For Russell

a collaborative publication part of the exhibition
For Russell  by artist Natalie Lauchlan

This publication is made possible by the
many anonymous voices of artists
living with Eating Disorders who have
contributed to this project.
When I was a kid I came home from school hungry.

I had to eat as much as I could before Dad got home, because he didn’t like to be around if we were still hungry.
After I left home, I thought he wouldn’t understand. I couldn’t stop. I still felt overwhelmed. Any place that I ate like Dad was on my way home, not away from it.

I guess I never learned to distinguish one feeling from another, so every thing felt like hunger.
Recently I saw a hypnotic therapist, because I wanted to know what that was like.

I wanted to ask her to help me lose weight, because I'd heard that hypnosis can do that.

At the very last minute I asked her to help me feel more comfortable in my own skin.
Lately, I've felt good.
There is something very lonely about a secret. The fear and shame of having to keep it. All of my actions masked by its weight. I am vibrating with an anxiety that I can never seem to shake. I wish I could move through it, shed it like skin. Hold it up to the light, to see its folds and creases, its pieces and what holds them together.

I have been waiting for this. There have been others. Moments that felt like warnings, but somehow they have never been enough. There has never been a moment serious enough that a cry for help was necessary, that letting the truth leave my lips was worth it.

But today, this is real. These walls and white sneakers. These waiting room chairs and hanging curtains. They know my secret. Here, these other voices, they are struggling too. I am them. They are me. We are all suffering. We have all had to speak our secret to these walls, to these coats.

But I am there alone. My bedside is empty. That is what divides us.
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That is what divides us.
I met Adrian in May 2018. escaped him the following March.

On February 15th, 2019, I got the most chilling clarity. An incident occurred that I will not discuss, which made clear to me the exact abusive nature of our relationship. From that day to March 13th, I spent all of my time trying to safely extricate myself from Adrian, doing my best to keep him in the dark about my escape plan until I was ready to make my move. I spoke with a trusted professor, I spoke with the Sexualized Violence Prevention Coordinator on my campus, and I spoke with a lawyer. These 29 days of my life passed in a blur of e-mails, appointments, legal conversations and, somewhere in the middle of it all, assignments for the four classes I was taking. I don’t remember if I even slept at all—I was in survival mode.

I decided to handle the situation myself, and quietly. I didn’t want to risk becoming another #MeToo story dragged out in front of the world only for Twitter and the Canadian justice system to convince each other that I was lying. Adrian was technically a public figure, and I was terrified of the tightly-knit community in which he worked. I knew of powerful people in his industry who would protect him at all costs. Everyone loved Adrian; it was impossible not to. He was the most charming man in the world—even my best friend, who knew everything about the situation, chose to protect him over me. Anyone who knew Adrian would assume I was lying if I talked about what he’d done to me, and anyone who didn’t know him would be hearing my voice against his allies, whose voices would be exponentially louder. I never stood a chance against him.
I confronted Adrian privately on March 13th. The safest trajectory was to send him a long but clear and firm text message in legalistic language that showed him I meant business. The message read, in essence: *we both know what you’ve done, it is criminal behaviour, get the hell out of my life.* One sentence in his response still sticks to my skin and leaves me questioning my memory and perception:

“I know I never did anything wrong against you.”

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*litany of non-evident coercion*

he asked me twice how old i was  
he called me baby & laughed when i sputtered  
he said the decade between us made it hotter  
his attention burned sweat in my eyes  
i don’t think i’m supposed to talk about any of this  
he said i really wanna be on top of you  
i told him a tide pen should get my eyeliner out of his gloves  
he said i can’t have this getting out and i said do you think i want people knowing  
i didn’t let myself count the seconds between gifts and demands  
i told him i’m leaving town and he said you’d better not be leaving me  
his name still feels risky in my mouth  
i’ve never been good at saying no
It would take me several months and intensive therapy to understand that what I had been through with Adrian was trauma. After February 15th I isolated myself in my apartment, hiding from the entire world because in my mind there wasn’t a single person out there who wouldn’t harm me. It took days for me to be able to go outside, and longer still for me to look another person in the eye. And yet, all that ran through my mind was, *so many women go through so much worse*. Who was I to be traumatized by this man’s influence when my experience was only a fraction of the stories I’d heard on the news and from people I knew? Why couldn’t I just move on?

