Masking to me is where most challenges occur, as the main component is one of human interactions, which can be random and unexpected. Relaxing with uncertainty when living with c-PTSD and autism is a huge skill to learn, and while I am doing very well with it after so many years of intense healing, this is the area that demands the most energy, therefore it needs the most protection and discernment. Some situations ask us to compromise and meet others halfway, and I am in support of that as long as there is no self-betrayal or suppression that add up to serious personal costs.

Going into an imperfect or uncertain situation with our eyes fully open, our feelings clear and a sharp, honest, self-aware and sincere mind is the best disposition and means we have weighed pros and cons, possible outcomes, and gauged our inner strength against most eventualities. That is a great way to meet life and a great use of an overthinking mind!

In my view, the most important aspect of managing this landscape is to try to operate from a place where all my internal and external layers are aligned in coherence as much as possible: values, ethics, window of tolerance, capacities, passions, relationships, pursuits, and so forth. Taking the time to identify what serves me well and what depletes me allows me to make more time for what helps me to move forward and become the person I wish to be within circumstances that have altered way beyond my wishes, hopes and preferences.

One of the most delicate and important aspects of living with fluctuating conditions is that I have to preserve a buffer at all times. This is not always possible, so I do my best. Experience has shown me that because I function with low support, low energy, high symptoms and need more time for recovery, if challenges arise in quick successions, my balance can tip very quickly and severely, and I could be left to absorb the consequences alone for months, where an able-bodied person might just need a few days of lower activity and a good night's sleep to bounce back.

As a direct example, I am writing this while dealing with domestic imperatives which were not severe, but needed attention, and as I live alone, I had to take care of that myself while navigating external stressors in a significant relationship and caring for sick animals that are very dear to me in the midst of a heatwave. I eventually collapsed with a health emergency that sent me to the hospital via ambulance. This sequence would represent a high level of stress for anyone. When it lands all at once in the already high stress baseline of complex trauma, neurodivergence and chronic illness, the consequences can be devastating and long-lasting. It usually happens in complete invisibility while many people expect me to keep functioning normally.

As an advocate I feel it's important to remain private about my symptoms and life, but I also try to find a balance of sharing with discernment in order to raise awareness of what day-to-day life actually demands of us in a society that persists in

pretending we can just get on with it like everyone else. This is why I committed to learning about my biofeedback and using it to navigate the way I organise my calendar, learning to be ok with disappointing people if I notice I am pushing through in a way that will take me months to recover from. There is no medal for these heroics, and as I reached my forties I decided putting myself first was long overdue. No one else can do it for me.

of my human body

it took me a long time
to start feeling at home
in this human body

i had to learn to breathe
yes! i had to learn to breathe
or rather, i had to learn to stop
holding my breath
to stop fearing the worst
and to notice that now
is pure and safe and free

it took me a long time
to build this home
to care for it
and really, it took me a long time
to stop destroying it
this body
to stop being afraid
when it turned against me

some rooms in this body
are so vast and empty
that their echoes get lost
lost with what i could be
some rooms have secret doors
hidden even from me

the gift was to settle
to learn to rest and be
to inhabit the home
of my human body

Bridging: From Inner to Outer and Back

I live in a very remote-rural area where there is access to nothing, which is a constant logistical challenge when operating with poor health and low support. However, I do have an abundance of fresh air, calm, silence and stunning views to rest my eyes and my system. I never take those for granted, especially because 16 years ago, I was fully bedbound for four years, and then fully housebound for many years after that. It was a particular kind of heartbreak to be unable to go out in my beloved natural environment, and the irony was cruel, as it is literally on my doorstep, but was still too far for me to reach.

Now I consider myself truly fortunate to be able to spend about 1% of my time outside of my house. I would prefer much more time in nature, but that tiny window maintains a balance and allows me to reconnect with myself in a powerful way while receiving gentle, uncomplicated healing through my interactions with communities of animals, plants, lichens, trees and rocks. I still have many housebound weeks through the year, times of acute illness, injuries, higher symptoms or burnout, and I treat those as the fluctuations of my natural inner seasons: times of wintering, rest and repair, where I bring myself the respect, space and attention needed to recharge and recover, preparing the ground for my next internal spring and summer.

