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## SPOTLIGHT

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### A SHARED BREATH

*One Breath* is a collaborative book produced by Clan Beo, a community collective located in Westport, Ireland, whose mission is to promote “respectful social integration for citizens who live with the experience of disability...” The book combines narratives and art by Clan Beo community members with haiku by Roberta Beary.

The book came about through partnership. Beary had organized an exhibit at Westival, an annual music and arts festival in Westport, in which she paired haiku by Haiku Ireland members with quilts from a local quilters group. The Westival chairperson, Willie Walsh, was involved with Clan Beo, and asked if Beary would help edit what came to be known as “reluctant engagements.” These “engagements” were narratives written in response to the discovery that many families of people with disability couldn’t bring to mind positive engagements with the various governmental and special social services. This was perhaps not surprising, considering the families had met with on average ninety-two different special professionals.

To gather together these narratives, over several years the members of Clan Beo had tried to engage with the families of people with disabilities. However, the overtures were planned through the normal channels—i.e. the special service professionals—with which the families had had unsatisfactory interactions. It quickly became apparent that the organization would have to mine their own network of families directly.

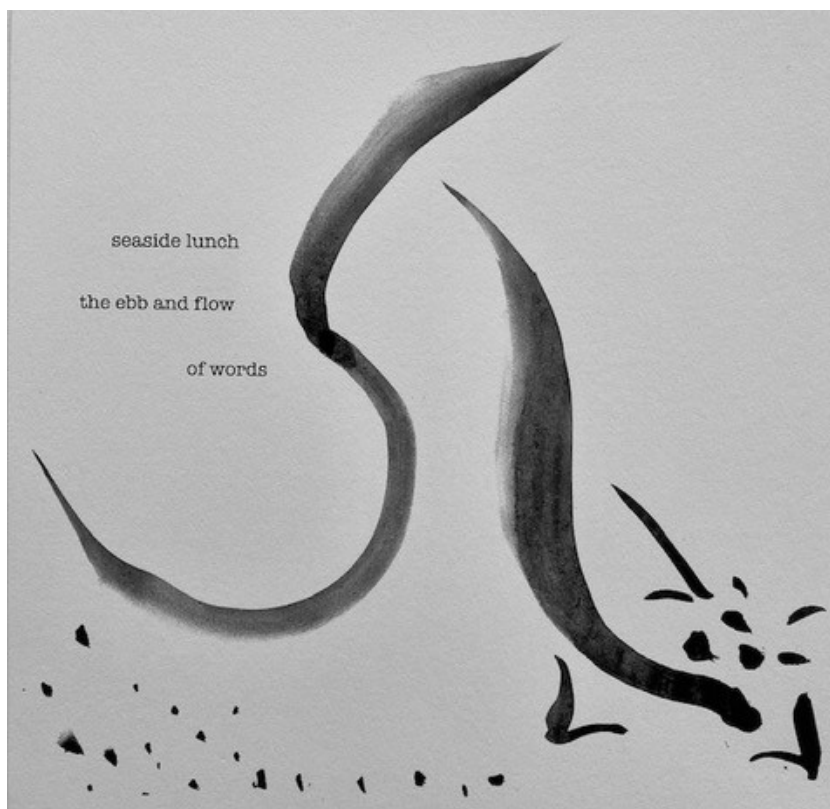
With a desire that the question itself be a positive interaction, members of Clan Beo asked thirty families to recall a truly empowering engagement with a special professional. From *One Breath*’s introduction:

Those 30 conversations were had at kitchen tables, in cafés, in the front seat of the car, on the street and (inevitably) late at night in a quiet corner of a bar. The conversations were rarely straightforward. In most instances

an empowering story was preceded by memories of other ‘professional’ engagements that still carried some trauma ... These conversations inspired the raw material for 23 narratives that are now used in a workshop on ‘right relationship’ created for people, families and those working alongside them.

After helping to edit the “engagements,” Beary had the idea of linking haiku to the prose as a way of bringing, as she described, “the abled community inside the conversation.”

