



Unravelling Threads

Asian
mental
health

The pieces in this zine explore topics of mental health (lived experiences and perspectives) which can be difficult to read, including discussions and references to suicide, ableism, transphobia, family violence, anxiety, and drug use. Please take care.

We have included a list of resources at the end if you need to seek support.

I want to begin with our choice of yarn for the cover. It is a metaphor to illustrate the complexity of perspectives and experiences of mental health for Asian communities. The powerful narratives included in this zine are a testimony of it. It highlights that there are many ways in which mental health is spoken about and with each narrative, there is an unravelling of sorts.

We have centred the voices of Asian peoples in this zine in the hope to amplify them because these voices, our voices, Asian voices are largely absent from the mainstream discourse of mental health.

This zine sits within the wider kaupapa of Te Papa's Asian Mental Health project. The project came about as a response to our invisibility, marginalisation and lack of representation in Aotearoa mental health space.

I want to say that I hope this zine moves you as it has done for me. I hope somewhere somehow it makes a difference.

Mehwish

Mehwish Mughal, editor

This zine would not have been materialised without the support of two amazing people: Dr Grace Gassin, Curator Asian New Zealand Histories, or, as I like to refer to her as, the ardent support, co-collaborator, and mentor of this project, and Daniel Crichton-Rouse, Senior Digital Editor, whose aesthetic abilities have given this zine a beautiful look. Thank you to both of you.

It goes without saying that the biggest role in bringing this zine to life is the generous and evocative contributions of all the people included. Thank you to all of you for sharing your narratives and beautiful artwork with us. I also want to thank you for being patient with me throughout the process.

I want to also thank all the people who sent their submissions which we were not able to include. Your engagement with us has touched me deeply and shaped the project in so many important ways.

JINNY CHIN

(17 June 1990 – 4 June 2020)

by Lydia Ng

As a child born in Aotearoa of migrant parents, her adult life was not easy especially in her journey searching for a job to achieve her career goal.

She was artistic and loved connecting with family and friends. Thoroughly enjoyed her schooling and college days with friends and activities.

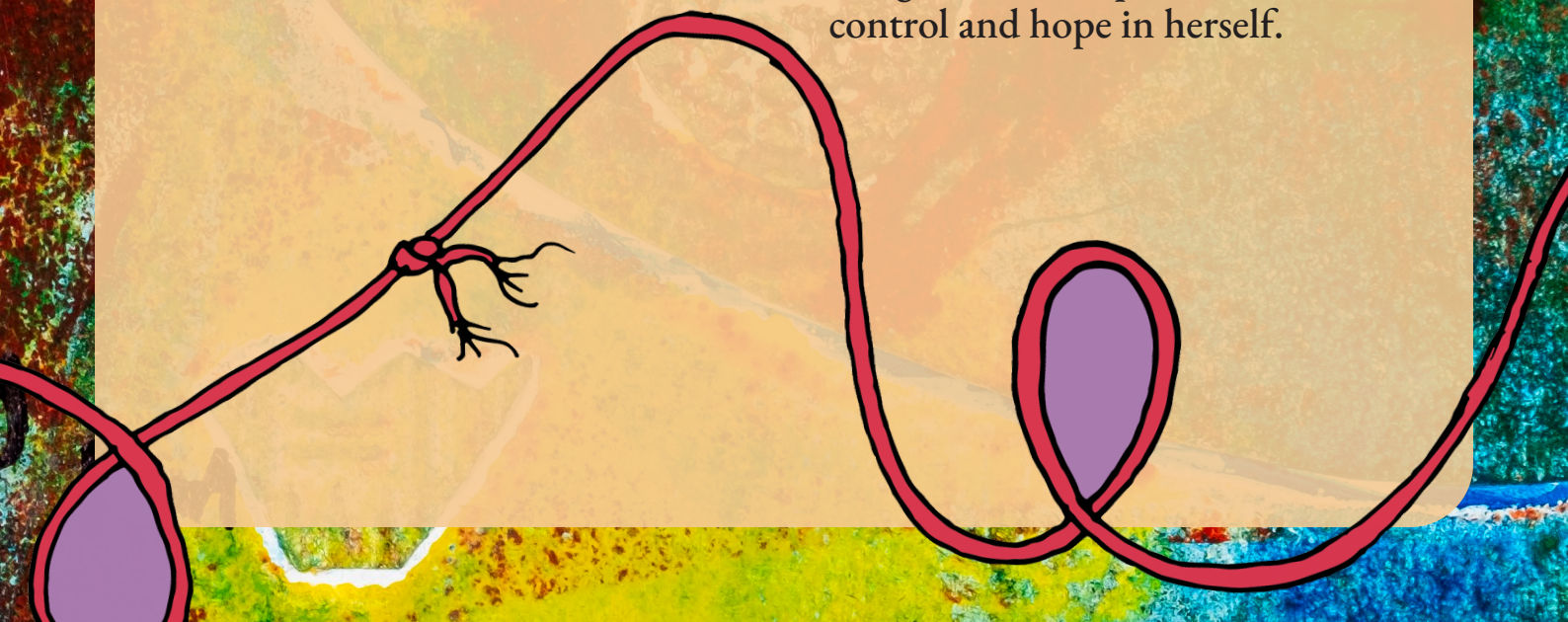
But life for her was difficult especially after university studies. Since leaving university she suffered anxieties which led to depression.

Her friends said that she tried so hard securing a job in her field of study. She studied Spatial Design at Massey University. Most architectural firms do not have apprenticeship programme but instead look for experienced potential employees, so subsequently she took up retail

jobs and other work. She did some volunteer work in the community to help her mental health and build self-confidence. She took care of her mental wellbeing, active in outdoor activities, for example Wellington Women motorcycle club, travelling, surfing and diving. She struggled to maintain a positive outlook to be accepted and belong.

She had lovely support from family, friends and counselling. Taking long term medication was not the answer for her due to the side effect from medication.

She changed her Asian name to Jinny (she said it looks appealing on her job applications !) Even up to her death, she applied for jobs, hoping to achieve her career goal. Unfortunately with the outbreak of the global covid pandemic, she lost control and hope in herself.



Aotearoa society can have a much better insight in the daily experiences of being a migrant or a minority group in society. Children and Adults want to be accepted and belong regardless of ethnicity. We all want to have trusted friends to socialise outside the family.

Tertiary sector cannot overlook one important fact of students' struggling with anxieties, depression. It can do more to engage with students and recommend a personal mentor to stand by them with understanding and build trusted friendship in their life journey.

There is a need in business organisations (both public and private) for a positive rethink of

depression because every person is different, with unique strengths and challenges. A lot of time people hear that someone suffering mental health issue and they assume incompetence. Organisations need to be more benevolent and be inclusive.



Painting by Jinny when she was in Year 6, aged 10



Architectural drawings by Jinny, 2019

CALM FROM THE CACOPHONY

Calm From the Cacophony tells my story of resilience and reconciliation with expectations placed on me. These include the well-trodden theme of good grades and becoming a doctor to gain acceptance or love. Realising self-worth does not hinge solely on pleasing others is a journey not exclusive to or universal for Asians, though relatable to many Asians. The crayons and fingerpaint textures appeal to the innocent child in all of us, and the fact that I have dealt with these expectations from a young age.

