



Playing with fire

introduction

the stories

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INTRODUCTION

Playing with Fire - peer to peer survivor writing

This zine was produced as an accompaniment to **Playing With Fire – live reading from survivor writers – an online event on April 24th 2021 hosted by Live Art Development Agency**. Organised by the artist **Jet Moon** and featuring commissioned contributions by **Jet, Dolly Sen, Elinor Rowlands, Ayotomi IF, Andie Macario**, and readings by five attendees of the peer to peer survivor writing workshops organised by Jet in March 2021.

Lick the flame, feel the thrill, dare to get close, you might get burned.

Does art come from our inner demons? I don't know.

What I do know is that writing has given me a way to survive.

To represent ephemeral cultures that flicker in and out of existence.

To learn that I am the authority on my own story.

Storytelling is a quiet activism that radiates outwards.

Our Live Reading is the culmination of a series of events funded by Arts Council England, which allowed Jet the time to finish their book, hold two peer to peer survivor writing workshops and produce this live reading event.

The peer to peer survivor workshop was something I wanted to do for the longest time. I obsessed about it, craved the space, but could not figure out how to do it without all of us triggering the F* out of each other.

I've been part of collectives and peer to peer communities for decades; slowly I've learned how to hold non-hierarchical shared spaces.

On the 6 and 7 March 2021, I ran two digital workshops for survivor writers. That weekend was astonishing, exhausting, nourishing, exciting. I loved being with the groups, holding the space, but it also massively expanded my understanding of myself as a survivor. It helped me make sense of myself.

Who is a survivor?

Playing With Fire uses an open definition of survivorship, including survivors of sexual violence, homophobia, racism and transphobia. There are lots of things we survive and that mark our experience in this world.

Writing is a tool, a creative fire that can transmute experience. An art process that belongs to everyone and can be used by everyone to find their voice

Memoirs of a Coconut

My mother doesn't remember the time of day, when I was born. Understandably, one can only presume that she had more pressing thoughts than the position of the sun in the sky. Like, which corner of this creosote earth we might rest our heads. A question that consumed her for well over two decades.

But the thing that she did remember about the day that I entered the world was my eyes. Wide and unblinking, she called them solemn. In many ways, it is fitting as this myopia would come to be a defining characteristic of our time together. Eyes focused on my minutiae, everything else obliterated.

Like a desperate cartographer, she searched my entire body mapping out the colourations and undulations that marked me as hers. The heavy spot on the left thigh, dimpled arms and legs splashed with night. It remains in my mind, my first understanding of what it is to be precious.

A balance had been struck, a pound of blood cast, with a bountiful return: four for the price of one.

The effort of bringing me forth left her milk powdered. For some time, that balance remained.

My mother found work during the day, and early evening she would return to find me turning and squealing piglet-like, for her caress. Night would find my mother bent crying over chubby limbs. The saline anointment, spoke to the sea and tipped the scale.

Mother left.

As the weeks endured, I became longer and thinner, until the inevitable. I fell ill. They prepared themselves, cashing her cheques and bathing my forehead with cool cloth.

I prevailed, I am told.

Emem Amana. Maker of things, lover of Nox and Greek myths.
Burgeoning writer. Veteran Listener. Embalmer of things forgotten
and dead. So that they persist, live on and are seen.

Message to other survivor writers:

We are here. We shall be seen.

Emem Amana

You are a murderer

Dream DJ mix

Tarantism is a phenomena that erupted in Italy, supposedly caused by the bite of a tarantula. In order to ward off death the body reacted with a kind of manic convulsive dancing.

Those afflicted would break out in trance like states, crying out, screaming and dancing. Evidence showed that music was the sole remedy to tarantism, inducing a treatment of energetic movement. Cases of tarantism (particular to southern Italy) are in keeping with mass psychogenic illness. In MPI, symptoms spread to all parts of a community or population without any common detectable agent connecting them. In the middle ages, cases of MPI would be attributed to spirit possession. In modern history, cases of mass anxiety were prevalent amongst workers who often did over-time.

The tarantella, a folk dance, which takes its name after the bite of the wolf spider, is believed to have originated as a therapy for the fatal condition of tarantism. The fast upbeat dance, featuring claps, tambourine or other percussive instruments, alongside fast paced routines involving couples or groups, differs from the dance of those struck down with tarantism. The dancing by people afflicted with the illness, was convulsive, solo and in delirium over the course of days.

I want to create a remix, a dance floor classic. Two separate, unrelated tracks, catchy. Compiled into a single smash hit. The first track is a ballad, about a child and a man. The verses describe a series of car rides at night along moon soaked lanes through the isolated exteriors of sleeping towns. Everyone asleep so they were alone.

