Re-Humanize
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Contents

Introduction ................................................. 1

End of August ............................................. 3
  Exploring: Anger ......................................... 15
  Exploring: Objectification ............................. 23

September Begins ........................................... 27
  Exploring: Gender-Based Groups ...................... 35
  Exploring: Consent ...................................... 41

The Longest Month ......................................... 43
  Exploring: Self-Worth .................................. 53
  Exploring: Taking Up Space ........................... 61

Into October .................................................. 63
  Exploring: Liberation .................................. 73
  Exploring: Victim-Blaming ............................ 83
  Exploring: Mental Health .............................. 97

Enter November ............................................... 107
  Exploring: Fierce Compassion ....................... 115
  Exploring: Powerful Conversation .................. 127

Light Returning .............................................. 133
Epilogue ........................................................ 135
Resources .................................................... 137
Notes .......................................................... 139
About the Author ............................................ 141
The day after I was raped I picked up a pen and started writing. Journalling had been a lifetime practice of mine, but my thoughts were too jumbled to write full coherent entries. Instead, I wrote short excerpts. I wrote words that were so destructive in my head and yet so creative on paper. And the outcome was this book, which is synonymous with my survival. This project became my lifeline; it forced me to learn, it allowed me to communicate what I was going through with (some) family and friends and it helped me turn harmful thoughts into creations to be proud of.

Through this experience, I have realized how uncomfortable people are in discussing sexual assault and how rape is treated like a curse word. But this is a real problem and we cannot fix a problem without gaining compassion and understanding. A week after my trauma, in a brave moment, I shared a post on social media “outing” myself as a sexual assault victim. I wanted to spark conversation and challenge the idea that silence is the exception. I wanted to teach people how to hold space for trauma and to create a new narrative of an “Empowered Victim”. The response was overwhelming — from those who wanted to support and from those who needed support. I realized quickly (with the help of numerous panic attacks) that it was unrealistic for me to jump from victim to activist in a week. So I combined my activism with my healing and I kept writing: a combination of poems and facilitated questions that I hoped would one day inspire change, compassion, human connection and collective healing.
Re-Humanize is a book for everyone. It is a collaboration between author and reader that offers interactive discussion questions and the sharing of my personal journey. It touches on various connecting issues including challenging rape culture, beauty constructs, eating disorders, depression, anxiety, PTSD and inspiring women’s empowerment. It speaks to those who have experienced objectification, which has been used to justify violence and feelings of “not enough-ness”. It is also meant for feminists and allies wishing to gain a deeper understanding of such experiences. And for survivors it is a gift: I hope that the sharing of my own journey will provide you with some solace and comfort in knowing that you are not alone. I hope my words will serve as a gentle reminder that your feelings are valid, that your survival alone makes you a warrior, that you are a gift to this world, worthy of reclaiming your voice, your body, and your soul.
End of August
I am a child once again.
Needing to be held.
Guided.
Soothed.
Needing a nightlight to offer refuge
From the darkness that lies behind my eyelids

And

I am older than I thought possible.
Weary.
Used and tainted
Like a thing that sits in an attic
Gathering dust and cobwebs
Becoming the kind of sad that is uncomfortable to look at
And is easier to cast aside

This is the paradox of rape survival.
The lack of sleep
Leaves me with a headache.
My head pulses
In the same rhythm as his thrusts
And regardless of where I am,
That is where I am.
You cover my mouth after I cry out
And continue thrusting
You apologize in a voice that sounds sincere
As if you cannot control what your body is making you do
It would be easier to understand
If you did not apologize
If you did not have a heart at all
Lying down on my stomach
Takes me back to staring at your wall
Motionless
Aside from the shaking
As empty as the lifeless object you just made me into
You leave and come back with a towel
To wipe the cum off of my back
The cum that you sprayed all over me
Marking your territory
Your conquest

I keep staring at the wall
Unmoving
As you repeat the words
“So sorry”
Again and again
Exploring: Anger

“Anger is a cue that something is wrong; to help mobilize our psychological and physical resources in order to help one combat injustice and abuse.”
— Hendrie Weisinger, Ph.D. ¹

• Have you been taught that anger is unhealthy? Consider that anger management is not called “anger elimination”.

