

The
**Loud
Way
Home**



The **Loud Way Home**

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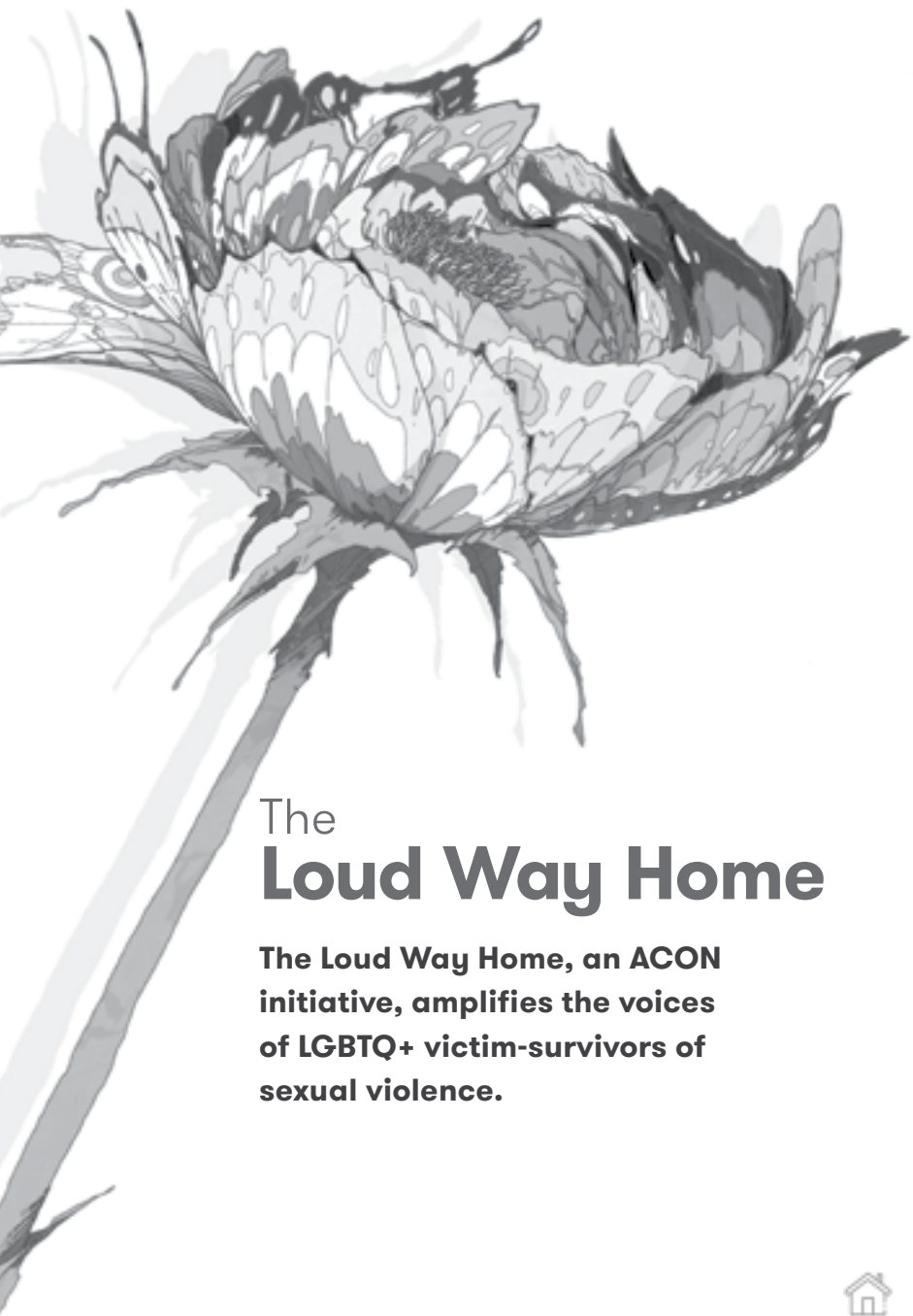
Acknowledgement of Country

This anthology was gathered, developed, and published on the lands of the Gadigal, Dharug and Dharawal people, as well as many other lands. We acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of the lands on which this book was developed and pay our respects to elders and ancestors past and present. Sovereignty was never ceded, this always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

We recognise the importance of storytelling within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and embrace the principle of 'First Nations First': re-centering Australian history with Indigenous histories. In that vein, we recognise that sexual violence disproportionately affects First Nations people, and that prevention work in this space is led by First Nations communities, particularly women.

Thank you for all the work you have done and continue to do in violence prevention. We remember that colonisation brought with it incredibly higher rates of violence against First Nations communities, and to this day continues to be a driver of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Sexual violence prevention will never be successful until we make meaningful changes to decolonise Australia.





The **Loud Way Home**

The Loud Way Home, an ACON initiative, amplifies the voices of LGBTQ+ victim-survivors of sexual violence.





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Please note some of the stories contained within this publication contain potentially triggering content. All stories in this anthology are intended for an adult audience, and some stories contain sexual themes.

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Notes To Reader

Please note that the following pieces may contain potentially triggering content, particularly in the areas of sexual violence, transphobia, homophobia, racism, ableism, prejudice, discrimination, self-harm and thoughts of suicide. The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of any entities involved in this publication.

We have used the following classification system so you can read pieces that are most appropriate and safe for you.



no mention of sexual violence.












mentions sexual violence.













mentions and describes sexual violence.

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Introduction

Jade Parker & Hamish Whelan

Storytelling is a powerful tool for advocacy and healing. Many cultures around the world utilise stories, to teach, to learn, to warn, to aide. Working in community health, we are privileged to hear many people's stories, and we have our own to tell too.

We share a core value in our beliefs that stories hold power and can promote healing, connection and community. This was the basis for *The Loud Way Home*. We wanted to bring together victim-survivors of sexual violence, and build a community, increase connections and give people the chance to have their stories told and their voices heard.

LGBTQ+ populations experience high rates of sexual violence, and yet we are often left out of the conversation. Misconceptions about our experiences, or what sexual violence looks like run rampant. There is no 'one' story about what sexual violence looks like for LGBTQ+ people. Structural inequality and discrimination intersect in ways that both overlap and are interdependent, and have their own impacts on our experiences of violence. We each face different structural barriers within systems that discredit, undermine and silence our communities. We must name these drivers of violence, from heternormativity and cisgenderism, to the impacts of colonisation, transmisogyny, ageism, ableism and racism.



At the same time as our experiences are unique, we also come together to loudly call for change, to say what we were told we could not, and to collectively tell our stories and offer solutions.

This anthology shines a light on a variety of different lived experiences and emphasises that LGBTQ+ people of all genders need to be included in primary prevention, early intervention, response and recovery pillars of work to end gender-based violence.

This work is part of ACON's commitment to achieving improved health equity for LGBTQ+ people who have experienced sexual, domestic and family violence. ACON's investment in creating The Loud Way Home reflects our values: Community, Collaboration, Equity and Inclusion. More than that, it's a powerful expression of our collective strength and the powerful nature of community care as a healing tool.

In 2023, ACON received funding from the NSW Department of Communities and Justice to support LGBTQ+ people with lived experiences of sexual violence and their healing journeys through creation of a creative anthology. We made the decision for this to be a survivor led project with elements of co-design. We bring our own lived experience of sexual violence to the project, and beyond this, we sought consultation from our Sexual, Domestic and Family Violence Advisory Group and from the Independent Collective of Survivors who supported the project and offered important feedback to create safe and supportive spaces for storytelling. We collaboratively built a workshop series to build group cohesion and trust. We also focused on how to use storytelling as an advocacy tool, on creative activities and on supporting one another to share our messages in safe ways. We had regular check in sessions throughout the life of



the project and will continue to share this anthology widely, supporting those survivors who want to, to use their voices to enact change and advocate for their communities.

When we bring people together, it is transformative. We have heard from participants that:

“There is power and impact in a collective voice. I feel less alone in my healing path through connection with other survivors and inspired to do something positive with my pain”

“I feel this workshop is an amazing opportunity for survivors to take back their power and impact others by creating something meaningful. For me I felt so strong afterwards to have this opportunity and experience to create something that could potentially resonate with other survivors, as I know only too well what a very lonely place this can be within.”

“I belong to a proper bad ass community (that was the most powerful room I have ever been in)”

These voices truly highlight just how important it is to create spaces for the voices and experiences of LGBTQ+ survivors. These spaces are currently a rarity, but with support, we can build them together.

Our participants have all brought important aspects of their experiences into this resource. Bronte brings light to the complexities of loving your abuser, Charlie takes us on a journey through their poetry of pain, survival, and might. Tito brings the perspective of a child sexual abuse survivor and the importance of culture as part of his journey, Catherin explores disassociation and the beginning of reconnecting to the body.



The Vietnamese Survivor shows the ongoing impacts of child sexual abuse, while Aurora illustrates the barriers many trans women of colour face. V Y lets us see how the relationship with trauma can shift and change like the ocean, Andre's contributions embody a survivor's anger and a reclamation of personal boundaries, while Siena teaches us that you can reimagine and take back pleasure. Sarah shares her deep connection to her Country, her ancestors and the complexities of grief, and Larissa's art depicts a journey through trauma, life after, and navigating healing. Agosto talks about the intricacies of time, and how healing might look like, Polly recounts experiences of midlife disclosure and the importance of being compassionate. Jinx delves deep into the prominence of pain and living in a heteronormative world, while Lachlan illustrates navigating new relationships in the aftermath of sexual violence. Maeve talks about experiences across the lifecourse, masterfully weaving in their lived experience of being a non-binary person with disability, and C.A speaks to how deeply important and powerful knowing and knowledge are. Caitie chants a siren spell about collective power, and Gigi braves the flames of their experiences.

