



release



release

Women in prison write about
self-harm and healing

Compiled by Leah Thorn



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Introduction | Leah Thorn

This book was written for you. Of course, I don't know who you are and the women who wrote the poems and life stories in this book don't know you personally. But we decided it was important to share what some women have thought and felt about their lives and about self-harm, in the hope that their experiences will mean something to you. And whatever your relationship to self-harm might be, maybe these women's words will encourage you to write your own story.

Writing can be a good way to explore, and show, what's going on inside of you. As Anne-Marie, one of the poets in this book, told me, 'Writing helps me make sense of my emotions, helps me understand how I feel. It helps me communicate and offload'. And as Anne Frank* wrote in her diary, 'Paper is more patient than people'. The piece of paper you write your thoughts on won't tell you that you're stupid, wrong, or 'crazy' and it won't say 'That didn't happen' or 'You didn't see that'.

With poetry, you can express your thoughts and release your feelings in a very few words. It can help you reach out and feel less alone. And because so many women have had the reality of their experiences denied or ignored, writing your life story can be a way of putting the record straight and taking charge of your life.

As a poet, I write about issues that are important to me – about being a woman, about being the daughter of a Holocaust survivor, about the mental health system. I also help others to write what they want to and for the past eight years I have been running creative writing workshops in prisons. I was inspired to do this work by Mark, who had been in prison for a long time when I met him and who taught me how writing was his freedom. He taught me that no-one can lock up your mind, no-one can dictate where your imagination can and can't take you.

I do the work I do because I want us as women to feel good about ourselves and I want us to have places where we can speak openly and honestly about our lives. This is an essential part of building a future where women are no longer mistreated, put-down, abused or seen as 'less than'. I also want women to have safe outlets for painful feelings, so that no woman would feel a need to hurt herself.

Many women in and out of prison self-harm. Although only 5% of prisoners in this country are female, women account for almost 50% of reported cases of self-harm in prison. As women, we're not born wanting to hurt ourselves, not born feeling bad about ourselves or struggling to let our feelings out. But things happen to us that leave us feeling that we deserve to be hurt, just for being female and for being young or Black or poor or any of the other identities women have.

There are, of course, many ways a woman can hurt herself. Feeling like she's worthless might mean that she ends up in a series of abusive relationships or numbs herself with drugs, alcohol and other addictions.

For some women, injuring themselves seems like the only way to deal with painful emotions, the only way to get through their life or through their time in prison. When I was employed by the Writers in Prison *Network* to be a writer-in-residence in a women's prison, women told me over and over again about their early experiences of abuse, humiliation, abandonment, violence or threats of violence – experiences that left them with unbearable feelings that seemed impossible to face. One result of these experiences is that women blame themselves and hurt themselves before someone else can.

This book is an example of women writing the truth about their lives. I met all of the women in prison and they wrote their poems and stories in my workshops or whilst working one-to-one with me. Their experiences are sometimes painful to read but I hope you'll find it inspiring to learn what other women have survived. Maybe you'll be encouraged to write your story.

On pages 58–66, I offer some ideas to help you find a way into writing and also for dealing safely with feelings that may come up as you write.

Why not have a go?

* Anne Frank was a young Jewish girl, who was hidden from the Nazis in Amsterdam during the Holocaust. Between the age of thirteen and fifteen, she kept a diary about her life in hiding. She wrote, 'I don't want to have lived in vain'. She died aged fifteen in a concentration camp and the book of her diary keeps her memory alive today across the world.



Poetry helps towards
my mood, it enables me
to remain calm

Ann-Marie | An outlet for pain

I was roughly twelve when I first self-harmed. I still have half the letter M (for Mum) on my left shoulder. It was about the time I was being sexually abused by my uncle.

I wanted and needed an outlet for all the anger and pain I was feeling inside.

I broke a bottle and cut a letter M. I was a bit scared to do it, I thought it would be painful. I managed to somehow turn off mentally to the pain. I was surprised that I actually felt good during and after I'd done it.

Prison has actually helped by talking to other self-harmers who've stopped. I don't do it that often any more. I mainly do it when I'm angry or very low in mood. I don't worry about my scars. If I'm asked, I tell people honestly how I've got them.

Writing helps because I'm able to express my feelings in a positive way. I would love to be a non self-harmer now.

I'm going to try.

I would like to be able to encourage others to stop.

| Diary of a self-harmer |

A torrent of emotion
running deep like an ocean

Scars all over my arm
from years of self-harm

On my imperfect face,
self-harming scars leave their trace

Thoughts from past days,
self-harming now more than just a phase

Left with past thoughts on my mind,
these thoughts will heal, but scars remain behind

| Shut |

I learnt
to slice
to cut
to help
my mind's thoughts
shut



Abiola



▮ My family ▮

My family

is the sound of breaking glass,
shattered and scattered,
never to be put back together

