All the tourist trekkers were enthusiastically snapping photos of the vast, expansive view on looking emerald lakes and there I was, facing the opposite direction with my back turned, my arm and index finger extended and my jaw dropped. Right there amidst the volcanic mountainside was Mother Nature’s finest: a giant vulva.
Please Stand Clear of the Closing Doors

Those car rides from the airport to our house in Hull, ever since I was a kid, arriving back from my Mother’s home in New Jersey, back from university, or wherever. This time with the swollen body, stiff muscle and sweaty stink of a thirty hours’ plane ride from Wellington to Manchester airports. Those car rides in England, with me jet lagged, only half awake in the passenger seat. Looking onto the motorway, watching the trucks and cars blur by. When I was little I used to think that I could breathe in England and it felt different. It felt like where I belonged. I remembered the excitement I used to feel and, just before nodding off, it made me smile.

Every good narrative deviates from expectations. Mine thickens, tears, withers, yet holds as I struggle to script my world. I choose to author a caring ferocity. I am soft cover but strong spine.

THROAT CLEARING BEFORE READING (aka cautions):

I have a knack for writing about topics that I struggle to talk about openly. The really painful and hard parts of my life. I write zines like this in the hope that people are able to learn from, relate to, find comfort in, and have some good chuckles along with it. I want this zine to be like one of those big hugs that mean something in hard times. But for some people it will cover topics that could be triggering or difficult to read. This zine includes pieces on childhood sexual abuse, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, repressed memories, anorexia, mental institutions, abuse perpetrators, consent, and communication. If you do choose to read this, please read it in mind that these topics come up and that you can always stop reading or skip over anything that you find hard. If it becomes difficult, look to ways you can care for yourself—call on a supportive friend, family member or helpline, go for a stroll, make artsy or crafty things, watch something silly on the telly, sing along really loudly to one of your favourite songs, impersonate dinosaurs, or make your own zine and vent that shit out!

This zine’s for all the queers who’ve repeatedly saved my life.

I encourage people to clog up photoccopiers and make as many copies of this zine as suits your fancy. If you would like any of my other zines, or if you have any feedback, questions, or tea recommendations feel free to write me a line at sarahteae@ex@gmail.com

South Island

Sarah Tea-Rex

2010 Wellington, Aotearoa/New Zealand (and lots of other places too! Hello, world!)
**Most people who are abused do not go on to become abusive themselves. Not all abusers are abuse survivors. There is never an excuse for abusive behaviour. Challenge anyone who suggests otherwise, it’s a common myth that is really hurtful for survivors.**

*** Men are not the only perpetrators of abuse, nor are women the only people who are abused. Living in a patriarchal society does mean that within the context of domestic abuse, violence is highly gendered and most often occurs with an adult male perpetrator–women and/or children survivor dynamic. It is also true that we have very limited knowledge of the actual nature of violence within the home, since it is notoriously underreported and difficult to define. Due to presumed gender dynamics, those whose experiences deviate from this structure have to face additional stigmas when dealing with abuse. It’s important to acknowledge that abuse can take place between any genders, in any community, and that it is all of our responsibilities to support each other. Perpetrator self-help groups, survivor support groups, and other community initiatives should be very critical of the ways in which they choose to include or exclude access to their services on gendered grounds. There is nobody who is ‘too marginal’ and services should be accessible to all.
Maybe if my abuser had worked on his shit, maybe I would’ve been safe. Maybe somebody in this group today will genuinely step up to the challenge of changing his behaviour. Maybe then a few more people are a little bit safer.

* Repressed memories are memories that someone has not always been conscious of but remembers later. Often, following one or more traumatic events, our brains will suppress the recollection of these experiences until such a time that a person is more able to cope with the intensity of their experience(s). For me this has meant that I had no conscious recollection of my experiences of childhood sexual abuse until many years after the abuse took place and then these memories were really scary and confusing. Partially because of the confusing nature of repressed memories a lot of people also go through stages of denial when they start to recall more. This denial is usually made worse by societal scepticism of childhood abuse memories in general and especially of repressed memories. It took me many years after I first started getting abuse flashbacks before I could identify myself as a survivor. I still sometimes get flashbacks or knowledge of experiences I didn’t know I had been through. It’s still really tough and really raw for me every time. For more information on repressed memories and childhood sexual abuse I recommend reading The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis (there’s also Victims No Longer: The Classic Guide for Men Recovering from Sexual Child Abuse by Mike Lew but I have not personally read this so I can’t vouch for its material). Grab a copy of the ‘Survivor’ zine too, it’s brilliant.
I sit around and I look at all the men in the room. I do not hate them. I’m not angry. I am relieved. I am encouraged. I am even a little bit optimistic.