If you are reading this anthology and have experienced sexual violence, you are not alone. You have a strong community behind you. You are not what has been done to you. You have the right to name your experiences, and how they have shaped you, and to find spaces and people with whom you can be heard.

With the many voices that contributed to *The Loud Way Home*, we hope that this collection serves as a reminder to the fact that LGBTQ+ people exist, we are diverse, and we experience and resist violence in a multitude of ways. Our voices, our stories



and our lives matter. We deserve safety, love, respect and kindness. We deserve to be seen, believed, validated and cared for. We deserve resources, compassion and understanding. We deserve to be LOUD and to come home – wherever or whatever that means to each of us.

This is *The Loud Way Home*.





Seeds Of Hope

Bronte McDowell-Jones

Dear Survivor,

Can I tell you a secret?

I loved my rapist.

It was not my first experience of sexual violence, but it had a lasting impact. My rapist was physically, psychologically, verbally, and sexually abusive. It got to the point where I had daily alarms set for their commands.

“Don’t Discuss: Mood, Work, Thoughts, Symptoms, Sewing, Gender topics, Plants”.

I wouldn’t tell anyone or seek medical treatment for my injuries. I loved them. It was too hard.

When I first told people, I was so scared I wanted to vomit. It was a relief when people said, “I will 100% support you.” Other comments were insensitive and hurtful.

“Don’t forget that there were good times with them too.”

“It’s hard to believe you Bronte when we didn’t see it.”

“Why on earth did you stay in contact with them if they did that to you?!”



Some friends never spoke to me again. I didn't expect that.

The police that took my statement were kind. But someone I trusted chose to tip off my abuser. Warned my abuser not to incriminate themselves.

The betrayal was bitterly painful.

The worst part of recovery has been realising the extent of the abuse and accepting the grief and rage that came with it. I still get flashbacks and nightmares. I check my phone out of habit. Sometimes I hear my abuser's voice in my head so loudly I think they're behind me. My body still fears them. Even if I know I'm now safe.

Dealing with trauma and a disability, is also really fucking hard. Support looks different when you have a severe condition. It's not easily accessible. Not when you're bedbound and simply using a phone can cause a flare up.

Speaking to a Victim Services psychologist made a huge difference. She helped me find compassion for myself. Without that support, my self-blame/loathing would have consumed me. Seeing healthy relationships and connecting to those who made me feel valued, was vital. Their kindness helped me recalibrate.

I don't regret reporting my abuser. Telling my story was healing. Learning how to love myself after sexual violence changed – and saved – my life. I know I still have a long way to go. But I don't have to live in fear anymore. I can talk about plants if I want to.

From one survivor to another: I hope you know that you are not alone... There are people out there who care about you,



believe you, and will wholeheartedly support you. Become your own biggest ally! Create the life you want. I know your trauma may still sucker punch you. But I hope you find joy and peace sometimes too.

You – my dear queer – are a survivor. The world is much more beautiful with you in it. Sending you all big sparkling love.

– Bronte





Telling Our Truth

Charlie Rose

In the depths of pain, where shadows loom,
you faced the storm, embraced the gloom.
Through shattered dreams and silent cries,
you found your voice, began to rise.

Though memories echo and fears persist,
you spoke your truth, refused to resist.
In each word uttered, you reclaimed your might.
A survivor's song, shining bright.

So let your voice echo, let it roar,
a symphony of healing, forevermore.
For in your journey, you found your choice,
to speak your truth and find your voice.

Let your scars become a testament to your journey's length,
as you stand victorious, your spirits unwavering strength.





I Survive Therefore I Speak

Tito Stowers

Right hand slithered
Across my face
Slippery and wet
Like a hungry snake
Heavy breath in my ear
Bad breath, unkept beard
Thick fingers
Tapping my skin below
As my mind froze
My already soaked lavalava
Disappeared
I woke to mocking words
“Shut up”
A 20 cent coin fell into my hand
I became a 6 year old sex worker
Not by choice
I became silent
Excruciating silence
For 26 years
You speak you die
“Nancy boy”
Childhood stolen



Destroyed, raped, mocked
Belittled, abused, robbed
Exploited, laughed at, beaten
Ignored, threatened, frightened
But no explanation
For a child's exploitation and annihilation
No justification
For my childhood mutilation and humiliation
Lived in fear
Suicide was near
So I lived with tears
Ashamed of being called a queer
I started dancing in the dark
With a swollen heart
Spirit explore new imaginations
For the boogie man's evil gratifications
Teen years a blur
Full of internal outbursts
Looking for trust everywhere
But all in despair
The rope
The knives
Never far from my mind
But I was meant to live
Through death defying attempts
The continuous act of contempt
Imprisoned by inner demons
Self-inflicted pain
Resilience
My weapon of choice



To shut down
Any irrelevant noise
So, my voice becomes a therapy
I survive therefore I speak
Misjudged for being different
I survive therefore I speak
Lethal choices of the past
I survive therefore I speak
I cried so many rivers
My cultural restrictions I broke
My religious faith I abandoned
I survive therefore I speak
Self acceptance at last
I survive therefore I speak for me
For Her
For Him
For Them
For You...





Shell Song

Catherin J Pascal Dunk

My body is a sock;
an envelope
that I don't clock.
It's there but
not much,
barely a crutch;
grubby, worn
loose, unadorned.

This body's my home
but I'm home alone,
stateless.

It's like a shell –
I only notice
when it's unwell.
Giant acorn or goose-neck
barnacle shell.

My orbs track
every colour, quirk –
but I'm camouflaged,
unseen.



My auricles ache
for satisfying sound –
perversely,
I stay silent.

My sniffer's aswarm
with scents –
but never mine.
I feast on subtlety, yet linger
unsated.
Touch is that heady drug
I won't use
 on myself.

My body's a sock,
an envelope
that I don't clock.
There but
not much. Self but
no self. Merely
a shelf.

Shell sock.





Spring Song

Catherin J Pascal Dunk

Acorn-like, I split,
goose my neck for the light;
burst forth
feather out.

Or maybe it's less boss bitch than that
and I start small,
slowly notice my foot, one toe; paint a nail?

Dye a few strands of hair;
meet my own eyes, just once;
remember to shower
or to eat.

However it happens, it starts.
Change – the only thing it's safe to expect –
comes for us all.

My body's right here –
as she was, all long.
If I relearn her contours,
the boundaries, what it feels like
to be safe,



will desire spring again
from that hidden well?

Can I reknit my body sock
in rainbow,
like maybe, deep inside
she always was?





Child's Play

A Vietnamese Survivor

“Wanna play a game?” he asked, playfully, as if he were about to offer an exciting solution to my problem.

He was my neighbour and his parents were our neighbourhood friends, people we trusted.

It was late evening and we were in my bedroom, laying together under the covers. The smell of Asian incense and sandalwood filled the air. We had school the next day and I had been given an order to go to bed early. His job was to put me to bed. I was just nine years old, and he, sixteen. I didn't know what sex was or what being gay meant at the time. I didn't know what it meant to be groomed or sexually abused. All I knew was that I didn't want to go to bed while everyone else was having fun outside.

“You can't tell anyone or we'll both get in trouble,” he said, planting the seed of secrecy that would grow for the next twenty years of my life. I was being taught a lesson very early on in life: that disclosure was dangerous; that society would dictate whether I would be permitted to talk about what happened to me; that there was a price to pay for playing this game and it was that I would carry the burden of shame and secrecy around for the rest of my life.



“Don’t make a noise,” he whispered.

It was nothing I had ever experienced before as a child. It made me curious, excited me even. Doing something under a veil of secrecy, the dangerousness of it all, hiding the game from our parents, all of this made the game so much more thrilling. We connected in some insidious way that night, through the game and through our bodies. He pulled me into his twisted world and with that, my innocence died too.

The next week, he came again like a raven looking for its prey. My parents were out, and he was there to babysit me. As the night progressed, I found him again in my bed.

“Do you want to play a game?” he asked playfully. I grew rather familiar with that phrase. I knew what it meant and part of me felt excited whenever he mentioned it. I was still a kid after all. It was as if I had been conditioned, brainwashed, into enjoying something so deeply disturbing.

I found myself drowning under the covers that night, my mouth forced upon his body parts, his hand on my head. I remember choking, my eyes watering. I never consented, but I didn’t resist either. It just happened; I did what I was told. I played the game, all the way to the end. I promised never to tell a soul. Until now.

Twenty years have passed. I’ve mastered the art of staying quiet now. There’s a lot of shame in experiencing what I did, so I tend to conceal, keep people at a distance so they don’t see the horror of what happened to me; so they don’t know I was tarnished in some way. I don’t want their pity or sympathy. I



don't want them thinking I'm broken in some way because I'm not – it didn't break me.

“My uncle sexually abused me when I was a kid,”

A friend tells me over a drink. It's the first time I've heard this from anyone else. We connect over our experience of being violated. Seems like I might not be the only person to have experienced sexual abuse at the hands of someone familiar but these things are never spoken about. It's still very taboo. It makes other people uncomfortable so it's easier for people like us to remain silent and invisible.

We drink our coffee and imagine a world where we are able to share our stories of suffering and not fear societal judgment. *Judgment* is terrifying because it goes hand-in-hand with *shame*; and we've had shame bleed into every crevice of our lives.

This is my message:

We need to change as a society. We need to open our hearts and our ears. We need to normalise openly sharing about experiences of sexual violence and create spaces where survivors are permitted to talk about what happened to them. We need change at the systemic level to ensure future survivors suffer less and people like me don't have to walk through life carrying the heavy burden of shame. We can do it – if we try.