The pandemic was the first time I could hear my own voice above others. I also describe the strange guilt I carry from thriving during lockdown while others suffered. I hope that my submission inspires others to reflect on their own experience and feel worthy of self-love.

by MICHELLE TIANG

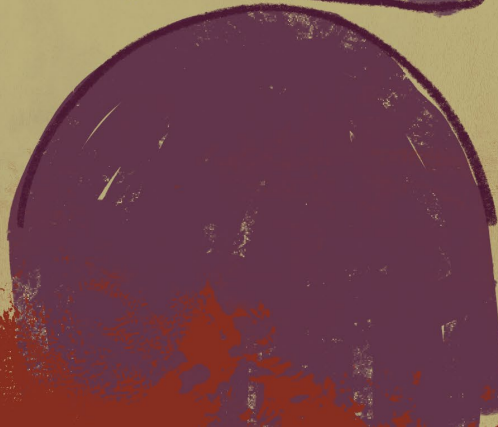
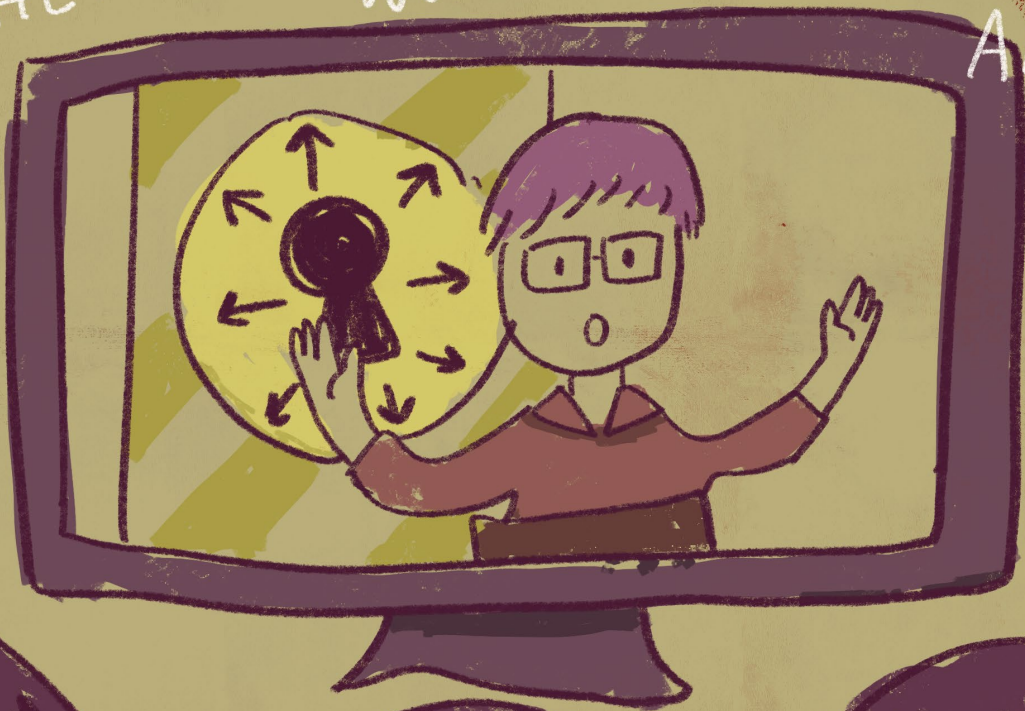
YOU'LL NEVER BE GOOD
I DON'T KNOW YOU.
ART AND MUSIC? STOP WASTING YOUR TIME.

SHAME ON YOU
IF ONLY YOU WERE A DOCTOR.
USELESS

YOU DISAPPOINT ME.

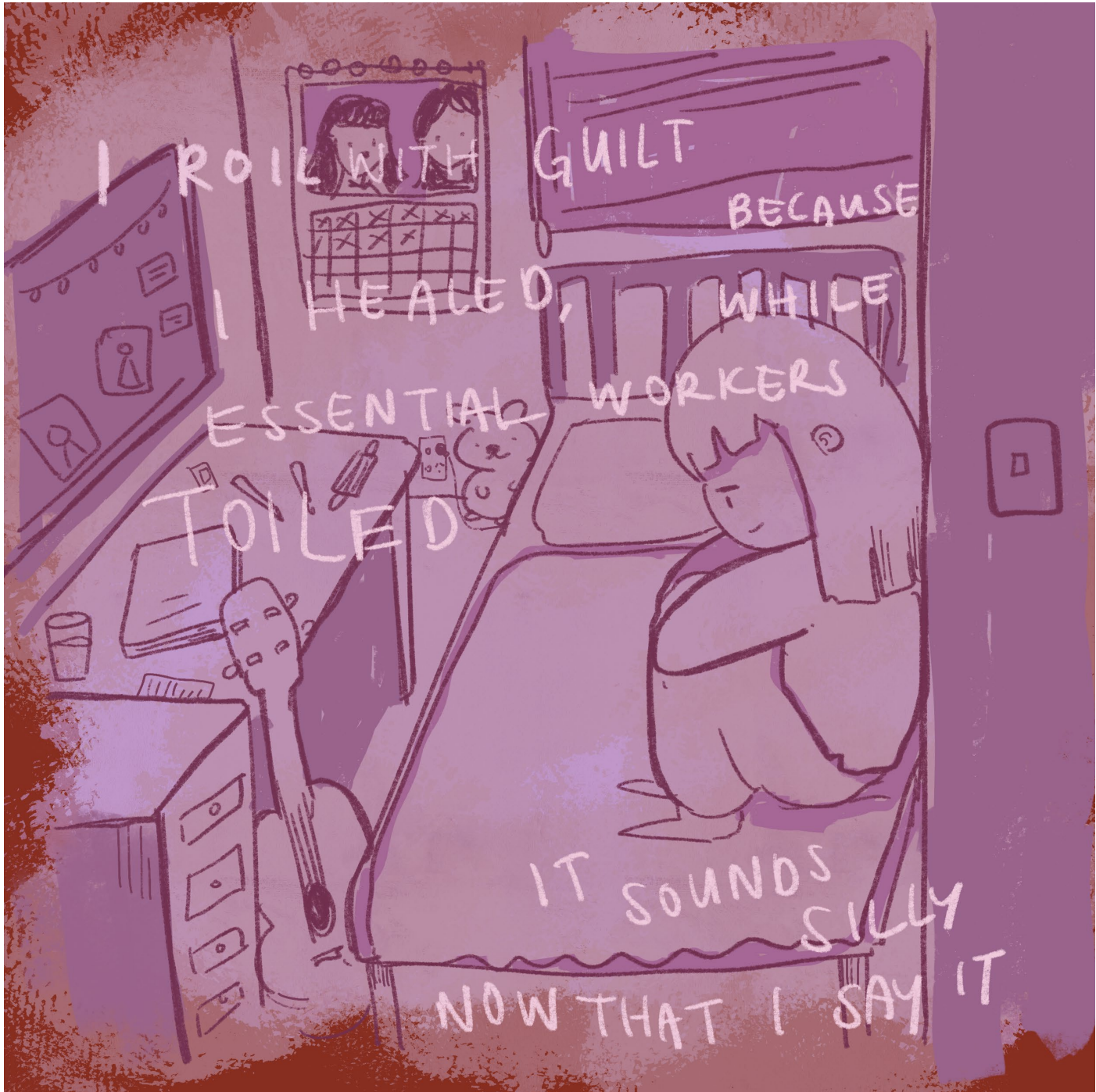


THEN THE WORLD WENT QUIET AND



FOR THE FIRST TIME,
I FELT CALM.





I ROIL WITH GUILT.
BECAUSE
I HEALED, WHILE
ESSENTIAL WORKERS
TOILED
IT SOUNDS
SILLY
NOW THAT I SAY IT

THOSE VOICES WILL ALWAYS
BE THERE - THEY'RE BACK -

WHY NO DOCTOR???)
LIGHT DISAPPOINTMENT

BUT THANKS
TO ALL THE
REFLECTING

I THINK I CAN
ACCEPT THEM
AND LIVE ON.



Grace Ko

*4 days
as me;*

*25-refusing-to-be-26, Taiwanese-Chinese-New Zealand-born,
healing-via-therapy-and-Buddhist-philosophies,
entrepreneur-and-corporate-extraordinaire.*

Day 1,

Every time I express an emotion to my therapist she likes to ask me, “when was the first time you felt this emotion triggered?” and 9 times out of 10 it would be related to your primary caregiver; the one person in your life that you share the most time, intimacy, vulnerability and experiences with. And mine was my mum. I’m not sure how many children of immigrants experience enmeshment trauma, but it can’t just be me. Enmeshment trauma describes a family dynamic where personal boundaries are blurred, where children sacrifice their own emotional needs in fear of parental rage. Children are obliged to comply with a potentially narcissistic parent and put themselves second (in Chinese culture, we must respect your elders regardless of the elder and how they may treat us, and any sign of rebellion against being a ‘dutiful daughter’, you’re immediately in the wrong). The enmeshment became a duty in the name of Chinese culture. Because Chinese families are perceived to have a collective identity, the weight of adhering to this duty grew and the requirement for a good Chinese daughter became;

- 1. She will put her needs below others out of respect*
- 2. She will continue to meet the needs of her elders and caregivers even at an expense to her own*
- 3. She will also meet the needs of those younger than her because “rang zhe didi” or “rang zhe meimei”, those younger than us do not know any better*
- 4. She will repress feelings of anger and sadness but allow others to outwardly express them*
- 5. She should feel shameful and unladylike if she outwardly expresses these feelings*

6. *She is expected to work through these emotions in the privacy of her own room*

7. *She is expected to act as if nothing has happened after emotional conflict, especially if her elders and caregivers have gotten over it*

In a relationship, it's my duty to be a good partner, to always follow through, to be on time, to stick to plans, to commit to healing myself. This can be hard when your partner's values lie in freedom, independence and choice. It can be hard because I wanted those things too? Perhaps it's time to modernise the concept of duty.

