Herman Newton

By Jasper Peach

There's this guy I know and he really gets up my goat. I wasn't introduced to him until recently, but he's hung around like a bad smell. Sort of like mould. Sometimes you can't see him, but you're inhaling his molecules and your breath is forever changed. His full name, Hermeneutical Injustice, means being denied the knowledge needed to understand and take control of your life. He didn't get the memo that he can't sit with us.

There is an assumption that pre-dates the actual birth of each person that everyone is cisgender. It's a boy! It's a girl! I am deciding everything about this human due to their genitals and that isn't weird or creepy *at all*. Anything else can be explained away once we expand into our next selves as confusion and/or sexual perversion, thereby denying the existence of trans people and our understanding of ourselves. Except as deviations from a cisgender norm. AKA "Am I trans/trans enough/just making this up" etc.

Decisions are also made about disabled humans prior to birth, with testing encouraged for parents to determine whether or not a child will be welcome in a family. The family may find it impossible due to the violent lack of resourcing and neutrality applied to variation in humanity. The community may express pity or simpering applause if the baby is allowed to be born even though there were "defects". If it looks like a eugenics loving duck and it quacks like an eugenics loving duck, you can read about the Nazis doing it and notice common threads. There's truly nothing new under the sun.

Can they test for predicted ability to someday perform a death drop in towering heels to the thumping beats of disco divas? Will those parts of the queer community also be an opt-in feature some day?

It is 2012, and I'm interviewing a band for community broadcaster PBS. At that time in my career, in history and in my own development it feels pertinent to list the gender of the three band members. After saying there are two women in the band, someone corrects me and says "one of our band members is non-binary". I pretend I know what that means

because we are live to air, thank them for clarifying and apologise for my mistake, then keep the discussion moving.

Later when I'm alone in the studio and I have three tracks cued up, I google non-binary on my phone. It's like the sky has opened up and something new which has always been there, like the sun and the clouds, has appeared. There's this part of me that's been walled in by bricks, thinking about sticking its head out into the light, feeling like it can stand here safely for the first time. I am at once stunned, joyful and gutted. Why was this kept from me? Why did I only have the frame of reference of feeling out of place, wrong, somehow at fault? The change of rule in my mind burrows way down and away from my consciousness for a few more years.

The pervasiveness of heteronormativity and the male gaze renders any non-cis male-centred sexuality as void.

Now I am 19, it's 2001 and I am in bed with a man and a woman. The way I scrunched my face up when the man gestured that the woman, indicating that I should kiss her is a scar in my marrow. I love her far too deeply to participate in jerk-off inspiration for the male gaze. The disgust I display is about him and not her, but there's no way to communicate this in the moment that I can reach for. If we're going to kiss it will be about her and I, and nobody else. I'm not there yet and it will take at least four more years to come anywhere close to having the words.

It was only through sleeping with a woman for the first time that I became liberated from the pervasiveness of heteronormativity. I had to feel it to understand I could be part of it. Reading words on a page, hearing lyrics and seeing plays and arthouse cinema and everything on SBS after 9 pm couldn't come between me and the safety I'd built around myself. It couldn't make me look away from how I was able to belong, in a very specific way I could manage. Sleeping with women and AFAB people was a very comfortable act once I opened the door to that life.

Ableism deems those who fall outside the norm as 'mad, bad and sad' and therefore unable to be trusted to know what their experiences are. AKA "you don't look Autistic/ABA is good actually, because you have to fit in. How can I be sure I'm really Autistic and not just *making excuses*". The outcome of ABA is the irreparable harm done to countless

children's development and wellbeing through stopping behaviour rather than helping children to learn new skills. ABA is still used extensively due to the hierarchy disparity between the disabled community and the western medical model.

In 2018 I see my exact experience of chronic pain on Instagram. All the exclusion that it places between me, spaces and activities. It's referenced in memes using the word Disabled. The pathways in my mind are lighting up like stars, blissful, sacred understanding that nobody could ever give me permission to use that word but myself. I began to learn about self-determination and the radical act of care that can be. It sat at odds with the collateral damage of decades of messaging that I was a faker, a drama queen, too much, too sensitive. Welcoming the word Disabled into my skin is an opening up. It ushers in what is now possible because I have the meaning and the term. When I can understand, so much more is possible.

In 2022, HireUp publishes my opinion piece "I didn't know if I was allowed to say that I was disabled". I write it because most weeks I get messages from friends and strangers describing their experience, asking if it's ok that the social model of disability feels like the right fit for them. I am clear and consistent in saying this about myself and somehow this places me in a hierarchy where I can grant permission. I am the crip fairy and I say "yes you are allowed" and everything changes. Who am I to say this? Who am I not to?

Can they say it? Out loud, to other people? What will happen if they do? Now I can just send them the link and there is always a follow up describing their tears of relief. It's such a tender crossroads to stand at, and I offer my solidarity and describe the abundance of courage in their actions. To even ask the question is incredibly hopeful in the face of the lives we lead. Thousands of times we're told not to know the power we hold, not to give a name to our experiences. The ones that broke and remade our hearts, tough scarred marks reminding us of what needed to crumble before lifting our gazes up from the floor.