I wonder if my abuser could ever break down. I re-envision him as small. I am able to see him as weak. I try to resituate myself as being the powerful one. I could crush him. His reputation, his career, his freedom—could all drain away if I pulled the plug. I’m not going to. I know the system isn’t designed for young radical women with a history of mental institutionalization to claim anything, let alone from the basis of repressed memories.* I know, too, that the police inquisition would be far more than I could take. The state protects him far more adequately than it ever protected me. This makes me small, too. Still, I try to resituate myself. In the weight of all my experiences, all I have is the power of knowing. Knowledge is power and the stronger I can hold on to it, the more he shrinks.

The optimism I feel in this perps self-help group is excitement at the possibility of de-railing a cycle of violence. Being emotionally vulnerable, chiselling at the silence surrounding violence loosens the foundations of abuse. Learning to deal with anger, hurt, pain, insecurity and hardship without lashing out. It is a lot of learning, a lot of challenge to take on. I don’t think abusers deserve forgiveness. I think they deserve to work fucking hard. Work hard out to change. No programme or group will do it for them. No programme will even come close. I’m sure for some this group is just an exercise in jumping the hoops; merely a pawn disclaimer facade that they are all ‘fixed’ now. But maybe, maybe, maybe, even if for just a couple of the guys, change can happen.

Confessions of a Consent Fetishist

Following the immediate recall of recent bedfellows we started talking about consent. Giggles were abound when I said I think it’s important to ask, to check everything’s ok, when we’re being sexual with a partner no matter how many times you’ve slept with them. My ideas around consent probably evoked the same level of reaction as if I had some sort of peculiar kink. So my confession to you is that I have a consent fetish. Knowing my partner’s hot for what’s going on and that I’m touching them in the ways they want to be touched turns me on. It’s pretty wild, I know, the whole communication thing. So subversive!

Ok, I tease (but maybe you’re into that— I don’t know yet, we should talk it over sometime), but really if we conceptualize kink as any sexual act that’s not heteronormative then if asking “how do you like to be touched?” acquiesces the same giggly reaction as confessing to having-say—wand sex toys, velvet cloaks, and calling the bedroom ‘Hogwarts’ then is checking in with our partners so outside of the mainstream that it actually becomes kinky?* Why isn’t consent written into mainstream (as well as many queer and/or kink) sexual scripts? What does that say about this culture? How did talking become taboo? And who benefits from this? And who is getting hurt?
As with the most common arguments I hear, my friends were resistant to the idea of such explicit, active consent because it just seems 'a little over the top'. I mean way to kill the moment, right? Active consent is just not a part of the taught sexual scripts we’re raised to follow. In our society, sex without force seems 'ok enough.'

To be honest, I don’t get that. Is it really a moment killer to hear a partner affirm that they are getting turned on? And if they aren’t getting turned on I would really, really want to know what I could be doing to make it more pleasurable, or more importantly that I need to stop before they become uncomfortable. Sex is way sexier once I’ve talked with a partner about their boundaries, what they’re not ok with, and also what is they do like, what gives them pleasure, how I can turn them on. Sure things like body language and moaning are really important and we can read a lot from these cues but we can’t expect to know what’s actually on in a partner’s mind without them telling us.**

I know people have misread my body language before and while I’m working on being more able to assert myself when I’m uncomfortable in sexual situations I know that I often let people proceed even when I don’t really want them to. I am working on valuing my own sexual desires and my own body enough that I don’t just let someone touch me because I think that they will feel awkward or embarrassed or put off if I tell them to stop. I don’t know what to say so I often don’t say anything. I may even reciprocate because I know that’s what the other person expects of me, because I’m following the script to a shitty fucking narrative. But if, in the circumstances when

I sometimes wish I could talk to the little boy that he was when he was abused. I wish that I could comfort that boy. I wish that somewhere along the line somebody would have noticed his pain and worked with him through that. Shown him to use the strength of surviving suffering to heal and help, not to hate and hurt. I wonder how things could have been different for him, and for me.

But here there is weakness in the daemons. There is fragility. There is guilt, shame, and there is sorrow. Survivors aren’t the only ones who carry these emotions, sometimes they feel it too. Perpetrators are not the all-mighty. Beneath the grit, they are small and they are terrified and they have lost control of themselves. There are no daemons, just struggling people.

I wonder if my abuser ever feels it. If he ever gets hit with any consequence to what he’s done. It makes me angry sometimes to think of all that I’ve had to endure. I take the shame and guilt and hatefulfulness of his actions against me. I bare his burdens. And I hope he feels it sometime, even if at just a fraction of what I have had. I hope that one day he will know the pain of his violence. I know he knows suffering. He is an abuse survivor, too.

I do not forgive him. He has no excuses.
Resituating Power

After I was introduced as an observer, it began as each man introduced himself by explaining why he was attending the group. That’s the first step, admitting and taking responsibility for their abusive behaviour. Here I was at a self-help group full of male perpetrators of domestic violence. I didn’t know how I would react. My stomach had been tied into a million knots, squealing out at me in nervousness. Would I get scared, angry, self-hating, or totally triggered and numb?

