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Adrift: Stories of the Unseen

Abstract

In “Adrift: Stories of the Unseen,” Samantha Osbiston reimagines her journey as a disabled, first-generation university student using metaphors from space travel and inheritance. Across essays such as “Trajectory,” “Tethered,” “Dark Matter,” and “Fishing for Stars,” she recasts the loneliness of inaccessible institutions as acts of resistance. Her references to orbit, gravity, and propulsion connect with images of bones and breath, showing that identity comes from both the body and the wider universe. Osbiston shows how class, disability, and bureaucracy can isolate students, but emphasizes motion—found in care, community, and ancestral memory. In the end, Osbiston describes survival as navigation, access as vital as oxygen, and storytelling as a force that propels her and others in unfriendly systems.

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SAMANTHA OSBISTON

Adrift: Stories of the Unseen

Foreword

As a disabled, first-generation student, I have learned that systems built for “access” often fail quietly, not through outright exclusion, but through silence, confusion, and misrecognition. In these stories, I reimagine my journey to university through the metaphor of space: a ship that breaks down, a voice lost in static, and a childhood memory of starlight that reminds me why I endure.

These are stories of movement and stillness. Of being far from home but not from meaning. Of being told you are too much and not enough, in the same breath. Of the unrecorded ways we float and fight and find joy, even when no one sees us.

This collection is not a cry for help. It’s a signal.

For those who know what it’s like to feel adrift, you are not broken.

You are the story. You are the sky.

Trajectory

Section 1—Gravity Bound

Gravity, a fundamental interaction, keeps objects tethered to the surface of the planet. In my town, gravity had names. It was called tradition. It was called expectation. It was called knowing your place.

To resist it, to dream upward, wasn't just difficult. It hurt. It pressed against your lungs when you tried to breathe ambition. Not out of cruelty, but out of sheer persistence. Constant. Mechanical. Industrial. Heavy.

My town was a patchwork of rust and sandstone. Our skyline wasn't glass and steel, it was cooling towers, silent now, like the fossilised bones of giants no one had dared bury. Cracked brick walls sagged behind wire fences. Weeds clawed through the pavement like stubborn hope. On the bus, I'd count the shuttered shops like stars blinking out one by one. The only thing still running on schedule was the wind, curling through alleys, whispering past ghost signs, always carrying the weight of something lost.

And yet, there was beauty.

The kind no one markets. Hills folded out like soft green knuckles. Stone viaducts curved like the spine of a sleeping beast. Ancient ruins slouched into the soil as if history had grown tired and lain down for a rest. In flashes, between two bus stops, or on a walk home, I saw the horizon shimmer like a portal. But it was never quite an invitation. Not for us.

In school, we didn't talk about university like it was a destination. We talked about it the way you talk about Mars, technically real, but unreachable. The numbers hovered above us like weather. Low grades. Low expectations. High dropout rates. It wasn't designed for take-off, it was designed to keep us grounded. You aimed for apprenticeships if you were lucky, call centres if you weren't, zero-hour contracts if you'd already stumbled. You aimed for solid ground. No one taught us how to build rockets.

They told us what we *couldn't* do before they ever asked what we *wanted*. When I said I wanted more, I was told, "Be realistic." The idea of escape was framed as arrogance. Ambition was labelled a defect. "You're a daydreamer," they said, as if that were something to be cured.

Most days, I believed them.

Until one summer, a battered paperback caught my eye in a second-hand shop. *Educating Rita*. The spine was cracked; the cover curled at the corners. I'd heard of it in passing. But something in me reached for it like it had been waiting.

Reading it wasn't easy. My own education had been so fractured that sentences slipped through my fingers. Words blurred. I'd been diagnosed as dyslexic, though it often felt like another way of saying "barrier." Like gravity had one more trick to keep me grounded. I read slowly. Out loud. Repeating lines like mantras. Building the muscle. I read through grit and will and shame.

There she was. Rita. Working-class. Loud. Older. Rough around the edges. Too late, too much, too *me*. And yet she broke orbit. She asked questions she wasn't supposed to. She barged into places that hadn't been made for her and sat down anyway.

And for the first time, I felt like maybe I wasn't broken for wanting more. Rita made me feel seen. Her defiance cracked the gravity that had kept me tethered to low expectations. Reading her gave me hope that I could do what had been denied to me at school, the science

and higher maths I'd been told I wasn't good enough for. That I could return as an adult and claim agency over my education. That I could choose my own path, medicine, bioengineering, fields that once felt sealed off, now shimmering as possibilities. Rita wasn't just a character in a play; she was proof that wanting more wasn't a delusion. It was survival. It was resistance.

What struck me wasn't that she became refined or accepted by the world she entered. It was that she dared to want in the first place. That her resistance wasn't ignorance but intelligence disguised as stubbornness. She reminded me that hunger for knowledge is its own kind of strength, even when every institution tells you to starve it. Reading Rita didn't erase the barriers I faced, but it shifted something vital: it gave me permission to imagine a different trajectory.

That book became a manual for a spaceship only I could see. It didn't hand me instructions; it whispered something forbidden instead: maybe you're not mad for trying.

Of course, Rita's world had changed. The doors she'd pushed open had been quietly sealed shut again. Tuition fees rose like atmospheric pressure. Grants vanished. Access routes disappeared behind biometric locks and endless algorithms. What once required a key now demanded proof you didn't belong.

Reading that, I felt the weight of my own reality pressing harder. If even Rita's path had been narrowed, what chance did I have? For a moment, it felt suffocating, as if the very air of opportunity was thinning around me. But that fear didn't extinguish the spark she'd lit. If the old routes were blocked, then I would have to build new ones. I couldn't follow Rita's footsteps exactly, but I could follow her defiance.

And so, the rocket began to take shape in my mind.

