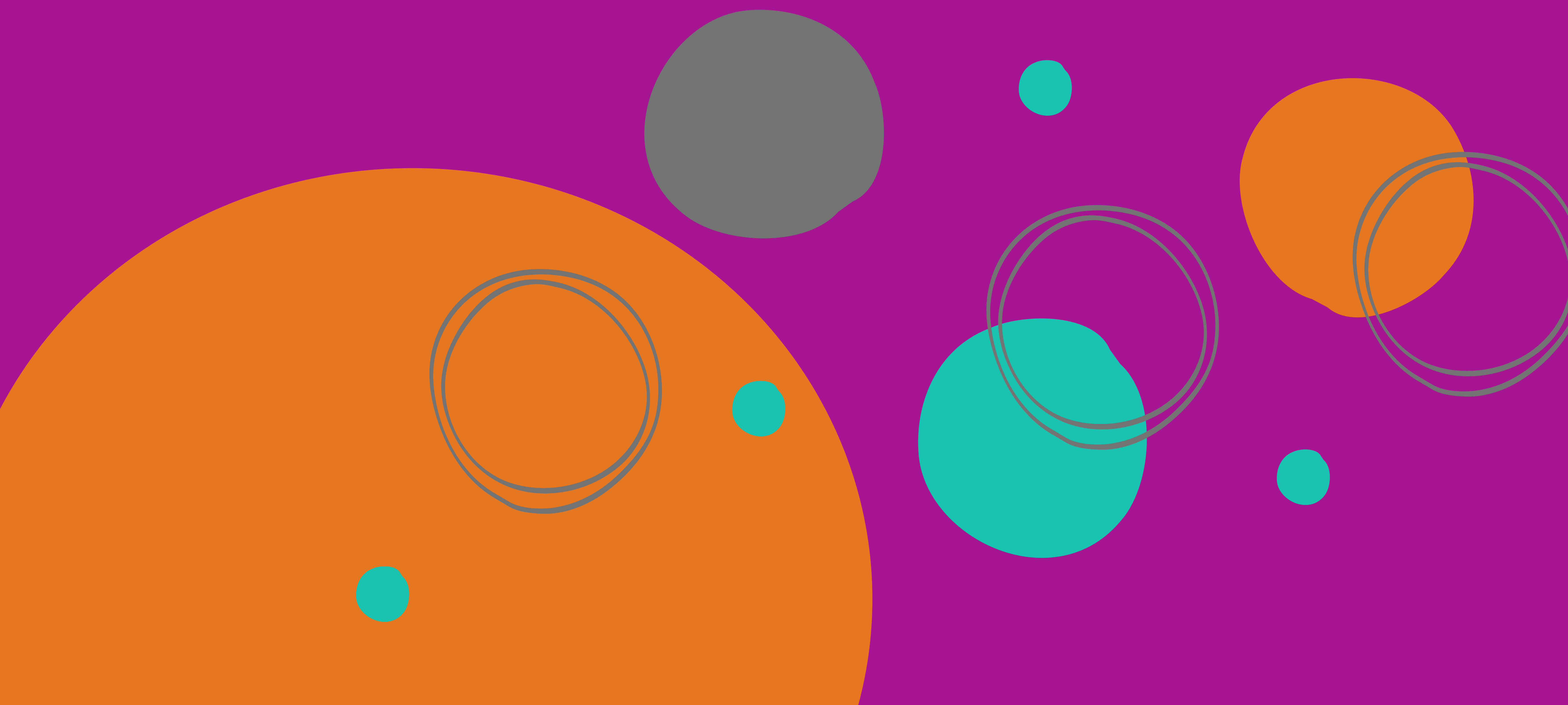




Laneway of Lived Experience

A project by SA Lived Experience
Leadership & Advocacy Network | LELAN



Laneway of Lived Experience

Laneway of Lived Experience was an interactive art exhibition funded by the Mental Health and Wellbeing Directorate – Wellbeing SA. The exhibition was launched on Tuesday July 29th 2021 at say.kitchen located on 78 Currie Street in Adelaide's CBD. LELAN was joined by a storyteller, who connected and encouraged attendees to contribute to her #1000hearts initiative.

The event was attended by 56 people, including the Laneway of Lived Experience storytellers, LELAN members and representatives from Mental Health and Wellbeing Directorate – Wellbeing SA, South Australian Mental Health Commissioners, philanthropic bodies, service providers within the NGO sector and the general public.

The stories and artwork of seven storytellers were exhibited:

- A storyteller who remained anonymous and shared their experiences of navigating addiction and their journey to becoming a peer worker in this space
- AJ, a creative who found her way back to art in 2010 after some traumatic experiences left her in a dark space
- Cat, an emerging creative, mental health advocate and university student studying Psychology and Disability Studies
- Lana, a mother of two boys and a wife who navigated complexities related to reduced working hours and unemployment during COVID
- Niccy, a school teacher who was committed to depicting teachers stress during COVID through her artwork
- Mario, a loving father who devoted his life to playing an active role in systems change following the loss of his daughter
- Michelle, the woman with 1000 hearts who nurtured a community of handmade hearts across metropolitan and regional South Australia during COVID.

This booklet was created to more broadly share and honour the storytellers, their stories and their artwork, as well as the Laneway of Lived Experience project more broadly.

LELAN's Care not Treatment film was showcased at the launch. This film was a core component of our Learning from Lived Experience (LfLE) Suicide Prevention Project in 2020 and centred the lives and wisdom of eleven people who have been personally affected by suicide distress or crisis. UNHEARD, LELAN's first online zine, featuring art and crafts, poetry, writing, interviews and resources recommended by the lived experience community was also exhibited.

