

**An Excerpt from Pushcart-Prize-Nominated Essay by Kaja Weeks**  
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**A Girl's Singing Nirvana, My Mother's Voice**

Play and grief are not usually paired in life, but for me there came a period of months when they unfolded in odd parallels. In Virginia, clinicians ushered Nekesa\* into the hospital's pediatric occupational therapy gym, the kind with ladders, ropes, swings, and climbing walls. Nekesa had been diagnosed with autism and been impervious to most treatments. At age ten, she lived without spoken language or visible social connections to others. I was called in to help, being a music specialist working with children whose neurodevelopmental challenges block fundamental communicative intent and, indeed, I hoped to find an inroad through a striking behavior of hers – continual singing. It was by no means an ordinary sounding singing – most people, family and clinicians alike, who heard Nekesa were puzzled, and even disturbed, by her sounds. Having been a singer all my life, I didn't react with the disconcerted stance of most; I listened with the awe of a musical soul mate to her hauntingly high, unusual melodies. In the cavernous room in which I first met her, she spun silken musical threads, tossed them high, caught the shimmering reverberations and began again. She paid no attention to us.

Nekesa was beautiful, with creamy, dark skin, and mercurial, light brown eyes that reflected the sparkle of light when she sang. Her long limbs moved so lithely the upper reaches of the gym was all but transformed into a leafy canopy where she leapt, whirled,