

empathy and the education system!!

DELINQUENTS

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I have a resentful, painful relationship with school. I am constantly repressing the feeling, one that I know intimately but don't know how to hold. I am in my first semester of university, and these large feelings are brimming inside of me. I want my feelings to have a home, or a voice. I will preface all of this by saying that I will discuss school in the first person (saying "I," "me," "my") so as to not generalize or speak for others. I also don't want to minimize the pain that accompanies school for so many people as if it is a solitary experience.

My experience with school is influenced by my struggles with severe OCD, depression, and suicidality. I feel a crushing isolation within academic settings. I long to have a place among my peers— and within the world— while being acutely aware of my discomfort in academia. Over the years, I have come to reject the competitive nature of school. It has been a long time since I have seen meaning in grades or AP scores. I have rejected the "survival of the fittest" tenet that is deeply rooted within the education system. I have tried to make school my own. I have reinvented what school could look like for me so many times. Despite all of this, I haven't felt any more at home within the school system.

When I sat in my high school classes, I felt this visceral sense of shame and self-criticism. I didn't feel like I had worth when my teachers spoke to me, as we did our assignments, as I sat in those spaces. When I am alone, I have so much love for myself and know how much I have to offer. In a classroom, much of that falls away, and I am left with the person who I do not recognize but a feeling I recognize so well. The contrast is devastating, between what I feel and what is expected of me, between what I try so hard to trust is possible— the light within me, my visions of community— and what school makes seem possible.

For so much of high school, I looked forward to college. I would have more freedom. I would finally be in classes that made me feel excited and inspired. Class wouldn't feel like *class*, but rather a space for personal endeavors that were tied to what I'm passionate about. As I am here, I tell myself that I am supposed to like higher education. I'm supposed to want to be in classes and like being called a scholar and feel inspired by academia. There is a seed within me, growing, calling out to me. It helps me tend to my anger at this place, at the classroom, at what school continues to be for me. When I wake up in the morning, I know so deeply that I don't want to get up and go to class. I sit in class and feel hollow, which is upsetting because when I am outside of class, I never feel more alive.

My everyday, constant struggle with severe OCD can be further complicated within a system that is largely organized around what others think is right for me. I am so tired of apologizing for being human.

Forgive me

For when I've been in despair and haven't been able to turn in homework on time

For when I didn't come to class because I couldn't sleep that night

For when my medication has caused pain in my head, spine, and esophagus, so I couldn't look at a bright projector screen without crying

Image description: Email from a teacher that says "Missing Homework: You have fallen significantly behind in your homework and are now failing economics. ALL these back homework assignments are due on Wednesday including the Study Sheet for the exam (also on Wednesday). Please see me tomorrow to discuss."

For when I have been late, incompetent, forgetful, confused, fallen behind, because I've been depressed and can fail to care about this system that pains me. I feel academic guilt so often,

especially when I find it too difficult to go to class. I hate having guilt toward school; I am in pain, and yet I feel as if I have done something “morally wrong.”

In November of my junior year of high school, I was hospitalized in an adolescent psych ward. I was actively suicidal, and every part of me believed I would not make it out of this time alive. I had dealt with anxiety since middle school, but I was not yet diagnosed with OCD, and I had been in unbearable distress for months. The narrative within my family and the psychologists at the hospital was that I would “recover,” get better, “back to normal.” There would be a definite point in time where I would no longer be in so much pain, and then my family’s life could resume. During that time, the process and parameters of my “recovery” from my suicidality were defined by school. I was explicitly given a timeline on which I would get better: by the time my second semester of school started. The idea of “recovering” was just as much in terms of how well I could “function” in school again, do homework and be in class, as it was in terms of my desire to be alive. The pressure of recovering was looming over me, always: the ticking clock of being able to “function” again by my second semester. Looming over my “recovery,” how I would heal from my severe depression, was when I would be able to catch up to my friends and prepare for my ACT, start the college process. *Are you starting to feel better? Do you feel like you can do work? Can we start scheduling your ACT tutoring sessions again?*

