

An exploration of my journey towards accepting my voice and my disfluency through poetry, narrative, and reflection. Challenging years of questions, conflict, doubt, and insecurity, I announce my confidence in who I am and how I communicate. My stutter is not stagnant: it ebbs and flows. I am learning to be comfortable with my voice no matter what. I believe what I have to say has value, with or without a stutter.



E
B
B



By Isabella Lashley

By Isabella Lashley

© 2022 SAY: The Stuttering Association for the Young
Isabella Lashley
Ebb

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the publisher or in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 or under the terms of any license permitting limited copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency.

Published by: SAY: The Stuttering Association for the Young

Text Design by: Indil Arts

Cover and Interior Illustration Design by: Francisco Borges

Distributed by:

SAY: The Stuttering Association for the Young
247 West 37th Street, 5th Floor New York, NY 10018

Printed and Bound by: BookBaby

Dedication

Dear Bella,

I hope you are happy. I hope you found a place to be free and smiling.

I hope you are learning things that excite you and that motivate you to continue on. I hope you are confident in who you are now and you were before.

I hope you make decisions for yourself and for your happiness. I hope you sing loudly. I hope you know what inspires you and what encourages you.

I hope you have support.

I hope you still sit outside during thunderstorms. I hope you still try out new recipes. I hope you still like the fall. I hope you still like long drives.

I hope you still like me.

*Love,
Bella*

Ebb

Isabella Lashley

It was the signature Sunday night Scrabble game in my house. I delicately counted out seven wooden tiles, methodically moving them around in my palm to be sure that these were the ones I wanted, the ones that felt right. I pulled my tiles from the red velvet pouch and carefully studied the letters and numbers carved into each one.



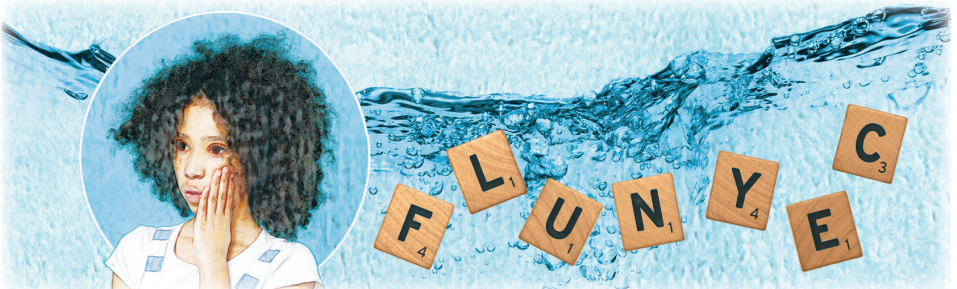
Ebb

As I placed them onto my rack, I searched for a word, like I often do as I speak. Trapped within the confines of my stutter, within trigger letters and fleeting conversations, as I speak, I censor myself, “often” rather than “sometimes,” “pasta” rather than “spaghetti,” “jacket” rather than “sweater.” Here, I was trapped within seven letters, blindly scrambling for a word.

I thought desperately, arranging



and rearranging them.



Isabella Lashley

Sometimes, speaking is exhausting. Sometimes, I get tired of the gasps of air and distorted faces I make to force words from my mouth. Sometimes, I am tired of the palpable discomfort of those around me, of the “Slow Downs” and the “Try Again.”

Ebb

I noticed as my family began to take on this restlessness, tired of waiting for me to find a word. “Who has the highest scoring word?” said my mother. “Who’s going first?” she added. She looked around the table expectantly, lingering a bit on me. My brother started to tap his fingers. My sister started humming to herself. My parents started to murmur about their next plays.

I felt the all too familiar heat of shame rising in me after taking too much time to speak, the pressure of an impatient attention. I recognized my heart beat and breath becoming erratic, a seemingly disproportionate response to a tense Scrabble game, but in that moment, I felt the memories of a childhood spent being discounted and ignored flooding into me.

Isabella Lashley

With watering eyes and shuddering breath, I once again rearranged my tiles and finally,



Fluency: noun, seven letters, fifteen points.

As I recognized the word I had spelled, I felt as if I was being mocked by my letters. I could not claim “Fluency” in any sense of the word and yet, with it, I thought I could win the entire game. F4 landing on a Double Letter Score and N1 landing on a Double Word Score meant 38 points plus the 50-point bonus from using all seven letters. F₄ L₁ U₁ E₁ N₁ C₃ Y₄ would give me an automatic 88 point head start in front of everyone else. I smiled recognizing the irony as I played this word. I now had the metaphorical head start of fluency that I had longed for. The advantage I had never had, the ability to speak with ease, now had become an advantage I alone could use.

