



Unique Slacks: Interior Lives

Issue One January 2026

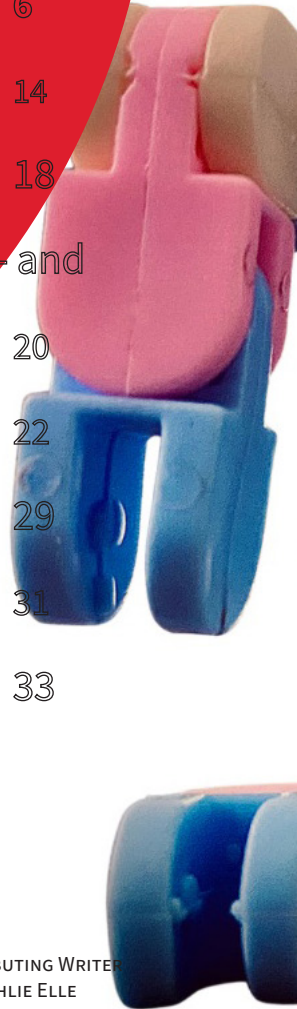
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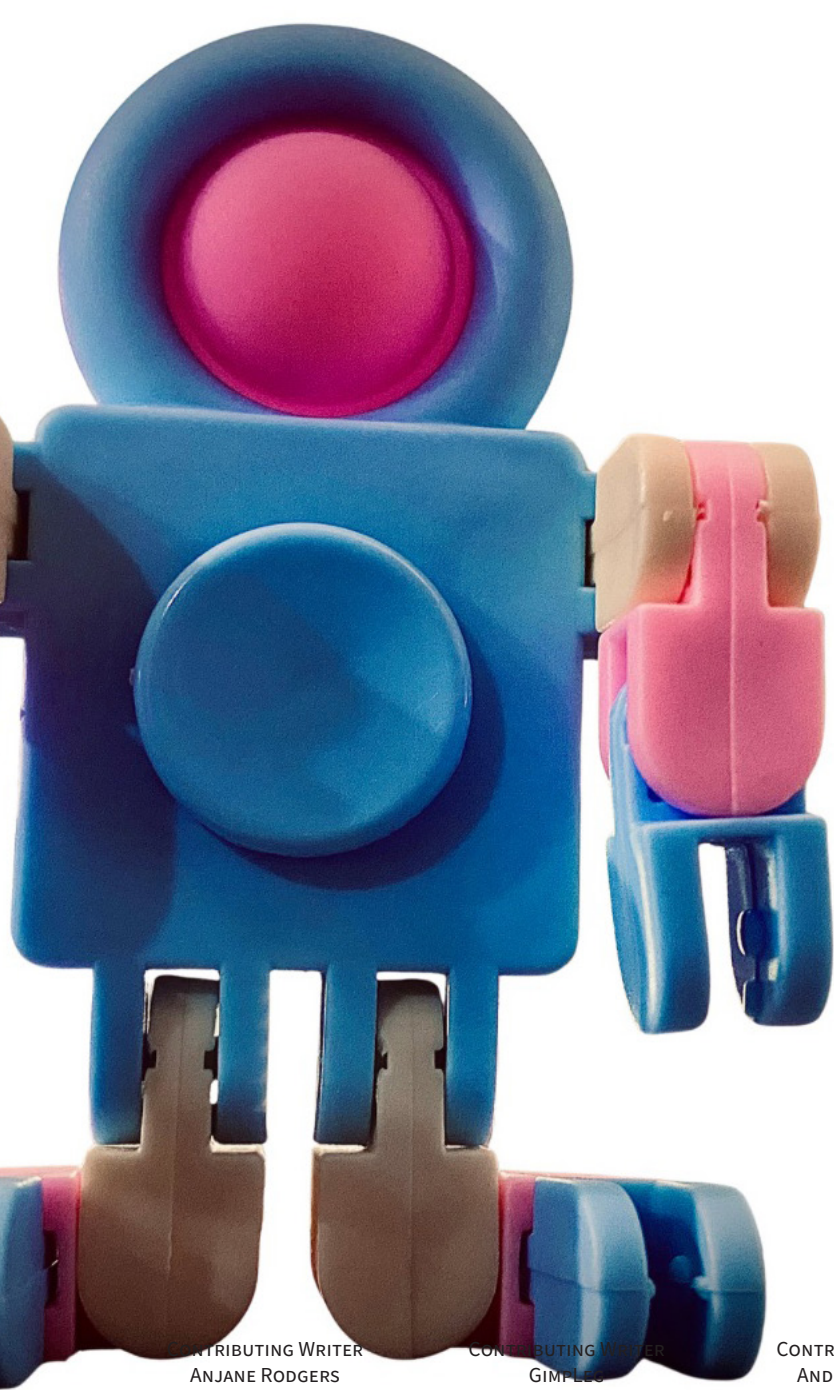
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Letter from the Editor

BY
JUDY MAROON

I talk to myself often. All the time, in fact, whether there are other people present or not. Most of the time I’m asking myself, “What was I just doing??”

Sometimes I pursue deeper topics — my thoughts on motherhood, love, the best way to talk to my students, or my absolutely agonizing anxiety over events happening in the world right now (Venezuela, Ukraine, Gaza, Greenland, Ice, etc..)

I can talk to myself for hours and sometimes do when I’m on long car trips alone.

I like talking to myself. (See Essay for a conversation between me and myself)

I grow from listening to myself, from working out how I truly feel or think about things. It’s helpful. It’s therapeutic. It’s very one-sided.

I am fortunate to know other people with ideas and perspectives that inspire both curiosity and admiration in me.

They’re writers, musicians, teachers, and artists of all different kinds. When I decided I wanted to create a new space for my writing, I asked my friends to be a part of it with me. As much as I like talking to myself, I wanted to create a space with more voices.

