

## Foreword

“As we let our own light shine, we unconsciously  
give other people permission to do the same.”

-Nelson Mandela<sup>1</sup>

“I am just one human being  
talking to other human beings.”

- Dalai Lama<sup>2</sup>

This inaugural collection of published work by Stephanie Esther Fam reaches into the depths of twenty years of intimate experiences and dauntlessly yet graciously pulls back the veil of pre-conceived judgements to uncover chasms and create bonds. It speaks about understanding instead of judging and marks a point where the poet meets the reader at a juncture where no-one feels left out and everyone is respected.

All of us are different to a greater or lesser extent and yet united by the common human condition. Stephanie's poetry is about finding bridges across difference, about communicating on a soul-to-soul level, about navigating life and continual growth. Her poetry encapsulates the trajectory of not only learning to accept and value difference and what is, but above all, to connect with others beyond ability, beyond gender, beyond race, beyond nationality...

It has been a privilege to witness and contribute in some way to Stephanie's journey during which in recent years she has grown exponentially as an artist, disability advocate and leader. Moreover, it has been a great pleasure to get to know Stephanie not only professionally but also personally and I therefore write this foreword from my heart as a friend.

Stephanie exemplifies the self-empowering potential of art and since 2006 has devoted herself to developing herself as a leader and strong communicator via the Toast-master movement. Her journey of self-expression via her poetry and public speaking has been coupled with a series of successes in disability-led practices via theatre within the artistic community.

Over the last few years, through multiple theatre performances and leadership development programmes, Stephanie has made her voice heard with passion and has planted seeds of enriched perspectives in the audiences who have been fortunate to see her transformative work.

In a similar way this poetry anthology brings together a personal story shared as a key milestone to furthering the forward-thinking agenda of inclusion in the arts and to challenge stereotypes, move beyond barriers and demystify the other. This is so important since society's attitudes are key for real core change in shifting perspectives and enhancing accessibility.

The spirit of enlightened determination that the anthology embodies, along with Stephanie's commitment as a performer to push through discomfort, physical pain and barriers, encourages other artists living with disabilities or with challenges of marginalisation or a lack of access, to likewise strive to express and empower themselves as artists and as human beings.

Throughout her work, Stephanie has expressed unwavering perseverance, even throughout moments of extreme physical challenges. She is committed to making a difference and to leading

through example by being the change she wants to see. Her bold yet sensitive words of this anthology's poems are like seeds germinating an often unnoticed perspective in the readers' minds.

Stephanie's artistic expression has therefore played a significant role in fostering awareness of transformational models such as the creative case for disability and the social model of disability that places responsibility on society to make the changes that are necessary to avoid marginalising people whose bodies and minds don't comply with society's idea of what is normative and acceptable, as opposed to focusing is on what a person can't do because of their particular physical, neurological or psychological characteristics.

This vision of society reverberates in Stephanie's poetry through which she expresses universal themes that connect a common human experience, such as love, regret, grief and fear. Stephanie's spirit and tenacity illuminate her work as she navigates how to embrace suffering and that which is unavoidable and beyond our control. Her work simultaneously explores the path to release pain through the beauty of nature and dreams to reach the place of peace beyond the mind and the limitations of concepts and perception. In confronting these lessons, we learn and are propelled onwards, Phoenix like, weaving through the pain to forms the fabric of our selves and spread our wings with a wide-open heart.

In a bold and unapologetic way - that is not always comfortable for the reader yet always authentic- Stephanie confronts life's challenges. However, mingled with the strength is the presence of the fragility and vulnerability that also makes us human, that underpins love and relationships, beyond disability and beyond death.

Stephanie forgoes wishful thinking to face reality and accept troubles and through this welcoming of what is she accesses the place of bliss via her words, via connection with others. In this way, partings, goodbyes, and internal growth trajectories are coupled with eternal truths that resonate inside the reader.

I hope this anthology will reach the open hearts and minds of readers, allow them to step into Stephanie's world and out again into society with an enriched vision of the light that shines within us all.

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**Dr Sarah Meisch Lionetto:**

Sarah is the Director of Arts and Creative Industries at the British Council in Singapore where her work draws on the power of the arts to bring people together and build trust via partnerships and collaborations between UK and Singaporean organisations and artists. Sarah has been leading on the Inclusive Arts campaign that she initiated in 2016 - the work is underpinned by the social model of disability and aims to inspire people to develop full and equal access to the arts via awareness and skills development, and to create an appreciation of inclusion as central to the dynamism of the arts. Sarah is committed to positive social change and to the transformative power that the arts plays in strengthening more inclusive societies. Sarah has a PhD in Literature (South Africa) and a Masters in Modern Art and Comparative Literature (France, with distinction). Her research interests include multilingualism, identity, belonging and translation in the context of cross-cultural studies.

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<sup>1</sup>Nelson Mandela's 1994 Inauguration Speech- taken from a quote by Marianne Williamson

<sup>2</sup>*The Book Of Joy*