I saw perpetrators opening up, being vulnerable, and struggling to grapple with their own weaknesses. I saw the big, burly, masculine man break down and cry. I saw men criticizing masculinity, and doing just a tiny little bit to chisel away at it by sharing their feelings.

I had always focused on supporting survivors, focused on scrabbling around to pick up the pieces and trying to put them back together. Always thought nount we could do about the shattering. The media images, the support work I’d done, my own experiences had all left me with this image of the abuse perpetrator as the horrible, yet damningly invincible, daemon.

He was stronger than me, older than me, wealthier than me, more respected than me, more trusted than me— he holds the power. This is always how I had seen my abuser, as someone to be absolutely cautious of. Anything to tip the gentle balance of his world manifested everywhere in my head as red, flashing danger signs. My duty since childhood has been to keep everything calm.

This has happened to me, these people had asked me and checked in with me I might have actually said “let’s cuddle instead” or “it’s time for you to go home” or “what the hell are you doing?” but since I didn’t appear to be resisting, or maybe didn’t come across to them as uncomfortable, they just kept going and probably to this day think I was totally cool with what happened.

While it would be lovely if I could claim to be an expert in reading body language, or to be some super sex interpreter of all body cues, the truth is that none of us really are. I only feel confident that what’s going on is consensual when my partner tells me it is. Body language is just one indicator. And I’m only hot for sex if I know that if I want to stop, change course, or slow down that I can communicate that and have it respected. And that my partner knows I totally respect their desires too.

If this mutual respect is a concept and a practice that is out of the ordinary— radical, and kind of strange— I believe it’s a kink worthy of a fundamental status to sexuality. So here’s my call out to you all to become sexual perverts with me and embrace active, hot, explicit, sexy communication with your partner(s). With my drink raised in a toast, here’s to a kink subculture of “yes!”

*I don’t intend to belittle attending as fine an institution as Hogwarts— if it gets you hot then all the more quiddich points to you, my friend. (Also, note, since when did microsoft spell-check recognize ‘Hogwarts’ as a legitimate word but not ‘transphobia’?)
** Even when our partners do talk to us, it’s not always easy for people to say what we are and aren’t into so it’s important that we try to make sure they know as much as possible that it’s totally ok for them to say no, or say they want to be touched or treated in ways that aren’t what’s otherwise going on. Also, sometimes words like “no” might be intimidating for people (especially if it hasn’t been respected in previous sexual experiences) so introducing safe words in addition to “no” can be an awesome way of keeping it consensual. Try talking with your partner(s) when you’re not being sexual and when you’re not in bed together, too. Sometimes it’s easier to express our boundaries and our desires when we’re feeling less pressured in the moment.

*** I am still learning, exploring, discovering where my boundaries are and so it’s important to keep in mind that even with open communication things like boundaries are not always easy to define with each other, and often change with context. Keep checking in.

**** If you’re into talking sexy, women’s empowerment, and combating rape culture I highly recommend reading “Yes Means Yes!: Visions of Female Sexual Power and a World Without Rape” edited by Jaclyn Friedman and Jessica Valenti. It’s where a lot of the inspiration for this zine rambling comes from, and it makes for a damn good read. There’s also a pretty fabulous zine called “Learning Good Consent” that is currently making my heart pitter-patter.

***** According to my friend it is grammatically incorrect to have asterisks that are not linked to the main body of writing. This is a loving “fuck you!” (and cheers for helping with the editing!)

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friend, even though (straight, cisgender) men are more likely than women to be physically attacked in public.*

That security guard didn’t make my night seem so secure. Be careful. I don’t want to hear some security guard tell another woman to be careful. I don’t want to be cooped up, perked up, waiting at home.

Fuck that.

That security guard ought to be careful. Authority, male or otherwise, ought to be careful. The state ought to be careful. Every member of the community ought to be careful. Careful not to perpetuate a culture of violence and fear. Careful to be care full, create a culture of support and respect.

I am not here to be reduced to just a potential target, not here to be mounted into perpetual victimhood. I am not here to be scared, even though sometimes society will shape me to be this way. And sometimes the fear is real and sometimes I am a target, a victim- and sometimes I feel weak as shit. But I also have the capacity, the history, and the real in-life story of survival. We all do.

I love the look of my city streets at night.

* “Cisgender” is a term that refers to a person who identifies by the gender they have been raised as since birth. Another way of saying this would be a ‘non-trans’ person. The prefix ‘cis’ can be used in front of other nouns, such as by saying ‘cismale’ to mean a non-trans man.
Collecting Bottles

Security had told the 85 year old woman collecting beer bottles from the trash to "be careful this time of night". After we gave her our empties, she said to us “It’s not me they want. I’m too old now to get raped. It’s you all who need to look out."

We women and genderqueers all need to look out, now. “Be careful”.