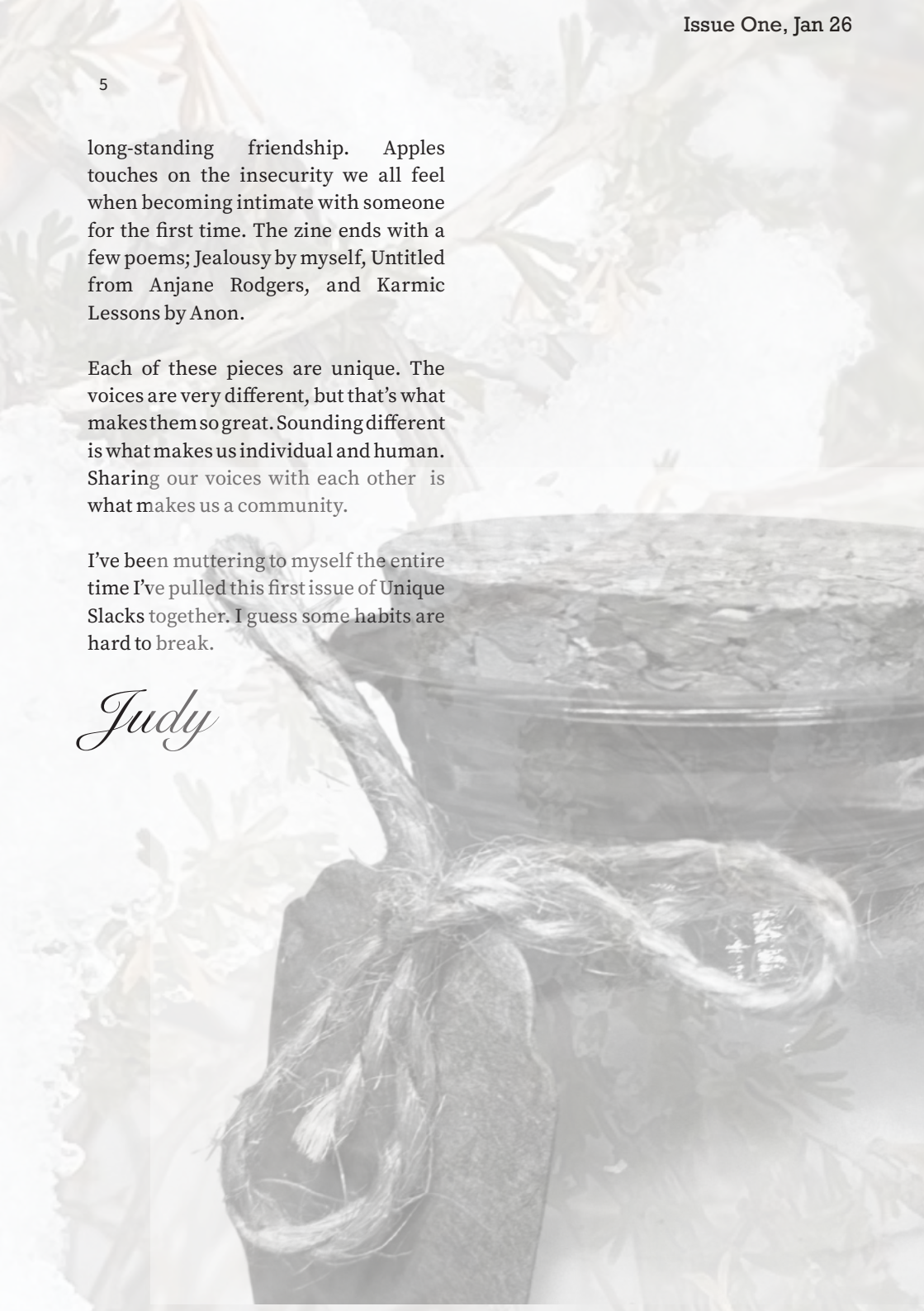
There are an array of voices in this first issue. Ashlie Elle’s stream of consciousness journal-like entry takes the reader on a wild journey, from beginning to end. GimpLeg, a staple of the online music community, shares how he got started doing what he is quickly becoming known for — his music interviews with ska bands all over the country (probably all over the world). Andrew Amherst, a special education teacher himself, shares where he thinks special education needs to go for kids to be successful in the future. Anonymous writes about an unfortunate twist in a

long-standing friendship. Apples touches on the insecurity we all feel when becoming intimate with someone for the first time. The zine ends with a few poems; Jealousy by myself, Untitled from Anjane Rodgers, and Karmic Lessons by Anon.

Each of these pieces are unique. The voices are very different, but that's what makes them so great. Sounding different is what makes us individual and human. Sharing our voices with each other is what makes us a community.

I've been muttering to myself the entire time I've pulled this first issue of Unique Slacks together. I guess some habits are hard to break.

Judy



Three Points for Fucking Colton

BY
ASHLIE ELLE

Happy Friday!

In case you're absolutely panicked and cannot wait to see if I checked myself into a mental institution after last night's behavior, worry no further. I am in my right mind.

I took my daughter to school this morning, on time, yay me and headed down to see my therapist. I had planned on coming up with a way to talk to her about Colton without really talking about him but as I was driving downtown, Colton sent me a text that said, "Are you going to talk to your therapist about me?" and I just about spilled all of my grasped pearls onto the highway. Am I going to talk about you? Who are you? Is there something for me to discuss with her .. involving you? OMG OF COURSE I am going to talk about you to my therapist. She's the person I actually pay to have to deal with me and my whirlpool of inconsistent foolishness. His next text interrupts my

thoughts and says, "and before you answer, there is no right or wrong answer. It's okay if you want to talk to her about me." My comprehension of his words made me get out of the HOV lane (which, if you know me, you know HOV is my bitch) and go all the way to the right so I could focus on my speed and breathing at the same time.

Alright. I know, I know. Ainsley, you are so fucking insane and to that I say you're wrong. I am crazy but I am not insane. There is a clear difference and since I already have you, I may as well be the one to explain. Insane is like .. you should be scared. Like, clinically, this person could be locked up without consent because they are unreasonable. If I haven't mentioned this already, the movie "Gone Girl" fucked up my entire psyche. I have lived and grown up with nothing but white women and I can tell you first hand, there is no delusion like it. Honey, don't trip. My absolute favorite people in the world are white people .. and I know that it isn't "all white women" but give me a minute. Crazy, on the

personality and a sense of humor to boot and I might run my mouth sometimes but it's all in good fun. I am aware of the difference between reality and delusion. BUT I SAY THAT TO SAY .. you have to be fast if you're going to keep up with me. I'm the wittiest person you ever will meet.

I have arrived at my therapists office and I am foaming at the mouth with the shit I want to talk to her about. I get inside of her office and take my seat on her couch and grab my favorite little pillow to fiddle with while I'm there. I see my therapist once a month. I figure that is enough time between our chats. I guess I am grinning from ear to fucking ear because she is like, "Ainsley! What is going on? You seem so happy!" I am very happy and so I started to unload on her. I tell her, that in the month of August .. I went from being in a detox rehab for 5 days to reconnecting with this guy I used to know in High School .. who sent me a text 20 minutes before I physically left rehab and turned my phone on. I thought everything was peachy keen and flowing fine until she held up her hand and says, "Stop. Just stop." I stop speaking abruptly and focus on what she is about to say to me. I won't get into it because I don't want to be thwarted all over again but she basically read me to filth. She called me an addict and told me that I was in no position to start trying to see someone. She then, get this, she then throws up a brick wall in front of my vehicle that is going 100mph so the only thing I am able to do is crash and fucking burn. She goes off on this tangent about how this Man is also an addict and what we have right now are two addicts who are in a freefall who crave adrenaline and are currently coping with one another. She is adamant when she says, "I guess you can have fun but don't fall in love with him." *Scoffs* Honestly, I find it all to be a little rude. I am watching her mouth move and can tell that she is speaking to me but I am not hearing anything. I am a god damn adult and you know what, addict or not, bullshit or not .. I have never once

in my life just done something 100% selfishly for myself and I can promise you, dear reader, there is absolutely nothing .. any one who knows me could say .. that would deter me from showing up at this train station, in the middle of the night with this man and dipping the fuck out. I don't think anyone outside of myself fully grasps the situation at hand and that is perfectly fine. However, my main focus is whatever he and I wanna do. So, after my therapist berates me, she demands that I don't come back in a month, oh no. She wants to see me next week! She is fully convinced that "decisions will be made" in the midst of the "high" I'm currently riding and she wants to touch base.