Navigating the Challenges of the In-Between Environments

When living with invisible and fluctuating conditions, we have to deal with the ripple effect this has on our immediate environment, especially the human communities in which we live and the impact they have on us. This is a distinctly delicate bridge to navigate. Most of us are dismally under-supported, misperceived and often invisible, or maybe we are only seen for the wrong reasons, with scrutiny, judgement and out-of-touch attitudes, but rarely witnessed in our full humanity, complexity, needs or capacities.

Many are not good at listening, but are very free with their opinions and advice, no matter how uninformed they are. I have always felt that my most painful and challenging symptom is what people say to me about what I live with: it is usually invasive, judgemental, unhelpful and draining. This is a huge factor in energy management. I have to protect myself from this relentless input, either by being very selective about who I let into my space and circumstances, or by being very direct and consistently rectifying misperceptions. The second option is not always wise or available, and discernment needs to be exercised to make sure energy is not squandered on trying to explain myself to people who are committing to misunderstanding me and uninterested in learning and integrating realities that differ from their own experience.

No matter how far we come with our physical and emotional healing, nothing can prepare us for the onslaught of comments and misperceptions when we become more visible. When I was housebound, this was an issue I didn't have to deal with.

Now being just one more percent visible has brought serious complications to my enjoyment of something that should be a celebration, simply because people cannot register the nuance, complexities and ambiguity of a situation like mine. They need a person to be either completely disabled, or fully functioning. Trying to explain how it is to exist anywhere else along that spectrum, having to choose between humiliating erasure through absorption of inaccurate perceptions, or relentlessly challenging them—either choice is fatiguing and stressful and one of the most challenging symptoms of living with a chronic and invisible illness. When the illness is actually visible on me, I am not visible: all my focus needs to go towards rest and accommodation in solitude, which means people tend to only see my better moments.

This complicates access to my external environment—ironically one of the main things I need at my core to feel balanced. Sometimes when I have a bad day which could be helped by a few minutes of fresh air, I decide to stay home anyway to protect myself from invasive comments, ignorant judgements, inaccurate perceptions and unsolicited advice. Below is a poem I wrote when I was starting to come out of the fully housebound situation and grappling with how the transition impacted my connection with the people who live near me.

housebound

i live in a glass jar
where time seems to have stopped
where everything i see
is just out of my reach

from here things are muffled
suspended through ages
on bad days i wonder
do i hear life clearly

'she is so elusive'
'she is so reclusive'
'you should see more people'

people pass by, breeze by, live nearby
who hears me
they don't listen
they make all the noise
and sometimes they wonder
'what is your class'

invisible class
crash after crash unseen

on bad days i wonder
if i died, would they know

in this tight-knit place
i am as hidden, as powerfully lost
as the village ghosts

and they sometimes wonder
'by the way how are you'
'(please don't tell the truth
it is embarrassing)'

i thread my days away
in a creative whirl
hurl art over the edge
of my glass
hoping for the best
trying to play my part

half empty or half full
my glass jar overflows
with potential and dreams
of all i could have been
enough grief to drown in

on bad days i wonder
how much longer unseen

Sensory Art as a Soothing Bridge

As a sensory artist I use my art practice as one of the main bridges between inner and outer environments, and it is possibly the easiest, most rewarding and most involved way to inhabit and tend to the in-between realm. The nature of my work is solitary but connecting, and allows me to spend many hours in quiet contemplation that is essential for exploring my inner and outer landscapes. The work itself often reveals things about myself that I have no access to otherwise, and when it reaches a wider audience, people's feedback usually signals more things I was not aware of, echoes of what they felt when interacting with the work, and what I might or might not have consciously added to it during the making process.