Between each beer bottle collected, she is rationalizing to herself that she is safe insofar as her age renders her a less valuable sexual commodity. She has placed herself in the lower rungs of a sexual market. Her understanding of social space made safe through the understanding of herself as nonsexual.

Violence is hearing that it is my responsibility, that is a woman or genderqueer person’s responsibility, to be careful. That our sexuality leads to violence towards us. That we should be scared. That our sense of safety sets with the sun, and afterwards public space is no place for the vulnerable. Risky.

The worst violence I ever knew was in my own bed with the doors closed by a person who was supposed to be a carer and protector of me. As a woman, I am more likely to experience violence in my own home than I am in public. For as many times as people have expressed concern on my walking home alone, through certain neighbourhoods, late at night, or after having had a few drinks nobody has shown worry over my safety once I’ve made it past the alleys, underpasses, and broken street lamps to the inside of my doors. For every time someone has expressed concern for me, or my female and genderqueer friends, walking alone at night I have never heard someone say the same to a straight cismale.

The Fortress

We call it the fortress, this new abode of mine. A ten bed hostel room in central Wellington, Aotearoa. With all the extra sheets tucked beneath the metal mattress frame of the bunk above mine, leaving to dangle lightly stained cotton walls of privacy and retreat.

Two months ago today— or some nearby day, whatever day of the month it now is— was the last time I had a place to call home. I graduated university in Montreal and since then I’ve been in a constant state of transit, a constant state of being out of context. Maybe this city will be my foothold for a while, maybe another city, maybe stability sometime.

Curl up at 2am on a Friday night, I’m writing by the light of my mobile phone in effort not to disrupt the snoring, twisting, turning, drunken sleep-talking fellow hostellers.

Up late thinking about the parts of myself I’ve hoisted around along with the portability of my life possessions. All this mulling introspection left to marinade. The little pieces of my life that I’ve let grow with all that I’ve learned, loved, left and longed for. I am so often weakened, insecure, anxious and lost. I’m working at weeding through the aspects that constantly bring me down, shake me to my core at times. Staying strong by my roots so deeply nourished in this earth despite how far reaching my branches may span.
I hate my bed sometimes— it traps me. I just lay there— thinking, thinking. I should be getting a job but I don’t want to leave my room. I should be reading a book but I can’t concentrate on the pages. I should be talking to my friends but I don’t want to bother them with my sadness. So I do nothing but lay down in my thoughts, as if I have been sucked in.

4pm and I decided I should make myself something to eat, have a cup of tea and go for a walk. Get out of the house. Get out of my head. Into the fresh air.

The park is beautiful. I like listening to the birds and the water, the gentle bristling of leaves in a soft wind. It helps to ground me when my mind has wandered to depressive ‘zone out’ spaces. I don’t know what to think of the world. I have to breathe deeply and smile as the occasional dog walker goes by. I am just feeling uneasy with myself. I want to get it on paper so it’s not just in my overdrive brain. I’m trying to think of some insightful conclusion to this rant but nothing except self-criticism comes to mind.

There is a part of me that will always carry around the pain, the fear, the reality of growing up in a culture of violence. There is no distance that I can travel to escape the assumption. The notion of violence being “just the way that it is”.

I want to write about violence and support in our lives and in our communities. How it has affected me and the environments I’ve been in. How we can create a softer narrative for each other and for all the wonderful, beautiful people to be born into this world. Learn to envision it not just in the abstract, but how we can envision this for ourselves and incorporate it into our own lives.

There is nowhere we can go to find peace. Peace is a stagnation and perfection that does not exist. What we have is constant change. We have the power to make progress. We don’t have to find peace when we have resistance everywhere.

My mind drifted. The day-to-day anxiety tapped in. The long list of tasks I was not going to complete cycled through my mind. Do the dishes, go to the bank, get vegetables, hand out CVs, reply to e-mails, look up job listings, call my mother, text my friends back. They are simple things but it makes me anxious just to think of them, so I simply wish them away, ignore them, knowing all too intimately that procrastination only worsens the matter. But today, like many days, I didn’t have the energy, so I will leave it all for a more daunting burden tomorrow.
Ode to the City Park Bench

Sitting on the city park bench, I am hunched over, knees bent and tucked away, closely defending my chest. It is warm between the sun rays casting shadows on this page. I look up at the fern leaves, the un-shy magpies, and the thinning stream that’s thirsty for rain. I breathe in deeply, glad that I was able to get myself out of bed today.

I woke up several times last night panicking because my dreams were being haunted by monstrous versions of my childhood experiences of abuse. I had been restless all night but tried to be calm so that my girlfriend, looking so beautiful in her sleep, wouldn’t be woken. I came home after she started work and I slept for three more hours and I lay half-awake in bed for four more.

I had let the sheets cocoon me and cuddled my pillow as if it was a protective shield to my body. I stared blankly, waves of emotions from guilty to fearful to numb swept over and through me. I didn’t want to engage my feelings. I wanted to be distracted, released, eased.