The vocal on the track describes an unseen force narrating the absence of choice in this journey. The song has an electronic composition, this track has been played over and over again. The second song is about a man and a young woman, they don't really get on and this woman finds the man's behaviour uncomfortable. The build up of the sounds in this song produce a symphonic crash lyrically revealing the man stabbing his dad to death. The two together make up You are a murderer/ Dream DJ mix.

Frankie Blomfield is a survivor, visual artist and also writes.
They live in London.

Message to other survivor writers:

If you find yourself drawn to it, may you find healing in the process of writing

Frankie Blomfield

Confessional

forgive me motherland for I have sinned
it has been 3 generations since my last confession
the wilding and the electricity sits deep within my chicanery
sacrifices at the altar of the diaspora and there
but for the gradient of goddess to godlessness go I

guigh orainn na peacaigh

is this what you imagined when you stepped out of that bushel
and into oncoming treason, so taken aback by the signalmen and soothsayers

Mol an Óige agus tiocfaidh sí

no longer seeking comfort in hard dick and hard liquor
no longer living in fear of the ailments of the elders
not returning to the scene of the crime
but a homecoming
reigniting my fire

Níl aon tintéan mar thintéan fhéin



Helen Bowie (she/they) is a writer, performer and charity worker based in London. Helen writes about politics, poor life choices and petty grievances.

Message to other survivor writers:

I would encourage any survivor who feels they have a story to tell to have faith in, share it with the world or share it with the notebook but know that it is precious and you don't need to carry it in your head alone.

Helen Bowie

Things that make the heart beat faster

Love takes effort. Understanding, communication, and the will to expand.

A lot of people have been turning to magic as support during these times. It's an act of self empowerment, of hope, and belief in change.

Pleasure is a radical act of defiance. We all look in different ways, listen in different ways. We all know about the white and male gaze, but there's also the ways women look.

The ways survivors look. The ways in which BIPOC look, observing the landscape for potential threats, routes to safety, how things are moving, breathing, for the glimmers of joy and wonder.

The way we look for joy during the pandemic is just as necessary. There are multiple ways of finding it, but what keeps me going and connected to the land, the sky, the world, the universe, is sex. Not just good sex, but what I've been lucky to find with my lover.

A Rare, magical understanding and flow.

The body and nature has always been my source of comfort, exploration and pleasure. Robin Wall Kimmerer wrote, that in this time, we as a species, are biologically vulnerable, and that perhaps it will foster a sense of empathy and understanding with all lifeforms that we share this planet with. They face daily uncertainty.

You don't have to be an artist to bring a sensibility and awareness to the world around you, nor to make sense of it. Why is it useful to identify as an artist? Is it like a charm for the self? A magical complicated act and way of being?

What's truly perverse is the society that we live in. Anal play & bodily fluids have never been taboo for me. Tantra considers all bodily fluids sacred. I like to feel it's in my DNA and I'm connecting to my ancestral roots.

Tantra also embraces death. Eros & Thanatos. I've accepted the risk of seeing my lover during this pandemic. The risk being his primary partner. Calculated risk is a turn-on for us. We have frenzied intense sex after funerals. Immersing in the pulsing, seeping life force. Connecting us to the universe. If we were in a warzone we'd be fucking whilst bombs dropped around us. Two degenerate atoms vibrating on the same plane.

Sun, moon stars and the hunger. To hold you in a single breath. Always.

Nosheen Khwaja is an artist, designer, moving image curator and massage therapist. Her work is rooted in the body, pre/colonial history, magic, the non-human and bringing forth the hidden.

Message to other survivor writers:

Write every day, even if it's two words. They may well make sense eventually, but equally they may remain mysterious. It's like creating your own protective talisman.

Nosheen Khwaja

untitled poem

Kind of like citrus, that taste in my mouth,
yesterday's vomit infused with fluorine.

We covered my bruises with thick concealer,
(same kind I still use for whoring.)

It's one of two inks that have followed me
Through each vibration of my grief:
One that masks,
The other to write myself out from
underneath,

Excavate my essence
From the wreckage of this core,
A burial ground, a ruin...
Which now, at least, they pay to explore.
Cough up an entrance fee
For a guided tour, an immersive
phenomenology
of hair, sweat, scars, skin,
salt that's strangely sweet like saccharine.
Some want romance, some comedy...
(all horror stories, if you're asking me.)

Can you ever choose to leave society
or does every cell scream "danger"
until some absent, ageless
part of you suddenly
unmutes your body,
realises it was asking for you,
to breathe.

And then you're not the understudy.
You can stop learning the script
And mouthing it silently
because fuck making sense.
Not in a language with blood on its hands.
We are all origami creatures,
Invisible fingers warp us into
Unfamiliar beasts.
It's when we unfold

we see where we've creased.
And this is the trauma.
Not the moment itself,
the marks that it leaves.