I tried to get on with life. Took jobs. Any jobs. Tried to climb from the bottom, rung by rung. But gravity was clever. You'd reach for something better and hear: *You haven't got the right qualifications*. Try to get the qualifications and be told: *You're too old*.

Once, I sat in an interview for a junior technician post in a pharmacy. I nailed the test. Scored higher than anyone. For a brief moment, adrenaline hummed through me, proof that I wasn't imagining my ability.

But when the papers were handed back, the room shifted. The panel stared at them like they were written in dead code, a language no longer worth translating. No smiles. No nods. Just silence thick enough to make my chest tighten. The only reason I'd even been shortlisted, they explained, was because of an obscure qualification no longer recognised.

"It doesn't align with current expectations," they said. Their expressions stayed blank, dismissive, as though my effort had never happened. I had passed every challenge. And still, it wasn't enough.

That's when I started building. For real.

Quietly. Secretly. In plain sight. I scavenged for parts, classes between working hours, online forums, and buried bursaries. I mapped a route without knowing where it ended. There were no shuttle tickets for people like me. So I stopped waiting to be offered one.

I would build a rocket.

Alone. From scrap. From borrowed time and stolen belief. I didn't have a launchpad. But I had fuel: rage, hope, curiosity, defiance. My hands trembled, but they moved. I had no manual, only blueprints drawn in the margins of someone else's story.

And a dream I was no longer ashamed of.

Section 2—Failure to Launch

That was it. I'd had enough. I would no longer be told what I could or couldn't do. Gravity would bend to my will. I wasn't waiting for clearance. I was launching, regardless of turbulence, regardless of the cost. The world might throw debris in my path, but I was an unstoppable force. I would not yield to immovable objects.

But building a rocket isn't like it is in the films.

There's no rousing soundtrack, no cheering crowd, no slow-motion montage. Just the hiss of unpaid bills stacking up like launch protocols, and the creak of doubt in your bones as you weld another dream to the hull.

My first launch attempt failed catastrophically.

I'd managed to secure a place on a traditional Level 3 course, textbooks, timetables, the works. But from the moment I boarded, the crew made it clear I wasn't welcome. Medical support? Denied. Accessibility? Mocked. Evidence of disability? Ignored.

They didn't see a student. They saw an anomaly. Something outside their calibration.

The head of the program treated me like a fault in the system, something to be debugged or discarded. Her words didn't offer guidance. They came down like cold static. Other staff followed suit. They built a culture of quiet sabotage, where legitimate concerns were met with condescension, and students like me were treated like disobedient children.

That year drained my fuel tank. One full cycle of funding... gone. My rocket stayed grounded, surrounded by debris and disappointment.

And I began to believe them.

Maybe I really wasn't cut out for orbit. Maybe I was deluded. Too old. Too broken. Too late.

I considered quitting space altogether. I told myself to accept ground-level life. There was a strange kind of safety in surrender, at least when you stop trying, you stop crashing.

But something in me, call it orbit memory, or just raw defiance, kept pulling my gaze skyward.

I decided to try a different route: maybe not as a captain, but as a crew member. Apprenticeships were being rebranded and pushed again. I applied. And applied. And applied. Between applications, I studied with the Open University, scavenging short modules like spare parts, bolting on whatever I could afford with the scraps of time and energy I had left. But even here, the docking stations weren't built for me.

No one said it outright. But the message was clear: "You're too old." That phrase echoed like a low-frequency warning across hundreds of rejections. No consideration for experience. No adjustment for barriers overcome. Just invisible age gates sealed tight.

And so I stopped.

Time passed. A whole year, maybe more, where I floated aimlessly inside the same four walls, unmoored from purpose. The world outside didn't offer direction. It offered drift. I thought: maybe this is it. Maybe the stars I dreamed about were never mine to reach.

Then, the world cracked.

A pandemic swept in like a cosmic rupture, throwing even the most stable systems into chaos. The devastation was immense, sirens, lockdowns, empty streets, lives lost.

But in the aftermath of collapse, there are always fragments.

And fragments, I knew how to work with.

A small course appeared, a Level 2 at a local college. It wasn't advertised as an escape pod. But it was *available*. That was enough. I enrolled. Quietly. Cautiously. It was taught in a backroom of a college, whose existence was barely recognised. No ceremony. No glory.

But there was light.

Wires. Circuits. Boot-up sequences. The language of systems and order. My hands remembered purpose. My brain, long starved of stimulation, flickered with heat. Each unit I completed felt like welding another panel to the outer shell. I was building again, not out of passion, not yet, but out of survival.

This college had a different atmosphere, thicker with understanding, warmer with relatability. The other students? They'd been grounded too. We shared the same planet. The same weathered maps.

And for the first time in years, I was allowed to *succeed*.

By the time I finished, I'd earned more than a certificate. I'd earned velocity. Confidence ignited. I dared to aim higher. A Level 3 qualification was now in my sights. Still, it wasn't a straight flight path.

Trajectory is political.

Some orbits are restricted. Some routes only open if you're seen as the right kind of passenger. And we weren't. But I didn't care. I pushed forward.

The work was hard, demanding in every way. But this time, I had a team. Tutors who supported instead of sabotaged. Systems that, while clunky, didn't actively work against me. And I thrived. I graduated with some of the highest results in the year.

But it came at a cost.

Most students get a clean block of funding, enough to build and launch. I'd already used over half of mine trying to find a launchpad that didn't reject me outright. I didn't have enough fuel left to reach the moon.

I had built a ship. But I had no way to beat gravity.

Not yet.

Section 3—Ignition

The rocket was built, piece by scavenged piece. But rockets don't fly on steel and sweat alone. They need fuel. And I had none.

Fuel wasn't just money. It was permission. It was passwords, codes, hidden entry points. It was the silent current that carried other students forward while I slammed into walls. I needed tuition support, disability accommodations, living costs, all of it, and there was no room for error. One missed form, one wrong date, and the whole ship would fall apart on the launchpad.