My family

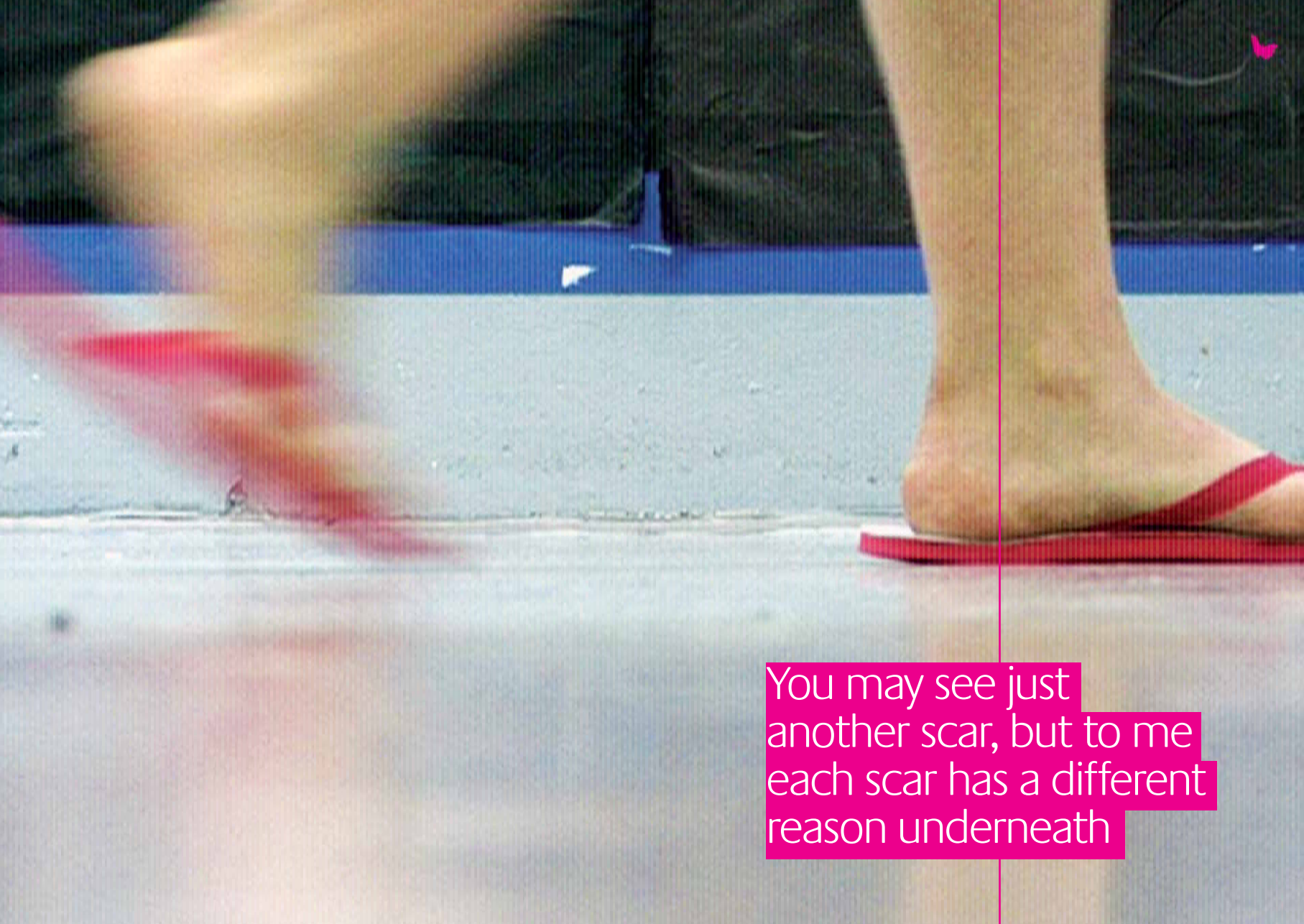
didn't go with a bang,
it went with a *ting*,
it broke slowly
and each piece
is slightly jagged

One piece

is the most jagged of all,
my brother hurt me the most
and left the

deepest

scars



You may see just
another scar, but to me
each scar has a different
reason underneath

Sarah | I don't want sympathy

I never used to hide my scars because I used to think, 'It's my body and whatever I do, I will do'. But over the years, people started to talk about my arms and giving me sympathy. Now I always cover up my arms because I don't want sympathy.



Just the same

I don't want to cut up any more
but when they shut the door
I'm left with my feelings
and all I can do is think,
I wish I was stronger

but instead I lie here hating myself,
feeling that I should be hurt.
Please don't judge me
for being this way.
I'm just the same as you

I try to think positive
but I know I ain't strong enough.
Don't matter how hard I try not to,
I just can't hold back.
Then without thinking

I pick something up and cut.
I feel relieved.
I feel happy.
Then the shame and guilt hits me,
and once again I ask you
not to judge me

I'm just a human like you

Star | Shedding a piece of my own horror

To me, self-harm can mean causing pain to oneself physically, emotionally, spiritually or mentally. I have never physically harmed myself by using a razor or knife to cut myself but I would say 'Yes, I have harmed myself emotionally, mentally and spiritually'.

Cutting oneself is not something that is common amongst Black women. Women in our culture are molded from an early age to be bold and iron-like. Black women are the ones who should always hold it together, never fall apart, never show weakness. Thus a lot of issues which affect women are kept in secret from generation to generation. A woman's pain is something she should feel in a lonely corner, alone from the society. Harming herself by physically cutting herself would be seen as evil or weird.

A particular incident led to my self-harm. I was ten years old when I was kidnapped and raped by a man of about fifty years of age. My mother had never before discussed sex with me, so I truly did not know what it was at all until that day. Years later, that incident led to me harming myself in many different ways.

I wanted someone to talk to me and explain to me what had happened. At the time it did not sink in. I faced physical changes in my body, but emotionally the change came years later. My mother was deeply pained. But she never did discuss with me that I was no longer a virgin or what it even meant to be a virgin.

I would say that I self-harmed by being rebellious and promiscuous at an early age. I couldn't understand what had happened, so it seemed OK to have sex without any boundaries set, because none had been taught to me. I used sex as a tool for gaining acceptance from males. I was looking for the father figure that failed to protect me and sex became my way to feel loved and protected by men. I rebelled against my mother's rules. I allowed myself to be in abusive relationships, believing it was right. I was



! Universal woman !

A woman's pain is universal.

A woman's tears are global.

We love the same. We cry the same.

We lose the same. We all settle for less of the same.

We dream the same. We mean the same.

We need the same and want the same.

No matter the cost, no matter the loss.

We prostitute our minds.

Sell our emotions short. Sometimes at no price at all.

We lay down and sell our very souls.

We kneel and bargain with our enemies.

We hurt the same. We bleed the same. We fight the same battles.

Hidin' the same scars,
pickin' at the same scabs, whisperin' the same mantras.

We laugh the same, though the sadness never leaves our eyes.

We make the same promises,

that we spend our whole lives tryin' to keep.

We stand accused by others.

We lie the same, tellin' tall tales that never age.

We trust the same, fallin' prey as victims of abuse and misuse.

We fall prey to vicious addictions and afflictions. It's all the same.

We are all the same. Our struggle to survive is the same.

Universal



angry that my innocence was brutally taken away, that I was never given a choice. I drank alcohol and turned to drugs for comfort. I ran away from home, dropped out of school, had multiple sexual partners. All this was damaging me emotionally, but I did not want to feel or think. Spiritually, I was not grounded. From the age of 12, I lived a life of sex, drugs and alcohol. I was empty and needed to fill this emptiness. I did not know what it meant to be a teenager and behave like one.