School sometimes convinces me it is all I have, that I am someone who is broken, during the moments when I wish I was anyone else. School is unaccommodating, inaccessible, rooted in discrimination, punishment, hierarchy. The article “Standardized Tests and Students With Disabilities: How the SAT, LSAT, and Bar Discriminate,” written by Haley Moss for the Teen Vogue series Disability (In)Justice, examines the ableism of standardized testing, all the way through higher education. One point that sticks with me especially: “High-stakes standardized testing is a \$1.7 billion industry that arguably puts its profits over the needs and outcomes for test-takers.” The design of the education system is often seen as an immutable, natural fact of how people are “prepared to enter the world,” rather than an oppressive history forged by discrimination, with distinct political imperatives. Take, for example, the industrial boarding schools that Native Americans were forced into in the process of assimilation after being uprooted from their homes. The school system is always upholding some power, whether it is being used in the process of racial violence, colonialism, or training its students to contribute to capitalism. It has hurt so many people.

My earliest memories of school go back to when I was in preschool; I had this sense even when I was four years old that, at school, I was entering some entirely different part of my life. In elementary school, one of the only things I knew about myself was that “I was smart.” At this point I didn’t have a lot of context for what that meant, or even feelings about it, but I was aware of it. We were divided into groups in class based on whether our “reading level” was higher or lower. Some of us were third graders who could read on a third grade level, and others were third graders who could read on a fifth grade level.

We got report cards where the teachers left comments and rated our performance in various aspects in the class on a scale of 1–4. I remember getting all fours on my report card and feeling so special, and it gave me some sense of pride when a kid who often made me feel bad went around telling the class about my report card, marveling at how I got so many fours. I remember feeling pride when my classmates would list the smartest kids in our grade and I could be high up there, behind some of the boys.

I remember enjoying my projects, especially my creative writing assignments. I wrote a poem called “Baking With Grandma” about the afternoons I spent at Grandma and Grandpa’s apartment, making biscotti cookies with my Grandma. I hadn’t particularly reflected on my afternoons with my Grandma before, and writing a poem was introspective in a way I was completely unfamiliar with and was totally undangerous because my relationship with the world was so different at that time. It was like the first second you wake up, when you see the light pouring in and recall your body but the rest of it has not come yet. That was what that time was like— awake and unaware of the life to come rushing in.

I feel so alone sometimes. The other day, I couldn’t stay asleep for long. I was lying in bed at 5 am, my chest anxious and tight, my limbs buzzing with sleep deprivation and the cold air drifting into my room. It was a Sunday on a college campus, so I knew people wouldn’t be awake for several hours. I bundled up and walked around the empty campus in silence, in circles, overwhelmed by the beautiful sky and how I could barely get through another minute awake within my brain. This felt so similar to the different ways I had felt alone, or maybe it was all the same. This seemingly gorgeous place, and all I can do is walk in circles, mustering enough energy to reach that lamppost, again.

I took a photo of the empty campus that morning.

Image description: Early morning, empty college field, with light peeking through lawn and trees enclosed mostly in darkness.

The more I healed, the more I began to recognize how school was in opposition with how I would stay alive, rather than in conversation with it. It is painful. I am so hopeful. I know there is a place for me. This is all messy, and filled with difficult memories. I am taking it one day at a time. I will end with a poem by J Jennifer Espinoza that always gives me more faith and serves as a wonderful reminder during especially hard times within school.

YOU DON’T HAVE TO WRITE THE BEST POEM IN THE WORLD

By Joshua Jennifer Espinoza

You don’t have to write the best poem in the world
You’re allowed to be messy and fuck around
with words and dreams and feelings
In a poem you are free to leave your body behind
and become a new body
In a poem you can dismantle a city and leave
it in ruins and no one can say shit because
a poem is constantly fluctuating
between existence and nothingness
Terror and elation Stability and madness
You, the writer, are ostensibly a human being
doing your best to stay alive
in a desolate place
full of hatred, sadness, memories of blissful ignorance
In a poem you can return to any state of being
or make a new one for a brief moment,

and it doesn't have to be a great poem! No! Who
decides what constitutes a poem anyway?
Other poets? The academy? Capitalism? Fuck that shit—
just write a bunch of words and don't stop
until you forget what a poem even is
and then go stand in the sunlight and breathe
or don't, whatever
I don't care
Who am I to tell you what to do?
Who is any poet / professor / professional literary vampire
to tell you what to do?
Write your truth Write a lie
Splay your body of love across the page
Against the screen
Whatever you want
Don't listen to anyone whose power depends upon
keeping your voice silent

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