Ebb

Fluency was a word that I couldn't say and an attribute I did not possess. Fluency, in my mouth, would become an incongruent and jumbled mix of stammering syllables and elongated sounds:



As I contemplated this very truth, the reality of my stutter, I realized that these echoes in my voice had value. The extra Fs and Ls had a number value.

$F_4 L_1 U_1 E_1 N_1 C_3 Y_4$ had just 15 points but
 $F_4 F_4 F_4 L_1 L_1 L_1 U_1 E_1 N_1 C_3 Y_4$ had 29 points.

Isabella Lashley

Though this realization now seems childish, it revolutionized my view of myself. My stretched sssssss and hard-won wwws now felt less shameful, less like secrets to hide or deficiencies to disguise. With them, I could earn points on life's figurative Scrabble board. I felt a strange sense of justice, as if the universe had apologized for my stutter.

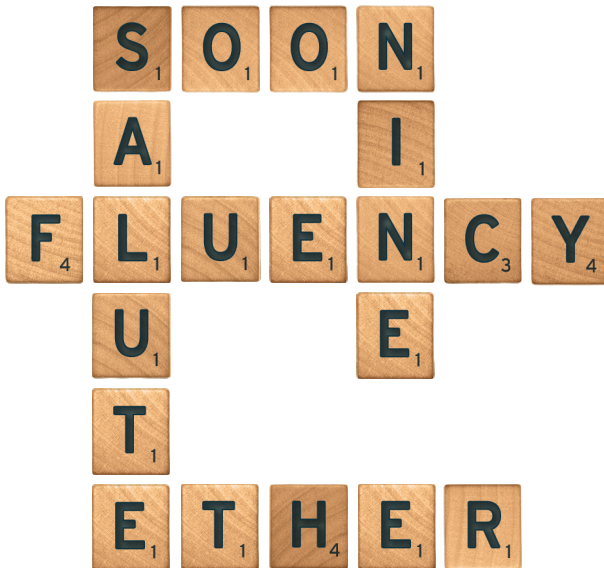
Ebb

Throughout this game of Scrabble, I slowly let go of the constant weight of my stutter. I allowed it to slip from my mind, past my spine, and through my veins, and finally out. Words lead these insecurities from my mind. Each word I played, I continued to assure me and my voice. I played with new tiles, reaching back into the velvet bag, now less anxious of the letters I would choose, of the words I could make. I replenished my rack with



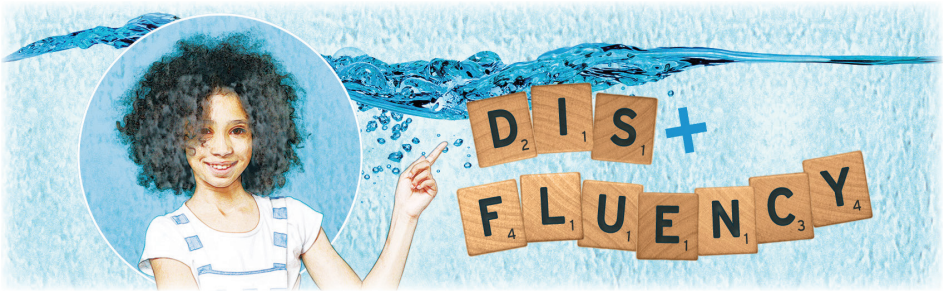
Isabella Lashley

I studied the board, looking for a new play. I was now unfazed by the reactions of my parents and siblings as I exaggeratedly took even more time to find my word. I did not care about discomfort I might cause for those around me. I deserved to play just as I deserved to speak, taking as much time and consideration as I needed.



Ebb

Soon, I began to realize the word I would use.