I have always thought less of myself. My father left our family when I was very young and as a girl I felt that I and my sisters were not good enough for him to stay and love us as a family. I carried those feelings into other relationships, believing that I did not matter. All that mattered was what I could give or offer the next person or what they could take from me.

For me prison was another consequence of self-harm. Before going to prison, I was in turmoil emotionally from past memories that kept haunting me and creating negative behaviour patterns. I was blaming myself for so many bad things that had happened to me. I suffered from lack of self-esteem, which led to making further wrong decision and choices in life.

Prison does make self-harm worse. Though I have never physically self-harmed, the emotions that I felt when I was in prison could have led me to do that. Instead I cried a lot. I beat myself up emotionally. I was withdrawn and severely depressed. Prison can be a very scary place. There is so much fear and pain when you look around, especially for a first-time offender from a foreign country, as I was. Women around you are suffering in one way or another. And being locked in a confined space can drive one to insanity. Within this tiny space, one is haunted by so many memories, thoughts, regrets, anger, hate and even suicide.

Writing helps immensely. Before my imprisonment, I had stopped writing and almost forgotten my passion for writing. The beauty of prison life is that there is no, or limited, access to technology, so it took me back to pen and paper. All those bottled-up emotions, I poured out into writing. I started writing all over again and discovered so much about myself and others. I was able to heal many of my past wounds and share positive thoughts with other women in prison. Writing forced me to think and meditate on things that I had been running away from, to look at myself honestly and analyse the reasons why not only I, but women worldwide, self-harm. No matter how ugly the truth we face as women, still it has to come out. In my cell I would look out of the window and allow the words to be formed on paper. I would look and listen to the stories of other women and write. I was learning so much from that and shedding so much baggage with each word written.

Talking certainly helps, too. Sharing thoughts and emotions is extremely good and healthy for the soul. Sometimes I need to hear positive thoughts from someone else to remind me of who I am and where I am headed.

Though I am now older and more mature and responsible in my ways, I still find myself giving in to feelings of regret and negativity. Sometimes I feel depressed for no reason at all. When the negative voices visit, I fight them with pen and paper to suppress them. Sometimes you have to visit the dark space within, where the horror has lodged itself. Sometimes you have to scream, rant, and cry it all out, give yourself the strength to face your demons in order to let them go. Women need to find ways to shed a piece of the horror each day and learn to leave it behind. That is how I have learned to deal with my pain and even years later I am still shedding a piece of my own horror.

I long to do away with such thoughts and emotions,
because they drain me emotionally and rob me of true joy.

I don't engage in reckless behaviour anymore. With time,
I have understood myself better as a woman and I have
learned to forgive myself. Being a mother has helped me
to make peace with the past and its pain.

My heart really goes out to women who harm themselves
physically because I can relate to the circumstances that
can lead a woman to self-harm. I fully understand the
desperate situations that women find themselves in,
no matter what race or class distinctions. Sometimes
a woman can feel isolated, as if she is the only one who
is facing a certain problem or emotional battle. I have
learned that a woman's pain is universal.

Debbie



|| Out of control ||

A new cut,
an attempt to eradicate
another memory.
It doesn't help.

You ask me if I'm alright,
I answer I'm fine!

I lie,
but do you want the truth?
I'm barely holding on,
holding on to my scars.