I enjoy using my work as the bridge in so many ways, one of them as a tribute to nature that I recreate on a miniature scale or a giant one, allowing me to play with scale and perceptions, but also to extract precious elements and organisms from a landscape I often crave to be in but cannot access due to ill health. Replicating those

elements with wool offers me a way to deal with the difficult symptoms which make most things inaccessible, and gives me a platform to create access to nature within my own space, and then offer that to others. The sensory sculptures and installations become a way to spend time in nature without needing to move beyond capacity, and bring much gentleness and compassion to a situation where we are so often told to try harder, push through and conquer genuine limitations through sheer willpower.

An important aspect of my work is to explore how autistic and disabled creativity can generate forms of community from within isolation, limited access, and chronic illness. Speaking from my practice as a mostly housebound, disabled and autistic artist and writer, I consider how wool, sensory sculpture, poetry, and installation become ways of thinking, communicating, and making contact beyond conventional social structures.

My work begins in solitude, but it is not solitary in its effects: tactile organisms, textile environments, and material presences create encounters between bodies, senses, animals, landscapes, makers, and viewers. I reflect on the ways autistic attention, sensory intelligence, and careful material practice can transform invisibility into relation. I ask how creative work might hold community not only as a social gathering, but as an ecology of touch, care, memory, place, and shared perception.

My creativity is anchored in the environment in which I live and with which I communicate intimately and frequently through observation, presence and receptivity. To me being outside in nature is not just a break or a distraction: it is a deep, profound and regulating immersion in the community of plants, organisms, stones, trees and hills that I feel a kinship with. That experience of relaxed joy, unconditional freedom, wonder and safety is always deeply appreciated. I offer it embodied presence, curiosity, respect, full focus, attentive presence and openness. This is one of my safest, most supportive and most transformative relationships. I give and receive freely during that time, without effort, expectations or pretense. I take the time to be part of my environment, to really get to know it through observation and receptivity. It is this concentrated distillation and total presence that I bring to my sensory work, and I think this is why it feels so organic and immediate.

Disabled autistic creativity is often misread as solitary, private, or inaccessible because institutions recognise community mainly through visible participation. My practice shows another model: community made through attention, materials, ecosystems, sensory access, and the visitor's embodied encounter. But for this kind of creativity to enter public spaces, institutions must understand access as infrastructure, not rhetoric. Connection does not always require physical presence. Community can be made through adapted routes. Disabled and autistic participation may look different, but it is still real.

Though I work in isolation, all my pieces have a collaborative aspect: because they pay tribute to nature, evoke my inner and outer landscapes, and due to my commitment to sourcing yarn from small Scottish producers who prioritise high welfare and regenerative practices. My work becomes a representation of small

communities and ecosystems: the community of a farm and the landscape within which they exist, the communities of the many flocks who meet in a single sensory piece, their shepherds and all who cared for them to produce the wool that I work with, the communities of mosses, lichens, fungi, plants, landscapes and atmospheres that make a regular appearance in my surroundings and my work, the community that is my own internal landscape, the community of visitors who interact with my work in physical and virtual exhibition settings. My process is slow and mindful, rooted in observation and presence, which I translate into evocative and anchored work. The pieces are not isolated objects. They are highly interactive, sensory organisms designed to exist in relation to one another. Their meaning emerges through community via provenance, accumulation, proximity, installation, interaction, and encounter, which all help to create stories.

Within museum settings, my work reminds people that there is a point of safety, calm, sensory joy and reassurance, which reconnects them to themselves and nature, a little island offering a safe harbour of grounding and private or externalised sensory joy. Visitors connect with my work on a very personal and deep level, miniature landscapes for people who may not be able to access the actual landscape in person. The permission to touch and smell the sculptures provides an embodied relationship with exhibition settings which can be deeply grounding and regulating. The work can be externalised towards many visitors who complete it by interacting with it, creating their own stories, reflecting their own connection to outer and inner environments, and nurturing the cycle from inner to outer and back.