My friend and I were on our way to look at an available flat when we stumbled across the Radical Social Centre. It was like a magnetic geek force field had propelled us toward it. We glared in through the windows: bookshelves full of dissent, a bike workshop full of diy, vegan cooking, feminism, graffiti, beds to stay in and people to hang out with. Wicked. My activist heart cosy-ed up to the idea of my social scene reproduced and re-presented all the way over in Aotearoa. Maybe there is a little piece of home here.

“Wellington makes my heart skip a beat... but not in a hypochondriac type of way” my travel-buddy excitedly declared to me as we walked up Cuba St, the city’s trendy-alternative section, passing the guitar-wielding buskers strumming for some copper. We laughed at our awkward demeanour as we wound our way back to the hostel. We had thought of taking a few days to decide which city to settle in but after spending a couple weeks in Auckland and given the lack of cardiovascular conditions, our rapid pulsating hearts indicated that the choice was clear in favour of this latest stop on the map.

I was feeling eager to make friends. Eager, too, to find a flat and free myself of the hostel-lifestyle of constant in-and-out strangers and party travelers. I knew I needed to do away with suitcase living when I walked into our hostel room one day to find the group of young British men holding their noses and apologizing for the stink wafting from the remnants of a shattered pigeon egg that they had dropped after having passed it around, daring each other to lick it. This was them on good behaviour, needless to say once evening hits the antics only became escalated and the hostel’s no-alcohol policy totally obsolete.

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The Simple Formulas of Cats

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The Simple Formulas of Cats
We knocked on the door, were invited in, and have spent the following couple weeks living in the centre, with their windows duct taped in place, five blankets each to shield us from frosty nights, dumpstered communal meals to feed our bellies, and a fireplace to sit beside whilst meeting the city’s radicals.

I went on this trip to broaden my understanding of the world, broaden my understanding of myself. I did it for the challenge. Here I am meeting new people every day, making connections, putting myself out there and projecting a confidence that is totally not there in how I actually feel. It is a challenge. I am growing. But I am also so meek. My instinct is to find a bed and curl up beneath the covers until everything else fades away.

Somehow everyone has been so nice and easy to get along with and I managed to work my way into circles full of people who I could envision becoming really good friends with later on. People who are into the same politics that puts passion into my life. I am stupidly lucky that people have been so welcoming.
But I get caught up in my insecurities and it all seems so daunting. Like every new introduction is a miniature trial and so far my newbie credentials means the jury’s out.

It’s hard for me with all my anxiety and depression. I don’t know how to have a reality check against what is me being insecure, what is other people being equally insecure and shy, and what is just somebody actually not liking me. I don’t have any consistent home, or internet, or the money for long distance calls and all the people who really get me are so, so far away. So I don’t have the reassurance of old friends to help me stay grounded. I don’t even have any private space to sort my head out. It feels really isolating.

It’s hard until I’ve made the deeper connections since people don’t generally greet each other with stories of chronic depression, anxiety attacks, abuse flashbacks and survivor fears. I want people to know about all the other sides of me before they come to thinking of me as an irreconcilable mess. Trust takes patience to establish and with all the extra stressors of moving, and all the forms of regular self-care removed, finding places to be open about the more sensitive sides of myself is a struggle.

The most reassuring thing I have right now is the resident cat, nudging his head against me as he purrs for my affection. On the cold nights he comes and snuggles and snores loudly beside me.
I have never been good at judging when people like me. I usually think that people are just being kind and then I get all awkward because I don’t know what they’re thinking and whether or not I should leave. Especially when I’m staying at other people’s places and I just don’t know what to do because I feel like I am constantly in the way.

Ugh. I just want my own space to be me.

I know that I’m insecure. I readjust myself so that I can hide it real well. Or I’m just real nice because I’m mulling about trying to see if there’s a way I can be helpful to counteract feeling like an imposition.

This is why I like cats. Cats won’t come to cuddle unless they want cuddles. It is a simple formula. No politeness, just cuddles. I like simple and I like honest. I like feline friends. Thanks for the cuddles, kitty.

I still feel marginal. Even within survivor communities I feel like I am pretty low-down in the ranks. I have been in groups before where my memories have been questioned, where I’ve felt uncomfortable about my queer identity, in situations where I felt unable to express that I do identify as “crazy” or as having mental health problems, and I have never been to a meeting or support group where people have talked about survivors who’ve been institutionalized.

Wellington has shown me a lot in the few months that I have been here. I have challenged the notion that I need to protect other people from knowing about my experiences of abuse. I am not just “too sad”. I have challenged the notion that I should have to be the one to put survivor issues and survivor resources onto the agenda. “Survivor issues” are not just about survivors, it’s about all of us. I have challenged the notion that I should be thankful for anyone willing to take on such a burden as listening to my experiences and feelings. It shouldn’t be my burden, it was not my fault, and the community has a responsibility to support me. I don’t have to be thankful that someone will listen, people should be thankful that I will talk.