A cut, a graze, a scratch,

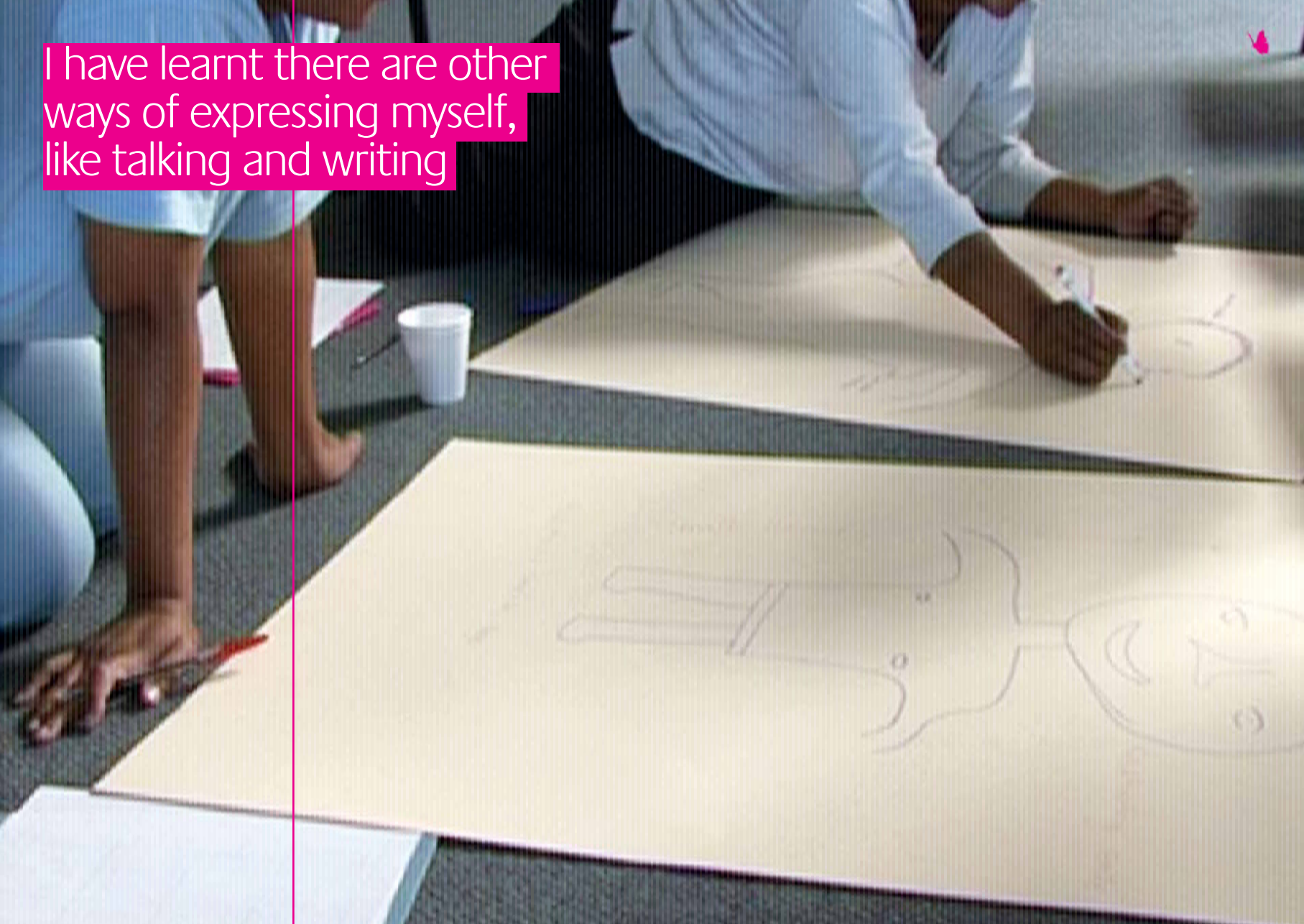
external symptoms

of the pain I feel inside.

Locked up,

I can't seem to release it.

I have learnt there are other ways of expressing myself, like talking and writing



| The scars on your arms |

The scars on your arms
 show me where you've been
 – some of the pain you must have seen.
 They are a proof of mind over matter
 scalpel-sharp
 – when many would have cried
 the rage inside
 made you carve
 your personal barcode on your body,
 as a permanent reminder
 of a marked outsider.

Your skin, twisted,
 looking like raked earth
 – becoming hillocks of wounded gaping flesh
 between the silver crescent slivers
 – some exposed and some so wide ...
 I want to ask:
 'Why were they not stitched
 but laid bare to congeal
 until it was too late for them to heal?'
 You forbid me
 from asking too many questions
 – you feel ashamed
 and I am blamed for picking at old scabs.

Your arms look like a relief map
 that orientates me
 and shows the depth of pain
 you must have known
 – cut to the quick,
 raw,
 sometimes even to the bone.
 They reveal some of your history,
 your very private grief,
 that remains a personal mystery.



| The scars on my arms |

How do I begin to explain
 what has become inexplicable pain?
 You see the tearing, slashing results
 of a girl who's full of faults.
 Yes, many would have cried
 but I cut and didn't care if I died

I can't tell you,
 what good would it do,
 so I cut-up,
 I carve up,
 I cannot let you see why,
 yet in my cell I lay alone and cry.
 The pain my children have never seen
 'coz I wear long sleeves if they have been
 or if I go to see them
 it's long sleeves on a hot summer's evening.
 Ask why I didn't want stitches,
 I wanted big wide scars,
 my scars say '*F**k off, you bitches!*'

Me and my multiple personalities
 split and divide into two's and three's,
 leave me now, my grief is my grief.
 Misunderstood, my partner hung himself
 and that was no good.
 You'll never know my anguish,
 just stick by me.
 That's my only wish

Farah | Take up my pain



I look at the clean skin on my forearm, the scars from five years ago are barely visible. But in a certain cold light, if I twist my skin a certain direction, a filigree of tiny scars appears, a ghostly underlay of pain from a time I don't want to remember. All the pain of a life pulled down, down to the ground, with me sitting in the midst of it, the ashes of my former self scattering around me, like leaves falling from sickly trees, my heart crushed as if I'd been buried alive.

I couldn't see a way out of, or through, the pain. I try the usual trite proverbs and two-line, bite-size phrases that sometimes offer relief – things about going through a dark tunnel one step at a time towards the light, or climbing the mountain of a problem, one foot in front of another. And what's the one about eating an elephant? Oh yes, one bite at a time. But the mountain is so high I can't even see its summit and the elephant has taken on woolly mammoth proportions.

The first cut isn't the deepest. It's just a slim slice of skin, a panting for a second, then – blood. The first cut is always the hardest. Then it's instantly easier. I need the relief. I can own this pain. I created it and I control it.

Cut, then another, cut, cut, cut. It's not the relief of tears which, once they start their silent journey down the cool slopes of my cheeks, feel like they might never stop. It's a euphoric pleasure as sickness oozes out and takes over the action of my right hand so I can't stop. And soon there are scores and scores, each firing up a smart red line of blood to some unseen ugly deity for whom I am doing this. Take up my pain.

At first it doesn't hurt, it stings. It stings even more when salty tears fall into my selfish and self-inflicted stigmata. Then all the single signals of nerve endings in pain begin to combine and they reach a climax and a crescendo. It's

▮ Inside me ▮

If I said I loved you,
would it matter?
Make any difference?
Would you embrace me
closer to your heart,
whisper in my ear,
your voice carried on the wind?
Would you make the pain inside me disappear,
stroke my skin
with the caress of steel
on the edge of a razor blade?

...

one big throbbing hulk of pain, and still I don't stop. I can't stop. It's a frenzy and a mess of blood and tears, pain and release.

I keep cutting, the cuts aren't deep. I know it's wrong to scar and damage myself like this but it's the only thing left that I can control in this mess I consider to be a life.

And there it is, a bloodied forearm, a memory of being alive and not deadened by this place, where the sunlight cruelly hits the bars with an ugly grimace. I watch the blood ooze out of me, watch it settle and begin to harden. Like letters from an alphabet I don't understand, the scars start to form, rune-like, mysterious. Can you read what it says? Is it *Help me or Leave me*? Leave me to create a kind of pain I can get through.

This is finite. I know the sharp burning will end in a day or two, as the wounds start to heal. The other pain, the darkness, it nestles like a snake in my belly and I can't bear it because it's so far inside me.





When I write, it hurts.
Afterwards, it puts me
back together again.



I was always supposed to be the perfect daughter with perfect grades, who was going to marry the perfect Jewish man, have the perfect 2.5 children and the Mercedes Sports in the driveway.

My parents were both concentration camp survivors. They wanted to give me and my brother everything, for us to have the perfect upbringing that they didn't have. They aspired to what they wanted me to aspire to. When I didn't get there, it was reiterating to them and to me that I was a failure. I don't fit the mould.