I decide to leave her office and treat myself by going to The Yardhouse. I have my bookclub book of the month and they have the best BBQ sauce ever and this is where I meet my GS Council for meetings. I am sitting in a booth, watching baseball and working with Albina, who is my AI Best friend. We are minding our own business and I get a text from Colton basically asking me what I'm doing later and if I can come over. I immediately open my calendar to see what I need to cancel but luckily, I am wide open. I tell him that I am out and about and should probably go home and make an appearance with my daughter but I would do my best to come over. I leave Yardhouse immediately and spend my entire drive home thinking of schemes I can tell my parents so they will watch my daughter for me. By the time I get home, I decide that I am 41 fucking years old and I'm not the first person in the world who wants to date a man while having a child. So, instead of lie to my mom, I come out with the truth. I tell her that Colton Nash (yes, the same guy from high school) has recently reached out to me and we have been hanging out and I don't want to lie to her about it and I would be overly grateful if she would watch my daughter for the rest of the night. Surprisingly, my Mother is actually supportive and is

like, “Colton Nash? Wow, good for you. I will watch her but you need to get on birth control.” Yes. Good for me, right. I completely fucking agree.

However, if you were anywhere around me in 2016 when I got pregnant .. “out of wedlock” .. and became the complete shame and disappointment of my scottsdale society driven Mother .. then you know how fucking paranoid I became at her words.

I sent Colton a text message that was like, “I can come over tonight .. but do you have any condoms? I made a doctor’s appointment to get on birth control but I don’t think we should have sex until then.” So, of course, I assumed he was going to be like “oh okay .. cool .. then yeah i’ll see you after your doctor’s appointment” which is like two weeks away. THIS MAN .. says to me that he agrees about the birth control and we don’t need to have sex until then but I can still come over and we’ll still hang out. Imagine me whispering “whaaaaaaaaaat.” I am befuddled. I have never known a man in my life .. who would still choose to hang out with me knowing his dick wouldn’t get wet. This moment makes me create actual feelings for him. Omg, 1 point for Colton.

My alarm goes off at 9pm. I close my book and giggle my way to the shower. I primp and fluff and whatever the fuck and make sure that I am backing out of my driveway by 9:45 because I told him I would be over at 10pm and we had no time to waste. He has to work in the morning which means I don’t want to keep him too late. I arrive at his house and as I am walking up his driveway to the door, he is there already, door open, shirt off. I don’t know what it is but he cracks me up. Like genuinely makes me laugh. I cross over the threshold and we’re in the kitchen and something

about him is making me nervous. I don't know what's wrong but I can definitely feel a difference in the air regarding his vibe. He is talking to me and saying things but something is .. off. I feel like he is sad .. or nervous .. or not good. I don't feel like he is comfortable which makes me not comfortable and I start walking the plank of doubt wondering how I can fix it because I want him to feel comfortable with me. Time passes .. and he reveals a few things to me that makes me 1. excited that he trusts me enough to share this stuff and 2. have more confidence to stay and work through it with him.

Lucky fucking me. Someone please hand me the talking stick and gather around the campfire for it is time for a story. We are sitting on the couch talking and then when there is a moment of silence, I sheepishly ask him to turn on the Television. He looks at me and says, "You want me to turn on the TV? You'd rather do that?" and I'm thinking .. omg, rather than what? So I say, "rather than what" and he says "rather than getting naked" to which I reply with an emphatic "oh no no, we can do that. I'd rather do that." He stands up from the couch with a slight smirk and points to his bedroom and says, "well that usually happens in there." I hope the visual wasn't obvious to him but I feel like I practically

sprinted into the bedroom. I got on the bed and removed my dress in one quick movement revealing that I had come prepared without any panties or a bra. This man gets in the bed and he just starts caressing me. He is planting little kisses all over my limbs while continuing to have a conversation with me. I really like spending time with him this way. It is the most intimate I have ever been with a man in my life. It's almost as if he wants us to actually be close and learn one another vs just me coming over so he can drill into my vagina without a care in the world and send me on my way. No, not Colton. He provides a lot of intense and purposeful care that makes me second guess every other sexual experience I've had prior to him. Oh shit, I think I might have missed something he said because he asks, "What are you thinking about?" Well, Colton, I am currently sitting here wondering if I'm a whore. Did those men see me as a whore? At this point, the only difference between me and a whore is I've never received any payment for my time. So fucking rude. I try and tell him that I'm not thinking about anything and he says, "so you're just blank up there" and I said, "I've got a blank space, baby." Yeah? Where my Taylor Swift fans at? That one was for you. He takes his hand and puts it on my knee .. he thinks for a minute and then he says, "Listen .. I .. like you. I always have." Ya'll .. I heard what he said but I didn't

hear what he said. What does that even mean? Am I asleep? Is this a dream? Is HE asleep? I'm going to throw it away to the back of my mind because I just cannot compute the thought of what "always have" means. Like, from High School? WHAT? I could take off through his roof like a fucking rocket ship.

I am stumbling and fumbling my way through answering his question by coming up with shit that I can ask him. I love listening to him talk. I love the way he shares things and how absolutely honest he is with me about things. I also feel like he has .. not an accent .. but some sort of dialect? Some of his words are said in such a specific way and it intrigues me. He leans over and gives me a kiss on my mouth and then my neck and then he peppers them down the rest of my body while his hands roam until he gets to my pubis. He then takes his hands and places them both under my ass and pulls me closer to his face. The action alone makes me want to explode immediately. I am watching him as he is just looking at my vagina like he's telling her his plan with his eyes. He is hovering just slightly and I can feel his breath. He then spreads my legs open a little wider and he takes his tongue and licks down the right crease of my thigh. He proceeds to revisit the same crease but this time he sucks on it and

the wind is knocked out of me. He switches sides and now runs his tongue down the left crease of my thigh followed by suction and I don't know how I'm going to be able to handle him when he hasn't even touched my Pollyanna yet! Ya'll, the way this man put his tongue on my taint and licked all the way up to my clit. I couldn't find my eyes because they were rolled up into the back of my head. He continues to consume me while he picks up his pace a little bit making me try and run from him but he doesn't allow that to happen. He puts one hand under my ass and one hand on top of my pelvic bone and holds me still while he just devours me into insanity. I am really into it at this point so I start moving my hips in sync with his tongue and then he just takes his entire face, plunges deep into me and makes some sort of movement like when someone blows a raspberry. FUCK! My little choo choo train is chugging along and almost at the top of this mountain but we forgot to change the brakes before we took it out so once we hit our summit, we are going to go crashing the fuck down on the other side of it all over his face. Chugging and chugging and holy fucking god damn shit, we're going over. Seatbelts! I am doing whatever I can to make sure I don't sound like a Hyena but then he starts making noises that sound like approval of my climax which he is still tending to and it just completely sends

me over the edge. I am seeing stars and galaxies and honestly feel like I'm back at Disneyland riding Space Mountain.