So I became a systems hacker.

I studied bursaries like star charts. I memorised eligibility criteria the way astronauts memorise oxygen procedures. I chased rumours of funding through decaying web pages and half-buried forums. I wrote emails that felt like distress signals, firing them off into black holes and waiting for signs of life.

My peers were choosing duvet sets and talking about Freshers' week. I was calculating how many hours of minimum wage it would take to cover rent and whether I could stretch

five days of meals from three tins and some rice. They were plotting adventure. I was plotting survival.

The numbers never added up. The spreadsheets glowed red like warning lights. Crash imminent. I was gambling everything on a launch that still had no confirmed coordinates.

Still, I applied.

One by one, the rejections dropped. “Unfortunately...” “We regret...” “Not this time...” Some didn’t reply at all. Others politely explained how my application had been deemed “non-traditional” and “not eligible at this time.” I had a fully assembled ship and nowhere to launch from. The runway was there, but the doors were locked, the pad blocked by invisible rules written in a language I had to translate word by painful word.

And just when I was ready to walk away, when I had accepted that maybe orbit just wasn’t meant for me, something flickered.

One message. One “yes.”

A foundation year. A conditional offer. A bursary. Not Oxford. Not Cambridge. But close enough to brush the edge of their gravity well. Close enough to count.

It wasn’t glamorous. It was practical. It was hidden at the bottom of a pile of PDFs no one ever reads. But it was a platform. A place to fuel up. A gate, cracked just wide enough to slip through if I moved fast.

I stared at the message like it might vanish if I blinked too long.

Then I screamed.

My lungs caught fire. I startled my neighbours and scared the cat. I couldn’t stand, but my body shook as if I’d already launched. For the first time in my life, the weight of Earth loosened its grip.

I was going to university.

Launch day came quietly.

No cheering crowds. No champagne. Just me, a packed bag, and a short ride that crossed a galaxy.

It was only twelve miles between my town and the university, but the distance felt cosmic. I boarded the bus with my whole life in a backpack, the kind you can get from the market for a tenner. I sat by the window, watching the world blur.

The bus rumbled past my old school. The one that said, “Don’t bother applying.” Past the council flats with their boarded windows. Past the shop with the “Closing Down” sign that had been hanging for five years. A bus stop where I used to wait for work shifts that led nowhere. Landmarks of stagnation. Ghosts of everything that almost kept me grounded.

Then came the viaducts. The green valleys. Ivy that spilled over ruined stones like nature trying to heal the past. I watched the hills roll out like they were saying: “Go on then. Try.”

I wanted to cry. Not because I was sad. Because I was terrified.

I’d made it this far. But I didn’t know if I’d survive orbit.

And suddenly, I was there.

Orbit.

The buildings loomed, tall, bright, antiseptic. The kind that echoed when you walked in alone. The other students swirled around me in clusters, polished and prepped, wearing brands I’d only seen in ads. They spoke a language I didn’t know. Acronyms. References. Jokes I didn’t get. No one explained the rules.

I came in riding a ship made of patched-up grants and impossible odds. They arrived in sleek shuttles with family crests painted on the hull.

I was an alien among astronauts.

They looked at me like a tourist. I looked at them like they were born in space, breathing a kind of air I couldn't buy.

But I stayed.

I studied. I adapted. I repaired my ship mid-flight. I learned how to make gravity work for me, not against me. I swapped out broken engines and kept flying. I attended workshops I didn't understand. I googled every academic phrase I heard. I panicked in seminars and celebrated every assignment I survived. I stitched belief into the seams of every week.

And still, I carried the weight of home. The doubt. The disbelief. The knowledge that everything around me was a borrowed suit, and if I took it off, I'd be exposed again.

But I didn't fall.

Escape velocity wasn't the end.

It was just the beginning.

Section 4—Breathing in Orbit

Orbit isn't freedom. It's just a different kind of physics.

No longer bound by gravity, you float, but nothing holds you steady. The familiar weight of hardship is gone, but so is the ground beneath you. At first, it's thrilling. Then it's terrifying.

The university was polished. Cold. Vast. The corridors echoed with certainty, voices trained from birth to say the right things in the right way. They spoke a dialect of expectation, years of private tutoring, gap years, inside jokes about ski trips and rowing teams. I spoke in survival.

They were astronauts. I was a stowaway with patched-together life support.

Every introduction felt like a customs check. "Where are you from?" "What school did you go to?" "Oh, I've never heard of that." I stopped answering in full sentences. My accent was a red flag. My background was a blank page they didn't know how to read. My ship rattled every time I opened my mouth.

Tutorials felt like being airlocked. Everyone else had read the texts twice, already knowing what mattered. I was still learning how to *read*. I spent nights decoding terms like they were encrypted transmissions. "Formative feedback." "Supervision." "Abstract." The words stacked like oxygen tanks, essential, but heavy.

I made mistakes. I asked the wrong questions. I said things out of turn. Once, during a lecture, the professor paused mid-explanation, sighed, and mused to the class: "Honestly, sometimes I feel like we're all just waiting for the other shoe to drop." My mind stalled. The other shoe? We'd just finished a dense module on physics, and I was still thinking in terms of mechanical cause and effect. I raised my hand halfway and asked, in earnest: "Professor, if the person is still wearing one shoe, wouldn't it be more logical to ask if they need help finding the first one? Waiting for the second to drop implies they already had it to begin with, which seems like the real issue."

The lecture hall froze. A few students tittered. The professor blinked, her dramatic moment punctured, and silence thickened around me. My heart thudded. I hadn't meant to be

disrespectful, I thought I was helping solve the problem. Instead, I found myself replaying the words, panicked, searching faces for clues about what I'd done wrong. It was only later that I realised it had been an idiom, not a puzzle. That was when I learned how easy it was to break a rule I never knew existed.