D I S F L U E N C Y

Disfluency: noun, ten letters, nineteen points

Isabella Lashley

Now, I would finish my own thought, add on to my own word. Finally, uninterrupted by impatient listeners, I was free to finish my own thought. I could revise, reclaiming an often desired



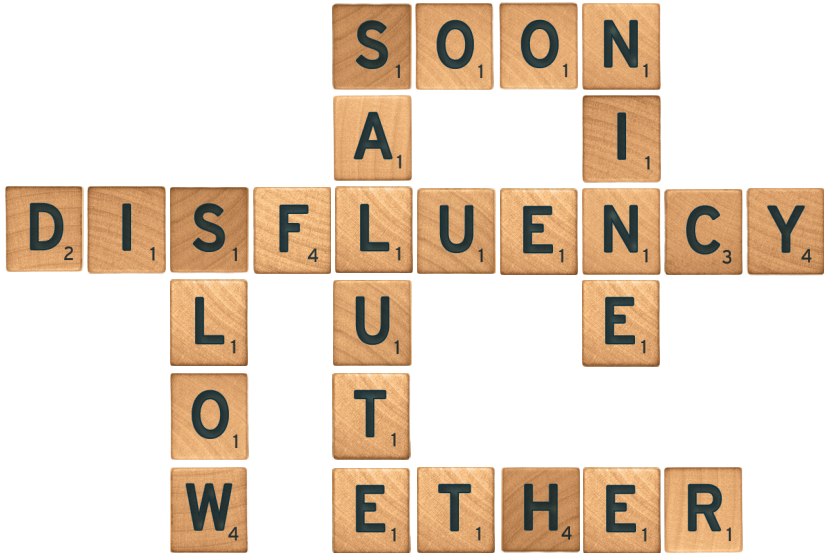
as my authentic



I fight to speak just as I fight to win a Scrabble game. With each draw of tiles and each new conversation, I adapt, using the words I can use. I take my time to ensure that I express myself how I want to.

Ebb

The next play was $S_1 L_1 O_1 W_4$.



Isabella Lashley

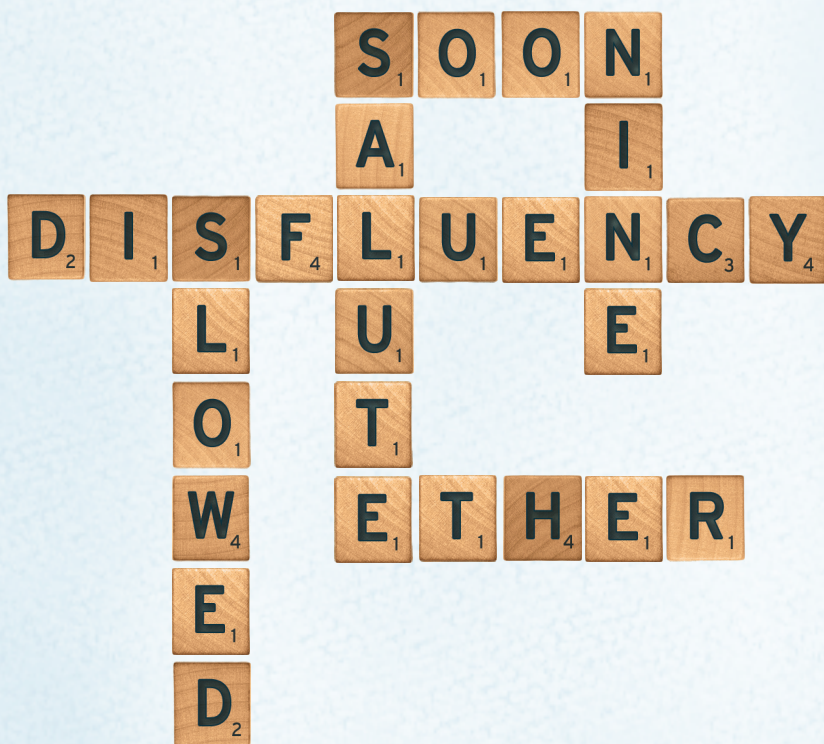
When the turn came back around to me, I looked down and my mind began to race at seeing $S_1 L_1 O_1 W_4$ on the board. My stutter is something I feel like I have to apologize for, to explain the way that I speak, only because it might take an extra 30 seconds maybe, is that amount of time worth making me feel horrible about myself for. I promise I can say the word. It just might take me more time. Maybe this particular time, I stuttered.

Ebb

**My brain thinks just as fast as yours. My
thoughts flow in the same way yours do. I am
slowed down, slowed down by my stutter.**

Isabella Lashley

So when $S_1 L_1 O_1 W_4$ was put in front of me, as I scrambled to find a word to play, the $E_1 D_2$ in my rack made me realize I could make this interruption of my words and thoughts, ones so commonplace in my life, more accurate: $S_1 L_1 O_1 W_4 E_1 D_2$.