LELAN extends our gratitude to the seven storytellers, the Mental Health and Wellbeing Directorate – Wellbeing SA and Adelaide City Council for their contributions to our Laneway of Lived Experience project. Moving forward, we will continue to stay true to our intentions of bridging the gap between the lived experience community, the general public and systems to shift perspectives, challenge assumptions and stimulate lived experience-driven learning through various creative and innovative platforms.



Launch Night





Journey, Interrupted I

My journey with my mental health has always been up and down, back and forth, push and pull. Fitful steps forwards and then backwards again. My journey towards my goals has often been interrupted by unpredictable episodes of illness.

During high school, I would spend countless weeks preparing for a final music performance or exam only to end up missing it altogether. I eventually got to university, ready to put those days behind me and stop having illness “interrupt” my plans... but it was not meant to be. When things have not turned out as smoothly as I’ve hoped, I have learnt some important lessons.

Through my experiences of mental and chronic illness getting in the way and interrupting my plans, I have come to learn that life is not a race. It is journey to be treasured and enjoyed. True resilience, for me, is getting up to keep going, one step at a time, towards my goals- no matter what unpredictable thing life throws my way. No matter how often I get interrupted.

Going for walks has always been something that has kept me grounded. To clear my head and settle my restless heart. A journey around my neighborhood, a journey that I get to choose. One that can’t be interrupted. One with nature and sunshine and good music funneled through headphones.

This is an interactive part of the exhibition. I am bringing one of my walks to you.

So, take a breath, come and walk with me. Stop to enjoy the nature in the photographs. Before you embark on this walk with me, I encourage you to scan the QR code and listen to the soundtrack of my experience.

Once you press play, walk side by side with my footprints on the floor.

These footprints symbolize my journey with psychosocial disability, multiple hospitalisations and chronic illnesses.

These footprints are the positive elements of my lived experiences, the constants and the ways in which I navigated everything.

These footprints are my journey, one that may be interrupted- but one that is not over yet.



Journey, Interrupted II

Sometimes it's wise to take a break
And go outside...
Stop looking at old memories
And breathe in the present for a while

Look at flowers
And flow towards calm
Stop to feel the warm sun
Or the raindrops as they hit your arms

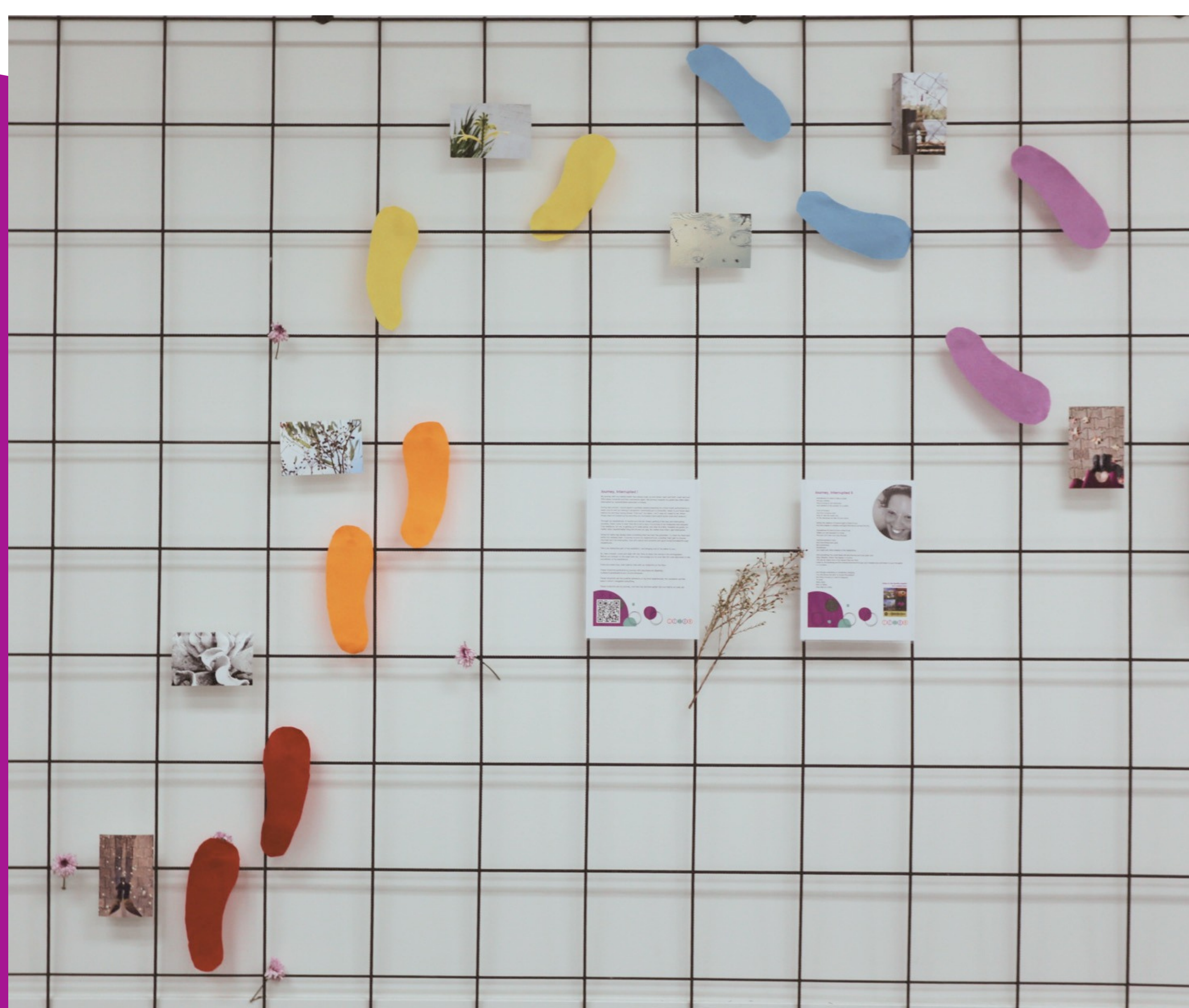
Notice the rainbow of colours right in front of you
And the shapes of shadow and light that dance across the sky

