

# *If We Never Get Better*

September 8th to December 10th, 2022

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What If we never get better?

What if illness, pain, isolation, loss, etc. are not the worst-case scenario?

What if these circumstances aren't pitied, ignored, or wished away, but instead are seen as a place for study, the cultivation of new skills, and an opportunity to relate to others in a new way?

Featuring the work of Anique Jordan, Ari Golub, Clifford Prince King, Debmalya Ray Choudhuri, Frances Bukovsky, Jaklin Romine, Jenica Heintzeman, Shala Miller, and Shanna Merola, *If We Never Get Better* examines these questions by bringing together lens-based artists who focus on health/care, collective grief, disability, illness, and healing as components of their practices. Examining health and disability as intersectional experiences, and the ways in which ableism and access to healthcare are directly intertwined with systems such as racism, sexism, and homophobia, these artists help to expand preconceived notions of these topics. Highlighting principles of Disability Justice, a framework coined by a collective of Black, brown, queer, and trans activists, including Patty Berne, Mia Mingus, and Stacey Park Milbern, the works come together to facilitate a more nuanced understanding of how we are all impacted by these systems at different levels and how art can be used to challenge that reality.

*If We Never Get Better* corresponds with the production of *The Photographers Green Book Vol. 2*. The second iteration of this publication brings together images, interviews, and essays by a variety of contemporary artists and scholars whose work and lives are aligned with these topics to create a resource that exists as a teaching tool, a point for individual reflection, and an archive.

# About The Photographer's Green Book

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Between 1936 and 1966, the Negro Motorist Green Book was a list of safe places for Black people during their travels throughout the segregated USA. Founded in 2020, the Photographer's Green Book, in that tradition, started as a list of resources to navigate the photographic community, which has historically denied the voices of those other than predominantly white cis male artists. Our work expands on the original Green Book's target audience to include other individuals whose voices have been under-supported or underrepresented in academic and arts institutions.

Inclusion, diversity, equity, and advocacy (IDEA) are the core principles of The Photographer's Green Book, which guide the questions we ask, resources we build, and the engagements we partake in for our community. We believe that history and the contemporary moment must also include the varying struggles and voices of those living in the 21st century. Through our expansion, PGB also engages directly with institutions needing structural and programmatic changes aligned with PGB's IDEA. We strive for a time when these resources and concepts are the norms, but until that point, we are here to advocate and give the tools necessary for navigating safely through the trenches of our cultural production.

# Principles of Disability Justice

As coined by Patty Berne and members of SinsInvalid.

## 1. INTERSECTIONALITY

“We do not live single issue lives” –Audre Lorde.  
Ableism, coupled with white supremacy, supported by capitalism, underscored by heteropatriarchy, has rendered the vast majority of the world “invalid.”

## 3. ANTI-CAPITALIST POLITIC

In an economy that sees land and humans as components of profit, we are anti-capitalist by the nature of having non-conforming body/minds.

## 5. RECOGNIZING WHOLENESS

People have inherent worth outside of commodity relations and capitalist notions of productivity. Each person is full of history and life experience.

## 7. COMMITMENT TO CROSS-DISABILITY SOLIDARITY

We honor the insights and participation of all of our community members, knowing that isolation undermines collective liberation.

## 9. COLLECTIVE ACCESS

As brown, black and queer-bodied disabled people we bring flexibility and creative nuance that go beyond able-bodied/minded normativity, to be in community with each other.

## 2. LEADERSHIP OF THOSE MOST IMPACTED

“We are led by those who most know these systems.” –Aurora Levins Morales

## 4. COMMITMENT TO CROSS-MOVEMENT ORGANIZING

Shifting how social justice movements understand disability and contextualize ableism, disability justice lends itself to politics of alliance.

## 6. SUSTAINABILITY

We pace ourselves, individually and collectively, to be sustained long term.  
Our embodied experiences guide us toward ongoing justice and liberation.

## 8. INTERDEPENDENCE

We meet each others’ needs as we build toward liberation, knowing that state solutions inevitably extend into further control over lives.