I have ...painstakingly... learnt to love the
relentless rippling of my creases.
They're a map,
blueprints to my boundaries.

Non-Binary People's Day and the struggle for Wider Revolution

I am Black and that will be the first thing many people will notice about me. But beyond that – I am African, Nigerian, Yoruba, and none of these can be divorced from my gender identity.

Black women in our society are routinely viewed as aggressive and unfeminine, which results in typical Western womanhood being denied to us, a phenomenon which is amplified for dark skin, queer, and/or trans Black women. Simultaneously however, many Black women have been gendered by society through colonisation.

Many pre-colonial cultures in sub-Saharan Africa had differing concepts around gender compared to Europe, with the Yoruba tribe being one of them. Social status and legal rights were not assigned by gender or sex, the language has no gendered pronouns, and there are multiple stories about our pantheon (the orisha) having genderqueer and genderfluid characteristics.

Through colonisation, our rich histories of gender variance have been erased and replaced with the European gender binary, and with it the gender based oppression as well as systematic transphobia that it allows – both of which are exasperated by racism, white supremacy, and anti-Blackness.

Because of this I argue that decolonisation is a necessity for the full liberation of non-binary folks, and vice versa that the liberation of non-binary folks is a necessity for decolonisation, as the imposition of the gender binary on colonised societies helped aid colonial control of colonised people, as well as facilitated gender based oppression.

(abridged version)

To decolonise the non-binary liberatory movement, we must abandon the respectability politics that are prevalent in our community. The cost of assimilation, aside from arguably justifying an unjust society, is the further marginalisation of non-binary people who do not assimilate.

When you oppose things like microlabels and neopronouns you are doing the work of transphobia, and transphobic cis people for them, trying to make us more palatable to wider cis society who already despise us and punish us for existing no matter how “respectable” we try to be for them. The benefits of social transition must be enjoyed by all members of our community, including those who do not use (or just use) she/he/they pronouns.

Non-binary communities also need to embrace body positivity and fat liberatory politics in order to free our population from the idea that to be androgynous you must be skinny. In fact the idea that you have to be androgynous in order to be non-binary needs to be deconstructed as it is based on the medicalisation of our gender identities – that to be a specific gender you must have a particular body shape, and to be trans, you must change your body shape to match the ideal body shape for your gender.

Freeing our communities from respectability politics rooted in cisnormativity includes rejecting the medicalisation of trans/non-binary identities.

The assumption that non-binary people do not experience physical dysphoria needs to be rejected, this is a myth constructed in order to exclude non-binary people from the concept of transness.

Not everyone has access to the material resources and support needed to physically transition, which isn't just a matter of finances but also emotional capacity as well as decisions around personal safety.

These material circumstances are numerous and complex. The housing crisis forcing people to live with transphobic family and partners or risk homelessness, stagnant wages and increasing amounts of impoverishment for those able to work leading to less income that can be dedicated to accessing private trans related healthcare where publicly funded services are non-existent or severely underfunded, and a lack of institutional and community support in navigating the bureaucratic systems and processes meant to help us access trans healthcare/other types of healthcare/welfare and benefits, are just a few examples that can be mentioned.

Most of these reasons are the result of living under late stage capitalism, modern colonisation, systemic misogyny and ableism, and of course transphobia and binarism, all propped up by a carceral police state.

The goal of assimilation, to make the non-binary community acceptable to wider society through forming a gender tertiary, and the spectacles of non-binary acceptance by liberal institutions serves to justify the current oppressive systems that drive our society. To combat this, the liberal push to turn the gender binary into the gender tertiary needs to be halted in its tracks.

The end goal of non-binary liberation is not being understood by medical gatekeepers but having no medical gatekeepers, not by having X on our passports but having no passports and no borders, not by outlawing job discrimination but removing the need to work in order to survive and have a fulfilling life, absolutely not by considering non-binary prisons but by abolishing police, prisons, and all forms of carceral and punitive "justice".

Instead of detailing an endpoint of this struggle, its preferable to develop the processes that will bring us closer to our goal, of a better world for all non-binary people.

Firstly, non-binary spaces need to work more in acknowledgement and actively dismantling hierarchies in our spaces, including but not limited to: racism and anti-Blackness, fatphobia, ableism, and transmisogyny, and uplift and centre the needs of the members of our community who are further marginalised by these oppressions.

This can be done through the methods of mutual aid and reparations, the redistribution of wealth and other material resources (or access to material resources) from those able to give to those more in need. This is not just to address material needs in our communities but to develop a collectivist culture of mutual support and community wide self-reliance. To further aid in community building we need to adopt principles of transformative justice to disrupt and prevent violence, building off the work of abolitionist movements, which will help allow for community wide healing from violence.