Sometimes I didn't speak at all. Silence, I discovered, was also a form of survival.

There were moments when I thought I'd drift too far. That I'd run out of air. I missed home and hated it at the same time. I questioned my right to be here. I began to imagine gravity pulling me back, offering the comfort of stillness.

But then, slowly, something shifted.

I stopped trying to hide my ship.

For a long time, I patched the cracks in secret, afraid that if anyone saw the duct tape holding me together, they'd decide I didn't belong. At first, it was exhaustion that pushed me into daylight, the realisation that silence was costing me more than speaking ever could. But it was also something harder, sharper. I had spent years being criticised simply for existing, for being the way I am. One day I stopped caring about making other people comfortable. If they couldn't see me for who I was, if they couldn't deal with it like adults, then their discomfort was not my responsibility.

And then Covid hit. I had major surgery, lost 80% of my stomach, and needed ten weeks to recover. The doctors told me that if I caught Covid during that window, the odds of surviving were barely seventy percent. I watched my body shrink, my strength drain away, and for the first time I understood how thin the line between living and not living could be. After that, hiding felt pointless. I had already stared down the statistics. I wasn't going to waste whatever time I had left on silence.

So I began to patch in daylight. I went to office hours, even when my voice shook. I asked for extensions, even when my hands trembled on the email. I applied for hardship funding, half-expecting rejection, and joined a society no one from my background had even heard of. Each step felt like walking out of an airlock with no guarantee the tether would hold, but I discovered others there too. Quiet satellites, also floating, also learning. The more I admitted what I needed, the more I found that I wasn't orbiting alone.

One lecturer looked at me, really looked, and said: "You're not here because someone made a mistake. You're here because you earned it."

I wrote that down like scripture. I needed to.

I started to stabilise. I rewrote the operating manual. I figured out how to balance the weightlessness with purpose. I began to chart my own path, not just toward success, but toward identity.

Not quite belonging, but no longer apologising for it.

I wasn't just surviving orbit anymore. I was starting to breathe.

Section 5—Orbit Mechanics

They say orbit is stable. Predictable. Safe. But anyone who's been there knows better. Orbit is motion. Relentless. You don't stand still, you circle. You calculate. You correct. One wrong angle, one missed burn, and gravity starts to whisper again. At first softly, like nostalgia. Then louder, like failure.

I found a rhythm. Not elegant. Not clean. But mine. Mornings were launch diagnostics, readings, rewrites, reboots. Afternoons were course corrections, seminars, supervisor meetings, debates that left me spinning. Nights? Repairs. Patching gaps in knowledge. Rewiring my confidence. Running systems checks on my sleep-deprived brain. There were days when I mistook exhaustion for achievement. But I kept flying.

I logged every assignment like a flight report. I set alarms to remind me to eat. Sometimes I forgot. I learned how to survive on caffeine and microwave pasta, how to stretch a budget across a black hole of rising costs. I printed lecture slides on the library's free quota and rationed the rest. I became a mathematician of scarcity.

But slowly, I started gaining credits, not just on paper, but in belief. Confidence didn't arrive like a comet. It came like condensation. Slowly, persistently. I knew which staff knew my name. I asked questions without rehearsing them first. One day I started to speak with pride. Quietly. Hesitantly. And others responded. It felt like the first time my voice echoed in a vacuum and *someone* heard it.

Even in orbit, I wasn't alone. I found others like me, not many, but enough. Other rocket builders. Other gravity defectors. We were the quiet ones in the back row, clutching notebooks like life support. We found each other with knowing glances. Shared strategies like contraband: How to get through the funding forms without triggering red flags. How to explain to your lecturer that "working two jobs" isn't an excuse, it's survival. How to ask for help without sounding ungrateful. We became our own ground control.

Imposter syndrome didn't vanish. It mutated. Some days I felt like a tourist with a stolen badge. Some days I was sure I'd be found out. Other days, I remembered how far I'd flown, what I'd endured just to get here. Those were the days I spoke up. Those were the days I helped someone else climb into their cockpit.

My imposter got a software update. Some days, sitting in the ornate university library, a room that felt more like a museum I was sneaking into than a place I belonged, I felt like a tourist with a stolen badge. Even when I secured a final, crucial bursary to cover some of my costs, the application process had been such a labyrinth of forms, hidden deadlines, and jargon that it felt less like I'd earned it and more like I'd stumbled on a cheat code.

Later that week, a first-year student, the first in her family to go to university, just like me, approached me looking defeated. She showed me a cryptic rejection email for a hardship fund. "They said I didn't provide sufficient evidence of my family's historic income," she whispered. "But my parents were self-employed for years; we don't have the P60s they want. I don't know what to do."

That was the day my imposter syndrome shifted. Instead of feeling like a tourist waiting to be exposed, I felt like a pilot guiding someone else into their cockpit. I remembered how far I'd flown, what I'd endured just to get here. My survival wasn't just for me anymore.

"The system is designed to trip us up," I told her, opening my laptop. "But I've cracked the code." Helping her navigate the same maze I'd fought through reminded me that belonging wasn't about passing every test the system threw at us, it was about refusing to fly alone.

And something else happened, something that caught me off-guard. People started asking me *how* I did it. They saw the duct tape on my wings, the soot on my face, and asked how I kept flying. They didn't mean it as pity. They meant it as wonder.

So I gave them what I had. The notes. The maps. The warnings about dead ends. I mentored. I supported. I stopped building just for myself and started building for others too. Blueprints I once kept secret became shared manuals. I was no longer the first. I was the first *of many*.

For the first time, orbit didn't feel temporary. I wasn't just passing through. I was building something real here, A base. A lab. A legacy.

But I also knew what orbit really was. A loop. A holding pattern. A safe zone before the next risk.