## 10. COLLECTIVE LIBERATION

No body or mind can be left behind – only moving together can we accomplish the revolution we require.

***If We Never Get Better***  
**Exhibition Guide**



**Jenica Heintzelman - #1**  
*Holding III* (2020)  
Photograph  
56 x 69 inches



**Debmalya Ray Choudhuri - #2**  
*The Weight of the Earth* (2022)  
Photograph  
18 x 12 inches



**Clifford Prince King - #3**  
*Night Sweats* (2018)  
Photograph  
16 x 24 inches



**Clifford Prince King - #4**  
*For Robert Rayford* (2020)  
Photograph  
16 x 24 inches



**Shanna Merola - #5**  
*Polychlorinated Biphenyl*  
*C<sub>12</sub>H<sub>10-x</sub>C<sub>1</sub><sub>x</sub> (2021)*  
 Photograph  
 16 x 20 inches



**Jaklin Romine - #6**  
**ACCESS DENIED**  
 (2015 - Present)  
 Photograph  
 16 x 20 inches



**Frances Bukovsky - #7**  
*Hemosiderin Deposit (2021)*  
 Photograph  
 8 x 10 inches



**Anique Jordan - #8**  
**Codes (2020)**  
 Photograph  
 18 x 21 inches



**Anique Jordan - #9**  
*Enough* (2020)  
 Photograph  
 18 x 21 inches



**Anique Jordan - #10**  
*Edge of Town* (2020)  
 Photograph  
 18 x 21 inches



**Ari Joel Golub - #11**  
*Hold Your Breath* (2021)  
 Photograph  
 57 x 72 inches



**Shala Miller - #12**  
*Echo* (2017)  
 Video  
 8:15

## IF WE NEVER GET BETTER ALTERNATIVE TEXT

### **Jenica Heintzelman - #1**

Title – *Holding III*

Year – 2020

Medium – Photograph

Dimension – 56 x 69 inches

Two people are positioned in the photograph, one individual in the foreground and the other in the background. Only the hands and arms of the person in the background are visible, their right and left thumbs pressed into the other subject's corresponding eye sockets between a bridge piercing. The person in the foreground has short, spiky hair. Their face is relaxed, mouth slightly open, exposing a small section of their teeth. They are wearing a cream short sleeve shirt with embroidered flowers. Two necklaces dangle from their neck, one with a name in cursive and the other with a small stone attached to it. Both individuals have a tan complexion.

### **Debmalya Ray Choudhuri - #2**

Title – *The Weight of the Earth*

Year – 2022

Medium – Photograph

Dimension – 18 x 12 inches

Black and white image of a shirtless masculine person who presents as South Asian, wearing dark colored track pants with a white strip along the side. Their body is slightly contorted, arms cradled above their head as it is tilted backwards positioned towards the sun light. Behind the subject is a lush, dense background of various foliage.

### **Clifford Prince King - #3**

Title – *Night Sweats*

Year – 2018

Medium – Photograph

Dimension – 16 x 24 inches

Two pillows partially covered with tan pillow cases sit atop wrinkled, sweat-soaked tan sheets. A light yellow wall completes the background. The bed appears to have been slept in, The soft light projected in the image gives the room a warm glow.

### **Clifford Prince King - #4**

Title – *For Robert Rayford*

Year – 2020

Medium – Photograph

Dimension – 16 x 24 inches

Two Black men resting on a bed in a dark room. One figure is reclining with one knee bent, the other is hunched over with his head in his hands as if he is praying. On the wall behind them there is a window framed by a yellow curtain. Warm light pours into the room through the window, highlighting the silhouettes of the subjects' bodies and casting a reflection of the window on the adjacent wall. The reflection illuminates a handmade poster that consists of a young, Black man's face with the name Robert Rayford painted beneath it. Taped to the poster is a photograph of a shirtless Black man in what appears to be a park.