Ebb



The trudge

The drag

The squeeze

It is never running fast enough,

It's the gravity pulling,

It's the pushing and pushing

until you tumble over yourself

Isabella Lashley



Somehow mental and physical

Somehow fast and slow

It's the pressure

The weight

The crush

Ebb

It's the tick, tick

Isabella Lashley

Tick

Ebb

Tick

Isabella Lashley

Tock

Ebb

The momentum

The rush

The



Isabella Lashley

Wait for it

Wait

Wait for it

Wait for it

Wait

Wait for it

Wait for it

Wait

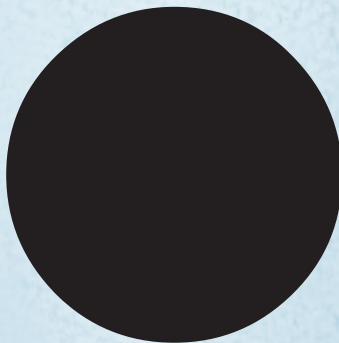
Wait for it

Wait for it

Ebb

A word cloud featuring the phrase "Wait for it" repeated in various sizes, orientations, and weights (bold, regular, italicized) against a light blue background. The text is arranged in a dynamic, overlapping manner, with some instances being very large and bold, while others are smaller and more delicate. The overall effect is a sense of movement and anticipation, reflecting the meaning of the phrase.

Isabella Lashley



Ebb



Isabella Lashley

S₁

S₁ L₁

S₁ L₁ O₁

S₁ L₁ O₁ W₄

S₁ L₁ O₁ W₄ E₁

S₁ L₁ O₁ W₄ E₁ D₂

Ebb

When choice
and control
are ripped away,

When    

becomes      

Isabella Lashley

The flush,

The burn

The blush

The red

The buzz

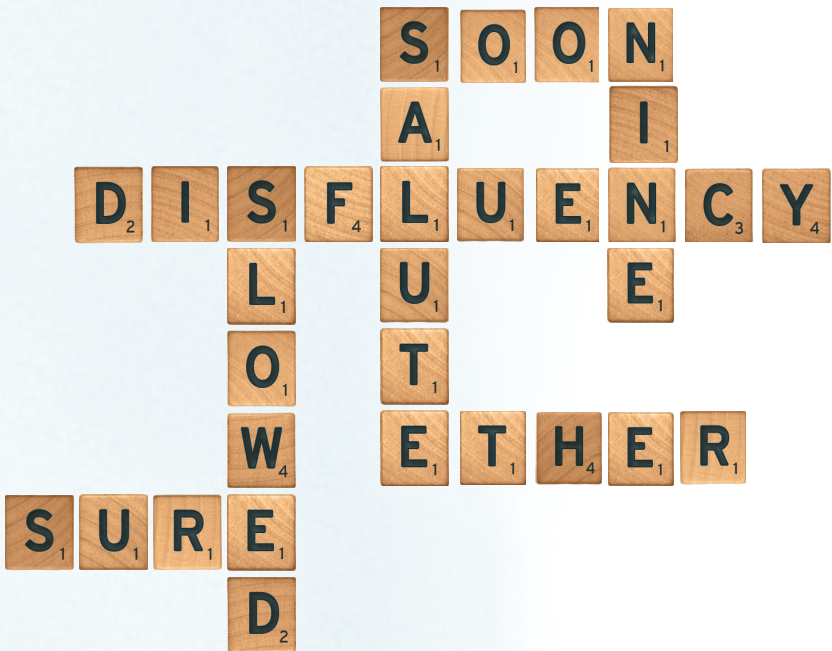
The shame

Is never



Ebb

A few more rounds and S₁ U₁ R₁ E₁ is on the board.



Isabella Lashley

Is a question really a question if you only want one answer, if you know what you expect, and won't accept anything else? Are you $S_1 U_1 R_1 E_1$? What answer do you want? Yes, no, maybe, kinda, not anymore.

If I speak, just know that I am $S_1 U_1 R_1 E_1$. That the prep and practice in my mind has made me $S_1 U_1 R_1 E_1$. Yes, $S_1 U_1 R_1 E_1$ of the words I say, of what I mean by them, and of how I say them. Yes I am $S_1 U_1 R_1 E_1$. I know that. Not even just $S_1 U_1 R_1 E_1$, I am certain of my worth, of my ability, of me.

And what does it say about you if your question can't handle my answer?

Ebb

Some questions, some phrases have a palpable, yet invisible smirk attached to them. Or maybe its a wink or crossed fingers, but sometimes there is an undeniable air of insincerity.

However, well- camouflaged or masqueraded their intentions are, that invisible smirk reveals the truth. Rhetorical questions, no matter how unsuspecting, have this deception.