Aurora, The Prince & The Police

Aurora Pearl

The police officer instructed me to press each of my fingers down into the dark blue ink pad and then imprint them onto the white paper document. Starting with my thumbs until both my hands were dripping in dye. He handed me a wet wipe so I could cleanse myself from the mess I'd made. With each wipe, I washed my sins away, God forgive me. I have transformed from a crawling caterpillar into a beautiful butterfly. Flying far away from where I was a decade ago. I am now an irrepressible trans woman living in Sydney's eastern suburbs, yet here I was in a cold police station once again. Only this time I had chosen to be here. Requesting my fingerprints to be recorded in order to acquire the visa needed to move to Spain and teach English.

The police officer takes one glance at my birth certificate and his eyes seem to pop out of his head like a cartoon character.

“Jesus! Is that your real name?”

My blood begins to boil and rush to my head, my mouth dry as cotton. I inhale a deep breath in through my nostrils and exhale out. The ghost from my past has come back to haunt me once again. My dead name exposed in the dreaded Birth Certificate, along with my assigned gender at birth which reads ‘MALE’.



A gender marker that I am unable to amend without paying the hefty price tag of Gender Affirming Surgery. I've overcome numerous obstacles to be seen for who I truly am, nonetheless, being called the name given to me at birth feels like a sucker punch. Right back to square one.

The last time I found myself in a police station, I was a cross-dressing twink living in the western suburbs. I was a shell of a human trying to escape my hell. As the night fell, I made my way to Oxford Street in search of something to fill the void. While drinking, dancing and snorting lines of cocaine in the clubs, I noticed a man who had been watching me the whole night, but hadn't said a word. He possessed an aura of entitlement and arrogance about him like a prince from a foreign land who rules with an iron fist. The sun began to rise simultaneously with the blonde wig lace from my scalp. The clock had struck 5 am and that meant it was time to return home before I transformed from a princess back into a pumpkin. The prince followed me outside and offered me a ride. I felt my gut tell me no but a part of me couldn't bear to trek it back out west by train. He flashed a bottle of Jack Daniel from within his black blazer and I succumbed to the temptation.

After a sobering hour-long drive, all I wanted to do was pass out. We walked up the steps before settling in on the couch in my living room. In his thick accent, the prince told me that he was very wealthy and could buy me anything I desired if I were his. With his breath reeking of JD and cigarettes, he came in for a kiss, from which I withdrew. He grabbed my hips and yanked me closer. He wrestled with my skirt trying to undress me. I told him I did not want to have sex with him. He unbuckled his



belt, unzipped his jeans, unleashing his toxic masculinity while tossing me to the floor. “Stop!” I begged. I drew all the energy left in my body to get up and run. My lemon chiffon skirt, tearing at the seams, splitting in two. With half left hanging in his hand, he went into a rage, “Do you want to play games with me?! I will ruin your life!” Each threat was punctuated with more menace than the last. He stormed into the kitchen and began to go through all the drawers and cabinets. I locked myself in the bathroom until he left. Shaken and too afraid to spend the night on my own, I went to stay with a friend.

The next morning I returned home to my humble block of flats. As I walked up the stairs, I could hear deep voices coming from my unit. My door was wide open. There were nine men in leather jackets and suits raiding my place. Bed flipped, drawers poured open, and papers scattered all over the grey carpet. One of the men flashed me an official detective badge while declaring they had a search warrant. He asked if I was willing to go down to the police station for further questioning. In my naivety, I agreed and waived my rights to an attorney. The detective informed me that the prince had reported he was held at knife point by me and forced to pay \$20,000 in cash. The detective took out two plastic zip bags, each containing items that were found in my flat that morning. The weapon used in the alleged crime, exhibit a: one of my kitchen knives and exhibit B: a bag of ecstasy pills.

The head detective advised me to accept possession of the amphetamines. Otherwise, I would be facing up to twenty years in prison for the charge of armed robbery. I felt a huge dark cloud come over me and my heart sank into the pit of despair.



I contemplated whether it would have been better to have been raped. I silently questioned the police and their ethics. I thought about how this would negatively impact my life and career trajectory. I accepted the plea deal and wondered if I would still have the opportunity to see the world. This ordeal proved to me that I did indeed want to live. It forced me to reflect on choices and take control of my life. Instead of drowning out my truth, I decided to cultivate it. I began my gender affirming journey to live the life I had always imagined.

“You’re done here. All there is left to do now is post them addressed to the Australian Federal Police,” said the police officer while handing me the finalised paperwork.

“Thank you, Constable, my name is Aurora.” Chin up, I walked out of the police station proud for facing my fears and not letting them limit me. I have dreams and goals that I aspire to achieve. I am on the path to my destiny and Spain is calling. The clouds parted and the sun shone bright from the heavens. I placed the visa application into the white envelope and sealed it with a whole-hearted prayer, bidding farewell to my past whilst making space for my future. The prince did not in fact ruin my life. He was the catalyst in saving it.





Keep Afloat

V Y Franco-Klothos

Experiencing trauma is like being dropped into the middle of the ocean, in the eye of a storm, when you don't know how to swim. If you are lucky, you might know how to keep afloat.

There is a sense of eerie calm, as the warmth of the sun begins to dip below the horizon. But as darkness falls, a sense of panic sets in. Lightning bombards the ocean around you, triggering a cascade of waves that rush over you. The rain lashes down, and like the waves, a feeling of hopeless solitude engulfs you. As you try to keep afloat, distress emanates through your mind and body, and so too does fatigue. You are physically and mentally exhausted.

Nowhere to rest in sight.

You begin to doubt your ability to survive, as the sea rages on around you. This only makes it harder to maintain your resilience, as the shock of the situation compounds with the disbelief at the betrayal that you feel from your body's paralysed reaction to it.

But then, you catch a break.

The storm starts to wane, and the waves start to lull. In the debris that lays in the wake of the tempest you notice a tattered



life raft. You are still exhausted, but you can take a moment of respite. You start to catch your breath, and you can feel your racing heart slow to a deep, calm pace.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

Though this storm has passed, you can sense the clouds forming an ominous threat above.

You now have two options. Give up and succumb to the waves – or use the last of your energy to make an attempt to survive.

Your legs are stiff, but they still *just* manage to keep you afloat whilst you grip the flimsy life raft.

It feels like you have been on the brink of drowning for an eternity. You can barely remember what it was that you were swimming back to. Who were you surviving for? You continue to move through the motions, and eventually you are numbed by the cold water, the harsh air, and the cramping of every muscle in your body. You are surviving, just barely.

But going through the motions has given you some confidence. You continue to struggle through the water, limbs still moving frantically but with purpose now. The further that you travel, the stronger your resolve. You know that you cannot survive alone, but you continue to swim, desperately hoping that someone will cross your path.

As day breaks at the edge of the sky, you see a small, dingy boat meandering through the water. This is your chance to escape. You force yourself to use the last of your energy to shout to the traveller.



A warm hand drags you onto a seat and wraps you in a dry towel. You look up, and a kind, familiar face greets you. They hand you a steaming bowl of food, and invite you to tell your story.

The sunlight hits your face you begin to thaw out. Your limbs start to soften and relax. You realise that the shame you carried at your lack of resolve was unfounded – you have proven that your strength lingers on.

In this storm, you have lost so much but you have not lost the person you once were.

You look to the shining horizon. You are still unsure of where you are, and how to return to your ordinary life. But there is one thing you know for certain now.

You know how to swim.

.





Flames

Gigi Peache

The dark, burning red of violence
still flashes before me when I close my eyes.
Swipes and slashes of endless black lick upwards,
cold and empty, in my peripheral vision.
I don't remember the first time I met the black flames,
but they seemed so much bigger then.
Or perhaps I was just so small.

I sometimes wondered if they were my friends,
they always seemed to be there, waiting for me
when I couldn't dare to open my eyes.
They whispered promises to me,
telling me it's okay to let them take me,
that I could stop fighting and just rest.
I knew they couldn't be trusted after that.

One day, as my heart raced and my body fought,
the black flames found me in a sea of lilac purple.
I had forced my eyes shut, expecting the same
fearsome red to which I had grown accustomed,
but something was different.
The flames greeted me kindly, it felt uneasy.
They told me this was not the same.



I told them it was better. Safer.

They laughed at me, and rightly so. I was so naive.

The lilac seemed so much more placid than
the volatile red I had come to know so intimately,
but it held secrets that the flames argued over telling me.

As I became more familiar with the sedate feeling
the purple brought with it, the more I thought
the flames were lying to me.

I felt safe in the purple; it wasn't life and death,
it was just... calm. Until it wasn't.

Somehow it began to leak out of my mind,
finding me everywhere until a translucent fog
of the palest lilac delicately clouded my vision.
Even the angry, dark red of violence now appeared
a gentle pink. But I felt safe, so I didn't worry.
Feeling nothing was better than the scalding hot sting
that accompanied that deep, horrible red.

Soon it had buried and forced its purple roots
within my entire being, violating me in an echo
of what I thought it was protecting me from.
There was no escape from the hazy orchid prison
that had devoured my life.

I wondered if I were in Hell, but the flames hissed with pity,
“At least in Hell they let you feel.”

I had to escape. It was suffocating me, forcing me to breathe
it in until I was left with heavy lilac lungs.

I screamed into the abyss of cold flame until my throat bled.
It was painful, raw.

Everything now seemed so hard to swallow.



I locked eyes with myself in the mirror,
my reflection opened her mouth.
I peered down to the back of her throat. Red.
I began to cough, my reflection watched my palm
cover my mouth, nodding knowingly as I felt tiny
warm droplets speckle my hand.

Red drops untainted by the orchid overcast,
shadowy flames finally silent.
I screamed for my life, begging for it to be returned.
My lungs felt lighter, but so did my head.
I'd never felt such exertion.
Speck by tiny black speck, the mosaic approach
of unconsciousness threatened me,
until I felt fingers coil around my wrist.
It startled me from the silence that had begun to feast on my
senses, tethering me before pulling me back to tangibility.