## **Shanna Merola - #5**

Title – *Polychlorinated Biphenyl C12H10-xC1x*

Year – 2021

Medium – Photograph

Dimension – 16 x 20 inches

A photo collage consisting of green and gray plastic pipes woven together with brown, withering brush, forming a border for the entire composition. In the center are images depicting various forms of medical care meshed together. One photo shows a person administering a shot, pinching the patient's skin as they inject the needle into their flesh. The second photo is an image of a person in green scrubs receiving an IV in their hand.

## **Jaklin Romine #6**

Title – *ACCESS DENIED*

Year – 2015 - Present

Medium – Photograph

Dimension – 16 x 20 inches

A woman sits in a wheelchair on a sidewalk with her back to the camera. Her long wavy hair capped at its ends by blue highlights, contrasts with the pink fabric slightly showing underneath her mesh top. A pair of sunglasses rests on the top of her head. The front of her body is facing the door of a white building adorned with green awnings. A red sign with the letters "LACA" capitalized sits just above the entryway. Flanking the entrance is another door to the left and a window to the right. All entry points are covered with bars.

## **Frances Bukovsky- #7**

Title – *Hemosiderin Deposit*

Year – 2021

Medium – Photograph

Dimension – 8 x 10 inches

Amber, gray, orange, and light pink blobs create a film that obscures an x-ray resting on top of a medical document. Below the x-ray is an image of a human skull.

## **Anique Jordan - #8**

Title – *Codes*

Year – 2020

Medium – Photograph

Dimension – 18 x 21 inches

Front page of *The Sunday Star* newspaper. The headline “Tracing COVID’s grim path” sits above a map of Toronto, Canada that is color coded by the density of COVID cases in the city. Black pen outlines sections of the map designated as “neighborhood improvement areas”, which correlate with greater density. Additional handwritten notes fill the edges and center of the newspaper, reflecting on this finding.

## **Anique Jordan - #9**

Title – *Enough*

Year – 2020

Medium – Photograph

Dimension – 18 x 21 inches

Front page of *The Sunday Star* newspaper. Above images of Egerton Ryerson, Samuel Peters Jarvis, and Peter Russell a banner of text reads “where the streets bear their names”. Under the photographs, red text references ongoing debates about changing Toronto street signs named after individuals with racist legacies. At the very top of the page a quote from another story highlights the precarity of migrant workers during the pandemic. Handwritten notes fill the edges and center of the newspaper, providing additional context for the headlines.

## **Anique Jordan - #10**

Title – *Edge of Town*

Year – 2020

Medium – Photograph

Dimension – 18 x 21 inches

Front page of *The Sunday Star* newspaper. The headline “Why COVID clusters on the edge of town” followed by a subtitle connecting neighborhoods with existing public health crises to those disproportionately impacted by COVID is situated above a photograph of a Black woman sitting in front of a vacant lot overgrown by trees and bushes. Behind her are two large apartment buildings. Hand written reflections about the topic cover the page.

## **Ari Joel Golub - #11**

Title – *Hold Your Breath*

Year – 2021

Medium – Photograph

Dimension – 57 x 72 inches

Light blue, bubbling water obscures the body (torso up) of a white person lying on their back with their arm bent over their chest. Their face is obscured by the rushing water. They appear to be falling backward.

## **Shala Merola - #12**

Title – *The Echo*

Year – 2017

Medium – Video

Run Time – 8:15 minutes

## ECHO TRANSCRIPT

SHALA: Ma, do you remember how I got that scar on my cheek, on my right cheek?

MOTHER: Yes, I do. You were really just an infant, you know. And uh, I think it might've even been before you were brought home. You know, when a child is born, they used to try to put those little baby mittens on them to keep them from scratching themselves. So, what you did, you scratched yourself. And to me I thought it was kind of deep, I mentioned it to the nurse or doctor, and they would say, "Oh, it'll heal up." I didn't realize, and I don't think they did either, it just seemed like a scratch. But it really never healed over right. I always questioned whether I should've put something on it, but they said, "don't put anything on it," because I questioned the doctor and nurse about it. You know nails, they're very sharp at infancy. It almost seems like it hasn't- I was kind of surprised that it left that little scar.