Finally, we, as non-binary individuals and as spaces, groups, and organisations, must strive to embed ourselves in wider decolonist, anti-capitalist, feminist, anti-ableist and anti-authoritarian struggles for collective and intersectional liberation.

The non-binary community has come incredibly far since I first came out, but I know that we deserve so much better and we can do so much better, together.

Ayotomi IF is a Black, queer, population health student based in the UK.

Ayotomi IF

THE *fuck normal*

My human heart belongs to both ape and angel in a world that doesn't believe in angels. The sanitised world humiliates my soul.

I have a mind of ill repute, which means I have the gift to make people feel awkward just by breathing in and out. But some of us know how to turn that into a glorious endeavour.

I want to put normality over my lap and slap its naughty arse. It is no inspiration to be, it is not worth laying down your life to be normal. Asking me to be normal is asking too little of me. It's asking too little of any of us.

Let's call normality by its more honest name – averageness, mediocrity, typical, ordinary. I know the powers that be currently hold siege to the control of language. You label those who are different 'abnormal', 'disordered', and 'maladjusted' and hope we are disgusted enough by the names given to us to hate ourselves. I do not hate myself. One thing I do is change the word 'normal' to 'mediocre' and I don't want it anymore.

I say your sanity has been recalled because of some errors found. People not driven mad by how the world is are a danger to themselves and others. They are carrying many defects including: denial, collusion, inequality, contributing to climate collapse, helped along by psychiatry, school, the family unit, and any of normality's other pimps.

The world goes through too much pain for your normality.

MANIFESTO

Psychiatry and society say I should have shame for hurting because of trauma, shame that I am mad. I was told to gain a thick skin in a world that gives me nothing to buy them with. I learned not to look to the world to save me. My heart has been broken so many times it is covered in scar tissue, protecting my softness and the true self inside it. In war, the torturers are salaried, the tortured expendable and unnecessary. You can't love that world. Nobody will be fighting for you. I don't need my suffering any more, I am making friends with my rage. I am making friends with my broken heart.

Madness is seen as malfunctioning in the programming and not an appropriate reaction to the system that it finds itself in. The divergent mind is not a spam folder. Society disables by putting viruses of self-hate and discrimination into that programming, and then tries to sell people sanity at inflated prices, only to make people's systems crash again and again. To that end, I want to disrupt systems that produce 'copy and paste' identities/ thoughts/perceptions/life/death, as a Trojan horse dressed as a my little pony on acid with a little sadness in their hearts.

Walking through the local cemetery with my dog Scamp, I see the same banal grey headstones, with dates of people's lives with no idea what they did with their time. They lived a time that wasn't theirs. They have other people's poetry, words, quotes on it. Their song was not their own. You know nothing of them. Their life stories as rotten as they are. The odd few have their own words, their stories on them, otherwise they lived and fed a system that meant other human beings died paupers with no headstones but the empty skies. I won't be like them.

Apologising for stepping on someone's foot is the right thing to do. Being apologetic about being yourself is not. We live in a world where being embarrassed, ashamed or regretful of who we are or part of ourselves serves the status quo and those who profit from it. You are harder to oppress or control if you are unapologetic about your being.

I had to learn the hard way, from being a survivor of childhood abuse to being a gay, disabled, working class, fat woman of colour. I make no apologies about being any of those things, in fact they are my power. I am having more fun than my oppressors, my shamers. Their shit doesn't work on me anymore.

One thing I do whilst lost in reign of brutal angels, listening to the butterflies scratching at the eyes of true dreamers, is create and create and create. Being creative is not therapy to be able to fit into the 'normal' way of life. It's a way of life that normal people will need therapy for if they ever met it. They need to do that or change the world to save us all.

I don't turn anger towards myself; I turn it outward and say 'fuck the fucking fuckers'.

Fuck those parking in disabled spaces to spend their slave money to keep them a slave.

Fuck corporate Prides sponsored by arms companies that kill queers overseas.

Fuck the trolls that brownnose abusers, and any sort of computer coward capitulating to any privileged cum.

Fuck those who says Covid only kills off the weak so let us go party. If being strong is being an unoriginal heartless mediocre creature, let's inherit the earth.

Fuck dreams that aren't even yours anyways.

Fuck those who get compassion fatigue but are never tired of being judgmental and selfish.

Fuck those who don't worry about a 3rd world that is manmade because the running shoes it cheaply produces look good on them.

Fuck those who are scared of witches and not the bastards who burned them.

Fuck those who are still sane in such a bullshit world.