*Engagement: 'After mutual eye blinks the conversation trickles between them, allowing him time to sense her state of well-being. Patiently, he waits for her words to flow.'*



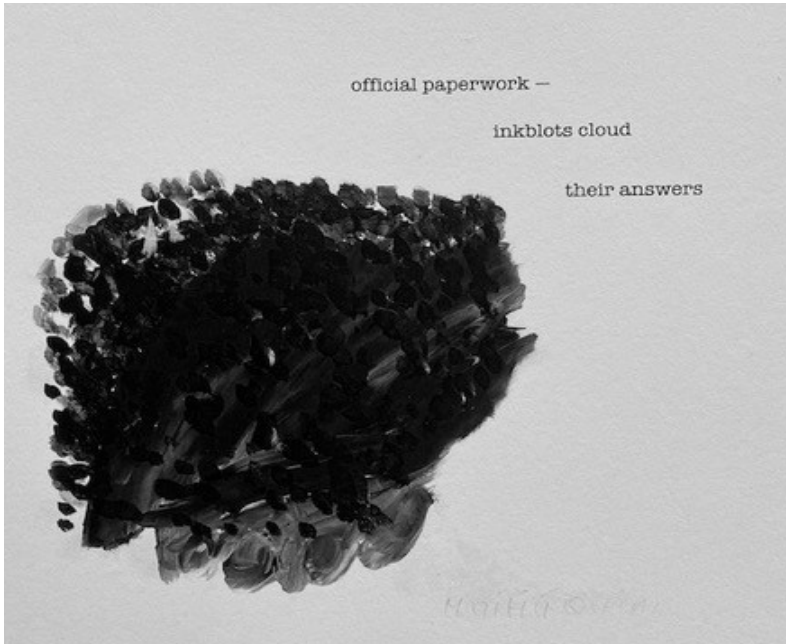
Beary has had a long history of speaking for the under-represented, so the poems on the struggles faced by the families of the disabled tied into her larger, personal obligation to speak for the silenced. In addition, she had extensive experience navigating the social services bureaucracy in the United States, so she could relate to the frustration and anger expressed by the families. Still, the act of writing and rewriting the poems ended up being a multiyear process, in which, leveraging her experience as a haibun editor, she struggled with the balance between prose and poem—a balance every haibun writer seeks, in which the two forms cross pollinate, but don't necessarily repeat information in the other. It was also important that the haiku could stand on their own.

When Beary shared her haiku with Walsh, he asked if she knew an artist who could help engage with the families. Beary suggested Mary White, with whom she had organized a haiku workshop at another iteration of Westival. The two had also read at the Westival launch of *Wishbone Moon* (2018), an international anthology of haiku by women that Beary had co-edited and in which both were represented. In October 2019, White gave a one-day workshop on haiga to fifteen participating families of people with disabilities. The results were dozens of mainly black and white images in pastel and ink, inspired by Beary's haiku, as well as the original narratives that inspired them.

The final book contains all twenty-three “reluctant engagements,” accompanied by Beary's haiku and the group's artwork. From an artistic perspective, the narratives are the least interesting part of the book, often describing what—to the abled—might seem as everyday occurrences: home visits by professionals, the reviewing of budgets, trips to the pub and newsstand, etc... Additionally, the need for privacy makes them sometimes read flatly. However, these everyday activities are undoubtedly fraught with tension for the families of disabled persons or disabled persons themselves, and it should be kept in mind that the original purpose of the narratives was to be used as a starting point, or meeting place, to begin a dialogue around what might make a “right relationship.”

That said, it is the art and haiku in *One Breath* that really shine. Beary does a good job expanding the perimeters of the sometimes-flat prose. She creates additional context, imagining other relationships, which in

*Engagement: "After 20 minutes queuing, they hunch over a counter, defeated by complex forms and demands for detail, caught in a system where their special need is €100 for the shopping."*



turn bring in nice details. A favorite example is an “engagement” that describes a mother dropping her disabled son off at a bus stop, and staying to watch him from a distance. Beary’s haiku, *how proudly he wears / his father’s tweed cap / daffodil bus-stop*, creates a strong three-dimensional character. The addition of the spring kigo “daffodil” nicely illuminates the boy’s self-confidence. The images themselves are a variety of representative and abstract art that are often made up of primitive or raw strokes. The combination of the poems and images is striking.

Information on *One Breath*, as well as a digital preview, is available from [www.clanbeo.org](http://www.clanbeo.org)