Sometimes it's hard to know what to do
When you are trapped in a forest
And you can't see your way through

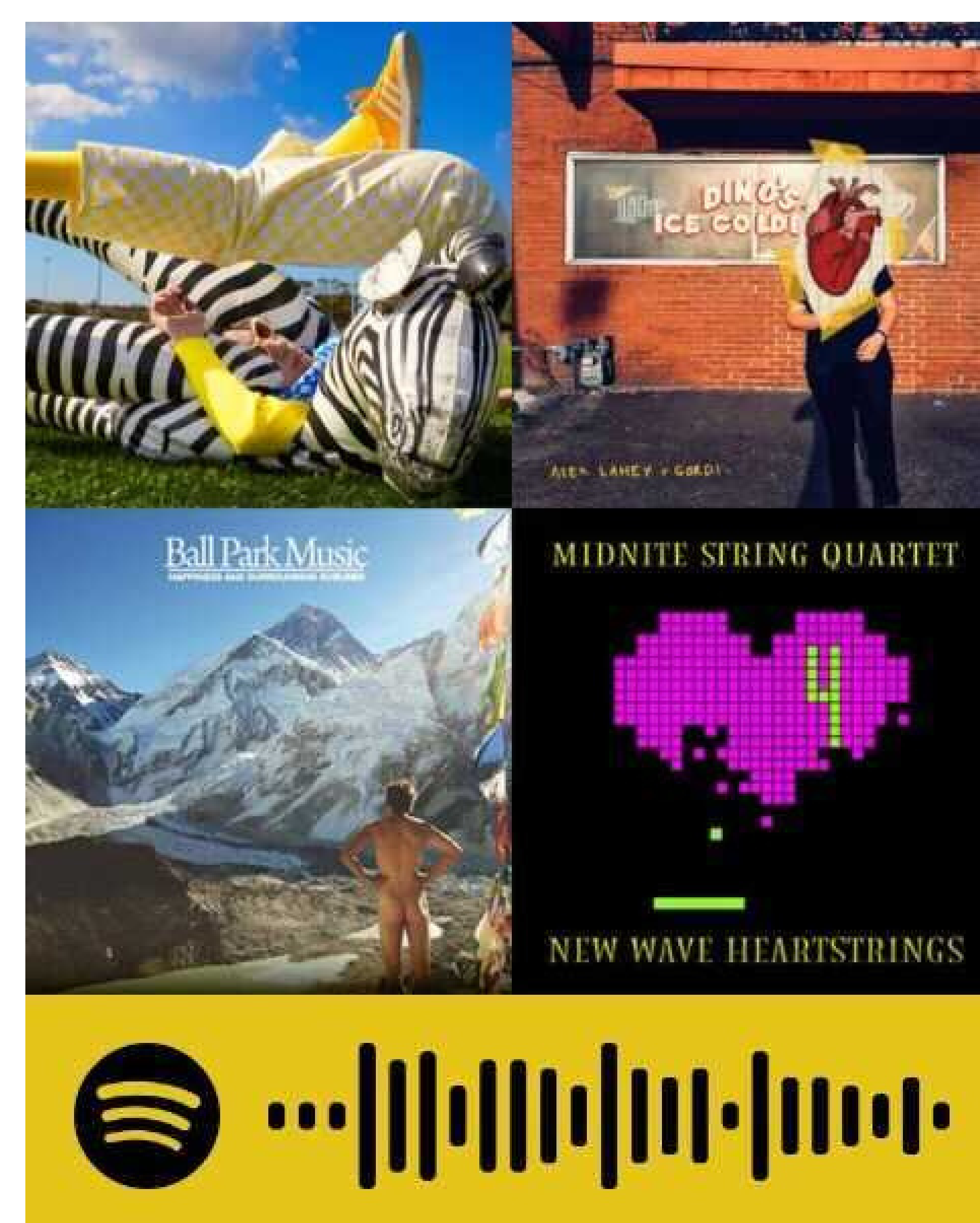
And Sometimes it rains
And everything feels grey
But sometimes-
Sometimes-
you might just notice beauty in the melancholy