Fuck the traditional domestic unit – the familial factory that spews out the most abuse, most murders, the most madnesses, the most illnesses, the most brokenness.

The list of fuckers goes on, so let's just fuck them all and subvert our own worlds and insist it be beautiful, too beautiful for the normal world to understand.

Dolly Sen is a London-born writer, filmmaker, artist and performer. She is a disabled, working class queer, interested in disability and the madness given to us by the world. She currently resides in Great Yarmouth in Norfolk. She/They.
www.dollysen.com

Message to other survivor writers:

If you are a survivor, you have a story. If you have a story, tell it. Otherwise your life will be made up of other people's lies. We all have the right to be our own story-tellers and creators of our own beauty.

Dolly Sen

A Kind of Feeling

It's an itch that I can't scratch, it's just out of reach but the promise of peace lingers in the horizon. In my quest for grounding I turn to nature, only she knows how to ground me.

Except her turbulence finds me in contemplative thought as I try to find semblances of peace, moments of stillness to cut the edge, an edge that grates ever so slightly that you can barely see the markings. But it's ridges are dissecting, zig zagging, just below the surface.

Still, I turn to her.

And I'm looking for a feeling. An indescribable feeling.

A feeling of elation, an impression of w[hole].

They ask me: what does healing look like, feel like?

A question I ask my mind daily.

I'm yet to find a concrete answer for them.

The sun feels good on my skin when the heat is on.

Reddish golden brown tones on my body glow with vitality to remind me that I am still alive.

Laying in my old garden I would lie for hours in her light on a scorching day looking for some kind of feeling.

Rubbing fingers on my slippery body covered in coconut oil trying to emulate an absent touch that I desperately fancy.

I'm glistening, but her glow dances around the shadows that slither into the cracks. Lying in her arms I burn away the skin that pulls me down.

Shedding intonations of innocence.

Shedding remnants of thieves who took from me.

If I lay long enough could I char away the holes?

If I lay like this and feel my way around the grass, would I meld into the soil and create new life unburdened with the destruction of self?

A ball of raging gas I am calmed by her tenderness as she lays all my faults out to hang on the washing line for all to peek.

Her warmth holds my delicate breath as I inhale her charming smile as if it tastes like honey and peaches, and I exhale all the sticky goo of past truths.

Melting into the earth I lay still with my head half cocked as insects would come to rest on my naked body and drink my poison.

And as they stung the itch clung tight to my bare flesh and there in her radiance I've never felt more exposed.

Vulnerable.

I welcomed that kind of feeling.

The hues of the sun pierce my retinas as I lay readily unbound.

I am forced to close my eyes and think of her.

My other lover: my other lover that brings me to my knees in her unforgiving presence that tugs at my afflictions.

Sitting on the beach on a cold windy day I allow my fingers to go numb.

The piercing cold stings and I'm looking for some kind of feeling again.

If I allow my tears to fall, would her blue glaze engulf me?

So I don't cry.

I've always wondered what it would feel like to let myself get swept away at sea, to get lost in her piercing gaze.

What the journey would look like as her salty curvatures corrode my edges til the shape of me is unrecognisable.

I could be reborn in her arms, and I could be anything she wanted.

I could be anything but me.

Washing away all the elements that mark up my materiality to this earth as her wrath knows no forgiveness.

I am undignified in her presence and she knows that well.

Yet her love is forbearing and as I come up for air she whispers the words I long to hear: that life's paths are just a series of aftermaths of tragedy clawing their way back into the earth's core so they too can be reborn.

This lover she puts me on a calming edge and I delight in her offerings of solitude, I revel in her vast knowledge of survival. In the end she discards my shedded skin like seaweed dragged out onto the shores of hope, hoping that another picks up where I left off. The fleshy parts of me awash on the shore like rotting carcass that no one has come to search for, long enough til the stench dissipates and the flesh liquifies into land mass.

And I materialise.

I form into new green pastures that dip in and out of soil, coming together to spring a new life as if the old one no longer shadows the shine.

The promise of a new horizon.

I grow new life on the surfaces that require tending to.

Cultivating connections rooted in the desire to break free of expectations that are placed on me as my survival doesn't make sense to them.

Whilst the failures of my past beg to be revisited, kempt and not forgotten.

Like I could ever forget.

How long before this new land is tainted by the echoes of foreign egos that sought to flatten me with their deceptions, that walked upon my muddy curves as if it were that [fucking] easy.

But when I dig deep into my earth I encounter unrefined layers of matter, begging to be chiselled away by the self inflicted loathing that haunts me.

And so I pound. And I hack away.

Desperate to excavate the memories of it all, every single particle that forced its way onto me and latched on for dear life.

That became a part of me, grounding me.