From March 13th until the end of the semester, I lived almost exclusively off chocolate chip banana bread from the café in my campus’ Fine Arts building. I didn’t buy groceries. I’m sure I drank water at some point, but I don’t recall drinking much that was non-alcoholic. I couldn’t bring myself to care about nurturing my body, so I drank when I needed something to do with my hands and I ate banana bread when the alternative was passing out. I had to finish the semester, after all; I couldn’t very well be losing consciousness in class or in the library. I had work to do. In the evenings, once the café was closed, I’d head to the campus pub for beers or go to my friend’s house for boxed wine.

By the kindness of the universe and with the help of my friends, I passed all of my classes that semester. I thought this meant that I was coping. I was fine.
all the men in my life want me
paid for.
my tongue & its parasites
stacked on fishhooks
with the keys to my throat,
the perfect fuck—
they hardly believe what i can swallow.

every man i meet
calls me pretty & i call
piranhas to corrode my skin
until i do not have skin,
carve me into clear brittle portions.

my cunt was made for secrets
too shameful for a person to know.

every man in my life thinks
he is the only man to tell me
what he’s never admitted before,
to say

  i’d tell you but then
  i’d have to kill you

right before he tells me.
every man who wants me

wants me to be the docile nigger.
the not-like-other-niggers.
the one who keeps her teeth rounded.
the one who never learned “no.”

the one without magic.
the one with a face for cum.
i will do what am i supposed to.
Of course, I was not fine. My diet of alcohol and banana bread caught up to me—I was losing weight, and quickly. Where I used to have muscle mass that was my pride and joy, I could now see my skeleton through my skin. I was slowly wasting away to nothing, and I had no problem with that. I don’t know exactly what benefit I saw to starving myself, but I have a couple of guesses:

Maybe I liked the ghostly way I looked when I wasn’t eating. I would look at my ribs and hipbones jutting out of my skin, knowing it was unhealthy, I’d think that I might waste away to nothing. This was fine—I wanted to disappear. I never wanted to be seen again. I felt the most terrifying exposure at the height of Adrian’s abusive tactics; I’d felt like the whole world could see me naked and vulnerable. Now, if I was getting smaller and less opaque, that meant there was less for the world to see when it looked at me. Therefore, starving myself was ultimately a good outcome.

Maybe I felt like I deserved to suffer. When I was starving myself, I would feel such intense hunger pains that I couldn’t stand up straight and I would think to myself: *bitch, you deserve this.* I believed that I had consented to Adrian’s treatment. I knew that what he had done was wrong, but I thought that I had brought it on myself. In my mind, he didn’t even know that he was abusing me until I confronted him about it. I was at fault for the terrible things he did, and I was also at fault for putting his career at risk by accusing him when he hadn’t even realized he had done something wrong. As such, I deserved the punishment I was inflicting on myself.
I didn’t feel like a person after I cut Adrian out of my life. He chipped away at my sense of self extremely slowly. He was clever. He knew exactly how to trick me into thinking that I needed his attention and his approval in order to be whole. So, once he was gone, even though it was my choice to have him gone, I was lost. Without him to tether me to my sense of self, I was nobody. More than once, I texted my best friend to say: *I know this doesn’t make any fucking sense but I don’t think I’m a person.* An extension of that feeling was that it was entirely unnecessary for me to eat anything. If I wasn’t even human, why would I need food to survive?

It wasn’t until August that my therapist finally convinced me to say the word “abuse” out loud. She would tell me countless times per session that I wasn’t at fault, and that I didn’t deserve what had happened to me. It took weeks of her calling Adrian a sexual predator for me to grasp the fact that he knew was he was doing to me. Everything he did, he did intentionally. His goal was to harm me to serve himself, and I never deserved to be used in the ways that he used me. To this day, I still need to repeat the incredibly important lessons that my therapist focused on teaching me:

- Consent out of fear is not consent
- He is a sexual predator and a textbook manipulator
- He abused his power over me to get what he wanted
- My brain experienced trauma
As I learned these lessons, I slowly but surely began to regain a sense of personhood. The summer that I spent in therapy saved my life. My disordered eating was a symptom of my trauma, so as I healed, I found I was able to eat again. I felt like a human being, and I felt like I was allowed to eat and to enjoy eating. The most delightful moment of my summer was when I went out to eat with my work friends after a particularly frustrating shift. We got drunk on tequila and ate many $3 tacos and went dancing, and I found that I was happy. Still carrying trauma, still terrified of the world around me and still with a ton of work to do on my healing, but happy. At the height of my traumatic experiences, I hadn’t thought I’d ever experience happiness again but there I was, defiantly alive and nourished and healing and joyful. I fought hard for this joy. I went through hell for this joy. I deserve this joy.
i am becoming a person

against my will
i de-escalate / don’t
drink / a martini
glass has a heart
in the stem
not meant to be eaten
anymore
i only chew / when
i wash my tongue.