And the stars were calling.

Postgraduate study. Leadership. Research. Activism. Those weren't just words now. They were coordinates.

But the system doesn't make it easy to go further. The fuel is rarer. The blueprints are hazier. There are fewer grants, fewer second chances. The atmosphere out there is thinner, less forgiving.

But I know how to fly on broken parts. I know how to build while falling. I know how to defy gravity.

And I am no longer asking for permission.

This isn't survival anymore.

This is navigation.

This is intention.

This is trajectory.

I am still in orbit.

But I'm already scanning the stars.

Tethered

Section 1—Suiting Up

They hand you the gear.
It doesn't quite fit, but you nod anyway.

The gloves are too large, made for hands that never tremble.
The helmet fogs before you even step out of the airlock.
The manual is written in a language you had to learn on the way up.

"You're one of the lucky ones," they say, smiling for the cameras.
"You made it."

And you did.
You passed the tests. Navigated the forms. Packed your life into 23 kilograms and a backpack full of dreams. You boarded the ship, looked back only once, and told yourself: this is everything I've worked for. This is the next step. This is escape velocity.

What they don't say is that the suit was never made for bodies like yours.
That adjustments are extra.
That support is patchwork.
That survival requires silence.

But you're grateful, you are.
Grateful in the way that's expected.
Polite. Smiling. Willing to ignore the growing tightness in your chest because after all, you're out here now, aren't you?

One of the few.
One of the first.
A first-gen explorer on a mission through unfamiliar stars, told to chart new territory while dragging a faulty oxygen line behind you.

They say, "We're so proud of you."
You smile. Say, "Thank you."
And tuck the warning lights deeper into your chest.

Because here's the truth:
You can't afford to need help out loud.
Not yet.
Not when the airlock is just starting to open.
Not when the universe is watching.

You adjust the helmet.
Take a breath.
And step out into the void.

Section 2—Airlock

The door hisses shut behind you.
There's a moment of weightlessness, the space between systems. Between expectation and reality.

The lights flicker.
You steady your breath.

This is where you wait.
For confirmation. For clearance. For someone to say, *yes, you belong here. Proceed.*

But no one says anything.

You float.
Not forward. Not back.
Just held in stasis by policies that don't quite open, by a pressure differential that leaves you suspended, not failing, but not safe.

You want to ask a question.
But you don't.

Because here, in this pressurised silence, questions sound like complaints.
And complaints sound like danger.

You tell yourself:
Don't be ungrateful.
Don't make noise.
Don't ruin this.

Because opportunity is fragile out here.
Because they tell you it's a gift, even when it comes with no manual, no spare parts, no lifeline.
And the unspoken truth is this: if something goes wrong, they won't fix it, they'll question why you were ever chosen at all.

So you ration your needs.
You edit your emails.
You pause before hitting send.

And in this delay, the air gets thinner.
The silence louder.

This isn't fear of space.
It's fear of being sent home.
Of losing something you fought to reach.

And so, in the stillness of the airlock,
You wait.
You wait until your lungs adjust.
You wait until the fear dulls to background static.
You wait until you believe again that it's better to be out here, tethered and invisible, than grounded and erased.

You lie to the suit.
You lie to yourself.
And when the inner doors don't reopen,
You press forward anyway.

Section 3—The Drift

Outside the ship, everything looks still.
But you know better.

You drift.
Tethered by a thread so thin you can barely feel it.
A lifeline knotted in paperwork, visas, permission slips, and carefully-worded emails.
You told everyone you were fine, because fine is the only way to stay out here.

There's no gravity.
No ground to orient to.
You move through this world by instinct and force of will.
Classroom to classroom. Building to building. All designed for bodies unlike yours.

You've memorised the layout of ramps that don't reach entrances.
You've catalogued the lifts that never arrive.
You know which doors open if you ask, and which ones never will, not for you.

But out here, you keep moving.

Because movement is proof you're worthy.
Because to stop is to fall behind.
Because you've already heard the whispers that people like you should be *grateful just to be here*.

The drift isn't dramatic.
It's subtle.
A missed deadline because the room was inaccessible.

A class you couldn't reach.
A resource that doesn't exist in your language, your context, your body.

No one sees the drift, because it happens quietly.
Because you smile through it.
Because the training kicked in: be thankful, be adaptable, be invisible.

The worst part?
You start to believe it.
That the failure is yours. That the system didn't fail, you just weren't suited for the mission.

You are floating in full view.
And still unseen.

No one radios in.
No one asks if your oxygen is low, or if your legs gave out, or if your equipment failed weeks ago.

You drift.

And you start to wonder if maybe you were never supposed to come this far.

Section 4—Tether Strain

The line is still there.

But it's stretched thin now, like your patience, your energy, your body. Every movement feels like it could snap it. Every request feels like too much.

You stop asking.
Because when you ask, they don't hear urgency, they hear attitude.
You start sentences with "I'm sorry, but..."
You end them with "It's okay if not."
You pad the truth with gratitude so thick it smothers the reality inside it.

You learn that survival isn't about needs. It's about performance.
Can you mask the pain well enough? Can you keep your voice soft enough? Can you be the version of yourself that doesn't make anyone else uncomfortable?

You learn to ration panic.

Because panic is inconvenient.
Panic gets labeled. Gets documented. Gets weaponized.
One wrong move, one honest admission, and you fear the tether might be cut.

They could say you're unfit. That you're not coping. That the opportunity would be better given to someone more "resilient."

You imagine the message: *Thank you for your time. We'll reassess your suitability.*

So instead, you perform capability.

You smile in the dark.

You laugh during the silence.

You send cheery check-ins while the ship inside you falls apart.

The strain tightens.

And you feel it in your chest, that sharp edge between honesty and self-preservation.

You want to scream, but even that feels like a privilege you haven't earned.

So you whisper:

I'm fine.