I feel weighted. Heavy. Rough.

Dragging this weighted material around bumping into other matter hoping to clusterfuck my way into some sort of stable state like maybe I won't forever be this superficial holed matrix always looking for some kind of feeling.

And what of you, if you were to thrust deep into your garden's earth would you feel the roots that cling deep and ask them sweetly to let go?

Or would you also cling back and welcome a familiar kind of feeling?

The multiplicities of nature, with its complexities varying, encapsulates the traumatised body's true disposition: a catalyst for progress and regression, a humble yet unforgiving challenge to transgress the desiring of piecing a fractured landscape that doesn't always stick firmly together.

A forever home that doesn't always feel like home.

But home is the goal.

The sun glares through the window of my new flat and I find myself again, catching my breath that lost its way in a dream.

I am left with more questions than answers and I return to that moment where they ask me: what does healing look like, feel like?

Andie Macario is a lesbian multi-disciplinary artist, filmmaker and poet from Rio de Janeiro, Brasil. Her work explores themes of sexual violence, active objectification, sexuality and the politics of desire. She lives and works between Brighton and London, UK.

Encouragement for other survivors:

There is power in creation, resistance comes in many forms. And remember, there's no right or wrong way to be a survivor. Do what feels right for you.

Andie Macario

Star Speckled Trees

**A rogue voice was given to me under a star speckled tree
I wonder why I was given a voice that spills strings of words
that spark so much anger in everybody, everyone.**

My face is judged as wrong too and as if I am in control of it. Not for its beauty or ugliness but for the way it “looks”. Its expression angers people and I feel my existence inside a glass box, I can see out beyond, but I exist never to be understood or seen the way I dare to imagine.

Yet, as a voice - it is adored. **People tell me I should be:** A news anchor, a bedtime storyteller, a visualisations voice over. It is a voice that makes screaming babies sleep, the hum of it brings them to the deepest slumber. It soothes.

When it strays from the arts or wherefore art? Then it unfolds, Emptying itself into the crowdedness of the world.

Living in rooms in my body is my existence.
My voice has a mind of its own,
I feel unattached to my voice. Because what I am trying to say, or when I say what I think I'm saying,
It is never understood or taken that way I hope it might be.

So, I pass away the days, not speaking,
Presented with a space to speak... (so to speak), I will be misinterpreted, misunderstood. Foreign. Alien, from the stars, I am a blister, sore, Anxious, a nervous wreck even when I feel calm, **I am what they tell me I am.**

I feel the fish swim inside me, its silky tail as it hits scorched sunshine on clear water.

I'm washing my being away
Hoping it'll jump out
Scare the next man who enjoys scaring women
So they know what it feels like.
I'm hoping it'll jump out at them, not for revenge. But so they experience
What it feels like, to be out of respite.

I want them to be questioned and scorned,
The way I have been all of my life.

because people tell me: "I did not hear you wrong, I heard you just fine.
This is what you said." Repeating the words back to me that I had said but
they did not sound like that in my head,
even though each word is in the right order, yet they had not tasted like
that in my mouth or I wouldn't have said it.

So, I choose to trickle my mouth out

Down the sides of my face
My wet cheeks are pouring out the sight of myself
And I'm holding the inside out so close
Under my ribs.

I'm following a voice that sounds like my own from under my tongue
I'm washing my body away hoping it'll jump out

Scare away the dreams that regurgitate

Silently spinning in my brain channeling my hunger
Exploding the wisdom behind my eyes,

I feel a goldfish swim in my stomach. I feel its tail, silky in the water,
It tickles me as it somersaults

I took up signing because the hearing world wants words said to them in a
way that stops me from completing my sentences.

I feel around in my mouth,
Even when they tell me that they're listening. It's too late
I see their eyes glaze over. Bored

I allow myself to trickle out of my mouth.

Holding the inside out so close I let it breathe for me
So myself is alive. Is me.

Under my ribs. I'm washing the words away

Chasing the shadows in the wind with a soft breeze through my hair
Channelling my hunger and exploding wisdom behind my eyes that seep
down deep into the grassy patches, into the puddles, into the murky deep,
into the shallow threadbare thereafter
Because I was born a girl

This container that I've created looks down on me while it grows in clouds
that heats up a mountainous sky. There is a frightened tiny peak of a moun-
tain growing a knot that is twisted and I'm holding tight to the end of it as
if it were a bright kite, and I see them fly up high over the Welsh mountains.

Looking down now at the locked out water, that I've given the key to. I feel
the fish swim within,

No one knows. For so long I wondered why I hadn't told anyone.

**And it is because I am scared she will die and I will need the
space and time** to grieve alone in the corners of my rooms, the corners of
my mouth that yelp out noises like a loud gushing or a pouring out of sight.