Soon there were more hands, the abyss grew murkier,
the colours of reality began to return.
Red and pink lips that smiled empathetically at me.
The blue blanket they had used to keep me warm.
The brown eyes of the half-naked woman before me,
with the strongest grip and the fiercest voice that sung
a story reminiscent of my own.
For the first time, I wasn't fighting alone.

The black flames still inhibit my vision,
they threaten to engulf me, but their icy sting
is no match for my warmth.
I'm no longer fooled by their familiar comfort.
I'm not afraid anymore.





Widows

Sarah Malone with Uncle Mark Merriman

Everyone thinks the widow is some old woman who lives on the corner on the street but in Blak Australia that's not so. She's everyone's mum, Aunty and Grandma. It's just ordinary. I know that because it's me.

I was young once too in year 6 at school. Thinking I will be 50 in the year 2024 kicking back in the January heat and now it's that time. My child is six years old and runs in the school yard. He doesn't mind this all so much, but wants a new dad so he can go in the car again, and maybe go to KFC, so until that happens he will play with his cardboard car and ignore me. Other than to kick me at night and demand endless amounts of food and throw things at my head because it must have been my doing. This disruption to his life. Mum can just work harder.

It's a long day and nights are hot.

He is yelling at me because I woke him up. Apparently, I can't get it together to be romantic with him anymore so a replacement is coming in this week. Must be the grief or the ongoing Centrelink lines, the inquest or my terror of the pressing funeral invoices. It's hard to know amongst it all, the romance went for me some time ago, when I carried the coffin with a few



kids, felt its weight between us and lifted it screaming into the back of the car. Crying out at the justice and injustice of that moment. I wore a white tennis dress and sandals and walked it like a runway.

Too young to be that woman.

Maybe if I hit the wood hard enough like the folks in the Tiwi and cry out again, I can make this stop and turn it around to another day and another time before when we swam in the water.

Just for one moment.

We were people of the water, the shore, and the sea – and now a box of ash carried in a Safeway bag on train from Hurstville. Maybe I should stop and tip it out at the intersection or at the drive thru McDonalds or put it on the dashboard with the dancing ladies as we don't eat McDonalds anymore.

“Dad would have got me that” they say.

In the line at Centrelink there is another woman. She seems older than me perhaps and laughs quietly and she has a bag of chips and a biscuit.

‘Smart lady.’

I think she knows we will be here for a while. I wonder what casket she had. The Seafarer or the Wayfinder perhaps or maybe just the new organic cardboard look. I stare at the monitor. There are quite a few in different sizes from slim fit to extra wide and I think perhaps they have to push them in and push the lid down, imagine rolls of body being rammed down under the lid. The kids play man in a box at school and laugh at the



thought of how funny it is that someone's dad actually died but out there it's what happens. They think it's so funny.

“How would you get the legs to stay flat, would you need weights to do that? Sticky tape?”

There is a level of envy towards widows, as though they got out of school early in some scheme, pushed him off a balcony or perch, and shoved him in a box. A fear, a reservation that somehow it's a poison.

Maybe the grief is catching, or it can spread out from you like some darkness.

In the Communities it's normal.

Deaths are so often, and public, you can hear the wailing so early in the day and see the body in the white bag with the big zipper surrounded by people crying, holding them, lamenting with everything they have inside them. Crying out and fighting for life in the hot morning. It's all ok because it's understood to be painful.

It's ok to be angry.

The older nun on her scooter, sits and watches. The health staff go back inside turn on the air conditioning and lock up. Fear and removal and knowing of night sprees and perhaps a flight in a light plane is coming. They can run away to Darwin and hear of another death over there, walking away through long grass.

Widows are as old as the earth, as old as humanity, watched, heard, and known. I can feel the long grass on my legs it's time to come back out here to these places, these graveyards, and start to narrate it because no one talks about us.



These women walking with loss through the fake green Bunnings grass cut into coffin shapes; placed with such care onto the red earth. The white plastic chairs in pairs sitting at the edges of the brightly coloured flowers – the only ones that are here in these towns.

A golden hairbrush, a bright bunch of flowers, a hairpin.

There is a tiny ceramic heart in the red earth with little hands at its edges, broken but not broken, and I pick it up and hold it like a European piece of something that meant something at some point in the human history and got out here somehow in this desert, why this angel?

Was she a widow too? Or just another survivor from the frontier war that killed some 400 or more women, children and Elders camping peacefully on the banks of the river.

It's sitting there, under the surface – the survivor story, all those widows all that romance of the great frontier.

Big land, all the dug up stuff.

Uncle will talk to Barry in the dreamtime to obtain his wisdom.

Gums will onto it.

Services Australia extracting money from super for the funeral, woman like the elves from Kempsey and trying to get super out for the funeral takes the ashes in.

Child support from the ashes.

That's gold. Drive thru Dubbo Kentucky fried, with the fake flowers, driving back low sunlight.





A Survivor's Spell Song

Caitie Gutierrez

a song that calls for healing,
from the depths where secrets hide,
not just a lure to peril,
but a cry for truth and light.



in the siren's soothing melody,
echoes of a spell unsung,
a survivor's voice entwined with pain,
where justice has begun.

in the whisper of the waves,
i sense a balance calling,
not rigid, nor bound by shame,
a path that's still evolving.



i won't assume there's one way forward,
my journey is my own.
healing is an ocean flowing,
in its depths, the light is shown.



too much focus on redemption,
forgetting those who bear the scars.
survivors' needs should shine the brightest,
chart your course by those healing stars.



righteous anger like a storm,
voices rising, breaking norms.
my justice isn't cruel or cold,
it's the flame where truth is forged.



you won't co-opt our stories,
our truths remain headstrong.
in each word,
i reclaim my power with this survival song.

i reject the hollow promises
from systems that won't listen.
my pain will not be analysed,
i'm not playing the victim.



i mock my oppressors,
humour as my sharp machete blade,
turning pain into resistance,
in my laughter, i'm remade.

i'll fight against the silence,
against the lies that bind me.
my story is my guiding light,
in my truth, you'll find me.



i'm tired of the stories
that favour the abusers' plight,
their journey back to normalcy
should not eclipse our light.

survivors' healing – justice,
must be our first concern,
for it's in our voices – needs,
where true change we discern.



i look to those who led before,
Black Panthers,
STAR,
Young Lords,
their direct actions light my path,
through the echoes
of their words.



with waterbending power,
and the *Luz* that guides the way,
i find the strength to rise and flower,
in the dawn of a new day.

the Red Road shows me the path,
healing wounds with ancestral lore.
yet, our practices, colonised,
are weapons for those who harm me more.

abuse is not mere conflict,
mutual abuse is a lie.
survivors are not abusive
for naming the pain we hold inside.



i won't be a silent victim,
i'm the force that breaks the chains.
in every tear and every cry,
a seed of justice remains.

you claim this is a witch hunt,
while i am the witch you burn.
my voice rises from the ashes,
the phoenix always returns.



survivors, we're forever changed,
by the flames we've traveled through.
our abusers must change the same,
in our justice, they'll find truth.

i am not the perfect victim,
i am the one who survived.
“our justice,” a spell i sing,
“together, Still We Rise.”





Ingrown Toenail

Lachlan Parry

I am just trying so hard not to think about it. Like, I refuse to think about it, now, of all times. But it's there, right in front of my eyes, taunting me, flailing around in the air like some chip crazed seagull. I close my eyes. If I can't see it, then it's not real. I won't think about it. I won't think about it.

But what if it's infected? Jack, please – you shouldn't – no, you can't. You've been waiting for this moment for two years, you can't make this about your ingrown toenail, you can't make this about your ingrown toenail!

I open my eyes again and there, somewhere on the bed, somewhere in the haze behind my fucking toenail, behind my legs in the air, is Richie. Sexy Richie, slowly eating me out, asking me if I'm okay, asking if I am enjoying it. If only he knew that all I could fucking think about was my *probably* infected toenail.

Can I be bothered? Probably not.

A bunch of my friends are going to Oxford St tonight and whoever I was today when I was sitting at my desk and I said



fuck yeah to the idea of a night out dancing – that person is dead now. As I try on a sixth shirt option in front of the mirror, I feel the all-too-familiar wave of dread wash over me –

You're hideous. That shirt looks terrible. These pants make you look like a real estate agent. It won't be worth it. No guys will want you. No one likes you. Even if they do want you, what will you do?

I decide *fuck it*. I pick up my keys and I text my friend that I'm on my way. We're meeting for drinks at the Courty before going over, which suits cause I can always just ghost when we're done there if it feels more like a kebab and bed kind of night. I get there and my friend Pearl is sitting in the backyard at one of the big tables. It's fully packed other than Pearl's table, which is empty except for her, making it look like she's glowing. Pearl kind of does glow.

Pearl and I have been friends since uni. Well, she's still there actually, she might never finish – not sure she wants to. When I sit down, she tells me to buy the first round on account of my new big boy job. I do as I'm told and we spend the next couple of hours talking as much shit as we possibly can.

A few hours in, and many beers later, this guy approaches the table and he's vaguely familiar. He has that specific fade in his hair that everyone had a few years ago, in the way that everyone has a mullet now. He asks Pearl how she's been, in response she's reluctant and mysterious. Before he leaves, he says how good it is to see me again and leans over, kissing me on the cheek before vanishing into the crowd.



I'm a bit gagged. If I'm honest, it's been two years since I had the drive... or the, whatever – It's been two years since I fucked anyone. Usually, bloody Timothee Chalamet could kiss me on the cheek and I'd be as soft as wet bread. But for some reason, in the backyard of the Courty of all places, I felt it again.