Do I subconsciously put others' needs above mine, in the name of duty? Or love? Or actually does duty now equal love?

Day 2,

I'm having my Carrie Bradshaw moment. Soft jazz in the back, water in a wine glass, I couldn't help but wonder...

A friend Saraïd said to me writing is therapeutic for her because it's a way of digesting your own words. By the time they come out through your fingers to the keys and back into your eyes, the meaning has changed and you're able to explore what you have written once again. "You understand how you feel, because you read what you wrote." – my therapist.

I just got off Wechat with my godmother – the person I go to when I encounter life's question marks. She's my mum's childhood best friend and a very dedicated Buddhist. She challenges the belief that we must plant our flags at the top of the mountain to be deemed successful – she believes we can stop half way and enjoy a different view, one that isn't inferior to

the view from the top.

She shared with me her Buddhist philosophies on letting go while I pushed back with "but my therapist said". An Eastern meets Western awkwardness that I had never encountered before. Godmother said to look inward, therapist said to look outwards at my past and childhood. Godmother said to just let go and stop thinking, therapist said keep digging deeper.

Godmother said my fate with him is over and that I need to be responsible for letting go in this lifetime, otherwise I will risk reliving this relationship in my next life. Therapist said fantasising about connection is a way of seeking intimacy because I didn't get it in the way that benefitted me in childhood and there was a lot of feelings of abandonment which heightened my fantasies of romantic relationships. Maybe I got too creative with my fantasies and I was blinded by the reality of my unmet emotional needs. I truly am a creative.

She also shared a quote with me; is the flag moving or the wind moving? The answer to this question is neither; it's your heart moving. It made a lot more sense in Chinese but essentially she's saying nothing that happens externally to us matters and all suffering comes from within. She said that therapy drags you deeper into trauma and can create a sense of self pity – but self worth and strength is stronger than past trauma.

I guess two ways of healing is better than one. Today I'm choosing the one where there are no worries in this world; we created them all as ordinary people.

Day 3,

In fear of burning out my support system with my train of heart break thoughts, I turned to mum – speed dial and

emergency contact. Ironically she had run out of patience with me and my attempts to hand my indecisiveness over to someone else backfired. I was walking home from work and I could feel myself choking up and feeling misunderstood. For the first time, I was relieved I was on speakerphone. My dad came to the (emotional) rescue, a phenomenon that only happens once a decade. Honestly, I didn't know my dad had the capacity to hold space for my emotions. You're telling me, the same man who stood there practising his golf swings or left the room out of awkwardness every time I cried as a child is now the man who was validating my feelings, who was comforting my insecurities and who was showing up?! He said he would stay on the phone to me for as long as I needed and that I deserve the deep love and care that I give to my community. At this point strangers were looking very concerned about my mental wellbeing, as I walked up the last incline up to my apartment, wishing masks covered the top half of my face instead. I wasn't even sure what I was crying for. Was it that I finally felt heard and held by my dad? And if so, did I have daddy issues I wasn't aware of? Lovely.

The conversation ended with his favourite bible verses, and it didn't fuck me off. I felt so good. I felt so fucking safe. Indescribable. New emergency contact material. A truly monumental moment for father and daughter.

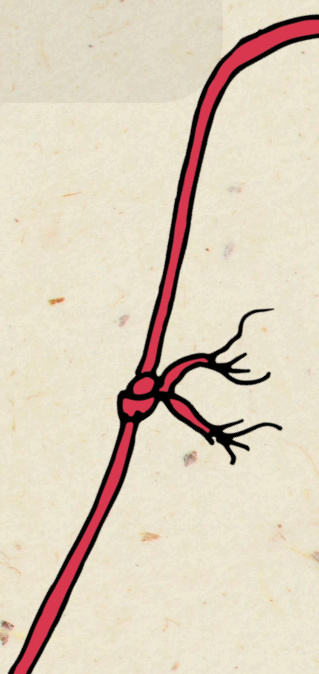
Day 4,

I've been taking a break from the world, the western world that is. And for those fortunate enough to do so, here is how; exclusively consume Chinese content until you feel disassociated from your colonised mind. Chinese music, Chinese food, Chinese movies, Chinese language, Chinese art.

Having a split cultural identity used to confuse me. I felt like I was one person at school and another at home. By 9am I was pretending like I would never eat chicken feet. By 2pm I was slacking in stats, relying on the teacher to over-explain ratios. By 4pm I was on the phone to the IRD sorting my parents' taxes. By 7pm I'm translating Chinese to English in an email to the council.

I always felt misunderstood standing on the line in the middle. Double identity crisis. My Chinese heritage became obligation and shame. Something that was always weighing me down. I would envy my friends who didn't have to translate for their parents, who didn't have to make sure their parents understood what was being said to them, who didn't have to make sure their parents were understood.

Today my heritage is showing itself differently. Today it's a getaway. Today it's allowing me to compartmentalise myself and seek refuge in the comfort and safety of Chinese lyrics. Today it's taking me back to sitting around the dinner table passively listening to Chinese aunties and uncles talk about their children and fight for the bill. And although I felt invisible, I felt safe. Today the English words that were used to bully me, make me feel insecure, threaten me, do not exist. I'm shielded by an old childhood friend who I had fallen out of love with but getting to know again as an adult.





CUT FRUIT

SOHADI YES

“Touk toh, Kampong noh (The boat goes, the village remains),” my Ma tells me with glistening eyes, a bittersweet smile and a heart heavy with anxiety that deeply longs for home.

My Pa first arrived in Aotearoa in 1983. He recalls a cold and mountainous country rife with extraordinarily tall humans. A decade later, he returned to Cambodia, married my Ma and they both settled in Te-Whanganui-A-Tara to start their family.

My whānau, like most other refugee families, carry intangible scars that have transcended generations.

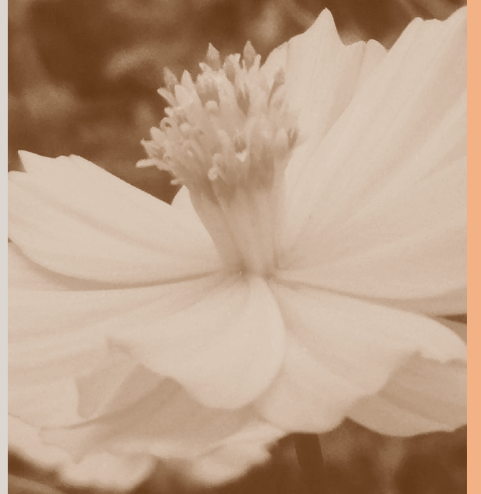
From 1975 to 1979, my parents and their families endured a traumatising

four years under the brutal Khmer rouge regime. Many lost their lives, were displaced, or orphaned – as my mother and her remaining sisters were.

It is a harrowing history that holds its clutches across multiple generations of Cambodians. Many Khmer kids in Aotearoa are raised learning this history. It becomes a weight that when received, lands heavily on your chest, leaving a scar as a lesson that whatever struggles you may face, you should remain grateful.

In Cambodia, my parents lived in the same village in Chroy Changvar – a peninsula wedged in between the Mekong and Tonle Sap rivers.

Life in a village is incredibly



tight knit. It's as if everyone is a member of one family. It's part of daily routine that neighbours checked in on each other and ate, celebrated, or prayed together. Life in a village meant having constant wrap-around support.

Living in New Zealand, my parents struggled to assimilate to the individualistic western model of living. Removed from the hustle and bustle of life in Phnom Penh, my parents felt greatly isolated.

My Ma and Pa missed their village community. They missed Khmer food, missed understanding what was being said and being understood by others, and they missed dearly the whānau they left behind.

For my parents, healing from their awful past came in the form of three individuals: my elder sister, my younger brother, and myself.