The vest I undress myself in will be like a vast openness of grief running through me privately, Opening and shuddering slow, like a burst engine bleeding in the gutter of a lake.

And if she lives?

Then she will have a hard life because autistic women do

And if she's not autistic?

Then, will she love me when I am so different?

Women like me are forced into feeling out in the dark for the magic that is lost on everyone, but we feel the sparkle in our hands and fingertips. Women like me need their art to prop them up when the emotions swim through them because the fins are sharp as blades. My stims go on for days.

And did you know that autistic mothers homeschool? **For they do not dare have the teacher talk to them the way they did at school.**

So the girl who I was, and who is now growing in me, at the hearth of a tree, will be told everyday: You go on now until you're old because men will take so much from you until you're hollow, bruised, burnt and blue in jobs, in employment, they'll suck out your self-worth.

But you girl have the sky

The fire and the earth

The mounds and the feet on the edge of the sea.

You girl have the sadness that I used to weep

But I will tell you over and over that you are tremendous and glorious and grand and you girl, don't need any man to tell you that they did not misunderstand you, that they understood you just fine. As they deliver line for line what they're telling you you said.

I lie in the shadows in my bed

The pain between my legs is immense as I grow you inside of me.

This pelvic girdle pain is worse than kidney stones where my days were filled with daily morphine “For prostate cancer pain” it said on the side of the packet as if only men needed these pain medications. Not women with kidney stones. Or breast cancer, vulva, cervical, stomach, liver.

If I don't feel out for ten kicks a day, I must call the doctor because she might have died in my Sac of water that I keep under my rolls of skin.

I am a girl holding onto a girl.
I am a girl growing a girl
Keeping her warm as she warms me under my rolls of skin.
I am growing her as the trees do,
But not upright,
Sighed into fire and burning bright,
I lie and cry tears no one else sees because I am not too sure what I am doing,
I am just a girl. You see

I am a ghost, not brand new but old and here and skinless wearing this body as a costume and I am faceless
In a prism of skin and fat and pain
I'm a girl and

I fear the world and its lack of understanding

I fear that I am bringing her into it and I fear the blame she will get because I am different and not united in the concealment of fate

My eyes run deep down the mountains of steep grass
And the tears that have fallen along these rocky slopes on my cheeks have tasted the vast oceans of pain

I cannot be saved from thoughts of drowning for I feel them every day either side of me whilst I stand steep on this mountain terrain, Soaked, in this pouring, hard hitting rain

With the flowers pointing to the sun the opposite way

I am unsung and haven't even begun, yet I am growing her and this responsibility is great on my shoulders

I am growing my baby at the hearth of a star speckled tree.

Elinor Rowlands is a storyteller who paints in rich and vivid colours from an unflinchingly feminine gaze. As a Neurodivergent artist, her work is mainly reflective of the autistic/ADHD experience moving between grief and joy in quick succession; the way emotions are so often deeply felt at such incredible speed within autism.

Encouragement:

Record your writing into a voice recorder, even just on your phone. I often “write best” when alone, in pain, in bed, during sensory overwhelm or burnout. I feel and taste the words from my head into my mouth and the rhythm/rhyme of the piece finds me. I encourage all survivor writers to explore the deeper relationships between two emblems within your body such as between your mouth and mind, or between you and the world.

Elinor Rowlands

Beach

We are going on a trip to the beach. Me and Dawn arrange together in advance what we are going to wear, this time it is our matching cotton dungaree sets.

I envy Dawn, I'm sure her lavender dungarees are more flattering than mine which are bright turquoise. This season's colours, that's what we wear. Still I reckon we look pretty hot in our matching duds as we climb into the Prefect when Aaron shows up. Dawn gets into the front seat next to Aaron and I get in the back. The smell of overheated plastic and leather hits my throat as I get in the car, sun-warmed seats burning the back of my legs. I shift on the seat, catching Aaron's eye in the rearview mirror I quickly look away. He is so full on lately, even worse than usual, reaching out to touch me when Dawn's not looking and even sometimes when she is.

Aaron cranks up the tape deck playing the same tape the whole way as we wind our way up through the hills of the Waitakeres, the road curling into deep green bush. Punga and thickety stands of Manuka with flaking strips of bark, stare back silently as 'The Stranglers' blare out from our tape deck. Aaron especially likes playing the song 'Peaches' over and over again, making sure to grunt along as the Stranglers make loud hooting sexual noises. 'The Stranglers' are singing about looking at women on the beach, how maybe they can help the women take off their clothes. 'Yeah! Peaches' Aaron shouts, laughing out loud, grooving along, nodding and slapping the steering wheel in time.