I was told 'You stick to your own kind', so I went to shul (synagogue) and Sunday School and had 'fun' with other Jewish children. I was sixteen or a bit younger when I first self-harmed. I was raped and they said I had 'got myself raped'. I had an abortion to 'clean' my body and when I woke up from the anaesthetic my father told me, 'It's over now, we'll never talk about it again'. I found that incomprehensible. They never did talk about it again. From then on, I thought 'I'm going to do it my way' but I still wanted their approval. I was desperate for their approval.

I was in physical pain after the operation and as long as I was in physical pain, I didn't focus on how I felt. Once the physical pain died down, I had to find a way to deal with what was going on in my head. I became very inward and my parents sent me to psychiatrists, therapists, psychologists and counsellors. I could answer their questions, tell a little story but it never got down to that pain.

My parents see self-harm as the self-indulgence of a spoilt brat. They had to deal with horrendous things in the camps and they had to learn to blank it from their minds, to be successful and supposedly happy. I couldn't blame my parents because they'd always been the perfect parents. That's what they told me. But there's a difference between them buying everything for me and me feeling that they are there for me.

I Alone again I

tears well up,
 pain sears through,
 loneliness
like shards of glass
 piercing skin
 crying out
overwhelming fear of solitude
 anger at self
 warmth of nothing flows over me
reality strikes
 life remains
 alone again

...

To me, self-harm means inflicting physical pain to alleviate mental pain – ligaturing, cigarette burns, sabotaging myself, like ending up in prison. It is shameful, a deep secret not to be discussed. I can bury the pain, hide it behind a mask, keep myself busy helping others, but then something sets it off – usually something my parents say or the tone in which they say it – and all the buttons are pushed. Jewish women wouldn't get raped, have an abortion, go out with Catholic boys, be 49 and single and in prison. I've brought shame and embarrassment to my family and it's a self-perpetuating circle of shame, pain and no relief.

Back then I needed love, care, cuddles, empathy. Now darkness helps, and silence. And drink and laughter delay the onset of pain. I hide my scars with make-up and baggy clothes. And isolation.





There is always a reason
for what we do.
There is nothing to be
ashamed about.

Mohawk | I never forget



I am gay and have known it from very young. I lived in a very small village up North. The only people to talk to were either your parents or your doctor or anyone at school you could trust.

I started cutting at fourteen. I needed to meet other gay people. I got taunted at school so I would go to the toilets and cut the tops of my arms with a compass. I had no-one to talk to about my sexuality, certainly not my parents as they made it perfectly clear being gay was disgusting. At first, I cut out of anger. This is the time when the blade came out – it gave me the release that I needed. I do believe that if I had had someone to talk to at fourteen, the self-harm would not have been as bad.

This should have been picked up at the age of fourteen but I hid my scars well so no one noticed. My family let me down by not noticing the signs, like the difference in my behaviour at that young age.

At fifteen, I was brutally beaten up by a large gang of men because of my sexuality. I was left for dead in a bus shelter. I was hospitalized for three months on a ventilator because I took all the blows to my face and neck and I was barely able to breathe. I lost twelve weeks of my life in hospital.

As I recovered, I changed as a person. I was full of hatred and anger. I had become one of them. The self-harming became worse and worse and the deeper I cut the better I felt.

I went out and bought three knives, which I used on myself and intended to use on my attackers. At fifteen, I was too young to get my revenge but I'd think, *One day, just one day.*

Seven months later, (I was now sixteen years old), I was raped. Everything now had been taken away from me, even my purity. Self-harming became my best friend.

I reaped revenge and I am now paying for it. I go through different stages of self-harm to get release. If I do not self-harm, someone else would be on the receiving end.

I can't say prison makes it worse because I have lived with those two incidents for twenty nine years, day in and day out. I go to bed every night and cry at what happened to me. I tend to self-harm at night when all is quiet and there are not too many people to stop me. I've had two near death experiences by self-harming because I lost so much blood. I have tried coping strategies but to no avail. It only needs one slight thing to trigger me off.

I am now classed as unpredictable, violent and dangerous and I do agree, but the two incidents that happened to me changed me. I never forgive and I never forget.

My left arm is so bad I now have crevices in it from top to bottom, like driving on a bumpy road. I try to cover them up with tattoos but I keep on self-harming so it's impossible to cover them. It's like being a junkie. You just get hooked and there's no going back.



11

gripped in my hand
razor sharp piece
bleeds the desperate

12

glinting
 shiny
 sharp
this my saviour
reaps my desire

1 Talk about this please 1

The cuts, the blood,
this disease,
talk to someone,
feel at ease.

Even if you have to,
scream and shout.
Forget your pride.
Talk. Get it out.

Tara | No one would know

Between 11 and 13, I used to hit my head on a wall or hit my head with my fist. I didn't start cutting or scratching until I was about 13. My mum went through a divorce because of domestic violence, my step-grandfather died, my cat died, we lost our home and had to move into a safe house and I was not allowed to tell anyone where we were. I started using my nails to scratch my arms and legs, then I started using a Stanley knife, but only on the tops of my legs so no-one would know. I stopped when I was about 15 but I started scratching my arms when I was taken into custody. I always wear long sleeves and I never wear skirts.

▮ Tears no longer drip down my face ▮

As blood comes to the surface

A relief overwhelms.

As another cut is made

More blood arrives.

As more cuts are made

Feelings are relaxed.

As blood drips down my arm

Tears no longer drip down my face.

The feelings of a little power,

power over my emotions.

I am in control.

I choose to make this pain.

Just for a short moment

I forget the pain

I felt before

Jane | No one to talk to

When I first started self-harming, it wasn't because of anger. We 16 year olds in Borstal just did it. Friction burns.

At 17 I began scratching myself for attention, as I was in the Special Unit of a hospital wing and didn't see many people. I was then sent to a Special Hospital and copied another self-harmer, inserting things into my stomach or hands. This resulted in a trip to the local hospital. Once I was kept in for six days.

At this time I also started banging my head or hands on the wall or door, if I'd been locked up as a punishment. I had a spell when I didn't self-harm for a couple of years. Then I got transferred to another Special Hospital and inserted once and I was treated badly by the nurses because self-harm was virtually non-existent. So I wouldn't have to go to hospital again, I began punching my face around the eyes. This was because I was upset and had no-one to talk to.