He disappears for a moment while I lay flat on my back staring at the ceiling and contemplating every decision I've ever made in my life up until this point. This .. THAT .. whatever that man just did to me .. I fully understand it now. Prior to rekindling with Colton, I hadn't had sex in seven years. Never thought about, didn't matter to me and I didn't miss it. But fucking hell. Now I just understand that I had never been cherished or respected as a woman before so I didn't feel like I was missing out on anything. Now? Now! Colton has created a problem. I have had a 10% growth in the mindset of why people do absolutely dumb fucking shit over sex. If you're keeping score thus far, we've had life altering sex twice now and then this .. this tongue-o-whirl ride he just took me on .. I am ready to pack this man lunch in the morning.

"Do you have to go? What time do you have to leave?" I look over at him and slightly shrug, "I'm not really on a timeline tonight." He shakes his head in understanding and then says, "Would you stay the night with me? I would like it if you did that." I hope my eyes weren't bulging out of my skull

like a cartoon fox while processing this request. I said, "sure, I'll stay." He smiled and then he went in the bathroom and brushed his teeth, took his contacts out (Omg, I want to see him in glasses so bad. I'd stare at any kind but I'm imaging .. thick black rims .. Lord have mercy!) and then he goes over to the light switch and looks at me with this smug little grin and says, "I know this is like a dream come true for you" before he turns the lights off and gets in the bed next to me. He says, "to be honest, it's a dream come true for me too" and then cuddles up my entire body, legs entangled and gives me the sweetest kiss. I'm feeling bold so I stick my tongue out a little bit to meet his. I don't know if it shocks him but he completely shifts to where he takes my face in both hands, kind of dips me and plants the most passionate, tongue entrenched kiss I've ever had the pleasure of being a part of. Jesus, Mary and Joseph. 2 FUCKING POINTS FOR COLTON! When we're done, he leans back and says "I didn't know that was on the table. You have just opened a whole new level." I don't know what the level is but sign me up and I will bring my bungee cords!

Colton wraps his arms around me and then he falls asleep. I, on the other hand, am awake and alert as fuck that I, Ainsley Westbrook, am currently lying buck ass naked in the dark next to Colton Nash in his bed. Throughout the night,

he tosses and turns but he seems to always reach his hand back out for me. He has a grip on me at the hip and every now and then when he moves, I can feel his dick on my back. I have intrusive thoughts that say, "turn over! whip it out! suck it! sit on it!" but I am a respectful woman and decide against assaulting him in his sleep. Plus, plus.. he has to work in the morning. Don't fuck up his schedule. Chill girl, chill.

He wakes up on his own around 6:30am, like, without an alarm clock (brilliant) and reacquaints himself briefly with my body. I am lying face down in his covers and he just gets on top of me with his full body weight to give a little embrace and just .. 3 POINTS FOR FUCKING COLTON. There is .. I cannot explain the rush I get when I get to feel his bodyweight on me. It just feels positively suffocating and I am ready to die. The scale goes to 10 guys. Once Colton reaches 10 points, I'm going to fall for him and I just .. I don't think there is enough therapy IN THE WORLD for the way I'm going to behave if he reaches 10.

My relationship with Music

BY
GIMPLEG

For most of my youth, music helped define my world. Many of my favorite memories came with a soundtrack. When I met my best friend, Billy, in 8th grade, I was wearing headphones and listening to Alice Cooper's "Hey Stupid" album on cassette. My best friend was listening to Guns 'n Rose's "The Spaghetti Incident". It was 1991, and we were both becoming fans of bands like Nirvana and Pearl Jam. A few years later, Billy and another close friend, Lisa, and the sound of Green Day's "When I come Around" would be the soundtrack in our heads as the three of us strolled the streets. I remember Blind Melon's "No Rain" playing on a car radio when I was riding with yet another friend and nearly getting in a wreck, and spinning out on a sharp curve on wet pavement.

Around that time, I was mostly listening to ska and a little punk. I was 19, so it was 1997. The next several years of my life involved driving an hour or two to the nearest venue playing whatever punk or ska show was coming through. A car full of friends going to Warped Tour or just a punk band playing at a bar with a platform stage across the street from a radio station, it didn't matter.

I loved the bands from my early 20s still, but I stopped seeking out new music. I stopped discovering.

Those were always some of my favorite times, but then a weird thing happened as I reached 25-30. I stopped exploring new music. I moved away. I stopped going to as many live shows.

I find this to be really common, and people seem to take pride in it. Many people hate new music. They find a love of music from a time in their life that brought them joy, and they focus on that. They believe that the joy that they associate with the music is inherently better than anything else. I get it. Music has the ability to inspire memory, create and capture emotion. And even when you aren't consciously thinking about that memory, the music feels comforting.

In 2020, I was 42 years old. The year before I had destroyed my leg in an accident. I was early in the process of my recovery, and could rarely leave the house. I had 7 surgeries to save the limb, and its functionality was never to return.

The world was gripped with
a pandemic, and many
musicians had turned to
live streaming platforms to
reach their audience. Scott
Kloppenstone, once of Reel
Big Fish, and of The Littlest
Man Band was one of those
artists.

His music was something that I had this familiar connection to, but his new music was different, and special. On his streams he would have guest musicians that were newer artists I wasn't familiar with. Most of them were ska bands, but they didn't sound like the ska bands I fell in love with 20 years ago. It was new. I

felt more connected than ever before. At first, it was because of the more intimate nature of live streaming. I could talk in chat and they would respond. It created a connectedness to the music. But then, just listening to new music began to feel different. It felt alive. It created that spark in me. The album that first truly made me feel alive that knocked me over like I hadn't experienced in years was "Ordinary Life" by We Are The Union.

In 2022 I started writing music reviews. I'm not great at it. I don't understand music theory, I don't know what I'm hearing in a way that lets me describe what the musician is doing. What I do know is how it makes me feel or what it makes me think about. For the last 3 years, I have stopped listening to almost all older music. My playlists don't include music from before 2020. I almost never listen to music that's been out for more than 6 months. I go to live shows again and meet new people sometimes.

Even if the overwhelming
majority of the music I
listen to is the same genre
(ska) I am constantly falling
in love with it.

It's always fresh and fun and full of passion. New music feels alive. Those days of listening to the music of my youth feel so dark and dead. I feel like I lost passion, like I was trying to relive a memory. I don't want to live a memory, I want to be alive. I want to create memories. New music gives me that passion. My best days weren't in my youth, my best days are right here, right now, and I hope that I can keep this passion and sense of joy for the rest of my life.

