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**“Our World, Reflected in Our Stories:
Making Sense of the COVID-19 Pandemic, through Octavia Butler’s ‘Speech Sounds’”**



At this point in the COVID-19 pandemic, there seems to be a shortage of safe places to store and feed one’s sense of hope. For me, it feels as though I’ve taken all of my hope, rolled it into a ball, and thrown it into the future with the expectation that I and the world around me will somehow catch up to it. The sprint to that hope has some days become nothing more than a crawl, and it is on those days that I feel most desperate to see some semblance of change or progress in the way we’ve handled the pandemic, as well as all the countless other evils that continue to push people away from each other. It is when I see pleas for help from overwhelmed healthcare professionals, messages in the family group chat about who just tested positive, and headlines reducing widespread tragedy to mind-boggling statistics that I begin to wonder just how far ahead I threw all that hope—*have I gotten any closer to it? Are the little changes I’m making in my life today really making the path to tomorrow any smoother? Is anything going to get better?*



One thing that has helped me navigate rough times throughout my life is reading. Reading, just as it sometimes does for most people, can offer a temporary escape from the raging fires we often find ourselves cornered by in our everyday lives. Additionally, reading can prompt us to think about the current state of the world in ways that we previously hadn't considered. Octavia Butler's short story "Speech Sounds" offers a glimpse at a world in which hope seems to have been cast away as the effects of a pandemic that hindered human communication only widened whatever divisions may have already existed between everyday people. Butler shows us a world essentially knocked on its ass—a society laden with jealousy-fueled violence and endless misunderstandings. As a result of a mysterious illness, some people have lost their ability to read and write while others have lost their ability to speak. Identifiers like written names and professions are reduced to meaninglessness, and common items used during a time "before the pandemic" have turned to artifacts. As I read the scenes revealing just how deeply barriers in communication can cut into the fabric of everyday life, I was reminded of the ways in which my own relationship with communication has been altered during the COVID-19 pandemic—both for better and for worse. I used to socialize without a worry of falling ill and/or infecting others by doing so, and I sometimes worry if I'll ever communicate freely in that sense again. I have found that there are moments lately when I try to reclaim that freedom; I go to a restaurant and abandon all caution while I eat, or I sit in a room of close friends and sit comfortably in my assumption that none of us have COVID. When I remember, sometimes suddenly, that the virus hasn't disappeared and that I've been truly lucky to have avoided it for two years, I try to reconstruct the sense of urgency with which I used to take measures to protect myself and others.

"Speech Sounds," which follows a woman in Los Angeles named Rye, details how communication and human interaction in a world warped by a pandemic is saddled with a number of risks. One misinterpreted look, wordless movement, or apparent difference in lifestyle can be the spark of explosive and inexplicable violence in Rye's America—and our current America doesn't feel so different these days. I find that, while I'm in public spaces, there's a certain level of risk of personal danger I'm assuming by exposing myself to other people period. I have to wonder if the person to my left and the person to my right have the capacity to not only care about me and my well-being on some level, but if they also could *understand* me in moments when understanding might be the one thing I need above all else. It's not lost on me that maybe even my capacity to understand and connect with others has been weakened in some way over the past couple of years. To see only half of people's faces, to hear their voices muffled, to have to assume how far apart our political and moral beliefs may be at a glance—how do these experiences change the ways I perceive others? how I choose to approach (or avoid) them? how I befriend them? how I rebuke them?

What I sensed in both the world of "Speech Sounds" and our world in 2020, at the start of the pandemic, was an air of hesitancy and dread, wafting through and around almost every social interaction. Laughing with friends, sitting across from a date in a restaurant, and dancing beside my mom while she cooks involved a certain amount of risk that wasn't there for the first 19 years of my life. When I think back on having a movie night with a friend or embracing my grandmother and sometimes find myself overcome with regret and worry, the reality of how much loving and connecting I've had to hold back hits me all at once. While we've generally become much more comfortable re-adopting the lifestyles we had pre-pandemic, I think it'd be a lie to say we haven't all had moments recently when the virus reminded us (very loudly) of its

existence. When we find out that the person we sat in a meeting with last week, or the friend we had drinks with last night tested positive, the risks of so much socialization in the age of COVID slap us in the face once again. For Rye and all of us, interacting with others can be a gamble—for many, this gamble is life or death. What happens to this world when connecting with people, closely and wholeheartedly, becomes too dangerous? Do our typical divisions grow into chasms so wide that mending them feels impossible? Do we retreat into comfort zones that are perpetually shrinking? Exactly how much *humanity* do we stand to lose?

I often wonder how much longer we'll be here, trying to claw our way back to a time when closeness was not dangerous. Though society has tried to catapult itself back into the “norm” and people have been encouraged to ditch COVID protocols, the risk of spreading the virus is still ever-present. I know that this desire to return to life as we knew it plagues so many minds every day of this pandemic as we all wait, breath held behind surgical masks, for some semblance of change. What can we do to make sure that as many people as possible are taking the pandemic seriously enough to try to prevent transmission? How can we shrink the sizes of communal outbreaks? When will the dangers of COVID *actually* feel like a thing of the distant past—and will they ever truly be?

It was, at first, gutting to read “Speech Sounds” and find so many similarities between the rundown world the story depicts and the reality we are currently facing. It is disheartening to see Rye, who has lost her family and beloved career in academia as a result of the pandemic taking her ability to read, struggle to find positive human connection in her dreary reality. However, Butler does not leave us with an absence of hope or potential for the human race to persevere; instead, she shows us how such positive connections can bloom, however briefly, despite all the factors in the present world that may threaten to snuff them out. Rye, through a few hours of interacting with a man named Obsidian, finds her way back to a means of human understanding and even passion. Without spoiling too many details of the story, I will say that “Speech Sounds” offers readers the opportunity to think more deeply about how the current pandemic has changed society and our relationship to it, how it may continue to spark change, and what we may do to make sure that those changes empower us rather than destroy us. Rye's story is not one of pure tragedy; she encounters hope in not only the world at large and the generations to come, but also in her own ability to reclaim a personal purpose.

I would recommend “Speech Sounds” to anyone who has struggled to make sense of our ever-changing world (and, honestly, who hasn't struggled with that?). It reminds me of the importance of the art of writing and how any story, though fictional, can function as the most necessary mirror to be held up to the world so that we may all, for a little while, see ourselves and each other much more clearly.