I ask Pearl who he is and she says his name is Richie and they used to fuck. He's an engineer, she thinks. I ask if it would be weird if I follow him on Instagram and she gets this kind of glint in her eye. Pearl says he's a bit known for dating trans girls but if he is into twinks, then the sex was like *fucked good* and I should absolutely follow him.

We go to Oxford St after a little while and jump from club to club, in search of whatever music will make Pearl happy. We drink a few too many vodka red bulls. At some point in the night, I end up sandwiched between these two guys while Pearl hooks up with one of their friends. The music is *just* good enough that I end up kind of dancing with the taller one. We shout small talk into each other's ears on the dancefloor, his name is Something, and him and his friends are in the Navy. God.

When he asks if he can kiss me, I down my drink and think *fuck it*, high on the feeling from when Richie kissed my cheek. Who knows what's possible with Something. The kiss is wet, but I enjoy it and I hear Pearl scream somewhere behind me. I want this, right?

Looking back, I can still see the look of shock on his face as I pushed him away when he slid his hand down my back, sending an all too familiar shiver down my spine. Don't touch me. I was out of the club before I knew it.



It's not that I *don't* want it... I really want it. But after everything that happened I just couldn't bare it and now it feels like it's been so long that at any point an angel could appear to tell me I'm pregnant with the Lord's child.

It just makes me feel broken, unfixable – like no matter what I decide, it's going to be the wrong choice and I'll end up being hurt again, beyond repair. Coming back from the brink last time is still a miracle to me; I can't promise I would be able to do that again.

When I get home that night, kebab devoured, I jack off to a picture of Richie on his Instagram; one from Mardi Gras where he looks fun, a bit wild, but mostly kind. When I pick my phone back up after cleaning off my stomach, I have a message from him.

Thx for the follow. Hope ur night was good. Mine was alright, highlight was seeing u.

He sends full stops and has auto-capitalisation on but it doesn't make me cringe one bit.

We text and text and text over the next few days and it feels like my very first crush all over again. While we're hanging out, I can't help but disclose what happened. Like bringing up a late night kebab, it just kind of falls out of me.

He listens and nods and says all the right things. He tells me whatever pace I need is good for him. He asks if he can just kiss me. It's the best kiss of my life.

We keep talking and it takes me about a month, (and two failed, panicked attempts) before I'm finally ready to try.



He comes up for air and I'm momentarily able to stop thinking about my ingrown toenail. He asks me if I'm okay and I tell him that I'm a bit in my head. He lies down next to me and draws lines on my arm with the tip of his finger.

After a little while, we start to kiss again and then I throw my leg over and sit on top of him. Both of us trying to make our bodies as close as they can be to one another, practically trying to merge into one. After a little while, with me on top, it happens, and I'm too caught up by how quickly I'm falling in love with this man to think about my toenail – or anything else.





Andre Cordova
Song: Kitten



"FUCK OFF"

Artwork Credit: Jay Kobe



Kitten

The anger of the abused

(Verse 1)

I was minding
my business, just
swiping away

Then this man
hit me up, had
something to say

Critiquing the
choice of words
used in my bio

Preventative
measures affected
his ego

Tone policing
a person of colour

If he wasn't a
thousand, I'd call
up his mother

I read him for filth
and taught him
a lesson

Hardly his fault he's
had poor education

(Pre-Chorus)

I've had enough

Fuck off!

You wanna
get rough?

Fuck off!

I don't wanna talk

Fuck off!

I said

I don't wanna talk

I don't wanna talk!

Fuck off!

(Chorus)

I'm a kitten, bitch

Not a fuckin' snitch

I will eat the rich

Throw you
in a ditch

Watch your
body twitch

'fore I fuckin' switch

And they'll never
know cos

And they'll
never know cos

And they'll
never know cos

Cause I'm a kitten,
bitch!



SCAN TO
WATCH
VIDEO





Andre
Cordova

"FUCK OFF"

(Verse 2)

Damn right I'm
tired of being
underrated

Unappreciated,
underestimated

As they might say,
that's just the biz!

Do you know what
my name is?!

Teach you to doubt
me, believe what
you see

Without your
approval,
how do I compete?

Not like I know
myself better
than you

Without a brave
hero, oh,
what will I do?

(Pre-Chorus)

(Chorus)

(Bridge)

I'm sick of the pain,
I'm sick of the trauma

I hate that I almost
got raped in a sauna

I'm sick of the
sexists, I'm sick
of the racists

I want them
to burn, just give
us an exit

A grand spectacle,
a supernova

Bitch, get on my
level, they need an
inhaler!

I'm calling on
justice to bring
down the karma!

Now gimme some
vodka, don't wanna
be sober

You know what my
order is? Cutie.

Vodka raspberry,
yes, tall glass please.

(Chorus)

(Pre-Chorus)

(Final Chorus)

I'm a kitten, bitch

Not a fuckin' snitch

I will eat the rich

Throw you in a ditch

Watch your body
twitch

'fore I fuckin' switch

And they'll never
know cos

And they'll never
know cos

And they'll never
know

Cause I'm a kitten,
bitch!





The Hardening

By Larissa Smith

Cotton muslin fabric,
plaster and mixed materials on wood.







This work is an exploration of imagery that grounds me, and connects me to pleasure. For many survivors, discovering new ways of approaching arousal and pleasure is part of the healing process. The creative process for this collage called for an examination of my understanding of pleasure. I began considering what pleasure looked like as an aesthetic experience, rather than a physical one.

I enjoy collaging because it allows me to work intuitively. Collaging doesn't demand perfection, it simply asks you to share your favourites – colours, patterns, words, items, people. The creative choices I make are based on instinct and experimentation; from the materials I choose to the layout of the elements.



This collage is a reclamation of beauty in a space that was made unsafe for me. While creating this piece, I realised that pleasure was mine to experience and explore. With a simple collage, I've started transforming my own relationship with pleasure. And I hope that you can too.

Reimagining Pleasure*Mixed
Media Digital Collage*
By Siena Bordignon



A photograph of a forest path during autumn. The path is covered in fallen leaves, with a red ribbon or ribbon-like path leading through the trees. The trees have yellow and orange leaves, and the ground is covered in brown and orange leaves. The text is overlaid on the image.

You have
reached
the midway
point.

Remember
to take
a breath...

Scan the QR code for resources



...now
continue
on the
path ahead



Synthesis

By Bronte McDowell-Jones





Dress
By Sarah Malone





Grass
By Sarah Malone





Wings
By Sarah Malone



Water
By Sarah Malone





Don't Touch

(Verse 1)

Everything I share
will be true

Which I shouldn't
have to say but
still do

It's bad enough to
live with memories

To wonder what you
must think of me

He stakes his claim
out in the distance

"I need to rob him
of his innocence"

Following until my
guard is down

"No one will know
if he doesn't make
a sound"

(Pre-Chorus)

They always say
boys don't have
to worry

No need to take
them seriously

(Chorus)

Like a demon from
my dreams

He grabbed me and
I couldn't breathe

Where could all
the angels be?

No one is here
to rescue me

Please don't touch

Please,
please don't touch

Please don't touch

Please, please,
please don't touch

Please don't touch

Please don't touch

(Verse 2)

I swear I tried to
push him off me

Hands all over
where they
shouldn't be

Even forced
me toward the
backroom

Now I'm in a bloody
courtroom !

(Pre-Chorus)

They always say
boys don't have
to worry

No need to take
them seriously





The anthem of consent

(Chorus)

Like a demon from
my dreams

He grabbed me and
I couldn't breathe

Where could all
the angels be?

No one is here
to rescue me

Please don't touch

Please,
please don't touch

Please don't touch

Please, please,
please don't touch

Please don't touch

Please don't touch

(Bridge)

As I think about what
could have been

I want to tear you
limb from limb

Make you wish you
had some discipline

As I think about
what you have done

I want to teach you
real fun

Choke you with
the belt of notches
you wear like
a loaded gun

(Final Chorus)

Like a demon from
my dreams

He grabbed me and
I couldn't breathe

Where could all the
angels be?

No one is here to
rescue me

Like a demon from
my dreams

He grabbed me and
I couldn't breathe

Where could all the
angels be?

No one is here to
rescue me

Please don't touch

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Please don't touch

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Please don't touch

Please, please,
please don't touch

Please don't touch

Please don't touch





I Survive Therefore I Speak:
Pieces of Me
By Tito Stowers





Note the oversize jacket is made out of remnants/pieces of material to suit the purpose and the title of the poems. It also have connection to my culture with the accessories I'm wearing. The stop sign is a common scene at school crossings which signify the "Stop child sex abuse".

Credits:

Designer: Tito Stowers | Photographer: Paul Vasquez
Wardrobe designer/Stylist: Lavashe Couture



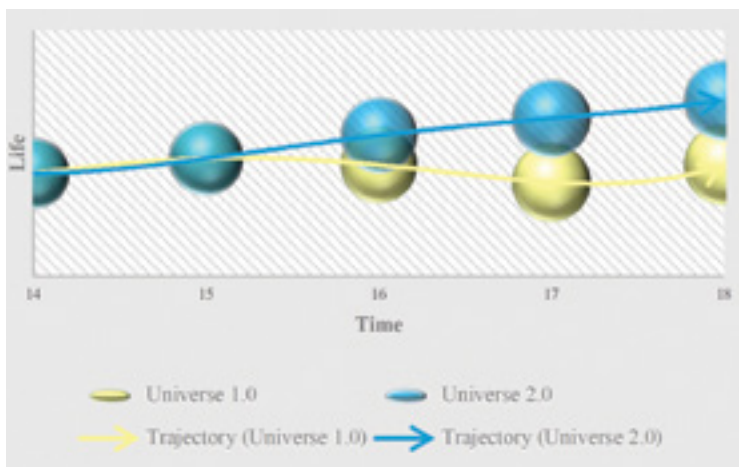


Figure 1: My life trajectory





Tangents

Agosto Malakas

1.