What is understood to be a universal experience across many migrant families, my Ma and Pa showed their deep love in unconventional ways without actually saying 'I love you'.

Waking up before dawn and busting out Yao Hon (Cambodian Hot Pot) from scratch followed by an anecdote by my parents, which often included the mention of their future death, was often how they'd let us know we were loved.

Be it bringing cut fruit to our room, piling our plates sky high with rice, or working long hours to provide for us each week. Ensuring that my siblings and I never had to endure what they did, offered my parents a new lease on life.

For many migrant children hailing from refugee backgrounds, this

overwhelming love from well-intending parents coupled with behaviours observed from childhood, creates a foundation for life that is prone to mental health struggles.

Much like our parents, my siblings and I grew up in New Zealand feeling similarly isolated and foreign, despite having been born here. We don't fault our parents for not understanding our challenges, nor would we ever fault them for our family's existing intergenerational trauma. And although we weren't raised in a village, we hold deep aroha for the village they attempted to conjure for us in our whare.





ALL THAT
GLITTER
DISAPPEARS

by
Joseph
Trinidad


You had your psychosis the same time Kanye West was having his. October 2016, the middle of the Yeezus Tour, during Trimester 2 exam week – the one with the floating stage, the one with ECON130.

In psychosis, everything made sense because there's always an explanation – no matter how convoluted. Suddenly, your surprising kinship to American popstars finally made sense, it's as if they never want you to feel alone in times of hardship. Kanye was going through psychosis in solidarity. It's because he knows you and he's watching.

You wonder if “psychosis” is a word that bounces around Kanye's head the way it bounces around in yours.

Olanzapine is a nasty piece of work. Described by Dr. Google as an anti-psychotic, mostly used by people living with schizophrenia; described by your real doctor as essential. He also prescribed Seroquel as optional – only use for bad nights. At your parents' house in Hawke's Bay, every night was a bad night. Ever since they picked you up from Newtown Hospital, you've been restless like a dog trapped in a hot car. You didn't take Seroquel at all. Your mother has an unwavering definition of optional – unnecessary. She can weather a storm without a raincoat. She's also the kind of person to say, why treat a drug problem with more drugs?

Your mother grew up in the Philippines. She understood drugs in the context of poverty. Weed is a gateway drug. She can't grasp why you would try such things, let alone make a habit of it because it's “fun”. A dark story she always liked to tell with a sly comic but reproached tone, “Your uncle



literally couldn't tell night from day," she said. "He sat on the porch, talking to his dead wife while smoking meth in front of your cousins." Seventh of nine siblings, she nursed her brother to health. It was tough but not impossible. Your mind begins to wonder, what kind of stories will she tell about you?

She set up a thin single mattress outside your bedroom door. Before that, she asked if she can sleep by your bed. You tend to sleepwalk at night. You violently said, no. Even punched a hole through the drywall yelling, "Take me back to Wellington now!"

*

In Hawke's Bay, everything closes at 5. Your town, Waipawa, is so small that the nearest Subway is 15 kilometres away. The only thing to see in your town is the Waipawa Settlers Museum, and even you're not crazy enough to subject yourself through that.

You took long walks instead. You created a playlist of your favourite bubblegum stuff. The doctor orders you to not listen to anything stressful. You filled your playlist with Little Mix, Fetty Wap, and Rihanna. No Kanye. Around your walk to the river, you catch yourself thinking the lyrics are speaking to you. Like, they're telling you that all your suspicions are right, that you're being watched, that you have information so valuable because you've figured something out – and now they are after you. You hear it when Rihanna sings Work, when Fetty Wap harmonises with Monty all throughout Jugg, and prominently when Jesy belts out in Black Magic. It's not the lyrics itself but what's underneath them. You



hear giggles. You hear a frequency that signals a sense of knowingness. A frequency that says, we know you can hear us. You're so special.

When these moments happen, you stop walking.


You breathe and inhale the summer air. Slowly. You force yourself to feel the warmth on the tips of your toes. You hold your breath for a couple of seconds. Then, exhale. Fully, like you're a big human balloon finally deflating. You keep repeating it until your heartbeat syncs with your breathing. You do it again, and again, and ... again. Doctor's orders.

*

The flurry of smoke trapped inside the bottle looks a lot like a shaken snowglobe – glitter on top of the ordinary; fluorescent reigns over everything. The bucky was generous with the weed too, it lasts longer with more potent effects. Finally, you've met your anxiety's nemesis. A head high, perfect for spending time with your friends, even better alone. Just you and your thoughts and all that lovely glitter.

You spent Thursday afternoons doing buckies in the Wellington Botanical Garden, the botans. With a crew of socially awkward boys in their unwashed Hallenstein fits, making conversation about the life beneath the life we're living: why is this, how is that.

You climbed the Trippy Tree before the Botanical Gardens people closed it off. Your first time – a very cute, very tall boy stayed with you until you gained the courage to make the climb. You were afraid to lose your footing on the well-



trodden branches. But he stayed with you, talked you through what you're doing while really getting to know you. You listen to Childish Gambino and so does he. You were describing your favourite song until suddenly, you're on top of the tree. You're now overlooking Wellington through the most expensive view you got for free.

In the midst of the haze, you fell into a rhythm. It was a sudden lift. An all too quick euphoric sprig. This is a new normal you accepted with an embrace. You feel it's warmth on your cheeks, rested your chin onto its shoulder like a puzzle piece finally finding its place. Maybe, mornings will be easier now.

And then, suddenly, you started losing time.

Your feet are wet, hurting, and covered in grease. You've been walking bare feet in the city. All night. Now, you're in a brightly lit white room, waiting. You feel like if you stare at the blue chairs, you'll begin to smell it. It's acrid and alien. It makes no sense but it's reality.

Then the policewoman finally calls your name and says, "You can make your phone call now."

*

You're now back in Wellington. You recovered faster than your doctor predicted.

You're smoking with the Trippy Tree guy again. You build the courage to tell him that this might be your last time smoking. You're seated on a bench in an empty lot in front of



Preston's butchery. In the dark, staring at a white wall.

You're a bore at parties now. You look for an exit when a joint appears in a social circle. You absorb all the snide looks every time you refuse people who would offer you a puff. A tense and cold feeling rushes over your body. It's not normal for you to do this. You dress way too well to say no to free weed.

The hunger for easy fun never evaporated. The restriction only magnifies every passing year.

But at least now, you've stopped calling yourself a lightweight and a prude for saying no. You're not reminded of the bad nights in Waipawa anymore. The flowery single mattress outside your door. That hole in the wall. You're instead reminded of an unhealthy habit and how it once felt impossible to end it. You take it easy, prop yourself up to be patient once again. Ready to take gentle care of a mind you didn't know you have.

You breathe. You keep at it. Doctor's orders.



Kelly Ye

14 hours ago

THE SPACE IN BETWEEN

Like many immigrant children, I am the bridge that connects my parents to the world they chose but aren't assimilated into. We moved to Aotearoa when I was five and by the time I could read, I would read letters from the bank, translate dialogue with the supermarket checkout operators, write notes to teachers on behalf of my parents. Each time I acted as the go-between reaffirmed my position as that. In the Venn diagram of my parents and Aotearoa, I am the space in between.

When I first came across Shaun Tan's book, *The Arrival*, I was moved by his depiction of the immigrant's story – of leaving home, in hopes of a better life elsewhere, in order to provide a better life for loved ones. Through the graphite sketches, I felt and understood the foreignness with which the immigrant viewed his new world, in the same way that his new world viewed him. I felt the immigrant's loneliness, and his bewilderment with this new life, all as he redefines what it means to belong in this new place. The story resonated with me deeply and I was so excited to show the book to my parents, knowing that they would understand. As it turns out, my parents did understand, all too well. I imagined my parents to be similarly moved, that this book would be the reckoning that bound us together, a commonality that drew us closer. The reality was that a week passed, and neither of them mentioned the book until I asked. Dad shrugged, noting that it was just the immigrant's experience. His apathy was baffling to me. I couldn't understand how he wasn't floored by the poignancy of the story.