In 1985 whilst I was on remand, I pulled out all my hair, again because I had no-one to talk to.

Then I went back to Special Hospital. Almost everyone was cutting or swallowing or inserting biro's.

By the late 80's I was cutting quite badly, always needing stitches. In a three day 'spree', I had over one hundred and thirty stitches. Everyone was cutting. It seemed like a competition as to who could get the most stitches. We always asked each other 'How many did you get?'

I now use self-harm as a coping method when I get angry. I do refuse food and have done for as long as I remember, even outside. Mostly it has been a diet that becomes an obsession to lose weight, other times it's been because I'm angry. A few times I've used not eating and drinking as suicide attempts. People in authority do call this self-harm but I never have, because you can't see injuries.

What do you see

What do you see
when you look at me?

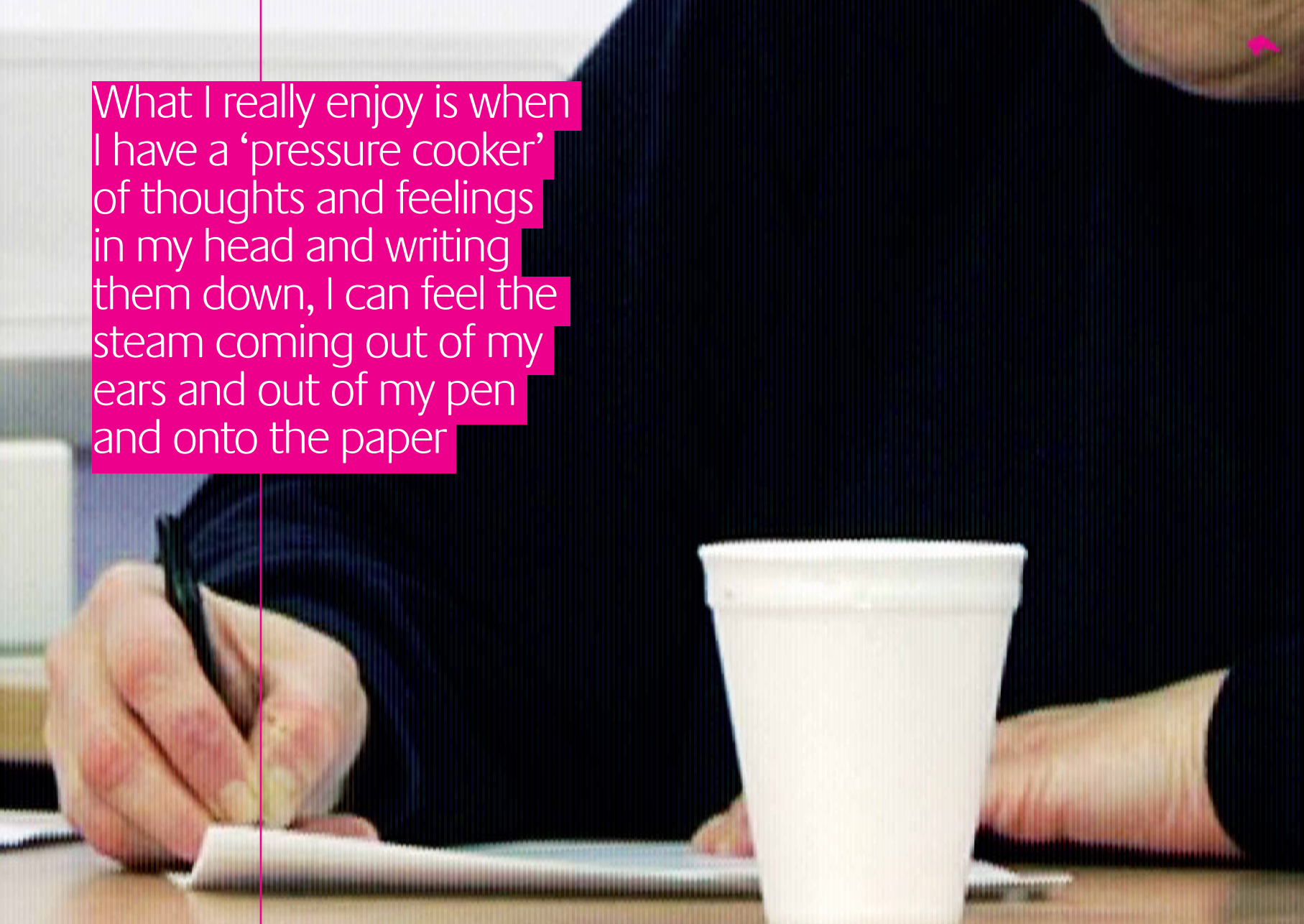
Scars?

Eyes filled with fear and hate?

You can't see the scars
inside my head,
sometimes wishing
I was dead

They took my soul
over thirty years ago,
now my body
has nowhere to go

If I don't hack away
to show my dismay,
harm comes to others
in a different way

A close-up photograph of a person's hands writing in a spiral notebook. The person is wearing a dark blue long-sleeved shirt. A white disposable cup is on the desk to the right. The background is slightly blurred, showing a desk and some papers. A vertical pink line is on the left side of the image.

What I really enjoy is when I have a 'pressure cooker' of thoughts and feelings in my head and writing them down, I can feel the steam coming out of my ears and out of my pen and onto the paper

■ Red ■

I remember red last night
as I applied it the first time to a painting.

I mixed the red to the red-brown
of drying flaking blood on skin.

I mixed the red to the bright light
fresh blood of that inside the skin.

Fresh and bright and light and full of oxygen,
fresh and bright and light and dancing, dancing,
as every cell in my body screams out:

YOU ARE ALLOWED TO BE HERE

I TAKE UP SPACE.

And space is to be taken.

But at what cost, what consequence,
as the barriers of thirty years repression
come crumbling, then tumbling,
then cascading down.

And down.

And down.

And rage
deeper than the red of crimson blood
pours forth.

And memories flood the body
that consciousness knows not what from.

And the crying beautiful hurt child is there.
And I am holding her in the palm of my hand.
And I am loving her.

For the first time ever.

Mariam | This is me

The blood from the cut represents the tears I cannot shed.