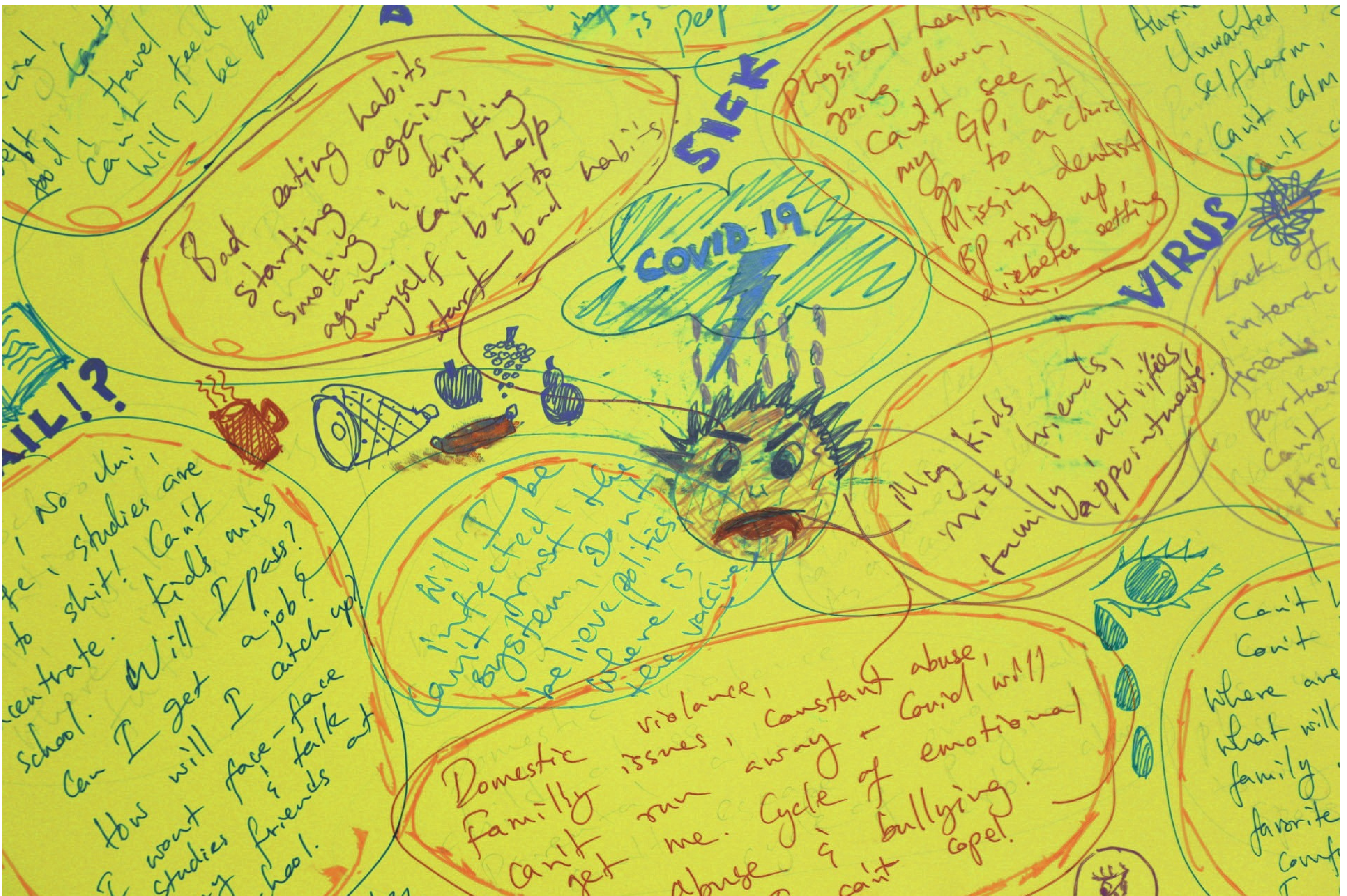
And sometimes the world feels still and moving and loud quiet and-
Stop. Breathe. Watch the ripples in a pond...
We can all make more of an impact than we think
Listen to the birdsong and the melody funnelled through your headphones and listen to your thoughts
s l o w down

And though everything is constantly changing
You will always be able to locate the present
And find a flower or a leaf to treasure-
To hold.
Here. Now.
Rain or Shine.
One step at a time.



**listen to the Spotify playlist
Cat created here**





The Messiness of Everything

So many things happened during COVID.

I thought I was getting my life back together – going out with friends, studying, working and taking care of myself but everything stopped with COVID. Having time alone made me think back to the messiness of everything. Things from my past... things from back when I was unwell... they started to come back and I didn't know how to cope.

I struggled with the messiness of everything because messiness was everywhere. It was in my mind, within our community, among the people I saw on the day to day. It's even trickled into our government.

I wanted to use mind maps to organize the messiness of COVID and I think it's ironic to do that.

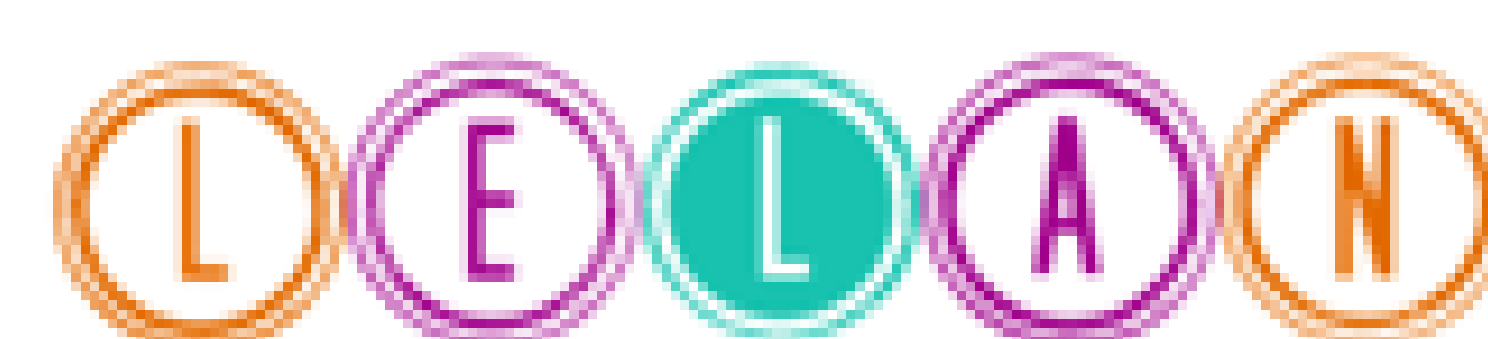


The Woman with 1000 Hearts

#1000hearts is a global kindness project that was started by Sarah De Jonge in Hobart, Tasmania in 2016. She is a counsellor and noticed that in the week between appointments her clients were quite sad and upset. So she started stitching felt hearts, to give her clients between sessions as a little support they could carry through the week. It then became a kindness project – kind to ourselves, kind to others and kind to the environment. She encourages us (the Heartists) to use natural products when making the hearts. Her mission is to change the world, one heart at a time.