I am a survivor. I am fucked up. I am bloody mental. And I have so much love. I have so much strength. I want to live in a community that isn’t shy of that. I want to stand up and be counted.
It also meant a lot to me personally. Hearing someone else at a meeting talk about being a survivor really comforted me. It was just a few little words but it made me feel so much more at ease. Like I am not all alone and it’s ok to harp up about what I feel. I was thinking the same thing about the campaign that she had expressed, “as a survivor”; only I was too intimidated to say anything.

The Wellington meetings were not off-set by open survivor input. We were damn staunch. In a few weeks we were able to organize hundreds of people taking to the streets in several Aotearoa cities to protest and we hit all the national headlines. The policies are still “under review” but at least the pressure is on and we did not allow ourselves to be invisibilized.

I can only speak for my own experiences of abuse. I don’t claim sexual abuse survivor expertise. But my experience does count. It is important. And sometimes it’s fucking relevant. We’ve all experienced a lot of shit, we’ve all survived in our own ways. Instead of worrying about how all these differences may create in-group hierarchies of experience, let’s focus on all our different insights and how we can use them to build on our movements, make our movements mega-hulk strong.

From hostel, to hotel, to holiday home my head lays to rest, to staring at ceilings, lays to the cycling and recycling of thoughts, on the white-on-white sterile pillows, sheets and bedcovers. In the hours it takes me on many nights to fall asleep my mind rears up times when the white-on-white sterile beds were met by the five am wake ups, just before the nurses switched shifts, to have me and a queue of other anorexic girls waiting to be weighed. Waiting in dread and fear, shivering in our emaciated, bone protruding bodies, and fidgeting over the paper-thin cloth, tied as tightly as possible around our waists, that was all we were allowed to wear when we stepped onto the scale. Hoping we would weigh more so that we could be released soon, fearing we would weigh more and be that much fatter to the world. To us, any result meant some type of loss.

I lye in bed now and think about where have all of our narratives gone? We theorize violence on the streets, violence in the home, but what about in our institutions? Slowly I have heard more of experiences of activists in prison, women in prison, queer in prison but there’s little in the way on marginalized groups in mental institutions, rehabilitation centres, therapeutic schools, wilderness programmes, and other psychiatric ‘treatments’. Why are our stories easily forgotten- pushed aside- resisted- or never told at all?

I was fourteen years old and living in New Jersey the first time I was ever admitted to an in-patient psychiatric facility. It was a voluntary admission. “Voluntary” in that I was told if I did not agree to go to this facility I would be placed in an involuntary, intensive institution that I was warned, without much detail, “would be far worse”. So I signed a sheet of
Hearing another survivor talk openly in a meeting really made me think about my community in Montreal and what I had become accustomed to. I had casually accepted this concept of “non-disclosure” as being normal and okay. But it is not okay. And it really affected me. It made me feel awkward and freakish. It made me shut up.

I came out publicly as a survivor in my second year of university in Montreal when I published a zine with my then-girlfriend about our experiences as survivors of childhood sexual abuse. We distinctly stated in our zine that part of the whole reason why we were putting it out was because we wanted to break the shame and the silence around abuse. We wanted to talk.

I had felt like most of my so-called community’s reaction was just to look down at its toes until a change in conversation topic. It was like I had started to break from my shame only to find a community that was resistant to confront its own shame about what I had experienced. Even though I was talking, without the community listening, the silence was not broken.

Wellington was a breath of fresh air.

The power to define what is disclosure and what is not lies in the same power that allows our communities to pretend that we are not survivors. Our activist meetings are full of survivors. The chances are if you are in a meeting and you are not yourself a survivor at least one of the people sitting next to you is. We can only “disclose” something, reveal something that is contrary to what has otherwise been assumed. Don’t assume that I am not a survivor. Don’t make it my responsibility to protect your false assumptions by having to pretend that I’m someone who I am not.
"As a survivor..." I heard her say openly, proudly. She said it in the middle of a political action organizing meeting with at least twenty other people attentively listening.

It was my second week in Wellington and I was at a meeting on resisting new policy that will create more bureaucracy and less support for sexual abuse survivors. We were going to protest, we were going to fight back.

After she said she was a survivor nobody in the room reacted like she had just said the most awkward or awful thing in the world. Most people just listened and nodded and continued with the conversation. At later points, other people even talked about how they were survivors too and how that effected how they envisioned the campaign.

I had spent years organizing in radical, anti-capitalist, queer, feminist movements and with all our talk of resistance I’d never heard someone talk about survivors like they, too, were survivors. If we talked about survivors in meetings it had to all be in the safely distanced abstract. Every survivor was third person only. It was “non-disclosure” policy, either in practice or in mandate, so we weren’t supposed to talk about our own experiences, only the experience of “others”.