I have hemmed and hawed on what to write about what happened to me 16 years ago. Is “happen” the right word to use? To “happen” suggests a singular event or instance, with no subject perpetrating the acts, as if I, the object, merely ran into them by chance or by circumstance, as if they simply happened to me, sans subject, sans perpetrator.

2.

Was it even 16 years ago when it *happened*? When do we start counting the years from a series of events that began from the moment you met someone, and ended when you removed them from your orbit? In any case, it was 21 years ago when they came into my life, and 14 years since I walked away from theirs.

3.

I have a hard time identifying with the word “survivor.” To call myself a *survivor* implies I surmounted something that could have killed me, but to acknowledge their abuse had the power to kill the me *then* feels like to assign them power over the me *now*, the 31-year-old me who wouldn’t piss on them if they were on fire.



4.

As I write I realize, this that feels like pride is merely armour for a more insidious version of shame.

5.

I have decided I don't want to talk about what *happened* then. I want to talk about what happened since.

6.

I lost my memories of that period of my life until one random day, maybe 9 years ago, they resurfaced. For days, I could barely speak or move, and when I finally mustered the courage to tell my partner what happened, she said I had *already told her* and somehow, this I had also forgotten.

7.

When I told my parents I was moving out to live with my girlfriend, they said *go ahead and never come back*. My entire "family" sat back and watched me pack my bags. I went from sharing a bunk bed with my sisters, to sharing a mattress on the floor with my girlfriend in a 19-sqm apartment. It was the best decision I ever made in my life.

8.

Second-best was deciding to move to Australia.



9.

I moved here 5 years ago, with my then-girlfriend, now-wife, and we married each other 4 years ago. *She* is the best thing to have happened to me 14 years ago, when she messed up in band practice, and we made eye contact, and she smiled and saved my life.

10.

I have a master's degree in STEM, and I work full-time in a job that I love, and I no longer worry about rent, but I worry about my visa, and strangers on the street coming up to "guess my nationality," and co-workers staring at my tattoos and pointing out my wardrobe choices, and being asked how I'm related to my wife, and about my sick father, and late-night phone calls, and the price of going "home."

11.

I go to therapy, but for other things, like my *nuclear family*. I have yet to go to therapy for that period of my life, and maybe I never will. Instead, I attend survivor groups and volunteer in survivor spaces, as to why, I don't know yet, I haven't unpacked that yet, maybe because I haven't gone to therapy for it.

12.

I can now see a doctor any time I need to, or want to, for any issue. I almost never went to the doctor's growing up, so this feels very new, like when I went to see a gynaecologist for bleeding, and she had to do a pap smear, and I screamed from the pain, and I cried so much that I scared her.



13.

They did all the tests and didn't find anything wrong, but I still bleed when I lift weights, when I wear a tampon, and when I orgasm. They couldn't find anything wrong, but I can hazard a guess.

14.

I write and paint and sculpt, and I watch plays at the theatre, and I eat at fancy restaurants, and I barely drink, and I don't take drugs, and I travel regularly, and I hate going back *home*, and I can't trust anyone other than my wife, and I barely speak to my *family*, and I love dogs, and I love kids, but I don't think I will ever have them, I don't know if I can even have them.

15.

I live in the city, and I love to walk, and when the sun is out and it touches my skin it feels like God herself is touching me, and I love my life and I am incredibly grateful, and I still can't say it out loud, and I still bleed from the scarring in my vagina, and I still have nightmares all the time, and I am afraid of all men, and I go to therapy, but not for these things, but other things, and I don't want to admit I'm a *survivor*, and I don't want to admit I was a *victim*, and yet I was, and so I am.

16.

If I travelled back in time and told the *me-before-then* that one day they would do this to her, and then everything else she would do after, I like to imagine her choosing to change course, her life trajectory splitting from mine, sloping towards points I will never know.



17.

What's another word for "regret" for things you didn't choose to happen?

18.

Perhaps in a parallel universe, there exists a version of me who wasn't raped on her 16th birthday, and we will never meet, though maybe I won't recognize her if we passed each other on the street, yet still when the sun is out and it touches her skin it feels like God herself is touching her, and she is just as happy, and maybe even happier.





My Own Author

Charlie Rose

I am the author of my tale so bold,
writing the painful words of my truths untold.
My past is my teacher and never again my chain,
from each lesson learned, I rise again.

I am loves's echo; I am justice's ending,
in my own loving arms, what was once fractured now mending.
I celebrate myself, and all that I am,
in life's vast ocean,
I am not merely a muddied dam.

The future it calls with welcoming hands,
In bloodied battlefields, my warrior spirit still stands.
I am boundless, I am brave, I am meant to be,
In my world, never chained but always free.

This is my affirmation, strong and clear,
Fills each fleeting moment, near and dear.
I am whole, unbroken, not merely surviving,
In the story of my life, I am thriving.





My Body Is A Temple

Charlie Rose

My body is a temple,
dishonoured and debased.

My body is a temple,
has always been too much but never enough.

My body is a temple,
unwanted and contemptuous,

My body was a temple,
neglected,
unloved,
devoid of worshippers,
or caretakers.

Scarred.

Damaged.

Forgotten.

My body is a temple,
adaptable and brave.

My body is a temple,
that I now treasure always.

My body is a temple,
where I begin to worship.



Persistently.

Compassionately.

Loud and powerfully.

My Body is **MY** Temple.

I will not let it ever be again forgotten nor downtrodden.

My body is **Mine**.





The House Is On Fire

Jinx

The first time I was touched, I didn't say 'no'. I froze, not knowing what to say or do, feeling my boyfriend's fingers travelling up my skirt in public. In that moment I didn't really care, or maybe I did and I just wasn't... really there. I didn't say 'no' or 'stop', I didn't even hate it (maybe I liked it?). It wasn't until six years later that I realised it was assault.

The first time he dropped his pants and asked me to blow him, I didn't say 'no'. I froze, my mind feeling so far away, my eyes and hands analysing this piece of anatomy as if I was in a biology lecture staring down at a specimen. But I still did it; I didn't want him to hate me. It wasn't until five years later that I realised that wasn't what consent was.

The first, and second, and third, and fourth,
and on and on and on –

I said 'no', but he continued,

saying he was 'getting me in the mood'.

I said 'no', and he sulked until I gave in.

I said 'no' and 'no' and 'no' but he kept asking 'why' and
'why' and 'why' until I ran out of reasons.



It wasn't bad.

It wasn't violent.

I enjoyed it.

I didn't hate it.

So... it must have been consensual?

Three years ago, I accepted I wasn't a girl, and it was the biggest act of kindness I ever did for myself. But of course, he didn't get it. He wouldn't use my new pronouns, laughed at my new name, berated me for my clothing choices, and refused to let me cut or colour my hair – until one day, the sludge of dysphoria that he was cooking inside me boiled over.

Six months, one year, two years after I left him, I didn't understand why I was getting all these nightmares. Didn't understand why I was dreaming about sexual violence, or why he was always there years after I had seen him last. It took me two years to realise I had been harassed, coerced, assaulted, and raped.

Being socialised as woman, the dream was always to fall in love with a boy, get married, have kids and raise a family. I ate up every teen romance book out there, drowning myself in heteronormativity and convincing myself that was what I wanted.

After all, boys were okay, I even found some to be pretty. Boys were fine, I even found some to be nice. Boys were alright, I even found some I didn't mind.

I didn't know, I didn't know, I didn't know that I didn't want it. I thought I did.



The first time I had sex with a woman, everything clicked – *this* was what sexual attraction felt like, what sex was *supposed* to feel like. It was like finally breathing in fresh air after living in a smoke-filled house for years, not realising the house had been on fire all along.

My experience is not an uncommon one, especially among queer individuals assigned female at birth, and it's commonly referred to as 'compulsory heterosexuality'. As a younger person, the sex education I received at school was much more progressive than it had been in the past, but it is and was still sorely lacking.

Without representation, I was unable to imagine a life for myself outside of the heterosexual cisgender normal. Even if it was burning down everything around me.

I didn't know.

I hope for future generations of young queer people to know what I didn't.

Maybe this time, the house won't burn down.





everything in its right place

Maeve King-Devery

When I was born, I was gifted a body that did not belong to me.

Of course, I wasn't to know that at first. Growing up I was told the same things so many children were, in an attempt to keep me safe, in an attempt to give me agency – *no one should touch your private parts, no means no, tell an adult* – but it wasn't until adolescence that I began to realise what I thought was mine belonged to everyone but me.

It's a strange feeling, to inhabit a body that isn't yours. To stretch out through your limbs and feel alien in your skin. To run – for joy, for the sake of running, for fear, or for fitness – and feel like you're taking a back seat in your own brain.

It's an even stranger feeling to sit across from a psychologist with kind eyes as she tells you this is disassociation, depersonalisation, derealisation – a normal response to trauma. Her voice is soft as she pathologises your bodilessness. She'll make you feel like lots of people live in bodies that have been carved up like sweetbread, thrown to the wolves, torn apart piece by piece, quartered and split.

She'll tell you this, she'll reassure you that what you're feeling is normal, and she will never – not once – call it rape.



She'll teach you strategies to help you begin to heal from trauma, and secretly instruct your parents never to use the 'R-word' around you.

She'll listen and comfort you as you cry over him for year after year after year, and she'll forever refer to it as "what happened with [REDACTED]" and never "when [REDACTED] raped you".

She'll invite the doubts into your mind, and she will do nothing to fend them off.

I was fourteen when someone first took something that was not theirs to take.

He started with my heart.

(A body without a heart cannot live for long, scientists say – and yet here I stand, a medical miracle.)