I became a “Heartist” in 2018 after seeing a Facebook post. I loved the concept of it – that you could do something so little and simple and bring someone some care or kindness or joy. Some of the stories that I hear from people when I give them a heart are really moving. I think the most help actually has been for me. Since COVID, it had a profound effect on me, when everything felt out of control, and the world was scary it gave me purpose. It was that idea that you can’t control all the big stuff but you can control little things that you do. I would be swimming in the morning, and stitching hearts during the day.

I have been taking the hearts that I made to people in the community – pharmacy workers and other workers who were “essential” during COVID. I also took hearts to the women’s shelter and Centacare – for workers, people receiving counselling and new foster kids coming in. I gave hearts to everyday people as well – I would always have one or two hearts in my pocket so if I saw mums with kids crying or someone who seemed a little sad, I could give them a heart. It kind of became a mission for me, where I forgot about what was going on in the world and thought about who I could bless with a heart each day.



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Lauren's Story

When I, Mario, her dad, think of the words on my daughter Lauren's headstone, I can only reflect on what her life could have been and how much more there is to tell.

Lauren suffered a Mental Health Illness from an early age. As an adolescent she developed an eating disorder. She eventually took her own life at 26 years of age.

In the beginning of 2004 I saw Lauren in hospital (WCH Adolescent Ward) suffering from Anorexia. She was 15 years old. I could barely recognise her. She was just over 30 kilograms and she looked like someone from developing country where food is scarce. Her bones were protruding through her skin and clothes.

Unbeknown to me, this was not the first time she had suffered from an eating disorder. She told me she spent several sessions in the WCH Mental Health Boylan Ward in the past.

At this point in time I had no knowledge or experience with eating disorders and I was initially at a loss to think of ways to help her. I turned to my own life experiences where I had to develop resilience and strategies to cope with difficult circumstances. My only focus at this time was to teach Lauren to overcome her fear/eating disorder and hopefully lead a normal life.

As a single Dad I felt like I was walking on eggshells when I was with Lauren. I was so afraid that I would say something that would tip Lauren over the edge. Eventually, Lauren took her own life at the age of 26 through a life long battle with mental health.

I spent countless evenings with Lauren in hospital and received regular emails during her battle with mental health/eating disorder issues.

"Each day that goes by I'm becoming more petrified to wake up and face life," Lauren said in one of her emails to me.

"Life is absolutely terrifying at the moment; I just don't want to see one more minute."



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Lauren's Story

Lauren's mental illness caused by her struggle to overcome the physical symptoms of her eating disorder.

She also wrote to me saying, "I can't believe how hard this is. I'm in so much pain and agony and I am absolutely terrified of everything I'm faced with."

Needless to say, I was heartbroken. I tried my hardest to be sensitive to Lauren's needs. I focused on listening and trying not to be too pushy in the hope that this was the best approach to enable Lauren to recover.

I ensured Lauren was in a safe environment throughout her early teenage years. There were signs of improvement and Lauren began home schooling in Year 11 after missing all Year 10, due to her fear of being surrounded by people.

Lauren's self-esteem improved as she started to meet friends, had sleepovers and enjoyed birthday parties. I recall Lauren being "on top of the world" at her sixteenth birthday.

Not long after, Lauren got a part time job and a driver's licence.

She then asked me about going back to school for Year 12 – another big step. Things were seemingly improving and Lauren was following the course of most teenagers.

I was always very conscious of making sure I said the right thing and not coming across too pushy. Lauren had a boyfriend at this time and moved out of home just before her 19th birthday. This move made me nervous as I was worried that she would go downhill if things didn't work out.

The contact between us became less frequent after she moved out. "Should I push the issue or let her have her own life?" I pondered.

Lauren successfully gained a double degree in psychology and things were seemingly progressing well in her life. Perhaps I didn't have a need to worry so much?



Lauren's Story

In 2013, Lauren tried to take her own life and she was admitted to hospital. I wondered could I have done more between 2013 and her fateful day two years later, 29th September 2015.

Before her death, she had been diagnosed and was being treated for Borderline Personality Disorder. I believe that BPD and Anorexia are mental health issues that are related in some way. I'm not a clinician so I make this statement as a parent.

If the correct early intervention had occurred before the eating disorder manifested itself, it could be possible that we wouldn't be writing this story.

My heartache as a father of not knowing if I could have done more, if I could have done something sooner or if I failed, will inspire me to help others in my situation.

Unfortunately I can't change what happened to Lauren, but hopefully we can provide intervention strategies at an early stage to prevent the disease developing further. We can also provide guidance and education for people who are around the person with an eating disorder – this is a real disease!

If you saw Lauren, she was a happy person, she was always smiling in photos. Behind that smile she may have been planning her end for some time.

Even if she was living today, we would need constant support around her, it's an ongoing thing. The reality is that mental illness never goes away.



No one's too far gone

In 2015, I got arrested and I missed the birth of my son (which was the day after). I met an Aboriginal kid when I was in a cell and saw his entire family in jail. It was that moment that I knew that if I can find a way out, I'll do whatever I can to support people like me get on the right path. That's when my recovery started.