Now that I'm older, and a little wiser, I can see how the differences in our reactions is because we have different immigrant experiences. My parents were in their 30s when we moved to New Zealand; I was

five. They had already lived a whole life before leaving it all behind, while I was just starting mine. Their mouths have been trained to form sounds a certain way, and no matter how long they live in this new place, they will forever sound different, while I will adopt vowels and consonants as if I've never known another language. The sense of alienation and the search for belonging will never go away, while their daughters will be more or less accepted into the new world. For my parents, *The Arrival* was nothing special, because it was their life. It was ordinary and lived and normal. For me, *The Arrival* was painful and confronting, precisely because it wasn't my story. I never lived through the loneliness of a new place, of navigating new customs and rules, the readjustment of life. I am separated from this particular immigrant experience by a factor of my parents.

In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, self-actualisation doesn't come until physiological needs, safety, belonging, and esteem are met. It struck me that many immigrants of my parents' generation are stuck teetering between safety and belonging, forever striving to prove their worth, while their children thrive and are absorbed into the new landscape. I see this play out in their anxiety over the decisions I make in life, stuck in a perpetual state of risk aversion, always urging me to take the safe route. Aotearoa is a different place for me than it is for my parents. Growing up, I was very good at assimilating, to the point where I was often told by friends that they didn't think of me as Chinese. I wore this as a badge of honour, not realising that this was deeply rooted internal racism until well into my twenties. My parents, on the other hand, were Chinese through and through. They held onto Chinese traditions (albeit diluted after converting to Christianity), spoke Cantonese with each other and broken English to strangers. They were very obviously "other" to the general population. This differentiation between myself and my parents in the eyes of society further necessitated me as their bridge between cultures. A quiet resentment brewed. When I was young, I longed for parents who could communicate to my teachers of their own volition, who didn't frantically gesture to me to take the phone handset mid-conversation because they couldn't understand the person on the other line. I felt these administrative tasks made me an adult before my time, stealing away my young years and

reversing the roles of parent and child. Of course, I recognise it now for what this was; my parents trying to survive. They couldn't navigate this world on their own so they used the resources they had: me.

一代比一代好 yī dài bǐ yī dài hǎo is a popular saying with my parents. It means one generation better than the next. It's for this promise that my parents moved from familiarity to foreignness, and it's this hope that sustained them through their years of hardship. It's also this perspective, a view on the collective over the individual, that affords them the ability to live life selflessly, and project this onto others. While I feel the taxing weight of being the cultural crutch, my parents see it as another cost for the good of the next generation, for the future.



things you don't want to hear when you are in shit



My name is **Ziqian Yang**, people usually call me Lucy to make life easier :) I am a Chinese immigrant and I have been in NZ for over eight years.

The pandemic has been a difficult time for everyone, psychologically and emotionally, but it's particularly difficult for Asian immigrants who lack whānau support, and potentially have experienced increased racism.

I am a social worker for the CDHB and also a full-time psychology student. The following narrative is from a Chinese female's personal perspective.

Impact of COVID: a personal narrative of a Chinese

When the pandemic just started in early 2020, my parents, along with my aunt and uncle, were planning to come over and visit me. My flatmate at the time said to me that she did not want my family to come over because they could bring the virus to this country. I immediately felt bitterness but could not really say anything as it was a somewhat credible worry. So I chose to be quiet. Anyway, the border was closed and the trip did not happen. Additionally during the COVID lockdown, I was verbally attacked by a teenager at a bus stop and by clients, calling me "COVID" and so on. I was mentally and emotionally prepared for this, but was still shaky when it happened to me. I sometimes joke about the experience and pretend that I am not affected. I did not talk with any professionals (such as EAP) about this as I do not believe it would be helpful. I don't even know what would be helpful.

From 2020 to now, during this 2.5 years, I have lost two grandmothers (one of them raised me) and an aunty (the one who was going to visit me). Dad had a minor stroke and surgery. I could not go back home to have a closure due to the lengthy MIQ time in both China and New Zealand. In China, **XIAO** – serving your parents and elderlies – is one

A photo of Ziqian's grandmother, taken just before she moved to New Zealand. Photo by and courtesy of Ziqian Yang



of the basic moral ethics. I understand that when I chose to come to the other side of the earth, I cannot fully meet the standard of being a good daughter/granddaughter in traditional Chinese values. But the pandemic makes it even harder. Although I video-call my parents regularly I still feel sad when I see mum and dad are getting greyer. I wish I could give them a hug.

Last year, I had a surgery as I found a lump in my breast. Despite being terrified of the worst possibility and crying everyday, I did not disclose a thing to my family as they would not be allowed in New Zealand. It would only increase their worry as they could not do anything to help. Scan, biopsy, to final surgery. The four months felt surreal, but luckily the lump was benign. I had a lot of support from my boyfriend and my friends. But what affects me the most is the impossibility to have my family here and hold my hand before surgery.

Mum and dad are finally going to visit me, hopefully by the end of the year. I am certain that much grief will resurface, many wounds will heal and closure will happen. I will be whole from the moment I give them a hug, because I am finally connected.

The chaos in my mind does not define me.

LeAnn Baigent

I chose to feature this statement as for years I struggled with my identity after being diagnosed with chronic mental illness at a young age.

For a long time, I questioned where things had gone wrong to have caused my illness. In the early days of being diagnosed, my parents did not know much if anything at all about mental illness. I guess it's a generational thing and it wasn't really something they came across in their upbringing in Malaysia. My parents refused to accept the diagnosis, believing that I was okay and just needed to heal my body with Chinese herbal medicine. Being Chinese in descent, showing respect to your parents was a value drilled into me from a young age. Even as an adult today, I find myself constantly seeking approval from my parents. When my parents did not believe I had mental illness, this created a lot of discord and chaos in my mind. Here I was being told by Western doctors that I had this life-long illness. On the other hand, I was being told by my parents that I do not have this illness, and my symptoms could be magically cured.

A Chinese upbringing in a Western society had at times been extremely conflicting, and my recovery journey has been a real testament to that. After a lot of tears, heated arguments, and deep and meaningful conversations, my parents and I have learnt to accept that my illness is something I will carry for life. This acceptance gave me a lot of inner peace and could in

some ways draw similarities to the stages of grief (we could call it the stages of recovery). I learnt that my diagnosis does not define me or my identity. I am still the same old person, with the same values and aspirations. And as cliché as this may sound, recovery really is not a destination or a goal that can be achieved – it is a journey.

I wanted to depict this conflict or “chaos” using embroidery as my medium. The images I chose do not have any special meaning or significance as such but depicts how my illness presents at times. At my most unwell, I lose touch of reality, and can become consumed in a flurry of chaotic thoughts. My family and I have learnt that when I am unwell, this is not my fault, and is not who I am. I hope to remind people to look beyond the illness. We are all human at the end of the day and the brain, like every other organ, is prone to disease. Everyone deserves to find peace in themselves and to feel accepted – warts and all.





Out of the

**frying pan and
into the fire**

by Rafiqah Abdullah

I'm a

minority within minorities. I am disabled. I am queer. I am Filipino. I am Asian. I am Muslim.

Growing up, I knew I was different. I usually kept to myself and stayed away from other kids.

I had difficulty doing things that other kids my age easily did, like riding a bike or tying my shoelaces. For that, I was called stupid. I was punished.

Being Autistic, I stimmed by cutting paper strings and clapping. Those behaviours were punished. Mom would get a fly swat and hit my hands. Why? Because it was "abnormal". If I smiled too much, I was told, "you're abnormal".

Growing up lonely, I had conversations with myself, I was told I was "abnormal".

There was a time when my sister used to brush my teeth. I wanted to spit out phlegm because I was suffocating, but she found it disgusting. So, she rammed the brush into the roof of my mouth, causing me to gag. She grabbed the back of my head and hit it against the marble sink.

Growing up, I was made to feel defective. I had short-term and selective memory due to my disability. I was deemed a disobedient child who was constantly

subjected to punishments ranging from slapping my mouth to being hit with a belt or fly swat. I was constantly humiliated and made to feel ashamed about being disabled and neurodiverse. I was insulted by grown adults for my bad back posture. I was called deformed, clumsy and lazy. Even after a child psychologist diagnosed me, my family's abuse didn't stop. It became worse. I was told I was using my disabilities as an excuse.

The height of the abuse, primarily mental and emotional, escalated to unbearable proportions at the age of 20. One day while trying to apply for work, I needed some help understanding the questionnaire. My sister told me I was stupid, so I cussed her out.

She retaliated by trying to cut the cable off my laptop. So I used my elbows to defend myself and my laptop. She became full of rage and pulled a knife on me,

resulting in my mom hugging her to restrain her.