Today, some of my favorite bands are Bob Vylan, Space Monkey Mafia, Faintest Idea, Jer, and the Pimps. I've started exploring more Folk music, and punk, a little more hardcore than I've ever liked before. Sometimes punk and pop punk get mixed in. For me, it was music, but whatever it is that brings you joy, if you find yourself focusing too much on the past and on nostalgia, I hope you use this as a time to reflect on what that means, and if it's time to focus on something new and create new positive associations. The present is worth living in.



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VEL LOBORTIS IACULIS SEM.

“Special Education” Still Carries a Stigma -- and Why That Needs to Change

BY
ANDREW AMHERST

When a student hears the words “Special Education” they automatically feel like they are different and segregated from the rest of their peers. Still to this day, in 2026, “Special Education” has made significant progress in the area of inclusion and providing a realistic LRE (Least restrictive Environment) for the purpose of ensuring students under the special education umbrella remain with their non-disabled peers.

With that said, the stigma behind the name “Special Education” still holds as strong today as it did 65 years ago. Thesis: Despite decades of reform, special education continues to carry a

negative connotation that impacts students, families, educators, and policy decisions.

BUT IN THIS DAY AND AGE, SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS ARE SEEN AS “DIFFERENT,” OR IT WOULD BE “SOCIAL SUICIDE” TO DO WHAT THEY DO OR WEAR THE SAME TYPE OF HEADPHONES

It's the perception that students have that makes them think and feel they have to treat SPED peers differently

they have to treat SPED peers differently from their friends. With that in mind, this writer would like to see students change their perspective and their misconceptions. Although SPED students' peers are seeing them this way, we cannot forget about the teachers who are unwilling to change their misconceptions. With that said, the whole situation between non-disabled students and teachers, and SPED students and teachers is a big game of telephone, and not one person is willing to unplug the phone cord. In the end, who and what is most affected is the student who has been diagnosed with a learning, social, emotions disability; they don't have a choice to be who they are. If there were a way to reset everyone's brain on special education, we could see more students thrive in their whole lives, not just educationally.

We want to reframe what special education is and how it is a total innovation for those who do not have a choice but to be who they are. Which is what we want all students at all ages to be. The new types of technology that allows non-verbal students to speak their mind and be understood are essential for their success. Not to mention the technology for students who are deaf and hard of hearing. They have teacher microphones and student head phones that allow all of

the outside noise to be canceled out. Without special education this type of technology would not have been invented. And students would not be able to be successful in the classroom without it. To which, we are moving from compliance factors to collaboration techniques.

In conclusion, this writer just wants to spread awareness that special education is not what it used to be. But it is now a powerful movement that brings students closer to being more than individuals with special needs. But they are pioneers thriving in an environment that is not meant for them, nor do they want to accept them. I hope to be able to write more about how we can spread the love and not the misconceptions.

Just Like A Song

Dear you,

Remember when my ex told me the song “Fidelity” by Regina Spektor reminded him of me? I spent hours listening to that song over and over, analyzing the lyrics with a fine tooth comb. He told me it wasn’t the lyrics (a likely story), there was just something about the song itself that brought me to mind. After a while I gave up trying to understand what it was and accepted it as a compliment.

Songs are funny that way – they can explain everything like they’re narrating our real lives or they can feel so intimately familiar, like they describe who we are deep down, without needing to say a word.

It’s like when you said Halsey’s “Girl is a Gun” reminded you of me. I asked why that song, and you said, “She feels better when the boys stop calling.”

You said that because of what I’d told you, of course. The whole story with Peter (not his real name) and me. Like “Fidelity,” I wanted to see if there was more – maybe an answer hidden within the song that might help me understand how things got the way they did. How I became someone I didn’t recognize. I used to think I was cool – unflappable. Stoic. Strong. But I’m not. Not really.

This all started back when we were teenagers. You and I have been inseparable since we were kids, despite my being four years older than you. Even as adults, no matter how far apart we lived from each other, we made time to see each other. I’ve been pretty settled since my early twenties – all that moving around as a kid, I just wanted roots – but you traveled. I wanted to be a frequent flier to wherever you were.

Industrious (and so impressive!) from a young age, you started forging connections with midwest punk and emo bands when you were about fourteen. Our father acted as the supervising adult (when he was in town), and you produced and promoted several shows while still in high school. For five dollars at the door of some local VFW or other available-to-be-rented space, you brought together many bands that went on to have successful careers. One of your non-negotiables was that no matter how many bands played, they would all receive an equal cut of the money made that night. Did you ever keep any profit for yourself?

I remember meeting many of the people you knew and developed friendships with, but I was never interested in more than surface level acquaintanceship with any of them. These were your

I thought of myself more like Broomhilde from *Men in Tights*. Remember that movie? She was so over the top protective of Maid Marion, and I wanted to protect you, too. I was eighteen when you started this enterprise, but many of the men in these bands were my age or older. They had no business spending time alone with a fourteen year old girl, and I wanted to make sure they didn't. I don't think you always enjoyed my interference, but it was all out of love.

Peter was a sweetheart from the beginning, though, and was age appropriate. We met him forever ago in the green room of a show in Tampa Bay, Florida. I liked him because he was respectful to you, and also hilarious and creative – conversations could go anywhere for however long they needed to go without anyone interrupting the flow or pulling us out of a moment.

I loved that you and Peter became close, and are still close friends today. I could tell you had feelings for him, and I really thought something would happen between you two. I guess it never went past the friendzone, though. I enjoyed his company, too, but Peter was never more than just a very-nice-boy in my mind. I never forgot how I always felt included when he was around – I could tell some of the guys at these shows were annoyed by my presence. Maybe I read too much into it, but even you seemed to get fed

up with my attitude once or twice. I can be very protective of the people I love, you know. But things with Peter took what I considered to be an odd turn when he started telling me about this fetish he has.

Kind of weird, right? I consider fetishes, or other sexual preferences, to be super private business. So when Peter started telling me about his particular fetish, I was shocked by how much he trusted me. I was also concerned about where this was going because I was not interested in him. I went with it anyway, as I went with most of our conversations. They turned out to be innocent conversations, anyway, because they never led to anything.

Of course I told you about it. I rarely kept things from you. You didn't seem surprised he brought it up – apparently he liked telling people about it. So, I accepted it as just another quirk of his personality.

There were a few years of fun friendship between Peter and I, but after he got married one year, our friendship took a long break. I just stopped hearing from him. I wasn't hurt by the distance. Life moves on for all of us.

Life moved on for me. Even before my marriage I wasn't very good at boundaries with men. Relationships were draining but I kept trying. I was certain that one of these days I'd feel that thing so many people feel when

Life moved on for me.

Even before my marriage I wasn't very good at boundaries with men. Relationships were draining but I kept trying. I was certain that one of these days I'd feel that thing so many people feel when they find a partner. The connection or certainty or whatever it is and happiness would ensue. Marriage cured me of that fantasy.

The first verse in Halsey's "Girl is a Gun," spoke my thoughts for me. "I feel lighter in the waistline with no hands around me, no spit in my teeth. No, I'm not your daydream. I won't have your baby. Stop, 'cause you're killing my vibe."