I wonder if things could have been different for me in terms of my sense of self. If I'd been exposed to an accessible way to understand what disability means outside the medical model. I'm no academic but I tend to understand any joke a few seconds before the crowd. Lifelong pattern recognition gives it away every time. Memes are access. They frame a devastating thing (how we are disabled by choices actively made in infrastructure, education, etymology and community, not by what's going on in our bodies) as a witty

visual with a cute font. It's the marrow of meaning and it reaches people who need to see it. It reached me and gave me the words for what was already true. It helped me remember what I already knew before the world got to me.

On waking I need to let all of me unclench in the time it takes. Only then can I manage capacity for light, for speech. I used to say the cruellest things to myself. You selfish f***ing asshole, get up. You're just making excuses, you're awake, you can also be doing things and contributing to the labour of the household. Now that I hold both acceptance and understanding of Autism, ADHD, complex trauma, ME/CFS, OCD, the more compassionate answer greets me. That if I take some time it makes more things possible. How gentle beginnings lead to sustained activity levels. Most astoundingly to me, turning on myself for being slow does not lead to any task being completed more quickly.

When I accept the timeframe needed to do some local vegetable shopping, to stack the dishwasher, to make and consume breakfast, panic doesn't need to be the biggest part of the equation. The final hurdle, understanding that the task may not be attempted at all today, is a work in progress.

I lose my long run of days on Finch, the self care app I downloaded in desperation to create a sense of myself other than helplessness. It reminds me to do basic daily tasks like brushing my teeth and eating three meals, rewarding me with colourful stones I can use to buy my little bird new outfits and things for their house. Before having the language for all of it, I would have given myself a useless droning lecture about how I shouldn't have slipped up, that commitment and consistency are important. Now I can say to myself "I was kinda busy, and driving most of the day yesterday. Never mind!" and move on. The run of days on an app impacts nobody but me, and I don't have to assign moral value to it…. so I don't.

Hermeneutical injustice is a mouthful and doesn't feel grounded in anything real. I want it to have a face so instead I picture a person called Herman Newton. He is balding, white and tall, and tells everyone off for self-identifying without proof from other tall, bald, white people that wear white coats and have framed certificates on the wall that are Fancy. There's way too much hegemonic whiteness about this guy to take him seriously.

Herman is a real dick of a person and has dead, smug eyes. I bristle at the word “injustice” when I try placing it on my body with an overhead projector, the light reflecting from the machine onto the wall with an overlay of this concept over my photographic image.

The association in my mind of injustice is showy and brash, not something I’m deserving of pointing at. I feel embarrassed to be making such a fuss. “Injustice is for real problems, actually” comes the admonishing, eyebrows-raised announcement inside my head. My thoughts usually stop there, but somehow I take another step and realise that I didn’t cause or welcome the injustice. It landed on me and held on because all that makes me who I am was quite a seductive prize for it to sink its teeth into. I am an energy producing treat for injustice, and a perfect host for it to grow and thrive in.

I climb into the image on the wall, ignoring physics like many systems have ignored my basic human rights. This moving version of me is a pencil illustration with googly eyes. I sit beside the merging of injustice and myself. I am quiet, listening and receptive. Injustice pauses its gnashing and roaring, reminding me of the creatures from Where the Wild Things Are, and we look at one another. I am slow-blinking. This is how you let a cat know that you are safe and gentle, so I give it a try. Injustice notices after a bit and I can almost hear their gears clicking softly down into an easier pace.

Would you like to come and sit by me? I thought that sentence and lobbed it over, inviting injustice to sit beside me, and with that wording stated a boundary. I have asked, not instructed, and injustice shrugs and strides over with big limbs and the stink of too much pressure. It crouches on its taut, springy haunches and we are not overlapped, we are separate.

I breathe slow and deep. Before long injustice has coregulated with me. After giving me a hard stare to assess whether I’m safe to confide it, it tells me how much it needs me in the picture in order to thrive. I listen, sympathetic, because I know how this feels, to need something very deeply. It mimics having no control, no agency, and not knowing if you’ll ever get enough. The scarcity mentality creates all sorts of problems and feels pretty exhausting. It induces hunger and fear that feed each other.

Injustice looks down at the soft green grass we’re sitting on, and then back at me. I am sitting on my bottom, my legs outstretched in front of me, leaning back on my palms. It

doesn’t hurt my body to do so because I am a whimsical version made of graphite and plastic. I forgive you, I think, and although this is for injustice it also filters through to me in the picture.

Nothing bad happens. Everyone is just processing what’s going on. When it feels like the right time I say and think: I love you. You kept me in a place that fit for a long time. I have some words now, and they can look after me. I never knew that pieces of the alphabet would make a cosy blanket, but they did and now I understand. I feel safer. Does that feel right and true for you, too?

We all regard each other, and it takes one thousand years and a few breaths, and in the split second of blinking where my eyes are closed, injustice has flown away. My wounds have healed on the body in the picture, and I can see the scars in their midst.

I have met myself for the first and millionth time. I will continue to slip back and forget and remember and jump down, turn around, twist and tumble, break and fumble, but I’ve had this moment and it’s just as real as any scar, any memory.

Hermeneutical injustice removed the possibility of me loving myself for my body, my mind and my gender for an awfully long time. Then I processed a lot of it and took some steps forward and away, out of the projection and back into my skin.

There’s spaciousness in my thoughts - they are no longer jammed up, there’s movement and ways to shift from an unfair or messed up status quo, big or small, into something new I can do myself. The name I’ve chosen for myself starts to feel sturdy, like worn in shoes or a soft hoodie I can snuggle into for sensory comfort. Justice is served and it smells good. It is the perfect proportions of strength and softness, and so am I.