*BLACK SCREEN. VOICE OVER OF SHALA SINGING A LOVE SONG. ON THE SCREEN IS THE FOLLOWING TEXT:*

LOVE SONGS.

I'd say it could be an adjective.

*"I'm feeling a lot like love songs"*

Timidly, and usually in her bathroom, Shala somehow will only write and sing about love and the blues. So, Shala will only write and sing about one thing: sinking.

Whether it be into the hands or essence of someone, usually a fake someone, or the idea of a someone. Or sinking into herself-her hole.

Shala feels empty and love songs are simultaneously the cracks in the walls and what she needs to help fill them.

I will often start my day with new discoveries on my skin. On Saturday, one appeared on my right breast and it burned a little when I stepped in the shower. It was a skinny long scratch.

There was no trace of blood but it was a pinkish red all over. This week, the grapes I ate were very large, so I had to take two bites into each.

On Monday, after eating one in particular, a piece of skin on the grape poked out and made a triangle. I pulled on it with my teeth and remembered when I used to skin grapes before eating them.

I kept track of my scrapes and scratches for the past few weeks. I encountered one at 4:15 p.m. on Friday, after accidentally scratching the scab off. It started to bleed, and I wiped the blood off with three different fingers, one after the other.

On each finger, the blood made a skinny vertical stripe. Another scrape appeared on my left hand on a different day. It's very tiny, just a small dot. I found it once it had already started bleeding.

The same Saturday morning as the skinny long scratch, I looked at my hand and saw that a piece of skin had been scraped off on the third knuckle of my third finger, and a streak of blood had run down my hand towards my wrist. The blood was dry and the scrape didn't hurt at all.

I didn't have a napkin or water, so I just rubbed at the dry blood, letting the flakes fall to the ground. I've noticed that the scrapes that stay around and become scars are usually the ones that I already find bleeding.

I have a list of questions for my fingernails and what they're up to in the night:

*Is it simply that I should just cut my nails shorter? Are my dreams making me too scared or too excited? Is it both?*

*Nails, is it that you, too, are searching/digging for something, or is it that you're revealing some sort of truth? Is it that my blood has something to say?*

*Is it about destruction or a test for durability? (I'm talking about my skin.) Maybe these two things aren't mutually exclusive?*

If I could offer myself answers that are nowhere near being absolute, thus just become new questions:

*My nails haven't been that long lately because I've gotten into the habit of biting them. But maybe I leave them too rough around the edges? I'm both. Scared and excited-because I'm anxious?*

*That's why I leave my nails rough around the edges? My nails couldn't possibly have a mind of their own so it's me doing the digging and searching. But maybe my mind is catching up with my body? My body initiated the digging and searching?*

*I'm trying to test my own strength through  
slight and quiet  
Destruction? Because I was, and probably still  
am, convinced I'm weak? Could be a stretch.*

Yesterday morning I found three new scratches on the back of my right thigh. It was surrounded by an amorphous shape of red. It stings a little, but it probably won't leave a scar because I didn't find it bleeding.

My mother and I talk to each other every day. Sometimes even a few times a day. We will often have moments where one will call the other exactly when the other was thinking of calling. We always laugh at this when it happens.

My mother and I have come to an agreement that there's something about the room of womanhood that builds our bond. I think in our room specifically, there's a blueness going around that almost feels hueless.

My mother confessed to me that the same heaviness that I find myself getting tangled up in is no stranger to her either.

She told me that things got so bad that she was once hospitalized. She also told me that if it wasn't for the power and grace of God, she wouldn't have survived it.

I keep coming back to seeing womanhood as a room. What I also see, and somehow hear too, is this idea of the daughter being an echo of her mother. I say echo and not copy because echoes leave room for transformation and continuum but never leave their source. Without the source, the echo couldn't exist.

Perhaps this skin is the four walls of this room. This brown skin. And perhaps these scratches and scrapes are telling me that I shouldn't forget about my ability to survive.

Black womanhood is waking up to find out that your skin is a lot like love songs in the way that it speaks of dedication and pain. I wonder if deep and honest love is also about survival. Because my skin and this room are telling me that it is.