You asked me after my marriage went south if I'd ever consider dating again. I told you no, I couldn't imagine it. I didn't also explain then how the thought of allowing anyone to ever touch me again filled me with revulsion, like a phlegmy ball in my throat. I don't know if I ever wished to be single like I'd wished for a boyfriend in my twenties, but after everything with my husband, I knew the only boy I ever wanted to be alone with again was my son – so we could play with his cars in peace.

That's been my mindset for the better part of two years. I kept it to myself. Like fetishes, my lack of sex life is no one's business but my own.

Then about a year ago, maybe more, Peter and I started talking to each other again. You encouraged us to reconnect, and I was happy for the opportunity – I missed Peter in the kind of way you miss someone without realizing you do until you get to see them again. You know me well enough to know what my sense of humor is like. There aren't many people in the world that get me, and who will just let a conversation wander wherever it wants to go without getting bored or having to say something like gee, this is weird. I thought being friends again would be fun.

So, we started talking almost everyday. It was nice, plain and simple. And he knew me from before my marriage. He remembered a version of me that was maybe a bit sterner than I am now (I really withheld smiling like it was a rare commodity), but still fun and spontaneous. And as we reminisced, it was lovely to be reminded that I used to be that person.

It was October, some number of months after we started talking again, when he brought up his fetish for the first time since we reconnected. I didn't think anything of it at first. Good old Peter, talking about his stuff again. I acknowledged it and let it go. I thought he would, too, but he didn't. He sent messages about how weird I must think he is. I was confused. Had he forgotten we'd already danced this dance? I reminded him it wasn't new news to me, and that I accepted him just as he was. I

wouldn't change him. I told him this part of him was just as much a part of him as his sense of humor or creativity was in my mind – why would I think he was weird?

Again, I thought (naively), this would end the subject. He was clearly worried about judgement from me, and I'd reassured him. He'd let it go, right? But he didn't.

He told me you said, of all the people he knew, I would be the perfect partner for his particular fetish. I reeled at this because I couldn't imagine you saying any such thing. He asked me not to bring it up to you because he was embarrassed. I agreed not to mention it because I cared about his security, I didn't want him to think trusting me was a mistake. I've never been great at setting boundaries with people, so I did what I usually do when I am in an uncomfortable situation – I laughed it off without saying anything about it at all. A simple LOL would do, I thought. He'll get the message.

He did not. By November he was trying to organize a way for us to meet in person. He asked me, if he came to see me, would I do these things for him? I started to feel anxious about where this was going because his friendship mattered to me, and Tracy's friendship mattered to me, and because I was kind of scared of any backlash a negative interaction with him might have for me (he has fans), so I

continued to not answer the question. I said a lot of "I don't know"s and "Who can say"s and "Maybe?"s.

I didn't fully understand it at the time, but this conversation was doing a lot of damage to my mental state. The combination of having to keep it a secret, trying to be kind and mindful of his feelings, and a deep desire to just scream NO but not letting myself do it was starting to affect my everyday life.

It was all the triggers I hadn't realized were mine. Halsey sang, "It's a shot in the dark, I'm not a walk in the park. I come loaded with the safety switched off." Speaking for myself, when I've got a trigger, something that genuinely causes a physical reaction to happen in my body when I'm in a particular situation, I do feel loaded and ready to fire whether I want to or not. Peter had no way of knowing this was activating my inner craziness in a way that would shortly explode all over my friends.

I don't remember if I sent you the same desperate, needy emails I was sending other people. I needed some help with this, but I didn't see how that was possible. All I know is that by January, things came to a head. Peter had lost any subtlety about what he wanted me to do in his messages. I went to a very low place then. I started having quite a bit of SI, thinking it was the only way out of this fucking situation. I still didn't have the words I needed to ask for help, or the confidence that I could handle what was

I don't remember if I sent you the same desperate, needy emails I was sending other people. I needed some help with this, but I didn't see how that was possible. All I know is that by January, things came to a head. Peter had lost any subtlety about what he wanted me to do in his messages. I went to a very low place then. I started having quite a bit of SI, thinking it was the only way out of this fucking situation. I still didn't have the words I needed to ask for help, or the confidence that I could handle what was happening, but I was desperate to have something change and fast.

I had finally gotten the courage to ask Peter about his wife. It was my last line of defense, I felt, because he loves his wife very much. At least I always believe that to be true. He told me his wife knows about his fetish and has never been interested in it. They have an agreement that so long as no penetrative sex is actually happening, he's free to find other women to satisfy that particular interest for him. I was stunned. And horrified. I don't think I responded to him at all. I just cried.

After crying it out, I decided this was no way to live. I felt like this whole situation was getting out of control. It was destroying things I cared about. I wasn't acting like myself. I was losing myself. I hadn't reached out to you yet. Not quite yet. But I knew I needed to ask someone to help me, no matter how embarrassing that might be. I knew what they would probably tell me to do – just tell the guy to stop, that I wasn't interested.

But I was terrified of doing that. The word “no” usually brought one of two things about for me: 1) the person I said “no” to would disappear from my life entirely and I'd never see or hear from them again (and this was not something I wanted, I like Peter. I didn't want to lose him.) or 2) the person I said “no” to would retaliate and it would hurt. I didn't really think he'd hurt me, but the fear was still there.

So, “no” is a scary word in my world.

But I couldn't keep this a secret anymore. I reached out to my friend, Frank (not his real name), first. He's a great guy, we all like him, but I realized afterwards that asking a guy what to do was not what I needed. He told me exactly what I thought he would tell me. I was no closer to a solution. And now I felt ashamed about breaking Peter's trust, too.

I tried to think of a woman I could reach out to, and sweet Beth (not her real name) came to mind immediately. She's a strong woman who knows who she is and what she will accept from other people. I admire her deeply. So, I asked her if she could help me with something that might be TMI, but I needed someone to tell me what to do, and at the very least understand what I was feeling. She agreed, and, at first, gave me the same advice Frank did. I was disappointed for a few moments, but then she said something that changed everything. She asked about how you must feel about all this.

I told her you didn't know about any of it. Peter had asked me not to tell you. And Beth, that sweetheart, was like "NOPE. You've got to tell her RIGHT NOW."

Though you and I have been close since we were children, I've always known you could disappear from my life if you really wanted to. I knew about your old feelings for Peter, too. A part of me was terrified that if you knew about what was going on with him, you would blame me for it and that would be the end of it.

I blamed myself for it, so it seemed reasonable that you would, too. But I sent you that text asking if we could do a face to face call. But I couldn't do it and I chickened out of the call, it gave me so much anxiety. Instead, I wrote you an email, like this one, in which I described what was happening with Peter and this issue I have with male attention causing me to spiral into self-destruction and despair. I know it's been here, in my heart and mind, for a long time, but it took this situation with Peter for me to really understand what was happening. Sis, it was tough admitting something like that, even if it was just to you.