Yet as I criticize psychiatry and institutionalization I have to be honest with myself— I do not know how else I could have overcome my eating disorder. I was so severely anorexic, both in body and mind, that unless I was forced to eat I could not bear the burden of consuming food. The guilt and disgust of my eating was too much for me. Part of me had to concede to a total loss of control, because if I had been in control it would have been unforgivable for me to have eaten.

I needed something, I needed community. I was sick. 'Insanity' is only a label society ascribes to deviant minds, but to be anorexic is also very real, very painful, and tough as shit to fight. There was a very serious disconnect between my body image of me as the fattest person on earth and me as the actual, emaciated self. Beyond the social context in which my eating disorder developed and flourished (and the fatphobic societal symbolism of fat as greedy, disgusting, out of control which I had come to so fear being) my own mind was not a safe place. So coming to an understanding of myself also meant that I had to learn some of my own goals and truths and unlearn many others. I had to sit down and think with myself what it is that was making me hate myself so much, hurt myself so much, and where all this hating and hurting was leading me. I tried to imagine a life where I didn’t drain all of my energy on self-destruction.
I have lived a life that will always be tainted by my early childhood experiences of abuse. Abuse to me personally as well as broader, violent messages from society have all trained me to internalize messages of worthlessness. But I will always be more powerful than my experiences of abuse because I have always found a way to live through and survive. Even when I’ve been hanging on by the thinnest of lines I have survived.

And I wish that there had been a way for me to learn to care for my body and myself without having to be so numb, exhausted, and disempowered by the industry of mental health.

I think what I needed was people to be there for me and listen to me and love me no matter what. I needed to hear more about other people suffering like I was and to know that even if some of us do always struggle, we can also strive. I think what I needed is a society that encouraged me to care for my body, a society in which my body was always cared for. A world in which my body and my experiences are respected.

But my two minutes of mental health pee break is up. I need the money, I need a job. It’s time to buckle up, smile and say “can I get you anything more, sir?”

(A few days later I quit— thank fuck for that!!)
Four Walls

Four walls. Turning the slightly busted metal knob and locking the door is my sigh of relief. Four walls to hold me in private space. I sit down in the toilet stall. I don’t need to pee. I just need to breathe. I need a moment to collect myself from the collapsed pieces of self-confidence that have shattered everywhere. Four tiny walls to hold a few minutes free from judgments of the world reigning down on me.

I miss my home. I just want to go home. I miss knowing where home is. I miss the comfort of being there, wherever it was when I had it.

So here I am freaking out with everyone I know to go to for hugs and love being on the other side of the globe. And I have about two minutes before I have to walk back outside to greet a bar full of customer demands with a smile planted on my face.

It’s my first week working as a bartender/waitress/bitch for the local brewery. I am the quiet new foreigner who everybody is too busy to show around. I’ve never worked in hospitality before and I am absolutely clueless on how to do anything useful. And I am pretty sure every time, that I’m winding between chairs, tables and crowds of drunk people that these platters full of dead cow slabs will slip right off the plate and its meat juices will splatter all over the always-right customers. The plates will probably smash, maybe I’ll knock over everyone’s beers while I’m at it, and my boss will be right there in front of me waiting to wring my neck.

Hospitality requires confidence, assertiveness, and speed. I am a nervous wreck once I’m behind the bar. Working for minimum wage, trying to push through my anxiety when all I hear from colleagues

The Tentacleising Poly-Love Octopus

I remember seeing her for the first time when she walked past my room and smiled. She was damn cute. I’d caught her eye and knew I had to meet her. After taking a moment to swoon, I ventured into the kitchen to brew a cup of tea as my excuse to say hello to her.

As I introduced myself I saw her beanie. The beanie she was wearing that has a patch which reads “poly”. “Damn it!” I thought to myself, “Why am I plagued with always being attracted to the poly ones?”

A few months earlier in Montreal I had broken up with a girl because, as I’d told her, I had to just face the facts that I am too insecure and old-fashioned for polyamory. I really liked her but I found her having a boyfriend as well as me to be really stressful. I thought that what I needed was the security of having one person who was committed to only me. I thought I was not confident enough about myself to feel assured someone liked me without the monogamous label telling me that’s how they felt. I had told myself and all my Montreal friends before leaving that I had given polyamory a try and it just was not my thing.

But here I was crushing on this poly girl. I got to know her more and realized that I actually really liked her. We flirted a lot. Eventually we talked about how we felt and I was honest about my misgivings with polyamory. She told me about her several lovers and her experiences with polyamory.

She invited me to go dancing with her—dancing with her and her other lovers and her lovers lovers and their lovers lovers. I thought the whole situation was a little hilarious, absurd and awesome. I had never seen a queer poly community so honest and open. It was just
a group of friends laughing together with seemingly little competition, animosity, or awkwardness between them.