You know it was challenging. It was hard... hard to get clean... but I did it. I got clean in home detention. I eventually had to go back to jail but I went back completely clean with a therapeutic mindset.

It's important to remember that jail isn't a place full of bad people trying to go good. It's a place where there's people who are unwell and need to get better. At the core of everything, is mental health.

My experiences in jail are experiences that won't let me quit. I think of this lived experience as my asset, as my weapon, as my wisdom. On paper, my rap sheet looks like it ruined my life but it's what gave me the experience and credibility to do the work I am doing today. I'm not just talking about AOD and jail because I've gone to school and learnt about but because I've lived and breathed it.

In the AOD world, there are people who come in and sit with their counsellors and think "What do they know? They haven't gone through what I have" but when you bring lived experience to it, you have the street cred and you have the trust. They trust that something works... something worked for you... consider the option, dwell on it and maybe pick up the phone to make that one phone call that will change their life.

My work is one of the most rewarding things I get to do. I work with families. I do counselling. I mentor people. I help mothers understand why their kids are the way they are, why they are turning to AOD and to get them to understand it in a more logical rather than emotional way. And to give them hope that their child will get better... will be better... by sharing my story.

You know, I tell them that I am an expert of my recovery but I can't tell you what to do. I can't write down a blueprint and expect you to follow it. What I can do is be open minded, listen to your experiences, share my experiences of what worked and maybe it'll work for you.

Most importantly, I'm going to remind you every day that you're not too far gone because
no one's too far gone





Rumination

With all the uncertainty, I was taking off work clothes at the backdoor, hosing down groceries and enforcing physical distance with 28 high school students in a classroom even though it was logistically impossible. I remember at one stage; I was creating a fun quiz about regulations to help Year 8 students manage the raised anxiety and onslaught of panicked reporting in the press because that's what I did as a teacher. That's the teacher inside of me, making them see the good from the bad.

Behind the scenes, my colleagues were facing various stressors as they went home to their families. For me, I wasn't able to see my mother for five months and that was one of my biggest stressors. That's what I did as a daughter. That's the human inside of me.



Relief

The work was created in 2016 to illustrate 'Teacher Stress' and the relieving impact of counselling and a regular meditation practice after an 18-month investigation. The fern fronds of Relief are representative of how resilience and creativity grow in a crisis.

Thankfully these ongoing practices were in place to manage the panic when I was tutoring students via e-mail from Wuhan, China in February 2020 and then the increase in workload as we scrubbed desks, made up individual sets of tools and created hybrid curriculum (online and in the classroom) in Australia. That was the **relief** inside of me.





The story behind AJ's art

I have been interested in art all my life. I attended Art school in the 80's however life got in the way and I didn't have time. I found my way back to art in 2010 after some traumatic experiences left me in a dark space. It has helped me to work through some of the subsequent challenges I was facing at the time, to help me some relief from the extreme anxiety and depression I experience. A way to practice mindfulness.

Since then, I have experimented with different mediums. Abstract collage, photography, still life drawing, portrait drawing, charcoal, water colour and acrylic.