I was called a toad, a clown, a freak and a loser. To escape this constant abuse, I moved out of the house.

One battle was over, but others were about to begin. As a result of ongoing abuse, I developed severe depression and was fading away faster than I could imagine. This phase of my life was punctuated by abuse from the systems and the desperate need to belong, to find a home. I was, in the true sense, homeless.

When I was at home, I was at fault. I was the problem. I did not cease to be the problem once I was out of the house. The health care professionals were concerned about me in the beginning. It always started like that. They thought I was resilient. As the sessions went on, blame began to be redirected at me. I regularly had to deal with passive-aggressive comments about my body, my mind, and my choices.

Everything I was doing was wrong. I was being gas-lighted in these sessions. My

pain was minimised. My experiences were reduced to either I was eating too much

or just not looking after myself. I remember being so horrified by one

incident in a session with a health professional that I lay on the floor for

several hours crying when I got home. The health professional was particularly aggressive, failed to listen, questioned my experience and blamed me for it.

I had to endure fluctuating levels of health care treatment which traumatised me further. I had to see a different social worker, a different GP, a different

psychologist, and a different counsellor. There was no longevity. The

consistency varied. Whatever was available. Whenever it was available.

As a person with multiple disabilities, I did not and do not find the health system

accessible. I'm unable to drive. I haven't been given support in understanding where to find help. I wasn't given assistance in setting up appointments or understanding my rights. My health concerns, both physical and mental, were repeatedly neglected.

There were some good ones. The ones who cared. They didn't last long.

There were days when I did not have enough money to eat. There are days when I go hungry. Does this not have an impact on mental health? It does. It makes you weak. It makes you long for some stability. When I question it, I am questioned in return. I am not saving enough. I should make my own food. How can I make my own food when carrying grocery bags is something that

my body does not allow?

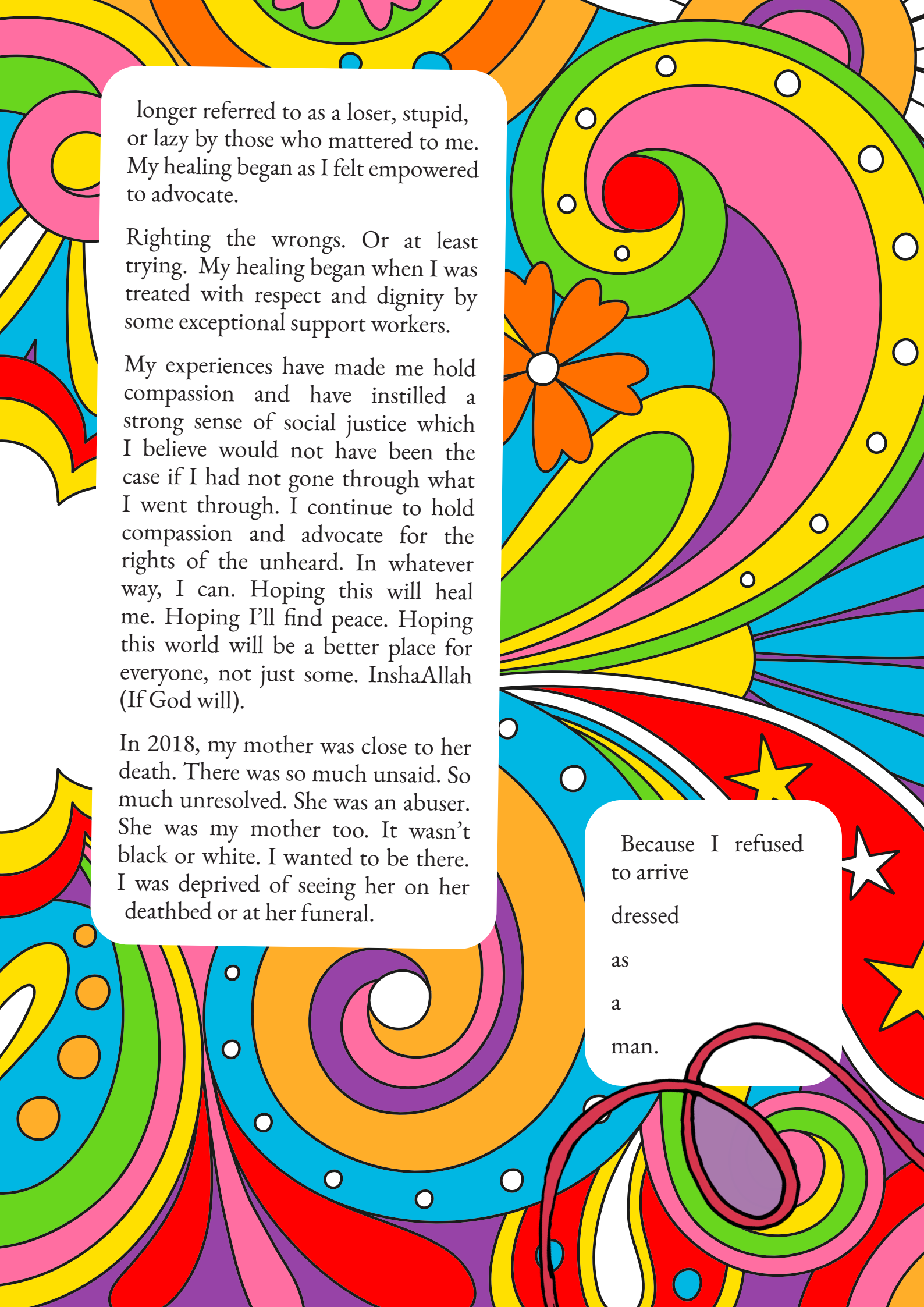
It is always my fault. I was blamed back then. I am blamed now.

My healing

did not begin in the fluorescent-lit rooms, sitting in front of professionals,

but in the community I found. The community of friends who held space for me. The community that eventually became my family. Those who accepted me for who I am.

My healing began when I was no



longer referred to as a loser, stupid, or lazy by those who mattered to me. My healing began as I felt empowered to advocate.

Righting the wrongs. Or at least trying. My healing began when I was treated with respect and dignity by some exceptional support workers.

My experiences have made me hold compassion and have instilled a strong sense of social justice which I believe would not have been the case if I had not gone through what I went through. I continue to hold compassion and advocate for the rights of the unheard. In whatever way, I can. Hoping this will heal me. Hoping I'll find peace. Hoping this world will be a better place for everyone, not just some. InshaAllah (If God will).

In 2018, my mother was close to her death. There was so much unsaid. So much unresolved. She was an abuser. She was my mother too. It wasn't black or white. I wanted to be there. I was deprived of seeing her on her deathbed or at her funeral.

Because I refused
to arrive
dressed
as
a
man.