i found a pipe-
cleaner in my vagina
i was looking
for my cervix / prefers
the lights off
& i fuck
for the first time / since—

then
i pleasure my
self until i stop
crying / isn’t that
what i’m meant
to do next?

against my will
i am becoming a
person which is to say
having survived
i re-self one cell
then the next.
A CRY FOR HELP
I have a friend, somebody who is there with me through everything. He knows more about my daily life than anyone else, there with me at every moment. He is there with me when I am lying on the floor, paralyzed in the fear of the memories, there with me when the weight of the past feels to heavy to move. He is there when I go to bed at night, like a blanket or a stuffed animal that a child can't sleep without. He is there when I wake up and get dressed, watching me tug at my jeans to see how far they pull away from my belly. He is there when I make my breakfast in the morning, keeping note of how much fruit goes in to my smoothie, or how long it will be until my next meal. He helps me fit smaller and smaller into my world. He is there with me through everything, and helps push the others away. Just us is all we need. He holds my hand through the pain of a lover's actions, through the worry of caring for a sick loved one, there with me carrying the weight of debt. He is there when I lose myself to the needs of others, or when I pile too many things on my list of to-dos. When the thoughts of *not good enough* come flooding in, he holds the door, he lets them wash me away. He stands on a little life raft in the flood and waits for me to find it, but he doesn't lift me to safety. He reminds me to drain the pains, like pulling the plug to let the bath water swirl out. He reminds me that when all of this is too much, I just have to pull the stopper and it will all come out. The flood will dry out instantly with relief, but the damage to the property is lasting. Soon the walls will show signs of wearing, not just the yellowing around the edges. The repeated flooding and draining will soon show. But he will be there with me when the damage is too great, and I will get help from others until he goes away, and I will grow again. I just don't know when I will be ready to say goodbye.
I have a friend, somebody who is there with me through everything. He knows more about my daily life than anyone else, there with me at every moment. He is there with me when I am lying on the floor, paralyzed in the fear of the memories, there with me when the weight of the past feels too heavy to move. He is there when I go to bed at night, like a blanket or a stuffed animal that a child can't sleep without. He is there when I wake up and get dressed, watching me tug at my jeans to see how far they pull away from my belly. He is there when I make my breakfast in the morning, keeping note of how much fruit goes in to my smoothie, or how long it will be until my next meal. He helps me fit smaller and smaller into my world. He is there with me through everything, and helps push the others away. Just us is all we need. He holds my hand through the pain of a lover's actions, through the worry of caring for a sick loved one, there with me carrying the weight of debt. He is there when I lose myself to the needs of others, or when I pile too many things on my list of to-dos. When the thoughts of not good enough come flooding in, he holds the door, he lets them wash me away. He stands on a little life raft in the flood and waits for me to find it, but he doesn't lift me to safety. He reminds me to drain the pains, like pulling the plug to let the bath water swirl out. He reminds me that when all of this is too much, I just have to pull the stopper and it will all come out. The flood will dry out instantly with relief, but the damage to the property is lasting. Soon the walls will show signs of wearing, not just the yellowing around the edges. The repeated flooding and draining will soon show. But he will be there with me when the damage is too great, and I will get help from others until he goes away, and I will grow again. I just don't know when I will be ready to say goodbye.
Gently, Now
by Signy Holm

I don’t want to hurt you anymore.  
I want you to see that you are worth so much.  
You are treasured  
You are loved  
You never deserved what happened to you  
I’m going to treat you better than that.

I’ll take care of you now.

You don’t have to stay like this forever  
You were put on this earth with the purpose of growing  
You were born to expand  
To absorb beauty and to exude even more of it.

Take up space.

Be seen.

I’m releasing you from this thing which contains you  
Confines you  
Tells you how to mold yourself.

You are alive  
You are life  
You are the air and the land  
You are everything  
You are everywhere

I want you to find your place  
Not be told where you should be placed

I love you.
Gently, Now is a self portrait diptych taken in my apartment studio, holding a Peace Lily. The plant has been removed from its vessel, its delicate roots exposed and vulnerable. My naked body on the floor, reflected by the camera lens, exposed and vulnerable. I caress and embrace the Peace Lily, tenderly stroking its leaves, holding it with an awareness of its utter fragility.