• Additionally, studies have found that anger actually lowers levels of cortisol (the stress hormone).² What are some rituals to embrace anger and to express it in a functional way? Would such practices result in less harm towards the self and others?

• In what ways are women specifically taught to inhibit the expression of anger? Have you been led to believe that anger in women is unattractive or “unladylike”? Do you associate anger with masculinity?

• “A 2008 study found that both men and women gave less professional status to women who expressed anger, while men who showed anger were promoted.”³ Why? Are we sacrificing our own comfort and well-being in order to appear polite and so-called “feminine”? 

¹ Hendrie Weisinger, Ph.D. ² Additional studies. ³ Cited study.
My body responds by clenching
So tightly that
All my muscles shake
Part of me thinks that if I clench tight enough
Your penis won’t fit at all and that would be the end of it
But you twist this fear response into
Something more suited to your needs and say
“It’s so sexy when you play with your vagina like that”
And now the only resistance mechanism I had
Has become a way to feed your fire and
I realize,
I am helpless
Sometimes I stare into space for so long
That I have to try and convince myself that
I am alive
I am Human

But I find this difficult to believe
Because I witnessed somebody convincing themselves
That I am not human
And now I am unsure if my existence is objective
After being reduced to a mere object
So I just keep staring
My insides as empty as the space that holds my gaze
Exploring: Objectification

Objectification means, “…viewing and/or treating a person as an object, devoid of thought or feeling. Often, objectification is targeted at women and reduces them to objects of sexual pleasure and gratification.”

• What are some ways that objectification exists? What are some examples of women in the media being portrayed as objects rather than humans?

• What is implied within this wording: “women give it up” and “men get some”? How does this language contribute to the idea that women are commodities?

• What does self-objectification mean? Have you experienced self-objectification? How might this be psychologically damaging?

• How might these concepts contribute to appearance anxiety and eating disorders, as well as violence towards women?

• How does our society profit from women disliking their bodies? How might self-love threaten the economy?
Happy one week of survival after rape
Congratulations on surviving
Sorry about the rest of it
Unfortunately if you want people to celebrate with you
They will have to descend into that black hole you’re sitting in
Maybe they can just peer into it
Look down from the top
And try to make out the figure that is you at the bottom
To say:

Congratulations on surviving
September Begins
I am confused when the panic attacks happen
These hives are an anaphylactic reaction
This inability to hear is from music played too loud
This nausea is just the heat
What is happening in my body is not the cause of an emotion
Not the cause of fear
Not some expression of post-traumatic stress

It can’t be.

Because my body is not connected to my mind at all
That link between what I think and what I feel
It was disreserved
When my body became someone else’s

I observe them walking
But my legs are not my legs
I observe them moving
But my hands are not my hands
My body is not my body
It was taken

So perhaps this will all go away if I just play my music a little quieter
Call it dumb
Call it illogical
But rationality does not belong in this realm of absurd action
I am not brave
I am not a hero
I am not a “better” kind of survivor
I am doing what I need
To heal
Impact,
Taking a wound and turning it into a flower
Alchemy,
Transmuting pain into gold

Your “me too’s” are compassionate
They show me the strength of my voice
Your “me too’s” are nauseating
They make me stare at the ceiling in silence for hours

Maybe it is a mere selfish distraction
A way to bring the attention away from my own pain
I’m not sure if the intent really matters
In comparison to the outcome

But:
I want to stop silence
Silence is a monster
Rape is a monster
“I have a misplaced fear of the soccer team,” I say laughing
And my friends nod and understand
It is a fear of power and masculinity
The kind that destroys and doesn’t create
That dehumanizes and only calls at 3am
That has been taught to win
And to keep score of their conquests
To use language that asserts their dominance like
*Did you hit that? Tap that? Did you bang? Get the kill?*

It is strange how the language we use to describe sex is also the
language we use to describe warfare
It is strange how one person could say *lovemaking* and another could
say *fucking*
I have to assume that the person is simply as harsh as their words
And now I say it without laughing because I find it strange that I
wasn’t already scared of the soccer team
Exploring: Gender-Based Groups

• In what ways do groups of women (often unintentionally) reinforce sexism? How does vocalizing insecurities encourage women around us to internalize harmful messages? What feelings come up for you when a woman peer shames her own body or objectifies herself?