THE PAIN WE PASS BETWEEN US

reconsidering narratives about Asian mental health in Aotearoa

by Dinithi Bowatte

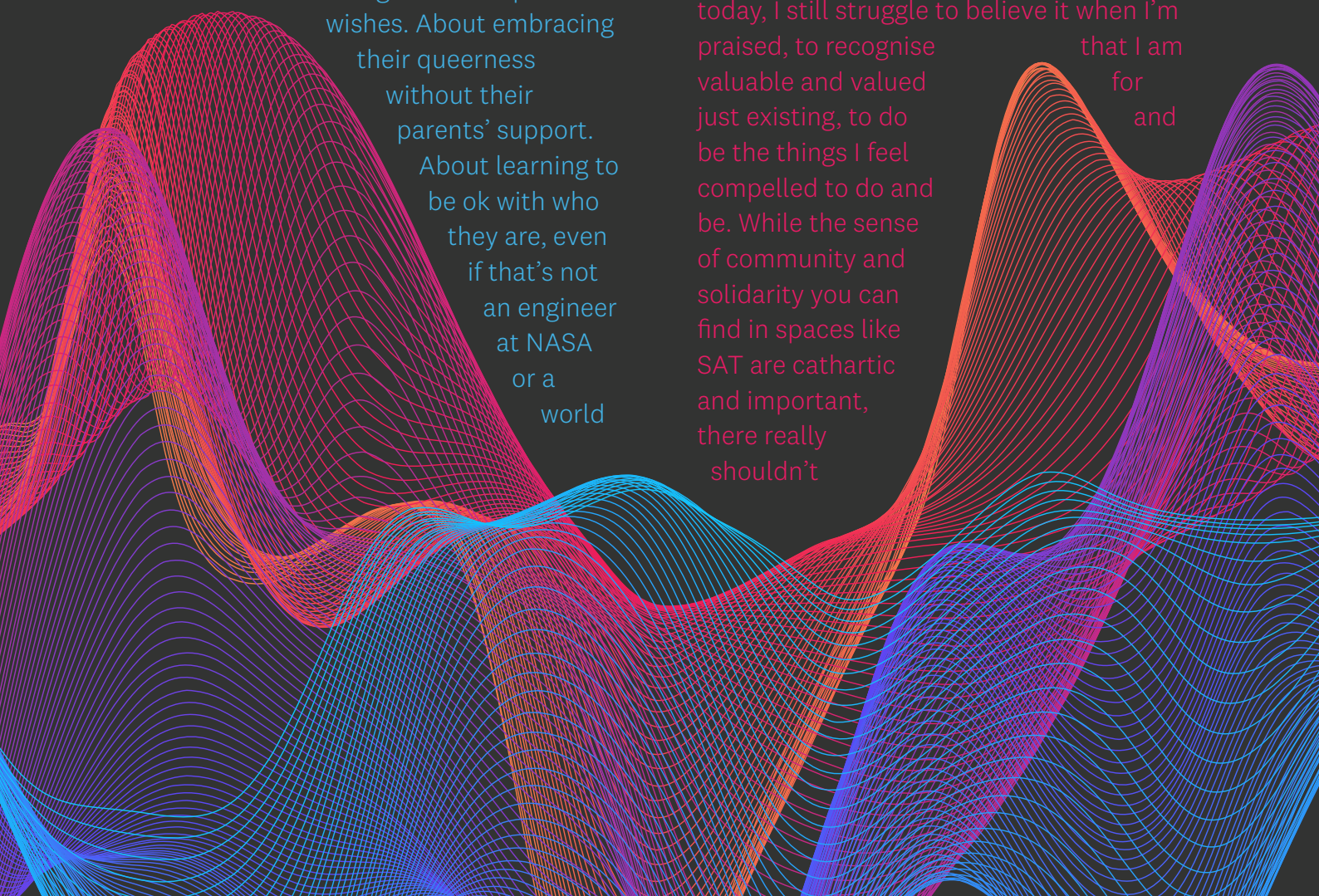
I had just started university in Ōtepoti when I first heard of the Facebook group Subtle Asian Traits. At the time it was a private group – you had to be added to it by someone who was already in it. While I can't remember who added me to it, I can remember scrolling through the posts feeling taken aback by how much of my own life was there, written up in posts by other people. Judging by the thousands of likes on these posts, it seems I wasn't the only one resonating with them.

Most SAT posts grapple with the ways young Asian diasporic people deal with pressures and expectations from their parents. People write about pursuing art or music against their parents' wishes. About embracing their queerness without their parents' support. About learning to be ok with who they are, even if that's not an engineer at NASA or a world

class physician at John Hopkins.

In Western societies, Asians are notorious for having strict, domineering parents. Parents who overwork their children, who expect excellence at any cost, who rarely show affection or encourage play. Certainly, among my own friends growing up, we silently understood if someone couldn't make a hangout.

It is no secret within Asian diasporic communities that our parents' commandeering behaviours, underlined with general emotional unavailability, have instilled deep traumas within us. As an Asian who grew up under impossibly high expectations from my parents, I find that today, I still struggle to believe it when I'm praised, to recognise that I am valuable and valued for just existing, to do the things I feel compelled to do and be. While the sense of community and solidarity you can find in spaces like SAT are cathartic and important, there really shouldn't



need to be a global community of diasporic Asians lamenting the parts of themselves they lost at the hands of their parents.

Recent articles, like ‘There is not enough support for Asian mental health in NZ’ in *Re: news*, have well captured the ways that the mental health of young diasporic Asians is undermined. But too often, I find these stories explain away our traumas as a consequence of culture. Supposedly, this whole global network of diasporic Asians bonding over dysfunctional upbringings exists because Asian cultures – which consist of dozens of different manifestations across the most populous continent on the planet – enable emotional abuse and devalue mental health and wellbeing.

As Edward Said wrote in his illustrious treatise on ‘Orientalism’ (*Orientalism*, Penguin Classics, 2021), it serves the West only too well when non-Western cultures are obligated into narratives of homogeneity. It’s an all-too-common act of distortion and appropriation that operates to maintain the dominance of the West. Because how could it really be that Asian cultures are fundamentally backwards if most of the West’s own ‘solutions’ to health

and wellbeing are rooted in various Asian spiritual wisdoms? From Zen meditation, to yoga, to Ayurvedic spa treatments, to herbal tea-infused-papaya-worshipping-plant-based diets, the West answers its own mental health crisis by commercially contorting knowledges that were once normal and normative amongst Asian people.

Too many conversations about Asian mental health disregard the politics of what it actually takes to survive as a non-white person in a white dominated society. Immigration to countries like Aotearoa have been intentionally made bureaucratically strenuous. Ian Sanjay Patel writes (*We’re Here Because You Were There: Immigration and the End of Empire*, Verso, 2021) of how most commonwealth countries’ immigration policies are reflections of racist British policies that emerged after waves of migrations to the UK and its colonies from China in the 1800s, and then South Asia and the Caribbean during the 1900s. Today, reforms to racist immigration policies remain mild. In Aotearoa, ‘low-quality migrants’ are still a recurring talking point at election time – no one, save us low-quality migrants



ourselves, bats an eye at such dehumanizing language.

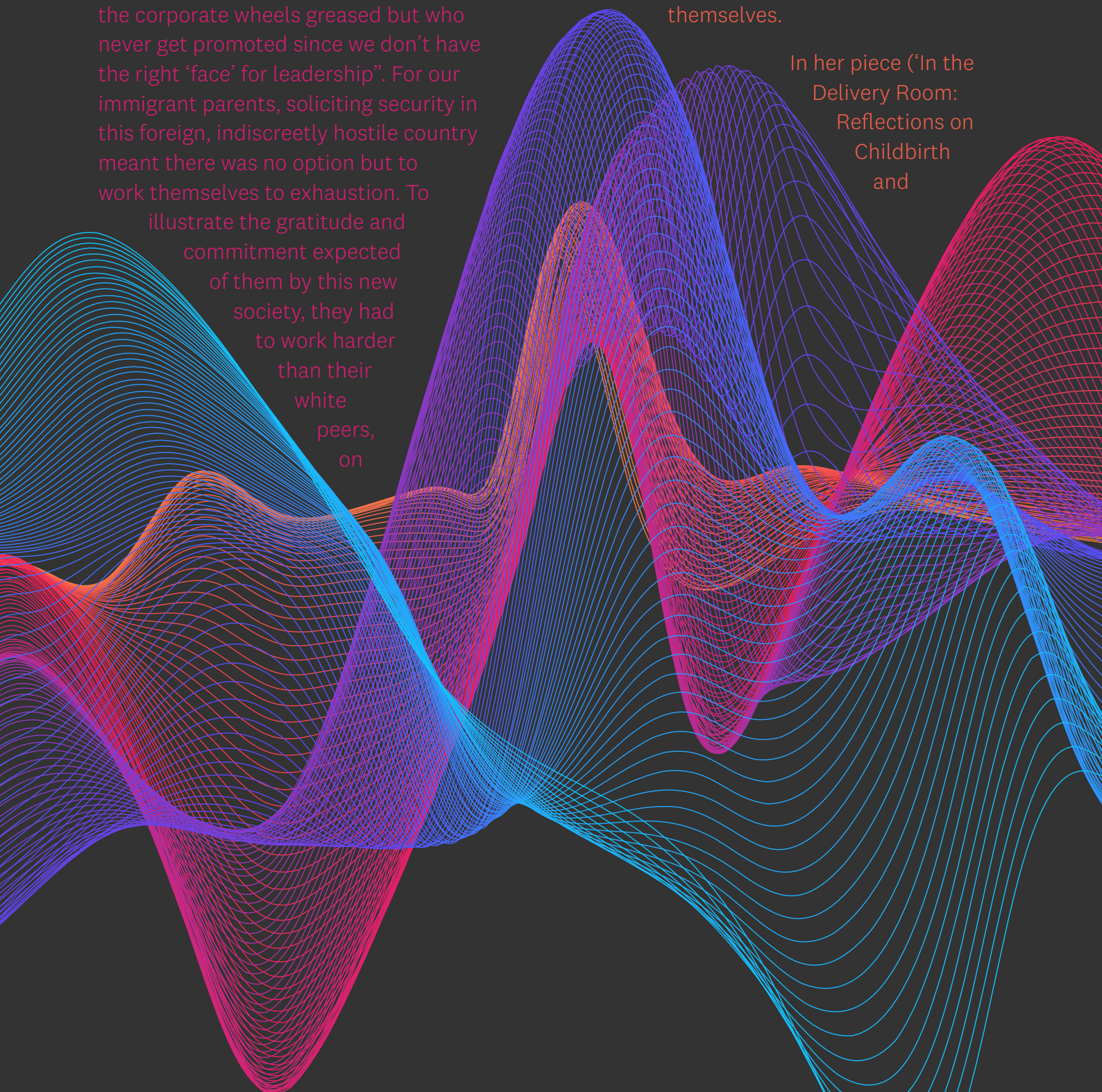
When it is made clear to you that you are not wanted here, you will of course work your butt off to prove to the state that it made the right decision for letting you in despite that. In *Minor Feelings* (One World, 2021), Cathy Park Hong writes that in America, Asians “are the carpenter ants of the service industry, the apparatchiks of the corporate world, we are math-crunching middle managers who keep the corporate wheels greased but who never get promoted since we don’t have the right ‘face’ for leadership”. For our immigrant parents, soliciting security in this foreign, indiscreetly hostile country meant there was no option but to work themselves to exhaustion. To