Of course, I didn't know this at the time. I thought that what had happened to me was normal, that this is just what happened to everyone when they had sex for the first time. Despite the warnings ringing in my ears from trusted adults (*you're too young to be having sex, you can say no, don't let anyone take advantage of you*), a boy I'd trusted, a boy I'd even loved, a thirteen year old boy who didn't know any better and who was only repeating history, had stolen my heart and my virginity and, worst of all, is that I was so conditioned to believe that my body was not my own that I did not even realise what was happening to me. It was not until years later, as I sat across from that psychologist, that it came upon me with a dawning sense



of horror that not only was what happened to me not normal, it was illicit, immoral, wrong.

The pattern repeated itself, year, after year, after year, men taking what they were owed like I was spread open for them to pick over and peruse as if my body was a fucking buffet. Slowly, I began to lose more and more of myself until I was a husk, spread thin – parts of myself walking all over the world, buried inside the men who had stolen me.

I began to joke that I would like to be a brain in a jar, or a floating cloud of miasma, ethereal and unobtainable. I began to starve myself, to try and disappear even more. And when I was an adult – when I thought I had finally started to grasp what was left of me – the body-that-was-not-mine revealed its ace: you're not a woman, actually.

To live inside a body that has been betrayed and then harvested by others is a cruelty. To then have what's left of that body commit a further betrayal is unthinkable. The one true ally I'd thought I'd had – my brain and my body, forever intertwined, surely there had to be friendship there? – had abandoned me at last.

Questioning one's gender is a scary experience for anyone, at any time, but while I was still trying to cope in the wake of seemingly boundless trauma it nearly killed me. I laid awake at night crying, wishing I could be 'normal', wishing that if I couldn't have a body of my own – if I had to have this strange one that didn't quite fit – it would be okay if I could just *make* it fit –

And then the pandemic arrived.



To be clear, COVID-19 did not give me a genetic disorder called Hypermobile Ehlers Danlos Syndrome. That had been lurking in my mangled cells since birth. But once I got COVID, it exacerbated symptoms that I'd (yet again) thought were 'normal', pain that I thought everyone struggled with, pain that was constantly dismissed because the unwanted body had breasts and a vagina and thus I had to be making things up.

The symptoms became something I could no longer ignore. It was the universe's idea of a cruel joke: a body that was barely hanging on, a body made up of contorted memories and stolen parts, a body that caused me dysphoria every single day, was now a disabled body.

Unlike being a survivor of sexual violence or being non-binary, being disabled was visible on this body. I began using a cane to help with my balance and fatigue – and the fact that my joints liked to dislocate at random – and all of a sudden people perceived me entirely differently. Society doesn't quite know what to do with young people who use mobility aids.

Most importantly, though, the cane was a symbol: there's something wrong with this body. This body has a dysfunction somewhere. You may think it's the dislocating joints, but if you look closer, you might be able to see the source of my true distress: this distinctly feminine thing, so different from how I wish it was.

Look even closer and you might begin to see how it's just a motley crew of skin stitched together with fragile thread. You might get a sense of mourning, of loss, of parts lost to now-strangers, walking forever with them.



Come even closer, close enough to touch now, but you won't be touching me. You might see me instead, far away, formless, laughing in the stars. Can you see the way I see myself? Can you see me staring out through alien eyes at a world not built for the likes of me, staring in the mirror at a body that I was given, a body I did not ask for? A body that is seventeen kinds of fucked up but despite everything can still ride a horse and climb a pole and write millions of words and a body that can keep fucking going. Despite everything, I can keep going, me and this body that does not belong to me.

I am not sure I can ever get back what was lost. Time and men and casual cruelty and years of denial – years of it wasn't rape, it's just 'what happened with [REDACTED]' – have made sure of that. But what's left behind can, perhaps one day, eventually feel like a home.





Lost And Found

Charlie Rose

In shadows cast by a cruel moon's glow,
a shattered soul bears a heavy woe.
Betrayed by trust and an innocence lost,
by cruel hands at a selfish cost.

A tormenting echo, a silent scream,
in the depths of night, a shattered dream.
The scars dormant, but deep they lie,
a constant reminder but never knowing why.
In darkness deep, a soul is hurt,
haunted by memories, forever alert.
Lost in a maze of sorrow's grasp,
struggling through each tormenting gasp.

Scars like shadows, etched in skin,
echoes of trauma, buried within.
No light to guide & no hope in sight,
just endless tears in the long endless night.
Each day a battle, each night a war,
against the demons behind the closed door.
In the night I scream, the memories appear,
in the day it's easier, I can fight and persevere.



My story may be tale of sorrow profound,
in the depths of despair, thought surely drowned.

Yet still they strive, against the tide,
I will find my strength and I will swim to the other side.





Midlife Disclosures

Polly Vader

Complex, revisionist, imperfect, glorious, devastating.

+

‘I am listening – sorry. Jesus why didn’t you say something? Oh my God, look at that,’ my friend sighs.

We’re walking along the coast. She’s pointing to a modernist apartment. I look at it. My hearing’s out of whack. The ocean’s loud, busy I’m attending to the edges of worlds.

‘Every time I come here, I stop,’ she goes on. ‘Have you ever noticed that balcony? I’d totally live there.’

I nod towards the coveted flat thinking that if she lived there the toddler would leap the pretty balcony to certain death, join the ghosts falling over each other to be heard the length and breadth of the cliff tops.

She touches my arm, with significance, chats on. I hear only murdered souls clamouring over the jumpers. Accidentals screaming all the way down from the cemetery. Their voices together are tall, electric, a textured wall of tones, perishing relentless strings.



+

‘Yes. I think you would make a credible witness. Have you thought about what it’d be like to be on the witness stand? Do you think you’re emotionally strong enough for that?’. She’s a criminal defence barrister, of the fancy and compassionate kind. Her first lens is the capacity of my evidence, memory and character to withstand both scrutiny and the processes of justice. Her first impulse is to protect me from both.

I’d not mentioned taking action. Coppers found enough of the others, got old mate locked up before I stuck my neck out. It’ll do. Besides, everyone else is dead.

+

‘Did this come up in hypnotherapy?’

‘Did what?’

‘The memories.’

‘Um, no. Hypnotherapy is sitting in a chair being relaxed and having pleasant visualisations while someone nice and appropriately qualified sits next to you.’

‘Oh.’

‘I used to go to at lunchtime, before big meetings at work so I felt like I could walk into a room full of twenty blokes with their arms crossed in chambray shirts. It helped.’

+

Silence.

+



‘Oh. Something happened to my sister, too, I think. Are you OK? I always wondered, if it happened to me and I just can’t remember it.’

+

‘It’s just, the suffering, it’s too much. I can’t.’

+

‘Jesus,’ my friend rolls the chair slightly away from the table where we’ve been hanging out, looking through songs. Always with the Jesus. ‘Not you too.’

I read disappointment mixed with compassion. Solidarity mixed with repulsion, impatience. Her arms get quite itchy. She is very sensitive to the emotions of others, which I need to understand. Absorbs them like a sponge. I apologise.

+

‘You know what you need,’ says the best, looking me straight in the face. I can smell her armpits.

‘I know what I need,’ I repeat.

+

Need threatens to swallow me whole.

I’m not always at my best.

Everyone’s got stuff and complex busy lives.

+

We both talk with our hands and flail from the waist when activated. She’s in mental health. Tells me how hard it’s been



for my partner, tells me what I need to understand. I don't know what she's talking about.

'You're in crisis! Do you even realise? Crisis!' She leans in, tries to lock eyes.

'You're looking at me like I'm standing on a bridge. I know what I'm doing.'

'You're not OK!'

I'm annoyed about this new crisis. I don't know what to say about being annoyed because I'm busy performing my answers to the requisite checklist of intrusive suggestions.

'I feel well. Kind of transformed in fact, and not to be fucked with.'

She shakes her head and takes me at my word, reminds me not to take on too much, drifts away.

+

'That sounds very hard for you'.

My friend's driving me home from the city. She says not to waste my talent, steps back from our plans. I go quiet. She wants to ask me something. Wants to talk about the ball of anxiety in her own stomach. Her worries about the designer not returning her emails about the playroom and laundry renovation.

I listen as she rails about what to do, how to get it done, how it will be difficult to be without a washing machine for six weeks but at least her mum's down the road although that also has its challenges.



Wisps of my spirit leak from my sphincter and escape through the air conditioning vents in thin trails of smoke.

I give her my full attention. Check in about it via text, later. She thanks me for my concern, says she thinks she'll be ok.

+





Taking It Back

Jinx

People only seem to care about my trauma
When they can see it etched out across my skin
Never mind the invisible handprints
Splayed across every inch of this body
It still feels his touch
Slimy, unwanted
Invisible.

A deep discomfort claws its way out of this body
Seeps out of its skin like poison
Scratches up its throat
Crawls out between its teeth
It itches
It never ends
I can't breathe.

Only satisfied with physical pain
It soaks up the sweat and the blood, then
Retreats into my skin
Crawls sluggishly into my mouth
Slides back down my throat
I can breathe.



Every comment about its weight
Its height, its hair
Dispelled from my mind
Each cut, every sting
Signifying that I am finally
Finally
Taking back my own body.

But they look and they stare –
Only uncomfortable when they can see it
They protest against the permanence of ink
That I chose
Never mind the unseen permanent bruises
Left in this mind
Its choice, disregarded.

But not here, not now
Where tattoos bloom across my skin
A work of art, covered in blood and pain
But beautiful and wanted
A permanent stain in my heart
Of my own choosing.

This is me
Claiming back my own body
From the touches
The words
The idea that I am only beautiful when someone wants me –
No.

I am beautiful
Covered in choices that I make
That I want.