• In what ways do groups of men (often unintentionally) reinforce sexism? The soccer team is merely a representation of larger societal forces; I acknowledge that this cannot be generalized. However, studies show that athletes participate in approximately one third of sexual assaults on college campuses. What might be the cause of this correlation between sport and violence?

• What does toxic masculinity look like? How does this differ from healthy/conscious masculinity?

• It is damaging for a woman to call another woman a “slut”, just as it is damaging for a man to put another man on a pedestal for “getting girls”. What kind of language do people use to describe acts of sex? Can you challenge individuals to use more progressive terms rather than those previously mentioned?
I say his name out loud in my session with her
It tastes bitter in my mouth
Like vomit
Like hate
Rising up my throat
Making me cringe
I shudder
And then swallow it down
“Step outside of your comfort zone”
I used to do that a lot
I flourished under a sense of possibility and challenge
I built a comfort zone as vast as a whole country
Its walls made from pride born out of demolished self-doubts
It was a place to run
To try
To fail
To live

But this haven built upon playful trial and error
It was invaded
With your weapons and your manhood

And now it is much too easy to step outside of my comfort zone
But this looks more like a push
A stumble forward, rather than a step
And the stumble comes with knots in my stomach
And panic in my chest

And it is nearly impossible
To step outside of this new discomfort zone
That is as vast as the whole world
There is no place of refuge from the whole world
“Most sensitive are the nerves in our sexual parts. When these are stimulated, through thought or physical sensation, nerves respond. Sexual responses are automatic. A girl may suddenly find her nipples harden when stroked by a rapist. High stress and anxiety themselves trigger sexual responses. Abuse is abuse whether or not you responded sexually.”

— Maltz

• How does a physical response differ from pleasure? How might the victim be psychologically impacted by this disconnect?

• What is the definition of consent and how is it irrelevant to sexual responses? Why might this concept of consent be unclear to some people?

• Historically, how might men have been taught that they have ownership of women’s bodies?

• How is the comment, “But it still feels good right?” a form of manipulation?
The Longest Month
Girls always have a secret
We were fed our own objectification at a young age
And we swallowed it whole
These lessons reached our stomachs and we stored them there
Don’t wear a crop top
Or let your gut hang out
And think hard about posting a picture in a bikini
Because your stomach is your biggest secret
And once it is out
People know everything there is to know about you

For some of us
For about 25% of us
Our biggest secret is rape
Our vaginas become our throats
And their manhood chokes us
And we can no longer speak
We are silenced

Or we are judged as liars, attention seekers, whores
Girls who did not make the right decisions
Girls who underestimated how easy it is for others to dehumanize us
Girls who failed to fathom the power of our objectification
Or the powerlessness of our objectification

I wonder if shame is synonymous with secrecy
I wonder if these words can be loosely translated into women’s bodies
Nobody talks about the third survival mechanism
We always hear of fight or flight, but never freeze
I was frozen
After the No's and the Please Stop's
And the realization that I was helpless
I froze

Perhaps it was during hour two of four
It’s like that movie where the patient is having surgery and they are given
anaesthesia and their body is asleep, but they themselves are awake
Eyes shifting and a mental soundtrack playing
The only distinction between dead thing and living being

I hear the sound of my leg flopping down
As he comes back to the bed with a condom and some sickening
newfound determination and he moves my legs apart like I am
some rag doll
He makes himself an opening
I watched him struggle to turn me from a human to an object
And I believed him
Because I heard that flopping sound and my brain heard
“I am a doll. I am not a human.”
At what point did we stop celebrating women’s power?  
We used to be honoured  
Our period blood worshipped  
Sprinkled on fields like some sort of magic fertile pixie dust  
With the belief that crops would grow faster, would grow taller  
Our ability to create  
Celebrated by all