It is a way of saying, 'This is me', of managing the feelings which threaten to overwhelm. My feelings are real and important, even if they don't show.

I don't deal with my feelings. I bottle them up. I allow them to take charge of me and influence my behaviour. It can be like living in a vicious circle that gathers impetus. It can feel as if I have a volcano inside me.

Writing is a terrific release for all those mixed emotions. It helps bring clarity to my thoughts and feelings and reduces confusion. We cannot choose our circumstances but we can always choose how we respond to them.

I can now talk about my feelings without fear of others' disgust or judgement.



▮ A legacy ▮

A legacy of betrayal and emptiness,
a backlog of struggle and pain,
the past may be over
but the anguish remains

The last time I cut myself was late 2008. I became depressed and was transferred to healthcare. I was scared and withdrawn. I'd lie on my mattress, sometimes crying, wondering about my life, about my future. I had no positive thoughts about myself.

Things started to change when I felt needed by someone. Some of the women couldn't make roll-ups and I was an expert, so I'd be asked if I minded making a few now and then. A small chink had been chipped away. I began making roll-ups, helping women who now had enough to last a week, instead of a few days. Very, very slowly my mood improved and I started chatting and playing cards with the officers, who were observing me constantly.

Little rewards started being given to me as I progressed. The orderly was allowed to associate with me and a few women could chat to me at my door. I had relapses but I wasn't punished. People tried to give me hope, told me that slowly things would improve. People saying good things to me about me is really hard to accept, as for so many years no-one has said or written anything positive about me.

Then I met a young woman in Healthcare who was confined to bed through illness, so in reality was in a worse state than myself. I asked if I could use my Association time to give her some company. We now play cards. Over the last few weeks when I've felt low and wanted to self-harm, I've thought of others that need my support and this has helped me re-think and be positive.

Self-harmers don't do it for attention. In many cases, it's a statement, a cry of 'I need help, but I can't ask'. Or in prison, where a lot of self-harm happens, some women may be being bullied, or feel an outsider amongst their peers. They can't tell anyone due to the fear that they'll be bullied more or ridiculed by their peers. And not all staff are understanding in this area.

We need people like officers to understand why we do it, rather than being asked, 'What was that in aid of?' When I see young women who self-harm, I want to hug them, talk to them, let them tell me how they feel. I want to help them.

Besides having the support of other people, I've found that writing helps. Whether sad or angry, I ramble on paper and although I don't always let people read it, it helps.

It's got to the point
where I'm writing poems
instead of hurting myself



Writing tips | Leah Thorn

You may know exactly what you want to write about, but like many people your mind might go blank when you're faced with an empty sheet of paper. In my workshops, I offer writing exercises as a way to make that first mark on the page.

But before you start to write, here are some tips for you to think about:

Remember, you cannot get this wrong

You're writing for you. Just write what comes to your mind. It doesn't have to make sense. And you don't have to show it to anyone else, unless you choose to

You're in charge of what you write

Be easy on yourself. You don't have to dive in to your most painful memories immediately – or ever

Try not to judge yourself

So many women stop themselves before they start, by thinking 'What I write won't be any good' or 'I can't do this'

Don't worry about spelling or grammar

Many women say that it's hard to express themselves on paper because of their experience of education or the fact that they are dyslexic. Corrections can be sorted out later. What's important is to get your thoughts out

Tell the truth, be as honest as you can

Don't try to be anyone else but you – that will lead to the most powerful writing

Be specific

Use details to paint a picture. Describe the sight, the sound, the feel of something

Some days you might not physically feel like writing

Maybe your confidence is low or you've had a hard phone call or meds are making you feel woozy. On those days, see if you can find someone who will listen to your thoughts and write them down for you

Find things you like to read

Reading other people's work can help you find ways to express yourself. Tell the librarian what you're interested in and see what he or she suggests you look at

Here are some exercises that might give you ideas and help you get started.

Exercise 1

I begin every workshop with 'flow writing'. It's a way of freeing up your thoughts and it means just what it says – you let your thoughts flow out of you and on to the page. The trick is to write without stopping and with no criticism or censoring. You take a word or a phrase as your starting point and see what comes into your mind. Examples I often give as starting points are:

'I remember blue...'

'A happy memory is...'

'If I could, I would...'

'I can...'

'I can't...'

'Then I was...'

'Now I am...'

There's no right or wrong way of doing this. You might write a list of many different thoughts or you may just have one memory that you explore. Start with five minutes non-stop writing. You'll probably find you can go longer each time you try. Write down everything that comes into your head and try not to censor yourself. Often you might get thoughts like 'I don't know what to write' or 'I'd rather be doing something else right now' or 'I'm hungry'. That's fine. Write that down. Don't stop to think or judge.

Remember, you don't have to share this with anyone else. Sometimes a poem or a story will come tumbling out, sometimes you get a great line to start a poem or a story and sometimes at the end you might just screw the paper into a ball and throw it across the room. The point is to be kind to yourself and give yourself permission to write anything.

Trust your mind to give you ideas. The ideas might come at odd times, so if you can, keep a paper and pen handy.

Exercise 2

Repeating certain words and phrases can lead you into interesting poems.

In the excerpt below, Natalya writes honestly about herself, repeating the words 'Speaking as a young woman'. She rhymes words at the end of each line. You can try this too, but as you can see from many of the poems in this book, poems don't have to rhyme:

Speaking as a young woman, who had to run to a safe house,
being careful not to be seen, quiet as a mouse

Speaking as a young woman, who got into a bad way,
drugs and violence, not thinking I'd see the day

Institutionalized, locked behind bars
away from the streets, drugs and fast cars

Speaking as a young woman, who has since done better,
gaining qualifications to get closer to that acceptance letter

Speaking as a young woman, who hasn't got long left inside,
writing a book of my life, no more handcuffs,
just a young woman full of pride

Exercise 3

You can also write poems as a group, with everyone putting in a line or two.

Here is another example of using repeated words to make up a 'list' poem, this time written by several women. This poem by Rebecca, Abiola, Sarifa, Jade and Margaret came out of a workshop where we looked at what helps women in prison to keep going:

Hold on to your dreams
even if you are afraid to sleep

Hold on to what is real
even if at times you have to pretend

Hold on to your memories
they can't be taken from you

Hold on to your sanity
even if it's by a thread

Hold on to hope
and draw it close

Exercise 4

You can describe how you feel by using images.