As he pulls the Prefect's stubborn weight around the hairpin bends in the road.

I glimpse the steep drop at the side of the road and I cringe, heart pumping, palms sweaty, gripping the edge of the car seat. I try to hide my fear, as it will only make Aaron drive faster and more recklessly.

Rimu, Rata and Kauri stand tall in the forest within deep valley drops, feathery heads of green forming a bright curved floor far below. I try not to think about how it would feel to enter that soft canopy and crash through the hard trunks, spikes and shards hidden in what looks soft and lush. At the edges of the road cling old Pohutukawa, gnarled roots gripping tight to the stony lip of the road, bright red bottle brush blooms, emerald leaves.

I press my face close to the half open window, the breeze fluttering through, bringing the scent of fresh water, moss, damp stones. A flicker of spray from a waterfall trickling close to the road flecks my cheek. Aaron grunts again: 'Aroogaroogaroo' - singing along with 'The Stranglers', he laughs, it's a harsh cruel sound. I try to keep on ignoring his sleaziness, I don't want to give him satisfaction seeing me uncomfortable. Dawn is sitting quiet next to him, skin sallow, shadows under her eyes, looking down examining the bitten skin around her short fingernails.

As we wind along, bush canopy overhead now flickering shade, the sun gets hotter. Wow, today is a scorcher, the beach is going to be boiling. Cresting a ridge, the road changes to rutted loose metal and I catch a glimpse of the beach. Piha! With its wide black sands. Lion Rock laying as if it has been dropped 'Plop!' from a great height. Forming a tiny island half in, half out of the waves. A fuzz of tussocky grasses and scrub on top.

Aaron pulls into the carpark and finds a spot amidst family cars, crowds of people unpacking chilly bins and towels. Bare chested dads with pot bellies, kids in jandals skipping tender feet over hot stones. The crash and roar of the ocean gets louder, gulls screeching overhead as we walk through the cut in the sand dunes and out into the roar and blast of the surf.

Onto flat sand where crusted salt is packed hard, our feet digging in deep when our heels break through. Tangles of dried kelp, pippi shells, and the iridescent glint of Paua scattered along the high tide line. Sharp crunchy seaweed spiking into the tender sides of my feet. White bleached sticks and bones, the scent of sea and wind close, breaking surf roaring and roaring. Foam crashing hard against the wet slick soaked black sands and rushing in a frothy layer fast up the beach to catch our feet. Tide sucking hard, tugging backwards as it rushes home into the depths.

We find a spot under a Pohutukawa that snakes out low from the cliff, its branches forming a handy seat and a place to sling our towels over. Shade from the burning sun and reflected brightness of the glittering black sands.

Time for a swim. I feel Aaron's eyes on me as I slip off my overalls. Ew! I'm glad I wore my togs underneath. We run hot footed over the sand, Dawn and Aaron holding hands, the three of us stand at the edge of the sea as the first icy cold wavelets charge over our feet.

Dawn and I both scream, it's freezing! We edge into the icy water, bracing ourselves each time a wave comes in, jumping up and down, small bobbing jumps as we go, trying to delay the shock of ice cold water on our skin. I can see Aaron's leering appreciation, his dog-toothed grin as he looks at me. The water is up to our crotches now, Aaron complains 'Argh! It's gonna freeze me balls off!'. He laughs and says to me 'You're gonna get a frozen minge in this cold water, Peachy'. I glare back at him, I don't want him thinking about any part of my body especially inside my pants.

I throw myself with a shallow dive into the next breaker, floating in its pull, then struggling to paddle against its force. I'm not a good swimmer. The waves tug at me as I reach for the sea floor but find only a brush of sand and shells under my toes, too far below to put my foot down.

Here the beach drops away suddenly, carved deep by the crashing breakers. I keep my head up, floundering, fighting against the waves, a gulp of salt water filling my mouth.

I claw my way to where I can get my tippy toes on the shelly floor. Then bob-kick my way back, using the next wave to surf me into shallower water where I stand waist deep, shivering, nipples erect, soaked bikini clinging, my hair forming salt wet ringlets.

I watch Aaron and Dawn further out, Aaron lifting Dawn in the waves, their slick bodies sliding against each other. Dawns shrieks of protest when Aaron dunks her, or when he holds her tight, feeling her up under the cover of the rushing waves.

From the book 'ITSY'.

Jet Moon is a queer, working class, disabled writer and artist who creates intimate spaces of sharing often within the LGBTIQ, kink, sex worker, disabled and survivor communities they belong to. Jet believes in collaboration and mutual aid as a practical way of building transformative communities.

To other survivors:

Your story belongs to you, write for yourself above all. Surf in the shallows for practice, the ocean will still be there. Even if you don't know it, you are loved.

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