

DISEASE IS NOT A METAPHOR

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by Cyree Jarelle Johnson

Disease is not a metaphor for some crude and unnamed other. Disease is not capitalism, nor is it communism. Disease is not anarchy, nor is it the threat of anarchy. Except for when the body is chaotic and unknowable. Disease is not a virus in the system. Disease is not the body, not the whole, but a part. Disease is not a test from god. Disease is not a fiery furnace, a wall to climb over, a home to be lifted out of by rope. Disease is not a battle to be won or lost in death. Disease is not a metaphor. Disease is not hyperbole. Disease is neither metonym nor synonym. Disease is a condition of the body. Disease is a visitor. Disease is a backseat driver who climbs up front and takes the wheel.

Illness is not a fligreed way to speak about things unpleasant and undesired, no matter how comfortable you may be with thinking of it in that way. You were not “crippled” by debts, nor “paralyzed” by fear, nor was your Thursday evening movie “lame”. You are not “blind” to the reality of the situation, nor “deaf” to the concerns of a close friend. You *were* entrenching able-bodied supremacy in language though, is there a specialized insult for that, taken from the lexicon of sorrow heaped upon people who are not yourself? No, there are not more important things to think about than words, because the things that you say are the substance of your thoughts, which become the things that you do and the biases you keep close to your chest.

Neither disease, nor illness, nor disability is a convenient way to transmit your point into the bodies of those who would not listen otherwise. Disease is so rarely convenient. By invoking disease you have likely hit the point in their brains that monitors pity, fear, and disgust. If you are talking to me, it is the sector that should learn to better control rage. Disease is not for you to take on and cast off and diagnose yourself anew each morning. Disease is not for you to diagnose in the bodies of others, based on your novice opinion and ableist vision. Disease is not erased by the clever sidestep of euphemism. You cannot close your eyes and blink it away in hopes that we will die before you open them up again. You may utter the name of the disease loudly, I do not think it offensive.

The body is not an apology for the disease. The body is not something to be looked at with eyes cast down and weeping. The body is not something to be viewed with the smug sense of knowing what

health is. The body is not an apology for the disease. The body is not a manifestation of corporeal weakness and lack to be filled up by Jesus or God or the holy spirit. The body will not untwist itself, anti-virus itself, or cover itself up no matter how many prayer circles surround it, or altar calls it kneels before. The body is not something to feel sorry for because the body is not sorry. The body may be twisted and sly, but the body is not an apology.

The body is not a mistake. The body is not a quirk. Not something to be aborted in utero because of preemptive pity and shame that you could produce such a body. The body is not something to be tested out of existence, or prepared for with good breeding. The body is not something to be quarantined in sanitariums and put under the defacto house arrest of disgust. The body should not be killed with medication and medical middle managers who know best while no one cares that you are dying. The body is not something to be fought against or beaten in a race against oneself. The body is a beating, spreading thing, moving and touching even at rest.

And the body is not miraculous or brave, even though it does so many things you think it shouldn't be able to. And the body is not just like yours even though there are overlaps in desire and function. Sameness is not a prerequisite for solidarity. And you should care about it even if you have made conscious attempts to ignore our bodies, to look away, to avoid hospitals and the smell of home care. And you shouldn't need an apology because the body is not wrong.

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