At what point did this pixie dust fall into the hands of a man  
Who received it as a threat?  
Calling off the celebration,  
“Quick” he said, “stop celebrating”  
“Turn this pixie dust into shame before women learn just how high they can fly  
Turn it to disgust before they fly so high  
That us men have to look up to see them  
Shielding our eyes from the sun  
As the women look down upon us”

“We have to pull them down so that they have to look up at us  
We have to destroy the celebration of creation  
In order to not be left on the ground  
In order to rise up”

— Why can’t we all fly?
As a woman
There are two ways
To make yourself a blind spot in a man’s gaze
Make yourself so big
You disappear
Make yourself so small
You disappear
Exploring: Taking Up Space

• Heterosexual women often feel that they should be shorter than their male partner. Might this be a physical representation of sexist power dynamics? In what other ways are women taught to take up less space?

• Standards in society often result in either shrinking ourselves so much that we become invisible or making ourselves so big that we are dehumanized and cast aside. “It is estimated that almost 30% to 40% of eating disorder patients are survivors of sexual trauma.” Why do you think this correlation exists?

• In many cases, might eating disorders and sexual assault be symptoms of the same larger issue? For instance, is it possible that despite being on opposite ends of the appearance spectrum, an anorexic woman and an obese woman are bonded by the same source of suffering: the objectification of women?
You can be an obsessive driver
Terrified of accidents
Gripping the wheel so tightly like you are holding onto your life
Don’t play music in the car
Don’t speak in the car
Keep your eyes on the road
And try not to blink

But no matter what you do
No matter what precautions you take
Your safety is out of your hands
If a drunk driver swerves into your lane and hits you
Taking pieces of your life
Taking your whole life

— Repeat as many times as needed:
*The rape was not my fault*
I spent a summer in the wilderness
And at night I walked in fear
Because you cannot reason with a cougar

Now I walk the city streets with the same fear
Because I’ve learned I cannot always reason with my own people
We speak the same language and yet we cannot communicate
Your desire to attack is much louder in your mind than my desperate
   words of reasoning in your ears

— Predators
You are not alone
The realization is warm soft hands wrapping around my whole heart
You are not alone
The realization is those same hands breaking my heart in two
Music is a ship travelling across oceans
Carrying like wind across centuries, cosmos and lives
I board in my heart and set sail in my mind
I sit on the moon and breathe
I return only once I have arrived

— Sounds of Healing
Let me sink without drowning
Float to the bottom of the ocean
Weightless as a feather surrendering to gravity
Abandoning all resistance
Maybe just for a year

Let me lay here with my hands resting on my stomach
Slowly breathing in and out
My lungs filling with water, like ears filling with music
Every inhale peace
Every exhale a release of the ticking clock that lives within my mind

Let the water become me
Forgetting where my skin begins
And when every part of my body is filled with music
I will be ready to ascend

To swim against the pull of gravity and rejoin the world of the living
I know it is bright and beautiful up there
But for now I would like to sink
Exploring: Mental Health

• What are your practices for self-care? How might these practices benefit the greater good? Why do you think self-care can be falsely perceived as selfishness?

• Have you ever been shamed for practicing solitude or taking downtime? In what ways do our cultures prioritize efficiency before mental health? How is this not sustainable?

• How can we use language to challenge stigma towards mental health issues?

• How might these simple shifts in wording challenge the way we think of labels and identity?