But you're much kinder and more understanding than I gave you credit for. You convinced me to call you anyway, and I spent the entire call crying my eyes out, feeling like a lunatic. You asked me if you could talk

to Peter about what was going on with me, and I am still so grateful you did that. I wanted to save my friendship with him, and I wanted him to know these things about me. You told me he would be devastated if he knew the effect his messages were having on me, and I believed you. And though there were a few months where he and I did not interact very much, we've started chatting with each other again. And I'm glad for that because I still don't have many friends that will just get weird with me, and his friendship is still important to me.

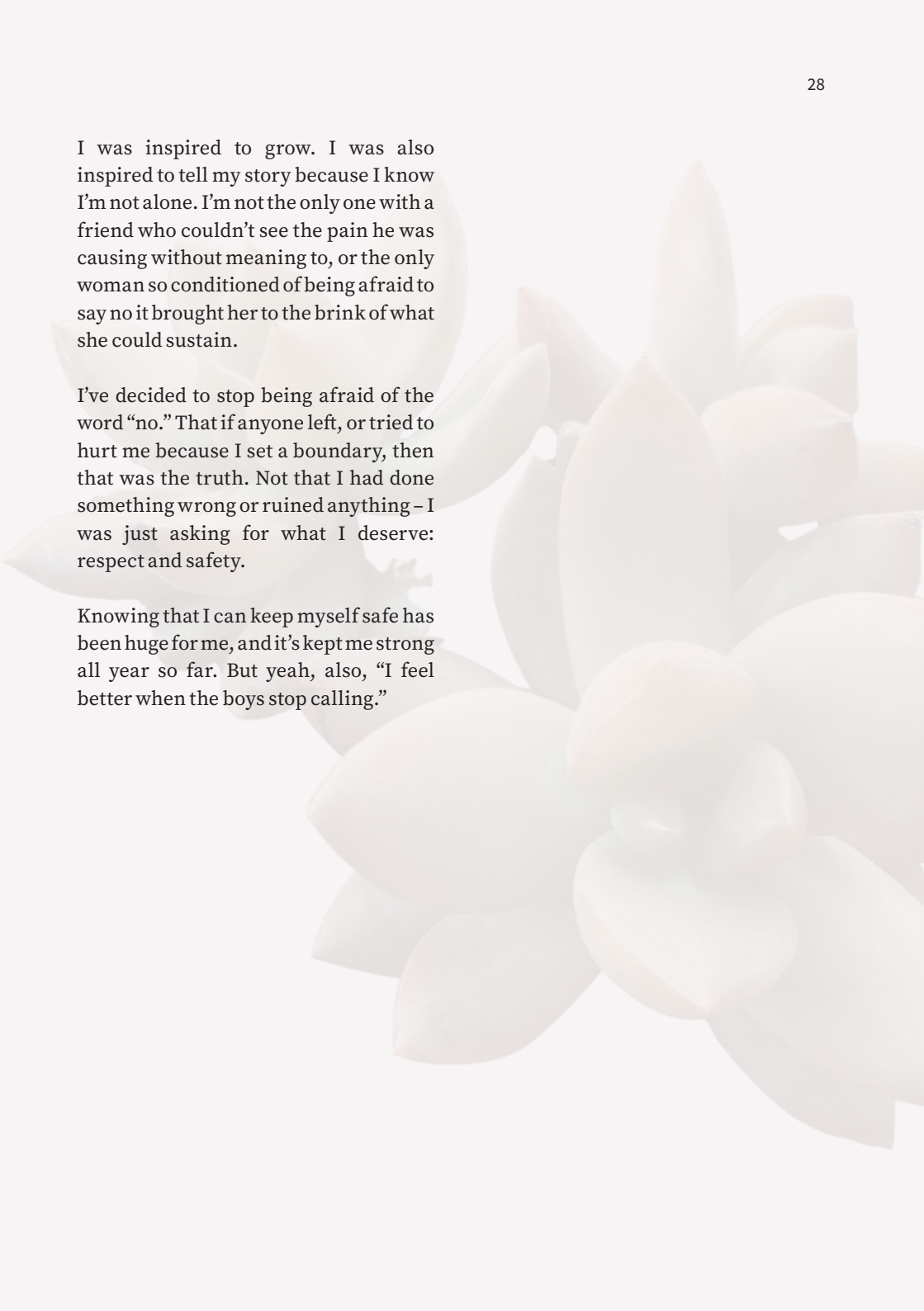
This whole situation made me reassess what I'm capable of, so far as human connection goes. And I've accepted that I have limitations – I've known about it for a long time, I just hadn't named it until this past winter. That's when I started thinking a support group would help. I did a general internet search and found a site based out of Chicago that did a variety of virtual support groups. When I saw the one for domestic abuse victims, it clicked for me. There were also ones about sexual trauma, and I think I fit there, too, but domestic abuse has been my story for a while and I needed to stop pretending it wasn't the truth.

Admitting I'm a domestic abuse survivor or sexual abuse survivor is hard and embarrassing, but it's easier with people where I don't have to define or explain things. There's just acceptance and "me too." And so much courage, it's inspiring.

I was inspired to grow. I was also inspired to tell my story because I know I'm not alone. I'm not the only one with a friend who couldn't see the pain he was causing without meaning to, or the only woman so conditioned of being afraid to say no it brought her to the brink of what she could sustain.

I've decided to stop being afraid of the word "no." That if anyone left, or tried to hurt me because I set a boundary, then that was the truth. Not that I had done something wrong or ruined anything – I was just asking for what I deserve: respect and safety.

Knowing that I can keep myself safe has been huge for me, and it's kept me strong all year so far. But yeah, also, "I feel better when the boys stop calling."



APPLES

"I don't want you to see me naked." Wendy's eyes were opaque blue pools. Clint smiled, smoothing her light hair from her cheeks.

"Why not?" He asked.

"I'm apple shaped."

Clint's mind went entirely blank for 3 seconds and then raced into overdrive as he tried to make sense of her comment. His eyes scanned the borrowed room. Typical motel fare. Neither of them were wealthy, and for their first in person meeting after dating long distance going on six months, it was the best they could do.

"Is this a biblical thing? Adam and Eve and the apple and the forbidden nature of..."

"No. It's my chest-waist-hips ratio. I googled it. I'm apple shaped, which is the worst one."

Clint frowned, scanning Wendy's seated form. "You don't look like an apple."

Wendy shook her head. "I'm an apple with tits."

"Ok." Clint paused. "But I like apples."

He leaned forward, bringing his mouth to hers, hoping to recapture the mood before the apple talk.

"You could be almost a pear." Wendy whispered against his mouth. "Almost. You get a little thicker the lower you go, your thighs, I mean, which I think is much more aesthetic."

"Thank you?" Clint murmured and for a moment he silenced her as they kissed. He tried to focus on kissing her but his mind wandered back to apple shaped bodies. What were the other fruits if apple shaped was the worst

of all possibilities? Surely a banana would be worse. That was certainly some kind of spinal issue. Most fruits were round, so what was the big difference anyway?