That’s what made me question the routes of where my ‘monogels’ identity had come from. It seemed like polyamory was made to work here in ways it never did for me in Montreal. I thought to myself that maybe there really aren’t any rules and there’s actually a huge range of relationship styles which suit us depending on the people we’re with and the situations we’re in. Maybe I had boxed myself into monogamy too quickly after only a couple of experiences with poly-dating. Instead of lumping myself under some pre-determined (and dare I say, capitalist) relationship script I could try to define each relationship on its own terms, each time.

I liked her and she liked me and it felt like something we should try to make work. So we talked about our insecurities, our boundaries, and our feelings towards each other. We talked and we talked and we talked and it was beautiful.

A few weeks, and many Buffy watching ambiguous friend-crush hang outs later, I started dating another girl too. She is beautiful, intelligent, witty, a little bit bad ass as well as deeply caring and we totally connect. I like her more and more and more every time we’re together. It’s the first time I have ever been the one in a relationship who has had more than one lover. And it surprises me sometimes just how much I can like two people, be with two people, and respect and adore two people as completely different but awesome lovers at the same time.

It’s taught me a lot about relationships and about myself. I have never communicated so clearly and openly
with people I’ve dated. It’s been really positive for me to take the time to consider what it is that I am actually comfortable with, what it is that makes me feel insecure, and how I can let my partner know when I’m feeling that way and how we can address it together. I realized that the comfort of pre-set boundaries of monogamy isn’t really the best way of addressing my insecurities around how my lover is feeling about me. The comforting confines of monogamy aren’t required if I can feel assured that the person I’m with likes me because they keep telling me so, because they keep holding my hand and because they come jumping onto the bed to give me cuddles and kisses. I don’t need to be the only person they like; I don’t need to feel intimidated by their seemingly cooler other lovers, as long as I know they still like me. And I know now the possibilities of being really caring and affectionate with more than one person because I am living that reality too.

It’s still really new to me. I don’t know what shape the relationships I am in will take. I don’t think I’m polyamorous. I am not really monogamous either. At various stages in my life I may find that I’m most comfortable just dating one person, or dating several, or having the people I’m dating just see me, or see several people themselves, or some type of pick ‘n mix in-between. I think I just really like being with amazing people. My relationship style of preference isn’t really definable— it’s about talking, assessing, re-assessing, talking more, listening lots, and jumping onto the bed for cuddles and kisses.
The Ringside of Unemployment

It starts from the moment I wake up. As soon as my eyelids slowly weaken themselves open I am ambushed with self-hating thoughts. My mind running loops, leaping, pacing, around all the ways in which I am terrible. I wake up to feeling like my mind is trying to push me down, keep me down, and away from life.

Unemployment. I need the schedule of routine work. I need it to force me to move. I need motivation to fight the depressive bully that constantly taunts me. I know I can function, I know I can accomplish things but when I have no job and no studentship my ability to feel productive is lost. I get convinced that I am useless to the world.

Becoming unemployed is a serious identity shift. I went from a world-class university student to the girl too fraught with inexperience to hold a minimum wage job. I get depressed, I get anxious, and a sense of conviction that I am too psychologically daft to search for a job, apply for a job, let alone maintain one. I am useless, quite possibly forever.

It's getting stuck in a rut. My confidence is totally deflated and I start feeling like shit every time I search on-line for job vacancies, and the thought of going in-person to a café, a bar, a shop, a care home, a temping agency, wherever it is I might apply to feels like the most daunting thing that could ever be. Surely I will enter a room, ask to speak to the manager and the entire world will look back at me with an expression of "what the fuck do you think you're doing here?"

I will say something wrong, I will do something wrong. I will just look wrong, be wrong. Then I will have fucked it all up and wasted everyone's time and, basically, I will just feel so stupid. I don't even want the job; I wouldn't be good enough at it anyway.

Then there's the family, the friends from home, the people I meet in the pub, the new friends I make, the stranger I'm talking to while walking along the beach. There's the "so what do you do?" question and... well, there's only so long before it gets exhausting to explain that I am still looking for work. I can feel their disappointment in me, their shrunken expectations.

Identity shift. Sense of hopelessness. And what am I supposed to do if I never find a job? Uselessness, a sense of. Creeping back upon me. Anxiety. The depressive bully comes back, throwing punches around. Knocks me right off my feet and down to the ground.

I could get up. I could get a job. I know I am smart enough, I am hard working, I am kind, I am actually not all that bad. If I could just get my foot in the door of an employers. I just need to be persistent and positive and present confidence. Stay determined. I know I need the money; I can't even get government support during my job seeking since I'm a foreigner. Need the money, but can't... just can't get the energy.

Get up. Get out of bed. Get a damn job. This is no TKO.

The bully is taunting. Depression is standing overhead, spitting blood and bouncing around. I could get up. Get my self-esteem up and hardy to take on the world. But I am pretty sure I will just get knocked down, rolled over, beaten up worse then before. Sometimes there is comfort in being sunk down low in life. Sometimes the possibility of failure is scarier than the guarantee of it. Save the risk, I may just rest low for today. Let the bells ring for depression.