Thanks for checking.

No, I don't need anything.

The tether holds. Barely.

But it's fraying. And the silence on the other end is beginning to feel like permission to let go.

Section 5—Re-entry

The hatch seals behind me with a hiss. Not relief. Not yet. Just... compression. The first layer of silence returning like a glove.

My hands are shaking. I didn't notice before, out there in the open dark. But now I see them, twitching inside the suit, a shiver beneath the fatigue. I tap the release on the helmet. It resists, then gives. My breath fogs the glass for a moment before it clears.

I'm back in the airlock. But not inside. Not really.

Not where it's warm.

Not where it's safe.

There's always a delay between closing the outer hatch and opening the inner one. A pause. A scan. A check. A moment where the system decides if I'm authorized to return.

And that's what it feels like, like I'm being evaluated. Will they still let me in, knowing I floated too long? Knowing I panicked? Knowing I felt something other than gratitude?

I stare at the interior hatch, waiting for it to unlock.

It doesn't. Not right away.

Maybe they think I've been contaminated.
Maybe I'm a threat.
Maybe I asked too many questions.
Maybe they saw the messages I never sent.

This is what reentry feels like:
Not the crash. Not the hero's return.
Just the awkward limbo between surviving and being believed.

I start rehearsing the story.
The safe one.
The grateful one.

"I'm fine."
"It was incredible."
"I learned so much."
"I'm lucky to be here."

The door clicks. The inner hatch groans open.

Light floods in. Sterile. Bright.
A crew member stands on the other side, clipboard in hand.
They smile at me like nothing happened.

I step through, one wheel catching on the seam of the threshold. My body aches. My face is calm.

"Welcome back," they say, like I never left.
Like I didn't almost disappear.
Like I should just be grateful to be breathing the same air again.

I nod. I say thank you.
And in that moment, I realize:
It's not the spacewalk that broke me.
It was knowing I'd have to come back inside and pretend it hadn't.

Dark Matter

Section 1—System Failure

I never thought I'd make it that far from the North East. From the edges of council estates to the lecture halls of Durham had already felt like orbit. But then came something I'd never imagined: a place on a study programme in Los Angeles. One long-haul flight later, I stepped out into a city that felt like another planet, its heat, its sprawl, its endless grid of streets utterly foreign to me.

The moment it happened, I was in the Huntington Gardens, the children's garden, of all places, searching for another student. His phone had broken and we couldn't contact him. We set out to find him, but instead of rescuing him, we became stranded ourselves. My scooter gave a last cough of power, then died beneath me.

It didn't explode.

There was no dramatic flare, no spinning hull, no countdown to impact. The ship just... stopped. A low whine dipped below audible. The stabilisers faltered. The light in the console dimmed. And then there was nothing.

No motion. No power. No control.

One moment, I was navigating the unfamiliar constellations of Los Angeles, foreign streets, foreign heat, foreign systems, and the next, I was adrift. A single point in space with no propulsion. The scooter, my mobility, my ship, failed.

It always starts with a flicker. A hesitation in the controls. A delay you tell yourself is temporary. But then it happens again. And again. Until denial gives way to truth.

The system is down.

I was far from home. Thousands of miles. No family. No familiar mechanics. No spare parts. The ship that carried me, that *was* me, had failed. I was still breathing. Still blinking. But I wasn't moving.

And in space, if you're not moving, you're dying.

I tried to diagnose it. Reboot. Recharge. Recheck every cable and port. But nothing responded. The power gauge blinked out like a final heartbeat. All I could do was sit in the cockpit, still, helpless, and waiting.

No emergency team arrived. No rescue shuttle. Because to the system, I wasn't in distress.

I wasn't seen at all.

Other astronauts tried their best, helped where they could, but it wasn't their job. The chair wasn't a luxury. It was life support. It was the hull, the engine, the thrusters. Without it, I wasn't just stuck, I was **trapped**, sealed in by a body that still had a destination but no vessel to get there.

Outside, LA shimmered with motion: people rushing to classes, conferences, cafes. I watched from behind the window of my dorm like a ghost. Space was bustling, and I was static.

A system like this, a world of compromises.

It wasn't new. It wasn't built for me.

It was my grandmother's, passed down from when she was dying of cancer. Because people like me, the ones who fall through the gaps, don't get what we need. We are expected to do without.

To stare into the four walls of our rooms.

To keep quiet because we can *technically* stand.

Because we're not paraplegic. Not quad. Not "severe."

We're pigeonholed into categories built by people who never needed a chair. The in-betweeners. The inconvenient cases. Treated like our condition is a moral failing rather than a series of unfortunate events no one chose.

And so we inherit machines like ghosts inherit houses. Haunted. Half-functional. Held together with duct tape and hope.

It should never have come to this.

Inside the cabin, I sat still for hours. Not sleeping. Not crying. Just frozen. My thoughts looped like a failing navigation system: *Maybe it's temporary. Maybe it'll reset. Maybe someone will notice.*

But space is indifferent.

And so I floated, not through galaxies, but through fear. Through hours. Through the terrifying realisation that I was entirely alone.

The chair wasn't a device. It was autonomy. And now it was a dead thing in the corner, mocking me with its stillness.

The alarms had gone quiet.

But the emergency had just begun.

Section 2—Drift

Space is never silent. That's a myth.

Out here, it hums, low and constant, like tinnitus in the bones. The whirl of failing circuits, the faint hiss of air recycling through overworked filters, the groan of a ship designed to keep going but not built to last.

I drift.

No navigation. No propulsion. The stars blur. Days collapse into each other like exhausted lungs. I count hours by the flicker of failing lights and the rhythm of my own breath. If I fall asleep, I might not wake. Not because of danger, because of inertia.

On Earth, people talk about freedom like it's a mindset. "You're still free," they say.