A depressed person vs. a person who is depressed

A gay person vs. a person who is gay

A happy person vs. a person who is happy

• Why do you think few people are educated on the freeze response, while so many are aware of the “fight or flight” response? How might freezing out in trauma, also known as “numbing” or dissociating, actually be quite adaptive?
Tired of having conversations with our mouths
As if our mouths are not just speaking on behalf of our souls

— Bored
Trauma itself is a global earthquake
Relentless hands that shake your world
And when the shaking stops, it has only just begun
Because you look around and become lost in the damage:
The home of your body, it has been destroyed
Your openness to trust collapsed and your sense of safety demolished
It will take us months to count the losses
Everyday you find a new reason to grieve

So ignore them when they tell you to pick up your chin
For they are choosing ignorance in the face of the aftermath
Tell them it is not so easy to move forward
When your entire world is unrecognizable
Day one:
I stared into the eyes of a stranger for two minutes
And found my own truth within her eyes:
I am scared to be seen
Scared to come out of hiding
And in my eyes she saw her own truth:
I have compassion to give and so I will give it
And I let out a breath as I chose to receive
And after two minutes of the world spinning around us,
We
Have come so far from being strangers

Day two:
I stared into the eyes of a stranger for two minutes
Silent
Stillness
Empty filled space
And what I found were the kindest eyes in the world
What I found was trust in my own heart that I had thought to be lost
And for two minutes we spoke with our eyes or our souls
And now I am unsure if we were ever really strangers

— Windows
Everything that once made me call myself beautiful
Was changed into something else
Like a dark evil twin that taunted my Light
My openness to trust became ignorant and naïve
My connection to all became dumb and resentful
And I broke with the thought: How wrong I was to love so deeply

But in this space of beings who do love so deeply
Who find divinity in the water while celebrating the moon
I breathe as I let in this new thought:
Maybe everyone else is wrong
Maybe they are killing themselves with their denial of connection
Maybe they are walking this Earth with blindfolds and tripping over compassion
Maybe they are poisoning their hearts with hate
Maybe they are wrong

And this does not fix everything
Not even close
But it allows me to face the girl within me who was so happy just to be alive
And for the first time in a long time,
I hold her with compassion and I point my resentment somewhere else
I begin to see that this war within myself, it has been misplaced
And now I choose to stand with those who live a life of love
Infinite
Unbound
Because they are here
And I think they might be right

Because we are here and I think we are right
Enter November
Some days all I feel is pain
An arrow piercing through my heart

Some days that arrow is pointed skyward
And that pain feels a lot more like resilience
Perhaps we want more than a life of happiness
Perhaps what we need is a life that is full
There is so much beauty in the circle that connects
The expectations of love underlying my depression
To the celebration of life that fuels my joy

I don’t want to neglect any part of that circle
Any part of myself
Any part of this life

— What I truly crave is wholeness
There is so much to learn at the bottom of the ocean
Do not be afraid to stay there and read the sand
While the rest of the world quiets
I feel it is time that I stop writing
As if I have taken up all the space I deserve
As if my voice is much too loud for my body
And for this reason
I continue to write
BIGGER and LOUDER
I continue to write
The Winter Solstice comes
And I open my arms to receive one moment more of light
Pouring from the sky into each day
Droplets of comfort with this knowledge of return

In patient solitude I lie in the dark palm of Mother Earth
I spin with the seasons
I vow to ride the waves of ups and downs
To flow with the cycles of maiden, mother and crone
To celebrate the monthly cycles of my body
Of the moon
Of every passing day
Of Darkness and Light
And breakdowns and rebuilds
I let go of destinations and commit to journeys
Forget beginnings and endings,
Live moments and moments
One step onto this never-ending path means I am already perfect
Imperfections and all

How freeing it is to abandon resistance
To merely exist
In all the pain and bliss and sorrow and love

It is not all easy
But all is right
I am not healed
But I am forever healing
Notes

These statistics are not fixed and are inconsistent across platforms.


Marlee Liss is a 22-year-old Toronto, feminist, poetess, globe trotter and yogi. Growing up as a competitive dancer, artistic expression naturally became her main outlet for emotion and self-discovery. By courageously sharing her vulnerable journey through trauma, she has grown a following through social media @marleenamaslays and has had her work featured by organizations like End Rape on Campus. Alongside this book, she has birthed the Re-Humanize movement, hosting a diverse range of fundraisers to end gender-based violence.