I want to be at peace with my body. This isn’t something that will happen overnight, and sometimes, I’m not sure that it will ever happen.

But it will happen. It is happening.

It’s happening now, as I write this. It was happening when I took these photos. When I fought with myself every single day to eat without punishing myself immediately afterwards. I started to get better when I began listening to my body, and giving it what it needed. I worked to stop depleting and abusing my body, ignoring its pain and hunger, started to view it as a growing, changing being that needs to be cared for and loved.

Plants need to be nourished and watered, kept in conditions best suited to that specific plant. Each species has unique needs, not just in order to live, but to flourish. It makes no sense to compare the needs of an African violet, which requires a very specific amount of water every three days, to a cactus, which can easily go weeks or months without water. You wouldn’t shame the African violet for requiring more water than a cactus, and you wouldn’t starve it of water until it withered and died. Rather, you would follow the recommended care to ensure that you are giving it the best possible chances of surviving.
This is the mindset that I had, and often still have, surrounding my body. I constantly compared the way my body looked to other peoples’ bodies, and monitored how much or how often I would eat in comparison to those around me. This self-monitoring and self-deprivation was my every-day life. These unrealistic comparisons became my normal; I didn’t know what normal felt like. My body was always wrong. When it came to eating, I was always in the wrong. I continuously punished my body to remind myself that it was wrong.

I starved myself, refusing to let myself feel satiated. I deprived my brain from nourishment, and lived inside of a fog. My body was weak. I was constantly tired, and cold. I was trapped inside a decaying vessel.

I learned slowly, and painfully. I learned to be present in my body rather than to go against it. I learned to advocate for my body and its needs. I learned to not only listen to its needs, but to its desires. These desires had been disguised as gluttony, greed, weakness. They came across as selfish, and I often approached them with judgement and disgust. I had to break down my biases surrounding my body’s desires, and I had to learn to accept them without question. What is life without desire? I could give my body what it needed to survive, but ultimately I wanted to see it thrive. I began to let desire in, to welcome it, and to satisfy it.

I am learning to love. Love is the most crucial, and the most difficult. It is a daily practice, and often it involves confronting things that I would rather keep buried inside myself. Learning to love myself has been my biggest accomplishment, and I will continue to practice it each day. When I feel that I am not at my best, I know that I am trying, and trying is all that we can do.
i learned to hate this body
The Eating Disorder Support Network of Alberta (EDSNA) is a non-profit organization and a registered charity dedicated to providing meaningful support to those affected—directly and indirectly—by eating disorders. They offer professionally-facilitated support groups in Edmonton, Calgary and online, host a website of resources, plan events, and give educational presentations, all with the hopes of sharing knowledge and fostering awareness. Thanks to their current funding agreement, EDSNA is able to offer these groups at a very low cost to the participants, and can even waive fees if clients are experiencing financial difficulty.

EDSNA provides information, guidance, a provincial voice, a community hub, and-most of all-sUPPORT and hope. Our vision is to ensure that no one in Alberta will have to face an eating disorder alone.

For more information about EDSNA and the support they offer, visit https://edsna.ca or follow @eatingdsna on social media.
Calgary Silver Linings Foundation was founded in 2014. We are working to improve the under-serviced eating disorder population’s access to life-saving treatment by creating a world-class residential eating disorder treatment centre.

Eating disorders are real, complex and devastating conditions. They are not a fad, phase or lifestyle choice and are often misunderstood. An estimated 55,000 Albertan’s have an eating disorder and these deadly mental illnesses have the highest mortality rate of any mental illness, including depression.

Silver Linings offers support groups for adolescents, adults, parents and loved ones. These professionally facilitated groups offer hope, support and an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of struggles, challenges and most importantly, celebrate successes.

For more information on Silver Linings support for your recovery journey go to www.silverlingingsfoundation.ca and follow us on social media @SilverLiningsAB.
Body Brave is a national charity dedicated to helping people recover from disordered eating and eating disorders, by providing the best in community treatment as well as breaking down systemic barriers to recovery. For more information about the training, treatment and support for body image issues, disordered eating and eating disorders offered by Body Brave visit bodybrave.ca or follow @bodybravecanada on social media.

**NEDIC HELPLINE:**

1-866-NEDIC-20 (1-866-633-4220)

*Monday to Friday, 9am-9pm EST*

NEDIC provides information, resources, referrals and support to Canadians affected by eating disorders through our toll-free helpline and instant chat. Outreach and education programming is available online and in the Greater Toronto Area, focusing on awareness and the prevention of eating disorders.
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