They dare you to respond, knowing that no answer would suffice, no answer is correct, that no answer would be enough.

Isabella Lashley

I weave minutes into the words I say
Minutes of planning and adjusting and considering
To make sure it's something
I want to say
That I can say
That it is worth saying

Ebb

So, no, I will not dignify

“Are you S₁ U₁ R₁ E₁”

with a response

Isabella Lashley

I have been sure long before you even considering asking
I have been building that sureness not just for these past
few minutes, but also for the years of my life before it

For me, just like for everyone else, the way that I speak
is normal, a default
I just spoke as I would speak, but I, unlike other people,
was told my way was wrong
That my way was uncertain

Ebb

I spent years censoring my messages
Years restraining my confidence

All because my way was somehow not the right way

There was a mutually understood time limit for certain
letters and sounds,
that my voice could
and cannot
keep up with

My certainty comes from years of thought, from years of
anxiety, and of scrutiny by others and eventually myself

Isabella Lashley

It has taken years to convince myself that no matter how many syllables I take to say a word or how many times I blink, each and every word I choose to say and the messages behind those words will always be worthwhile

So, yes, I am $S_1 U_1 R_1 E_1$ now, and I will be later too.

Before this moment of realization, insecurities around my voice consumed me, gnawing relentlessly at my self-esteem. After years of failed speech therapy and of wondering what was wrong with me, I pitied myself, hating myself for my supposed weakness or disability and feeling helpless. Apologizing for the burden and inconvenience I saw myself as became a painful reflex.

Isabella Lashley

The only way that I can win when it wins
Is if we become we
We are indivisible
It is intrinsic to me

Without it I am no longer myself
Without me it can no longer be

Even though it can feel impossible
Even though it may feel like I am battling myself

If I speak it wins
If I don't it too wins

Ebb



Ultimately, each part of it is part of me

Isabella Lashley

The fast

Ebb

The slow

Isabella Lashley

The blocks

Ebb

The flows

Isabella Lashley



The beginnings

Ebb

and pauses

Isabella Lashley

The only way I can win
Is if I find power in being joined with it

If it is no longer is an enemy, but rather
My ally

Ebb

I can never win

if I am trying to best myself

Isabella Lashley

As I developed my own self-awareness and found a community of others who stutter at the Stuttering Association of the Young, I slowly let go of the constant weight of my stutter. We bonded over spoken word and improv, allowing our voices to just exist without edits. Now, I live language, relishing the sounds and structures that flow from my mouth. As I explain $S_1 S_1 S_1 C_3 U_1 L_1 P_3 T_1 U_1 R_1 E_1 S_1$ to wide-eyed toddlers as a museum intern or even just order $F_4 F_4 F_4 L_1 A_1 N_1$ from my favorite Puerto-Rican restaurant, I speak with confidence.

Ebb

Although my stutter stays with me, complicating some conversations and interactions, my disfluency no longer controls me. I now dedicate myself to supporting others in feeling this unconditional empowerment in their voices. I am no longer afraid to say what I want, what I need, what I believe, even if I know I may stutter, and I want to help others feel comfortable in doing the same.

Isabella Lashley

**I think they see a young girl
With curly hair and dark eyes.**



Ebb

Someone who talks a lot,

but stumbles and stutters.

Isabella Lashley

They see

eager

creativity

Ebb

**They see a defensive confidence
A defiant self-esteem**

Isabella Lashley

They hear carefully manicured phrases

whittled down

from the billowing thoughts

in my mind

They hear meticulous

edits

and doubts

Ebb

I hope they see a girl who is thoughtful and passionate

A girl who pushes past her insecurities

A girl who is motivated to learn and grow and evolve

Isabella Lashley

Some of what they see

and hear is true,

Ebb

But I hope and know there is so much more to me.

Isabella Lashley

Ebb

Epilogue

Isabella Lashley

Ebb

As my fluency ebbs and flows
Changing with the tides of my life
Rising and falling
Slowing and starting

These waves push
Harsh words and self-doubt
into my shell
Scratching and scrapping
My inside

Slowly I build layers of a defensive confidence
to ease the pain
A shiny coating of courage
Inside my shell
to protect myself

After many years, these ebbs and flows
And my mother-of pearl morale
Cultivate a smooth and resilient core
A poised pearl

Made of me
Made from my memories
From my obstacles
From my will

An iridescent pearl
Of my spirit
An orb of energy
Made from the ebbs

Isabella Lashley

Ebb

*A special thanks to Colleen for her Saturday
morning cheer and guidance.*

Isabella Lashley