"You just need to stay positive." But they've never been trapped in a capsule that was barely holding together, in a world that only sees your needs as valid if they come with a diagnosis that fits neatly on a form.

My chair, the system, the vessel, the thing I relied on, was never just mobility. It was my stabiliser. My orientation. Without it, the world tilts. Everything becomes a negotiation with pain, with shame, with impossibility.

I used to move. That was enough to pass. I could stand if I had to, walk a few steps. That made me unworthy of support in some people's eyes. "You're not paralysed." "You don't look disabled." They handed me a map written in someone else's language and told me to find my own way.

Now, in this floating tin can of a room, I realise how small the world becomes when you lose motion. When independence breaks, the universe shrinks to four walls and a locked door. You become static. A body without propulsion. A mind without mission.

Every attempt to fix things loops back to the same question no one says out loud:

“Why are you even here?”

As if access to opportunity, to study, to travel, to build a life, was something I borrowed, not something I earned.

I send messages, emails, forms, appeals. They bounce back. “We’re sorry for the inconvenience.” “We’ll forward this to the appropriate department.” “Have you tried turning it off and on again?”

I wait. Systems buffer. Staff rotate. My requests vanish into the void between teams. Nothing lands. There’s no one at the helm.

Outside my window, LA glows like a constellation of other people’s lives. I am in one of the busiest cities on the planet, and I might as well be orbiting Saturn. Everyone’s moving. I am not.

Not broken.

Just... suspended.

And no one notices a satellite unless it falls.

Section 3—Static

I send out distress signals.

Not dramatic ones, just emails. Calls. The quiet kind of SOS that disabled people are trained to send: polite, apologetic, burdened with gratitude. I say please. I over-explain. I make jokes to soften the panic.

The responses arrive like static.

One department says it’s not their responsibility. Another says they’ll escalate. A third forwards me to someone on annual leave. I loop between access teams, student services, tech support, and outsourced vendors who treat my mobility like a customer service ticket. No one seems to know who has the manual. Or if the manual even exists.

“Have you tried charging it?”

“Yes.”

“Have you checked the fuse?”

“Yes.”

“Can you walk?”

Pause. “Can you walk?”

As if that’s the point.

They say it like walking is the win condition. As if the whole system wasn’t designed around the assumption that I’d bring my own transport, carry my own body like spare luggage. As if the failure of my ship doesn’t matter, because surely I can crawl.

They’re confused because this isn’t supposed to happen.

A student stuck in a city without functioning mobility equipment? That’s not in their contingency plan. “We’ve never had this issue before.” Ships don’t fail. The Titanic was unsinkable. My scooter was “robust.” The university is “fully accessible.” The law says so.

But the law isn't a wrench. It won't fix the snapped wiring. It won't push me to class. It won't get me out of the apartment when the fire alarm blares. I learned that in New York, when I arrived for a programme and discovered that some student internship organisations didn't even have wheelchair-accessible housing. The building I'd been assigned had five steps at the entrance. The only way I got in or out was by having people carry my scooter up and down. To make it worse, they'd placed me on the fourth floor. That first week, when a fire broke out in the basement, I had to fight my way down the stairs, dragging myself step by step while the alarm screamed. The law said I had the right to access. Reality said otherwise.

The distance between me and the rest of the world grows louder. Every reply from a department that "doesn't deal with this" feels like another orbit widening. My messages float, unanswered. I start keeping a spreadsheet, dates, responses, silence. Data to prove I'm not imagining things.

I try not to scream.

Because if I scream, I become "difficult." If I cry, I become "unwell." The system has no language for people like me in crisis unless we present it in terms it finds comfortable.

So I ration my urgency.

I say, "It's fine."

I say, "I'll manage."

I say, "Thank you for your help," even when there was none.

This is how people disappear in space.

Not through explosion or fire, but through erasure. Through disbelief. Through systems that fail gently, quietly, bureaucratically, until you're just a missing data point in someone's inbox.

And still, I try to fix it.

Because I have no choice.

Because no one is coming.

Section 4—Ghost Ship

By now, I've stopped expecting rescue.

I drift the corridors of this campus-planet like a ghost in a ship no one sees. My wheels silent. My questions unanswered. My needs met with thin smiles and redirect links. They talk about "accessibility" like it's a virtue, a line on the website, a ticked box on the form.

But access is not an idea. It's a mechanism. A ramp that works. A lift that doesn't trap you. A chair that moves.

And mine doesn't.

So I'm not a student now. I'm not anything. I watch the life I came here to live move just out of reach. The lectures. The libraries. The street food smells I can't chase. The coastline. Freedom, so close I could chart its shape, but never reach it.

Every day I wake up, the same question loops in my mind: **What happens to a body that isn't counted?**

There are laws, sure. Policies. The kind that make institutions feel righteous. They speak of "reasonable adjustments" like we should be grateful they're even imagined. But reason is a cruel metric when survival is unreasonable.

They say inclusion. But they mean tolerance. They say equality. But they mean assimilation. They mean: prove you're worth the extra effort. Prove you're not faking. Prove you really need help. Prove your worth in pain and patience.

I used to believe this chair made me free. A vessel. My ship. But when it breaks, when no one repairs it, I become the broken part.

I try to push back, but the push is slow. Heavy. It's paperwork, waiting lists, impossible costs. I apply for emergency support and get told I don't qualify. I ask about repairs and hear "out of warranty." I ask again, softer, and they stop replying.

To be disabled in a system like this is to be marked *too inconvenient for reality*.

I tell them, "I can't get to class."

They say, "The materials are online."

I say, "I can't leave the apartment."

They say, "It's only temporary."

I say, "I am alone."

They say, "Let us know if there's anything else we can do."

And then they do nothing.

I go days without speaking to a human face.

I watch the light change on the walls, a slow clock. I miss entire weeks of teaching. I become vapor. A student in name only. My mind still burning, still full of fight, but my body locked down by a system that says: If you don't fit, disappear.