My friendship with sheep is a privilege that I never take for granted and directly influences every aspect of my sensory art. To have access to such affectionate and gentle companions is one of my favourite things about where I live. Within the finished works, sheep can figure as literal presence as their tiny selves, where I enjoy replicating their characteristics in miniature and placing them in our familiar landscape which I recreate out of wool and textiles. My close sheep friends feature in several pieces, either in 2D or 3D. This way to pay tribute to those characterful beings is not accidental. They are one of my most easeful and essential bridges between inner and outer environments. A day where a sheep visit is possible becomes immediately better, sweeter and soothingly connecting. I carry this feeling as an embodiment of friendship, warmth and presence, and seek to distill and crystallise it through my sensory work so that others who might never meet my sheep friends still get to experience some of that joy, warmth and sweetness.

In some pieces the sheep are present as their essence even if they are not figuratively represented. I once made a throw entirely with the fleece of one very special sheep called Boss Ewe. It was a huge honour to receive this big cone of her creamy, honey- coloured, slightly silvery wool and to be present with her for the countless hours it took to make the throw, her gorgeous wool and essence flowing through my fingers for every tiny stitch. The design was improvised by holding in my mind the landscape that she came from and spent her whole life in, where she grew her beautiful wool and received loving care from her shepherd through the long years

of her happy life as the leader of the flock. I use the throw every night, it covers the foot of my bed while I sleep, and I treasure this heirloom and the fact that she keeps me warm daily although she died several years ago. I am so touched to preserve her memory and honour her life through her presence in my home.

The main way in which I honour the sheep is of course by carefully selecting my producers, but also by designing unique pieces that best showcase the unique quality of their yarns. Depending on where the yarn comes from and what kind of sheep were involved in its making, it will have very different qualities. The yarns I work with have their own character and presence. They are alive and change depending on the light. As I mostly use undyed yarn, I get to see the many natural colours of sheep, and delight in the depth and richness of those hues.

I always aim to pay tribute to the landscape in which the sheep spend their lives, and like to joke that often, they get the best views in the place where they live! This is certainly the case for the sheep I visit here, getting sweeping views of our mystical glen where they enjoy watching tourists congregate around the cairns and standing stones!

The way sheep inhabit their landscape feels relevant to my work in many ways, primarily through the way it feels, as I like to capture the atmosphere of a place through my designs, as well as the way a landscape looks, its distinctive features and the topography of the land. My shawls and blankets often look like mini maps when laid flat, and they map the steps of the sheep, through lines, waves and grooves which mirror the distinctive “sheep paths” that sheep make through the fields they live in. Those paths are the ones they tread repeatedly, and they will never stray off them, creating a vast and intricate network of lines that converge until the entire area is covered. This is not unlike the flight lines that birds follow, and is a phenomenon which fascinates me and recurrently features in my work.

Another way sheep inhabit my work is through the anchoring smell of lanolin, which I use as a focal point for my soothing shawls, blankets and sensory sculptures. The earthy, comforting scent is a direct way to signal safety to the brain, connecting us to the ancestral bond we share with these animals as a source of warmth, companionship and a link to nature, and which I enjoy bringing all the way into my home, people’s homes, and museum settings: a perfect example of bridging our inner to outer environments.

adopted family

spring spells
grass lush in darkest green
mint glows silver velvet
ravens call overhead
to rowan trees watching

wind is warm and swirling
whispering safe secrets
for tantalizing hills
butterfly gives a winged kiss
bees dance in the heather

fluttering golden pine
smells so sweet and heady
i forget this body
shelter in his branches
offers me the right kind of visibility

catch my breath
mend my wounds
soothe my soul
protect my steps

gentle herbs and daisies
birds spiders stones and trees
nettles dandelions
ingredients for potions
are friends to me
safety to me
are family to me

holding each other
noticing each other
hearing each other
helping each other
through changes through seasons
through all lack of reason

thriving anyway



Gaelle Chassery, *Nesting: Regulation Station*