illustrate the gratitude and commitment expected of them by this new society, they had to work harder than their white peers, on

top of language and cultural barriers.

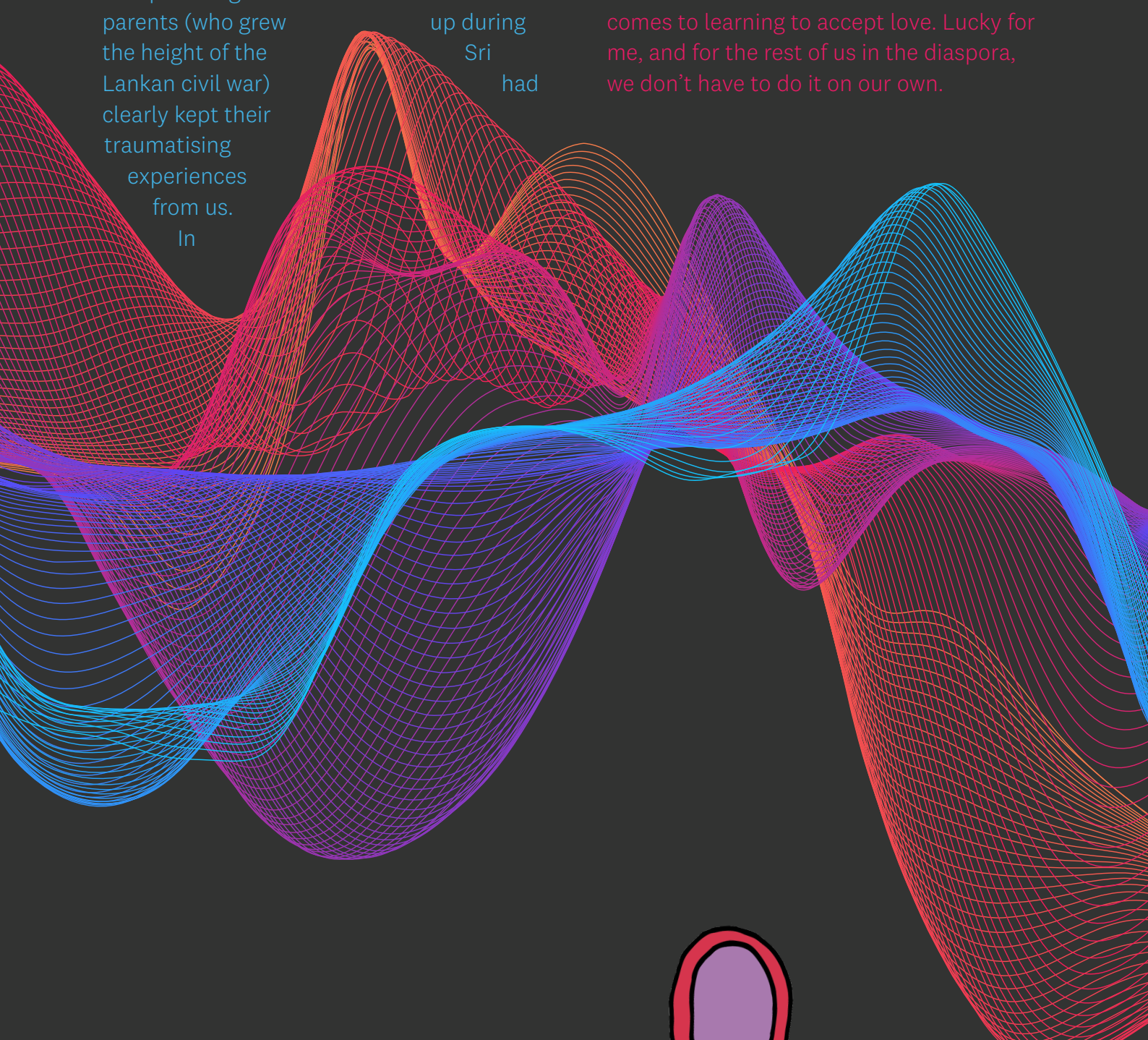
My parents have never said these things to me outright, but I hear them there in their admonishments. They tell me I don’t wake up early enough, don’t study enough, take too many breaks. Why did I get 99% instead of 100? Why haven’t I planned out my next 5 years already? The emotional traumas our parents inflict on us are just traumas inflicted on them by society, passed down. They inadvertently traumatise us because they are deeply traumatised themselves.

In her piece (“In the Delivery Room: Reflections on Childbirth and



Intergenerational Trauma’) for the *Pantograph Punch*’s recent 呼吸//Breathe series, edited by Helen Yeung (founder of Migrant Zine Collective), Nalin Samountry explores the nuances of her relationship with her mother, who, she writes, “was emotionally unavailable” growing up. She describes how “it took [her] until adulthood to realise it wasn’t [her] presence that caused this”. Samountry’s piece is about intergenerational trauma, and how easily it is passed down from parents who were directly subject to the consequences of Euro-American imperialism. It reminded me of a conversation I had with my sister, who put it together before I did that our parents (who grew up during the height of the Lankan civil war) clearly kept their traumatising experiences from us. In

that moment, their general aloofness, their lack of enthusiasm to communicate, made a lot more sense. They were so used to keeping profound injured feelings to themselves that it must have resulted in their keeping some of the loving ones in too. My life hasn’t been totally bereft of affection from my parents, they love me (deeply) through humour and sarcasm, mainly, and kind of even through their admonishments. When it comes to loving me earnestly, though, the strain it has on them is palpable. I’d always blamed that on my being difficult to love. But like Nalin, I’m now working on knowing that to be untrue. There’s a lot of work to be done when it comes to learning to accept love. Lucky for me, and for the rest of us in the diaspora, we don’t have to do it on our own.



Helplines and services

Asian Family Services
asianfamilyservices.nz

Asian Mental Health Service
asianhealthservices.co.nz/Asian-Mental-Health-Service

Lifeline
0800 543 354, or send a text to HELP (4357)
lifeline.org.nz/services/lifeline-helpline

Mental Health Foundation helplines list
mentalhealth.org.nz/helplines

Youthline
0800 376 633, or send a text to 234
youthline.co.nz

Research

Peiris-John, R., Kang, K., Bavin, L., Dizon, L., Singh, N., Clark, T., Fleming, T., & Ameratunga, S. *East Asian, South Asian, Chinese and Indian Students in Aotearoa: A Youth19 Report*. Auckland: The University of Auckland, 2021. <https://www.youth19.ac.nz/publications/asian-students-report>

Trace Research. *New Zealand Asian Wellbeing and Mental Health report 2021*. <https://www.asianfamilyservices.nz/resources/resource-items/new-zealand-asian-wellbeing-mental-health-report-2021/>

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