I am a forty six year old woman who lives in Docklands, Melbourne, Australia. I have lived on a disability support pension since I was twenty four years old. I currently live alone in a one bedroom apartment managed by a social housing organisation. It has been a journey to live at this property involving loss, hardship, violence, abuse, death, grief, shame and mental and physical pain that is unresolved. My sense of self is fragmented as are my memories and story. My life also involves a story of survival and survivor guilt as I am aware that many people in my circumstances who have contact with social and community services are referred to institutional supports and not given the opportunity to live with the degree of independence and autonomy that I have.I am all to aware of the ones who have not survived and who are not appropriately grieved in our community or country as we face yet another spectre of a stolen generation or forgotten Australians. As the Melbourne winter approaches I am also aware of having a safe secure place to go out of the elements for almost two years after a period of homelessness whereas a number of associates and friends remain homeless or have been unable to maintain their housing. This has occurred in a situation where Disability Support Pension and Newstart allowance are not able to meet basic needs including housing. There is a shortage of housing properties for vulnerable and marginalised groups. Like many I depend on services to obtain food and healthcare. I am part of an underclass and a growing disparity between economic classes in this country. I am also an outsider and marginalised person within disability consumer cultures as I live without family support, have experienced recurrent homelessness, have experienced significant ongoing abuse and violence without protection, am physically disfigured and do not tell a coherent narrative of my life and identity. I am somewhat outspoken, agitated and confrontational and therefore an object of stigma who is problematic, ‘violent’, angry, sad, scared and reminded frequently that I am not respected.

The previous tenant of my apartment committed suicide. He was isolated and subjected to abuse and exploitation by family members. The services he was involved in did not intervene or meet his needs for emotional and social contact and connection. He threw himself off the balcony. Many clients of housing services die at properties due to suicide, overdose or violence – as if having a home does not in fact meet their needs. I am aware of the need to meet the aftermath of profound trauma and suffering and the sense of rage and anger that many feel – and services are not doing this. The neighbours of my property frequently fight and I hear sounds of traumatic violence through my walls. I sense that their pain and distress comes from the lack of emotional regulation that occurs when needs are not met and this is the outcome of long involvement with services where there is little regard and profound disconnection between client and service workers and providers. I have come to view disability and community services in this country as like clubs or job creation schemes for a certain class and mindset of person and that this has been a means of preserving and enforcing social and economic privilege and that this has become an exacerbated social divide in our country. There is such a difference between the organisational culture and consumer culture. We now have an underclass wailing against this class and outspoken organisations such as Homeless Persons Union of Victoria or *Roominations* Radio Show on Community Radio 3CR starting to provide both a voice and means of organising stakeholders and political actions such as street protests, social media, community media, occupations and forums. Education for staff is occurring in a higher education and vocational setting where trainers and teaching staff have been able to function in dysfunctional services with redundant and outmoded models and concepts of disability or mental illness or addiction. Graduates who go on to survive in the health, disability and community sector are able to service and perpetuate cultures of bullying and cover up. Access to housing is influenced by access to work and education but the culture of our education systems for students is increasingly reflective of the culture of self-entitled class and elitists and limited narratives and constructs of dysfunction, deficit, mediocrity and inferiority of identified persons with disability, addiction, mental illness, brain injury, criminality, child abuse, sexual abuse or domestic violence which all become generic categories for service provision and access to services such as housing, employment, mental health, community, education etc. The community has become divided with service consumers and homeless persons increasingly the targets of violence or social policies that further exclude and disadvantage those persons. I have many friends who are still homeless and they sleep on the streets. There is a lack of choice for persons with disabilities when accessing services who are not viewed as a whole person but invalidated and infantilised. My needs as a woman are never acknowledged by disability service workers.

My experience of the system and of society has led me to be largely excluded from experience of family or relationship. In many respects I am too traumatised to connect with myself let alone experience an intimate connection with another. Experience of services and institutions such as education and work have involved little sense of authenticity with one being forced to act or put on a mask and to put up with the bullying, abuse and harassment. I have been subject to such hatred that I say I know what it is like to be a Jew in Nazi Germany. With respect to cuts to services and benefits and lack of autonomy I would say many persons with disabilities live with annihilation anxiety similar to holocaust victims and survivors. The current situation is one of an obliteration of diversity and difference.

I am a person subject to social, emotional, physical and financial abuse by my family as do many persons identified as living with a disability. This situation is condoned and perpetrated at a societal level and within services. I have resided in a number of women’s refuges throughout the country and note the high rate of disability and incapacity of women who access these services. This situation has occurred in a system that still pathologies and medicalises women and children’s emotional and physical responses to abuse and violence. I have also lived in rooming houses, homeless shelters and on the streets. I have lived in country towns in structures without adequate insulation for heating in winter or cooling in summer or adequate transport within the community or other communities. These towns have lacked accessible and adequate food or health and community services. I have witnessed and been subject to the dire exploitation of persons with disabilities in Australian rural communities where they are excluded and subject to life on the margins in abject poverty. Country towns in Australia are marked by our history of institutionalisation and imprisonment. Housing services and community services reflect the extension of a culture of incarceration and institutionalisation with increased funding for clinical mental health and prisons taking funding from other services to prevent homelessness.

In order to obtain housing from the state one must be compliant with services or compliance based treatment programs such for mental health or alcohol and drug issues. Causes of homelessness are still viewed as personal and individual failure rather than structural and institutional violence. Compliance requires acceptance of violations of privacy with respect to intrusive home visits and providing personal information about employment, financial and contact details. Many services are in fact an extension of the justice system culture of policing and incarceration with service workers being little more than police interrogators, torturers or prison security dogs. That is why we are in housing services. We are subject to interrogation and isolation. Housing services and obtaining supported or public housing in Australia involved violations of human rights to live free from cruel, degrading and inhuman treatment, the right to privacy and freedom of movement and the right to free speech and freedom of thought.

I live with a degree of survivor guilt that the state has provided for me and not for many others around me who still live on the streets or are confined to institutional housing services or long term disability rehabilitation services where residents face emotional and material deprivation, lack privacy and are subject to financial abuse as their basic needs are not met and they have no choice in decision making or accessing alternative health and support services. Residents face additional stigma in the community and lack ability and means to participate in the community.

I am currently grateful for warmth, security and safety from the elements and threat of violence – being able to rest, sleep, make food for myself and come and go for work, education, services and social activities – even as I live with apprehension about reduced life expectancy and related social and familial abuse. I am frequently visited by emotions such as fear, anger and sadness and I spend most of my time alone. I also spend time thinking about the life I want to have for myself. I don’t think about housing or home but prefer to think about having shelter where I am safe at last, can take refuge, reclaim my shattered, fragmented and broken self and story, learn to inhabit my body, put the pieces back together and undertake self-leadership, create structures and find my voice. I am a work in process.