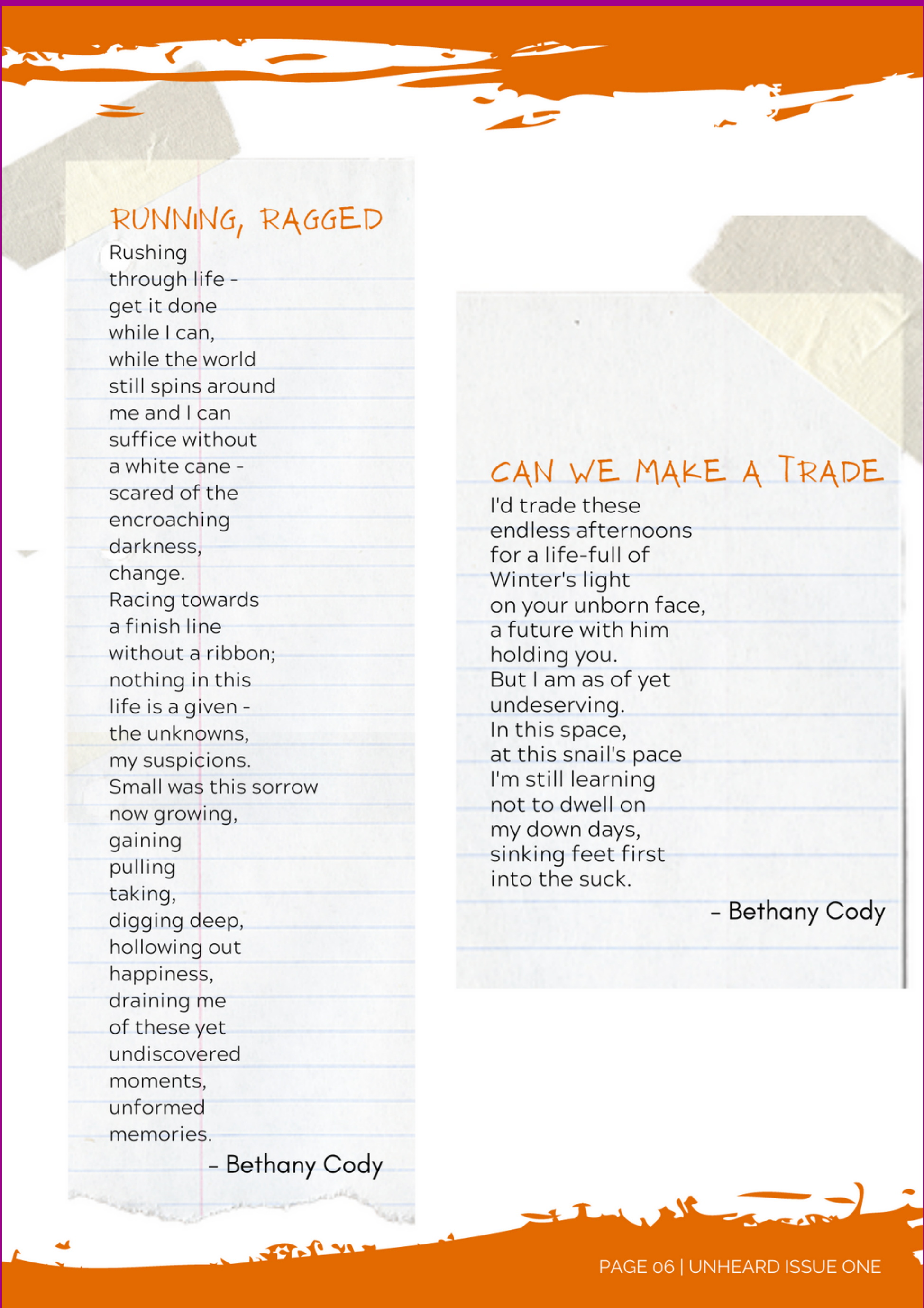
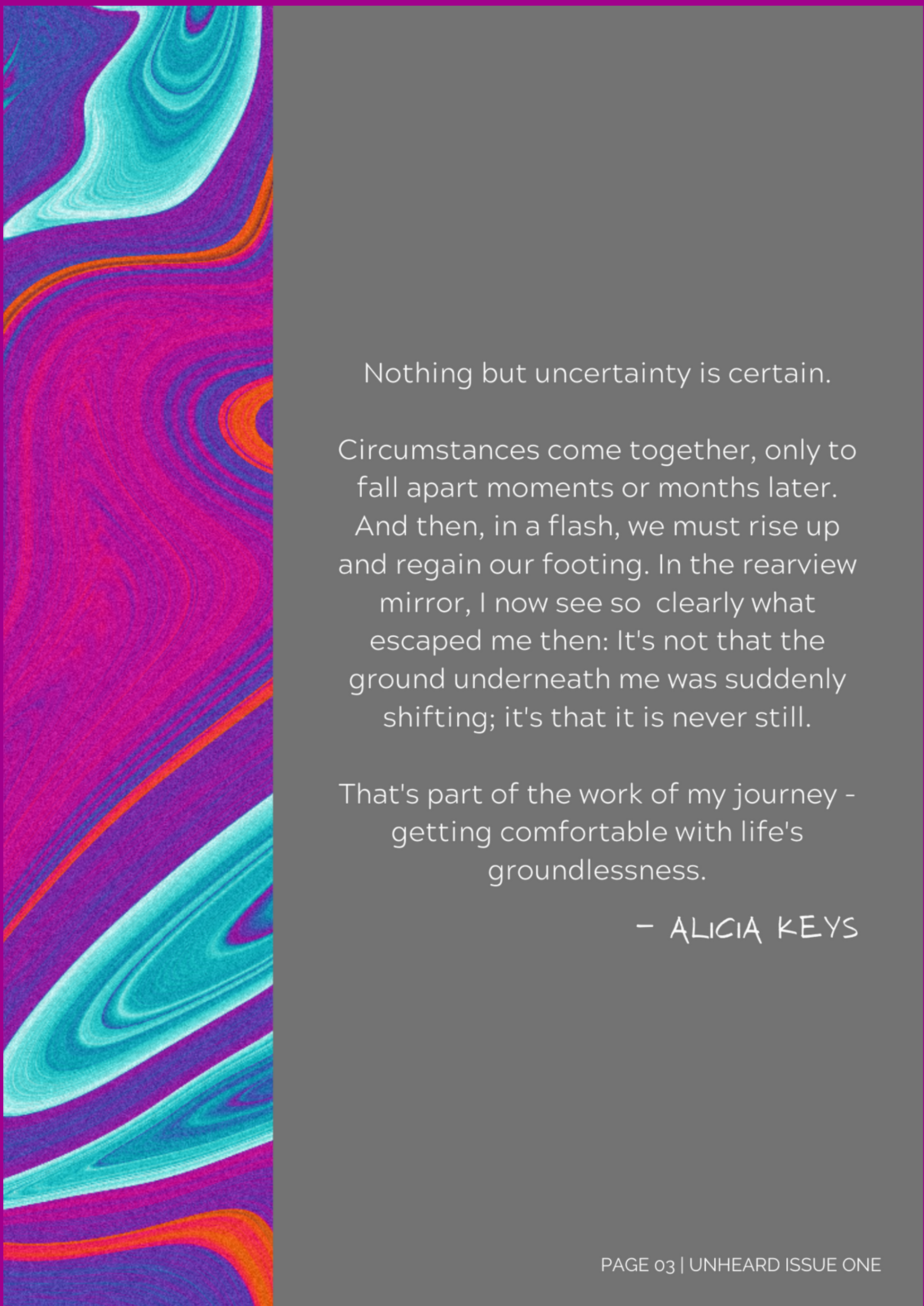
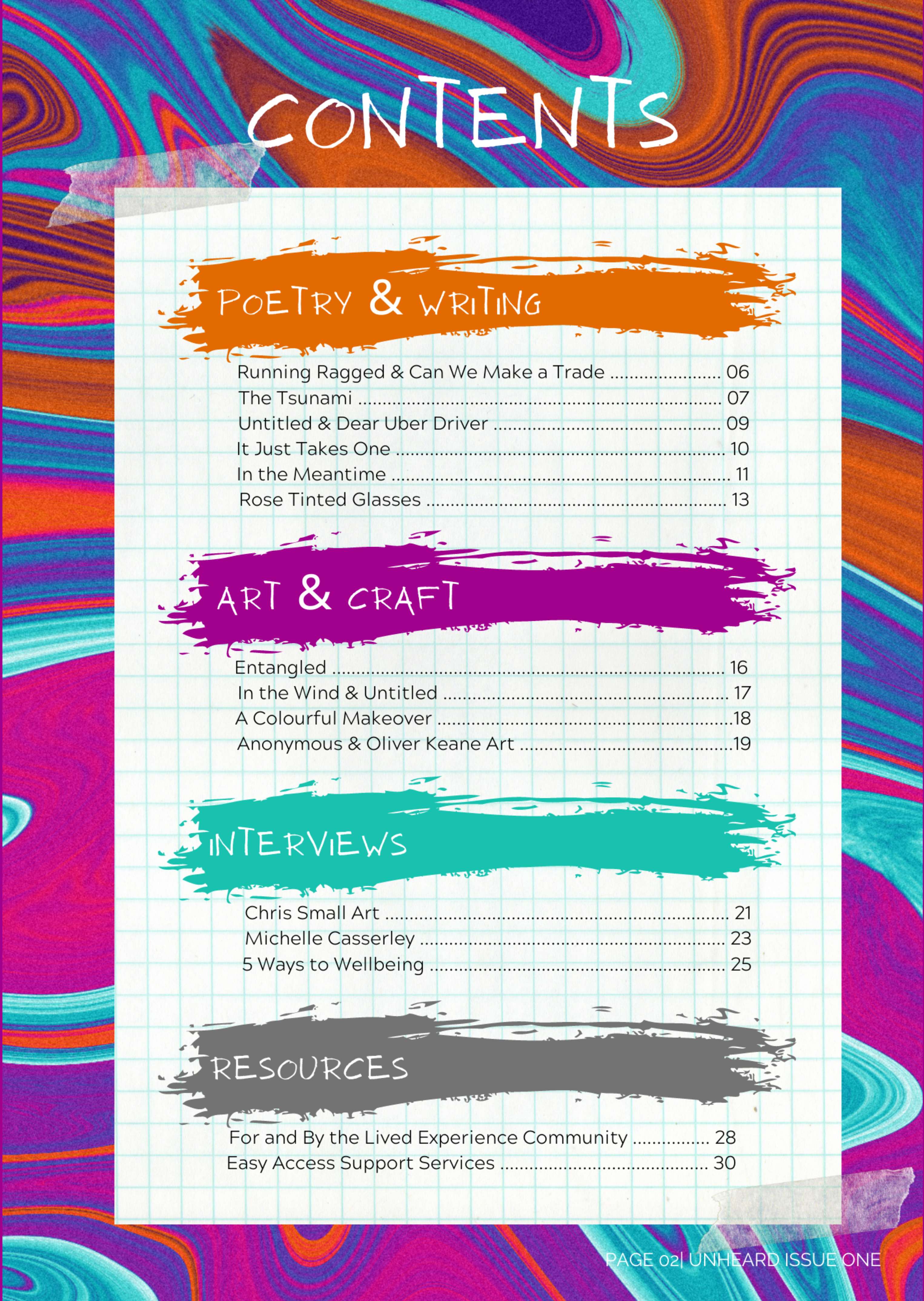
My inspiration comes from the natural world around me, and from the fantasy worlds in my imagination.