Because I Wasn't Allowed To Know

C.A. Watts

I didn't know it was neglect; there were a lot of us.
I didn't know it wasn't discipline; I thought it was deserved.
I didn't know I should ask for help; that would just make it worse.
I didn't know, because they didn't want me to know.

I didn't know I wasn't meant to be figuring it out alone;
that had always been the default
I didn't know it wasn't my responsibility;
I genuinely thought it was.
I didn't know adults were meant to guide you;
the responsibility was just always on me.
I didn't know it was abuse, because they didn't want me to know.

I didn't know I was built different;
I just thought I didn't know enough.
I didn't know the expectations were unfair;
I just thought I wasn't trying hard enough.
I didn't know I shouldn't be scared every minute of every day;
it was all I'd ever known.
I didn't get to know. I wasn't allowed to know.

They didn't want me to know because I was just a kid.
They didn't want me to know because it wouldn't matter if I did.



They didn't want me to know; it was irrelevant to me.

They didn't want me to know; I had ages to grow up you see.

I didn't know I was meant to have a say; I'd never had one before

I didn't know I could say no; I'd never been allowed to before.

I didn't know my life was meant to be mine;

it never had been before.

I didn't know safe places existed; I'd never found them before

I didn't get to know because it benefited them for me not to know

I didn't know what I didn't know, so I thought I knew enough.

I didn't know I wasn't safe; I'd never felt peace before.

I didn't know I wasn't alive; I'd never lived before.

I didn't know my existence wasn't to purely meet the
expectations of others;

I'd never been allowed to disregard them before.

I didn't know it was wrong; I was of legal age.

I didn't know expecting it was coercive;

all we're told is people wanting you is a good thing.

I didn't know I was meant to enjoy it. I wasn't allowed to know.

I didn't know it shouldn't happen; I thought it was meant to hurt.

I didn't know I shouldn't feel like I did;

I thought every relationship had problems.

I didn't know it wasn't normal to bleed;

my boss wouldn't even let me go home.

This wasn't what a relationship was meant to be, but I wasn't
allowed to know.

I didn't know how easily the way we're treated as a kid

translates into our adult relationships;

if we didn't recognise what they did.



I didn't know it wasn't ok. People kept telling me I was just being dramatic

I didn't know to report it; I thought it was normal.

I didn't get to know because it benefited them for me not to know.

They didn't want me to know.

How could I claim I didn't want it if I didn't know what 'it' was.

They didn't want me to know; then

"of course you know" "you have 3 older siblings"

"how could you not know?"

Because you never told me bro! I wasn't allowed to know!

I didn't know I wasn't broken; it was all I'd heard before.

I didn't know I had a community; I'd never seen them before.

I didn't know there were people out there like me;

I'd never come across them before.

I didn't know, because I wasn't allowed to know.

I didn't know I was Autistic; "that's for little boys" they say.

I didn't know I was ADHD "it could be flogged out" of me, he claimed.

I didn't know how morbid it was to be relieved it wasn't just me.

I didn't know what autism and ADHD were, and so I couldn't know what they meant for me.

I didn't get to know. I wasn't allowed to know.

I didn't know Autistics are 6x more likely to be trans and trans people are 5x more likely to be Autistic.

I didn't know 9/10 Autistics assumed female would experience what I had in their lifetime,

so I didn't know I was at greater risk of being targeted.

I didn't get to know. I wasn't allowed to know.



I didn't know that upwards of 70% of prison populations meet the criteria for ADHD,
so I didn't know I was more likely to be impulsive and that would leave me vulnerable.

I didn't know what autism and ADHD were, and so I couldn't know what they meant for me.

I didn't get to know. I wasn't allowed to know.

I didn't know what intersectionality was; how all forms of prejudice are connected.

I didn't know you couldn't solve homophobia without solving racism,

or racialised Queer people would be left behind;

That you couldn't solve transphobia without solving ableism or trans crips would be left behind.

You can't solve Autistiphobia without solving Queerphobias, or Queer Autistics get left behind.

I didn't get to know, because they don't want us to know.

What you don't know is: your community is waiting for you, when you decide you are ready.

What you don't know is: we are everywhere.

What you don't know is: we see you.

What you don't know is: so many have travelled this path before.

You need to know what you don't know.

You need to know: no fault lies in you.

You need to know: you are not alone.

You need to know: who you are and what you're about.

You need to know, and you need support to figure it out.

You need to know where to find us.

You need to know we can help.

You need to know who you don't know.



You need to know the needs of your body are normal,
while the expectations of what you do with it put on you
by others is not.

You need to know how your body works,
so others cannot take advantage of that lack of knowledge.
You need to know it shouldn't hurt,
and anyone who disagrees doesn't care about your pain.
You need to know what you don't know.

You need to know, no matter who is telling you otherwise:
your body is your own. Your brain is your own.

Your feelings are your own,
and you do not owe anyone any part of them; any part of you.
You need to know it should only happen if you want it to,
and it doesn't count if you had to be 'convinced'.
You need to know what you don't know.

You need to know you're not 'mature for your age',
they are simply predatory for theirs.

You need to know what you don't know.

You need to know you are more than another's conquest.
They are building their identity from you,
while you do not have to build yours from them.

You need to know, because it protects you to know.

You need to know your 'number' does not discount your
right to choose;

that a higher number does not equal a lower value.

You need to know that a past 'yes' does not discount a current 'no'.

You need to know that many things can mean 'no',

but only an enthusiastic and freely given 'yes' is a yes.

You know to know, because to respect is to know.



You need to know your gut instinct is not wrong,
no matter who tells you to ignore it.
You need to know no one else knows your experience;
its validity cannot be taken from you.
You need to know the risks you face.
You need to know how your body feels when it's content and safe.
How else will you recognise when it's not?

No one taught me what I needed to know;
it was expected I just would.
And even when I knew enough to say something,
I didn't know enough to explain.
And they could ask all the 'whys' in a way I couldn't,
because I was never allowed to ask,
because I wasn't allowed to know.

I was never allowed to know,
so when I did finally speak up,
refuse to keep the peace,
not rock the boat,
those confronted by what I had to say
could reply "well what do YOU know?"





Built From Broken Pieces

Tito Stowers

Broken and disconnected
Like uneven edges of a mosaic
Scattered hopelessly
Like glass from a broken mirror
Pieces of childhood trauma
Cluttering the soul
Gathering dust
Within collapsed walls of the heart
Broken promises
Built a wall within my faith
The unwilling trust
Felt at the sign of betrayal
I chewed on broken pieces
My mouth remaining shut
But I AM
Built from broken pieces
Strengthened by the will to live
Surviving by the kindness of strangers
Standing tall to live
Mosaic cemented
The mirror sealed
The picture comes into focus



The reflection is of bravery
Spat out the wounds
That haunted my soul
Washed my mouth out with a cocktail
Of these survival chapters
For the broken pieces
That fear me
Turn into a collateral art piece
That makes me smile today.





Warriors Might

Charlie Rose

I've unleashed my painful screams into the void,
the memories replay like I'm still being tormented behind
a locked door.
My tantalising tears tear through my silky – smooth skin,
utterly destroyed.
Fighting each night and day like I'm my own metaphorical war.

My chest heaves heavy sobs of release,
the memories are agony, but they remind me it's real.
Each breath a battle, asking when will the struggle cease.
Let the feelings be felt, no more trying to conceal.

My scars – My stories – My battles won.
Each one a reminder of never giving up my fight,
I stand strong knowing my fight has just begun.
Marks of survival, of triumph, of my warriors might.



Colour Me



Draw Something



Draw Something



Draw Something



Word Search

M G P B I S E X U A L Q X X C P A L
A R A I N B O W Q U E E R C H R N S
R G E N D E R D I V E R S E A O D I
D L Q Q W G M A Z J D R A G P G R S
I T D G A A S E X U A L Z P P R O T
G R V F E M M E L F A F C R E E G E
R A B A L L R O O M A W I I L S N R
A N N O N B I N A R Y M Y D L S Y G
S S B R O T H E R B O Y T E R V Y I
O E X R L O V E P W C A Q H O N S R
M A S C N Z L E S B I A N I A P J L
A P M W T D J B X L L P R Z N Z J S

ANDROGNY
ASEXUAL
BALLROOM
BISEXUAL
BROTHERBOY
CHAPPELL ROAN
DRAG

FEMME
GENDER DIVERSE
LESBIAN
LOVE
MARDI GRAS
MASC
NONBINARY

PRIDE
PROGRESS
QUEER
RAINBOW
SISTERGIRL
TRANS





ACON is Australia's largest health organisation specialising in community health, inclusion and HIV responses for people of diverse sexualities and genders. Established in 1985, ACON works to create opportunities for people in our communities to live their healthiest lives. ACON was founded by community, for community, and it is in that spirit that we continue our work as a fiercely proud community organisation, delivering a broad range of programs and services that focus on key health issues that people from LGBTQ+ population groups face. This includes initiatives that enhance empowerment, autonomy, community connection and self-determination of LGBTQ+ people and communities.

ACON has a long history of in sexual, domestic and family violence (SDFV). Our work, which is primarily NSW based with state, national and international reach, spans the domains of prevention, early intervention, response and recovery and healing. ACON is committed to supporting initiatives, such as this anthology, that are led by and for LGBTQ+ victim-survivors of SDFV to promote healing and recovery for our communities.





The Loud Way Home, an ACON initiative, amplifies the voices of LGBTQ+ victim-survivors of sexual violence.

Told through words, painting, multimedia, and more, these stories navigate the complexities of community experiences of sexual violence and shine a light on an often invisible issue.

Our artists and storytellers want other LGBTQ+ victim-survivors to know – you are not alone, we are here, and there is help available.

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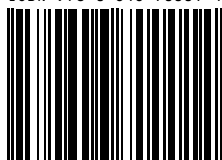
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