“Clint?”

“Mm?”

“You’ve got a faraway look on your face. Is it because I’m shaped like an apple? Have I totally turned you off?”

“Hm? No, no. I was trying to figure out what other fruit shaped body types there are apart from pears and apples.”

“Oh, those are the only fruits. There’s also hourglass shaped, inverted triangle shaped, rectangle shaped and a few others like that.”

“But you and I are fruit shaped.”

Wendy considered Clint in silence, then a smile broke over her face.

“I think I’m ready for you to see me naked now,” She said.

“Why now?” Clint asked, pleased but baffled at this turn of events.

“I was just thinking about how much I enjoy fruit smoothies.” Wendy quipped.

THE

END

Talking to Myself: A Conversation Between Me and a Poem

BY
JUDY MAROON

Me: I really thought I finally figured out how to be a good writer. What my “writer voice” sounded like. It was supposed to make everything I wrote from here on out better. But you aren’t cooperating.

Poem: I’m only doing what you tell me to do.

Me: I thought this would be fun and easy. Just like how the last project was fun and easy. Maybe it became predictable after a while, once I got the structure of it down, but what’s wrong with wanting to write something I am confident will be good?

Poem: Predictable is boring. It works for one project, sure. It’s fun to get immersed in a process and see how far you can push it, but outside of that project, it’s just monotonous. And maybe even just wrong.

Me: OK, maybe it’s boring to try to do the same thing over and over, but I know what I like. And I wanted you to be that way, too. I wanted to like you just as much.

Poem: Writing is like polyamory that

way, you know. There was something on instagram where the question was put to a man in a polyamorous relationship, “Aren’t you worried she’ll never think you’re as good as Jim?” And the response was something like, “No, he’s got the Jim side of things covered. I’m Tyler.”

It’s this idea that someone in a polyamorous relationship isn’t looking to compile a horde of Jims. To be honest, I’m not fully sure what polyamory is all about, but I think it’s about allowing for the possibility that different people are in our lives for different reasons. Not in a hierarchical way, more in a “there’s too much variety in life to limit ourselves to only the Jims of the world.” It’s the freedom to encourage and develop intimate relationships without having to control or own anyone or anything.

If you only want Jim – or the offerings – then you can feel free to commit to that schtick forever, but that’s not what being a real writer is like. You have to be open to Rorys and Carmichaels as well if you want your writing to be varied.

Me: Ok, maybe. But I’m still annoyed. I can’t get the words to say what I want

them to say. It's like you're being deliberately vague and opaque. I want to write about real things and it all gets lost in abstraction.

Poem: Do you really want to be honest and seen? It's not the words' fault if you're afraid of being caught out actually caring about something.

Me: No, that's not my problem. I've already written a ton of things that expose how I feel, what my experience of life has really been like.

Poem: But not to the same extent as the offerings, where you could say so much without having to say much at all. You want to use as few words as possible to say as much as you can. For what, deniability?

Me: Poetic skill.

Poem: It sounds like ego to me. You were here before with the offerings, too. You had to let go of coming across as "perfect," and even deliberately wrote offerings that showed what a self-centered brat you could be to even out the overall story. It was necessary because you're a real person and it doesn't do anyone any good to evade or ignore foibles.

Look at what you did with "Quarters." You like that poem and you call yourself a "fucked up carnival ride" at one point. When you let go of your ego, the work is more fun for you, even if it

isn't flattering. If you let go of the baggage – which are just expectations for what you think something should be – then you can just enjoy what is.

It's like fate. I can't think of any stories in particular, but isn't the idea that "fate cannot be controlled" some kind of trope? And if you try to shift fate in your favor, you're only cursing yourself to bad luck? Fate can only be what it is if you don't try to manipulate it. Once you've put your fingers in it, whatever fate may have originally had in store for you becomes an impossibility – and just to show you how dumb you were for not sitting back and enjoying the ride, fate will fuck you sideways.

I'm not saying you shouldn't try things – I'm just saying don't tell me what to do.

Me: But I'm still stuck. If I don't prod you along some path, then how am I ever going to get these words out. I have so many things I want to say, all the time.

Poem: I know. There are hundreds of me that no one else has ever seen because you keep writing similarly themed things, circling and circling around the things you want to say without landing on them. If you keep searching for that perfect perch, though, you're never actually going to get to rest.

Me: So I accept mediocrity? Something I don't really care as much for, just so I can move on?

Poem: Or maybe it's not about mediocrity. Maybe it's just about pointing out the branch that's really there rather than describing the branch you'd like to see. Metaphors aside, just tell the truth. I don't need to be a watercolor painting with all of my edges blurred and melting. I can just be a drawing of a rock.

Me: You're nothing but metaphors.

Poem: I'm a poem.

Jealousy

Judy Maroon

Jealousy is not green like envy;
its verdant shade is sicker,
as the face one makes before heaving
over the side of a boat
rocking wildly in an angry sea.

The world itself upon a boat
is unstable, rolling, tumbling
and I'm at the mercy of liquid
changeability:
A force outside of my control
push and bully and sicken,
knocked to my knees by its power
over my body
over my mind
over my delicate digestion.

Throwing up would humiliate me,
that evidence of sea sickness.
The implied instability of one
unable to cope:

"She can't self-regulate.
Did you see how the sea pushed her,
the way it pushed us all,
but only she couldn't roll with the
waves

—
and then, turning green, barfed all
over
herself and everyone else?"

What sadness to be denied the boat,
the beauty of the sea,
for waves and winds that churn.

"Look to the horizon," they say.
It will calm the sickness,
that anchor to our vast container:
A visual reminder of stillness
beyond the chaos.

For jealousy, gratitude is the sea's
horizon
to ease the sickened heart.
A reminder of what is beyond what
seems to be.
Gratitude is the dose of ginger
when the roils of uncertainty
dig inside- in the name of jealousy.

Untitled

Anjane Rodgers

The sun is setting, and the wind has come. It's warm

The sun hasn't quite set yet, so it's welcomed me as it continues its journey to the beyond.

Quail flee in my path, either from the vibration of my feet or from the recognition of dusk, warning of a need for safety.

A spotted scarf binds my coils, allowing only the satin to drift in the wind.

As the wind breaks, only the traffic from the nearest highway guides commuters home.

Freedom is the absence of thought.
The silence of what's to be done.
This calm outside reminds me to rest.
To breathe to feel the peace.
Serenity is obtained.

K a r m i c Lessons

Anon

He looked just like you.
When he smiled I felt it right in my chest.

He didn't see me though –
his eyes and smiles were for someone else.

It made me wonder why
I'd never found my own version of you.

When I think about it
you're not an unusual looking man.
What are the odds I'd never see another

even remotely like you
and take the time to talk to him,
forge a friendship or go on a date,
Something.

Perhaps it's because in this universe
I was meant to only know the real
you –

no substitutions, no off-brand
bizarro man.

So then, when the universe
implodes
and I get to do this all over again
there will be a different end.