I love the freedom of experimenting, expressing my feelings and my playing with memories...

I love to see what happens when I do something different and then follow that through to see where it finishes.



UNHEARD Zine



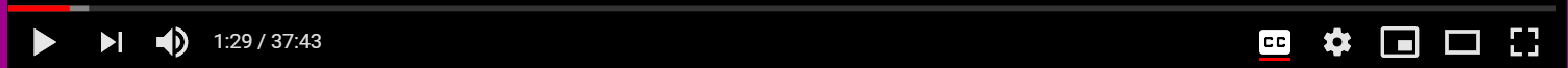
Care not Treatment Film



Care not Treatment

Lived Experience Contributions for Understanding and
Responding Better to Suicide Distress/Crisis

(TITLE)



www.lelan.org.au/carenottreatment



About LELAN

LELAN's purpose is to amplify the voice, influence and leadership of people with lived and living experience of mental distress, social issues or injustice to drive change. The organisation has three areas of focus:

- Developing the capability and influence of people with lived experience
- Nurturing organisational and sector capacity for partnering with people with lived experience, and
- Impacting system improvement agendas to benefit people with lived experience.

As the lead lived experience organisation in South Australia LELAN has particular expertise, networks and partnerships that centre the lives, wisdom, recovery and contributions of people with lived experience. Because of our strong and trusted relationships with people in the lived experience community we are able to have deeper conversations about things that matter, drawing our collective experiences and action together in purposeful ways.

By centering the perspective, collective insights and solution ideas of people with lived experience in all of our work, as well as being immersed in the lived experience community from grassroots to strategic levels, LELAN demonstrates the principles, practices and change dynamics that the social sector is calling for and deperately needs.

LELAN has extensive experince and a proven methodology for leading capacity-building and co-design initiatives, frequently with a focus on sensitive issues and including groups that bring divergent perspectives to the conversation. In partnership with UniSA's Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Research group LELAN have researched and used a collaborative impact approach to develop lived experience leadership and systems change in South Australia.

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Lived Experience Project Worker: Sam Lai

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