And sometimes, I almost want to.

Section 5—Dark Matter

When your ship fails in space, the silence isn't quiet. It hums. It presses in. Not with fire or explosion, but with erasure. You vanish by degrees: the emails you stop sending, the lectures you stop attending, the doors you stop trying to open.

And no one mourns a student who disappears quietly.

Here's the truth I've come to know in this stillness:

Independence is not a luxury. It's oxygen.

When the wheels stop turning, it's not just your body that halts, it's your agency, your momentum, your identity. The chair isn't just transport. It's escape velocity. It's presence. It's power. Without it, I am forced back into the old shadows. Plato's cave, but with fluorescent lighting and closed captioning, a flat version of life, where I see outlines but never get to touch the real thing.

And the people outside, they look in like tourists at a dark exhibit.

"It's such a shame," they say.

"You're so brave."

"I wouldn't cope."

But they could. They would. Because we do, not out of choice, but out of necessity. We find ways to hold meaning in a world that won't hold us.

So I did what I always do: I adapted. Not because I should have to. Not because I wanted to. But because no one else was coming.

I mapped new paths with broken coordinates. I reached out to strangers in forums, used translation software to navigate bureaucracy. I taught myself the maintenance routines

for the failing machine. I re-engineered my routines to the pace of crawling freedom. One painful workaround at a time.

And slowly, I came to see this failure not as mine, but as theirs. A society that builds rockets without room for every body. A system that pretends equality is access, when it's really just silence with a caption.

But not everyone drifted past.

One student, quiet, kind, sharp in ways no form could capture, stopped orbiting long enough to dock beside me. He didn't have to. The system didn't tell him to. There were no credits, no accolades, no performative service hours. Just a question, simple and radical:

"Do you need help?"

And when I said yes, he didn't flinch.

He asked questions. He looked at the wiring. He researched brands, contacted vendors, made phone calls that had been disconnected. He didn't ask to be a hero. He just stayed, not above, not ahead, but beside.

And when my chair finally moved again, when the wheels rolled for the first time in days, it wasn't because of policy. It wasn't because the system listened. It was because one person, one fellow traveler, saw the emergency not as mine, but ours.

In the dark, he had noticed the blinking signal.

And chose to answer it.

I do not want pity.

I want propulsion.

I want the systems that were promised.

I want to be allowed to exist fully, not as an exception, but as a design.

And until then, I will keep transmitting.

From this drifting vessel.

Across this cold and indifferent void.

I will keep broadcasting signals not of hope, but of **truth**.

I am not broken.

I am unsupported.

There is a difference.

And somewhere, out there, I know there's someone else, watching shadows flicker on walls, wondering if they're the only one who sees how wrong it all is.

To them I say:

This isn't the end of the story.

This is the dark matter.

The part they say doesn't exist, but still shapes everything around it.

You are not alone.

And you are not a malfunction.

You are the signal.

Fishing for Stars

No one told me the stars would be this close.

Not the advisors, not the forms, not the webinars that promised I was prepared. They warned me about lost luggage, culture shock, exchange rates, homesickness. But no one mentioned the rooftop sky, open, infinite, like it had been waiting.

And so, I fished.

Not literally. But with my heart, my breath, my whole body stretched toward the sky, casting invisible lines for something I couldn't name. Not success. Not pride. Just... belonging.

Because studying abroad was never meant for people like me.

The paperwork made it seem impossible, endless forms, proofs, signatures, every line another test. I filled them like dares, casting each one into the dark, hoping something would hold.

And when I arrived? It didn't feel triumphant. It felt like a mistake.

My feet touched unfamiliar ground, and the ground didn't welcome me. Everyone around me talked like they'd done this before, international flights, summer programs, study grants. I smiled, nodded. Pretended my accent didn't shake and my body didn't ache from pushing itself to keep up.

I'd made it. But I hadn't landed.

Back home, the stars were buried under streetlight and worry. My nights were made of work shifts and tired dinners, whispered dreams and careful budgeting. There was no space for wonder. Only endurance.

But here, one night, I climbed to the rooftop, alone. I didn't go there to feel grateful or inspired. I went because I couldn't breathe in the shape the day had given me. I needed air. I needed distance from all the invisible weights I carried: first in my family. First out of the country. First to ask for help, and be told, "We'll get back to you."

And that's when I looked up.

The stars didn't dazzle me. They didn't need to. They just... showed up. Quietly, fully. Like they'd been there all along, waiting for me to look.

So I fished.

I imagined casting a line from my chest to the constellations, just to see if something might tug back. Not achievement, not recognition, just proof. That I could be here. That I *was* here.

A kind of soft joy settled in my bones. The kind I wasn't used to claiming.

I didn't talk about it. Not to classmates who planned weekend trips like they were errands. Not to professors who assumed confidence meant comprehension. Not even to the family back home, who saw only the postcard version of this life.

This rooftop ritual became mine. A practice in quiet resistance.

Eventually, someone else came with me. A friend. They asked what I was doing.

"Fishing," I said.

“For what?”

“Proof.”

They didn’t laugh. They lay beside me. We watched the sky turn slowly. We breathed. I think they understood, that sometimes, joy isn’t loud. Sometimes, it’s survival made still. Sometimes, it’s simply the act of reaching.

They call it *first-gen euphoria*, but it never feels like a shout. Not to me.

It’s the exhale after the deadline is met. The click of an accessible door that finally opens. The warmth of a cup of tea on a night when you almost gave up.

It’s the moment on a rooftop when the stars don’t feel far away anymore.

I used to think I had to earn this. To prove I was grateful. To work twice as hard to justify half as much. But the truth is: I don’t need to be perfect to deserve the sky.

I just need to keep casting lines.

Because even if I never catch a star, I’ll know I dared to try.