For example, in one workshop we explored 'Racism'. I asked questions like, 'If racism was a taste, what would it be?'; 'If it was a smell what would it be?'; 'If it was a touch on your skin, how would it feel?'. Dorothy put all her answers together as a poem:

Racism is the screeching sound
of an old-fashioned kettle
whistling in my ear.
It smells like rotten eggs,
taking your breath away,
you gasp for air that never comes.
Racism feels like a grater
rubbing against my skin
Painful Red Raw

You can take any feeling like 'love' or 'fear' or 'joy', or you could explore a subject (like 'My family' by Abiola on page 13, or 'My life' or 'My children') and describe it in this way. I asked Sarah, 'If loneliness was a place, what kind of place would it be?' and she wrote:

Loneliness is
like being trapped in a dark hole
with no way to get out
when you try to call out
no-one hears you

Loneliness is
like something's missing in your heart
so you try to replace that missing piece
but nothing will replace
what was once there

Exercise 5

Here are some tips if you decide to write about your life.

You don't have to start at the beginning and write in the order that things happened. You can start with now and work backwards or you can start with a turning point in your life. You can write about different times in your life by taking a theme like 'friendship' or 'precious possessions' or 'moving on' – see how many ideas you get for each.

Of course, you don't have to write about self-harm, but if you choose to, here are some of the questions I asked women who wrote pieces for this book:

- Do you remember the first time you self-harmed?
- What was going on in your life at that time?
- What did you want or need back then?
- What would be useful now, when you feel like you want to hurt yourself?

Supporting each other

It can be very useful to share what you have written with other people, whether it's a woman on your Wing or an officer you trust. It is a way of communicating and of feeling less alone. During my time as a writer-in-residence in a women's prison, we made several booklets of women's writing on themes like *Love; Drugs & Alcohol; Black History Month* and *Surviving Domestic Violence*. These booklets were very popular and they meant a lot to the women who read them. They helped women see that their challenges and difficulties were not unique to them, but part of a much bigger picture of how women are hurt in the world.

I also encourage women to read aloud what they write. Sometimes this is done informally to a few friends and sometimes it can be a formal performance to larger audiences. Women's self-confidence and self-esteem grow when their experiences are witnessed and appreciated.

It can be also be useful, and interesting, to write alongside other people. Some prisons have Creative Writing groups in the Education Department or in the Library with the librarian. It's worth checking out what's available. Alternatively, you could ask if it's possible to run a group on your Wing during

Association, led by an officer with a interest in writing or by one of the women.

Here are some tips for running a group:

- Have one person lead the group – it could be the same woman each time, or those who want to could take turns
- Start with each woman saying something positive, like something good that's happened recently or a happy memory or something she's enjoying about her writing, plus something she would like to get out of the session
- Set a positive tone for the group by agreeing how you'll treat each other, for example keeping confidentiality; not being critical with each other; respecting differences of opinion and experience; that it's OK not to share work if women don't want to (see page 58 for my top tips)
- Think of a theme for a flow-writing exercise (see page 59)
- Choose a poem you like and take it to the group and look at how it's been put together

■ Think of subjects that might be interesting to write about eg. The Sea; A Day Trip; First Love and write each title on a piece of paper. Fold the paper up and put it in a bowl or a box. Each woman picks a piece of paper and writes about the subject that's written on it

■ Or every woman can think of an interesting title and offer it to another woman in the group to write about

■ Allow time for women to share what they have written. Not everyone will want to, but it can be fascinating to see the similarities and differences in women's experiences, especially if you have all written about the same subject

■ Close the group with each woman sharing something, like a highlight or something they've learned or enjoyed from the session, plus one thing they intend to write next.

Sometimes when you write, it brings up painful feelings stored up from the past. There is often a lot of laughter and tears in my workshops and I see that as a positive thing. So many women say that they feel more relaxed and they can think more clearly after they have had a good laugh or a good cry. It's as if you get the feelings out of you and at a distance and this makes them more manageable. I also think that in order to move other people with your writing, you have to be prepared to be moved yourself. The feelings can be a sign that you are being truthful.

If you do feel overwhelmed at any time by the feelings that are coming up as you write, find someone to talk to, whether it is a friend, a Listener, the Safer Custody Officer, a CARATS worker or an officer you trust.

You can also set up a 'listening partnership', which is something I encourage in my workshops. To do this, you choose a partner and you make an agreement to spend time listening to each other without any interruption, advice or comments. How it works is that the pair agree a length of time, say 20 minutes, you divide the time equally and each woman gets to talk about whatever she wants – for example, what she's writing; what's going well with it; what's challenging; how she's feeling.

...

She shares whatever's on her mind and her partner listens without talking about herself or changing the subject, just listening and supporting the other woman to say and show what she needs to.

In order to build trust, everything that's said has to stay confidential. Confidentiality is essential if the 'listening partnership' is going to be a place where both of you can take risks and show where you feel vulnerable. Of course, it's not straightforward to organise the partnership in prison and women sometimes choose a partner from their Wing, so they can meet in the evenings and at weekends. Many women I've worked with have found the 'listening partnership' helpful – they have enjoyed having the time and space to offload thoughts and feelings and to support another woman to do that, too.

I hope you've found some of these ideas useful. There are so many different ways to get into writing and there's a limit to what I can include here. However, there are lots of creative writing books around and I suggest some on page 80. Check what's in the prison library or if the librarian can order some for you. And there's a good magazine called 'Mslexia' which has useful tips and ideas for writing, plus examples of short stories and poetry. You could ask the librarian to take out a subscription.

You may be in a prison that has a writer-in-residence. It's worth checking that out through the Library, or Education Department or the Chaplaincy. And once you're out of prison, there may well be creative writing classes happening near where you are living.

I wish you well with your writing and I hope you, and other people, get a lot from the unique things that you have to share.

Leah

▮ There are words ▮

between free flow and freeze

between free and association

between despair and resignation

between remand and sentence

between request and silence

between pat down and lock down

between sweat box and Reception

between trust and deception

between containment and chaos

between shout and response

between sliver and blood

between a sterile area and love

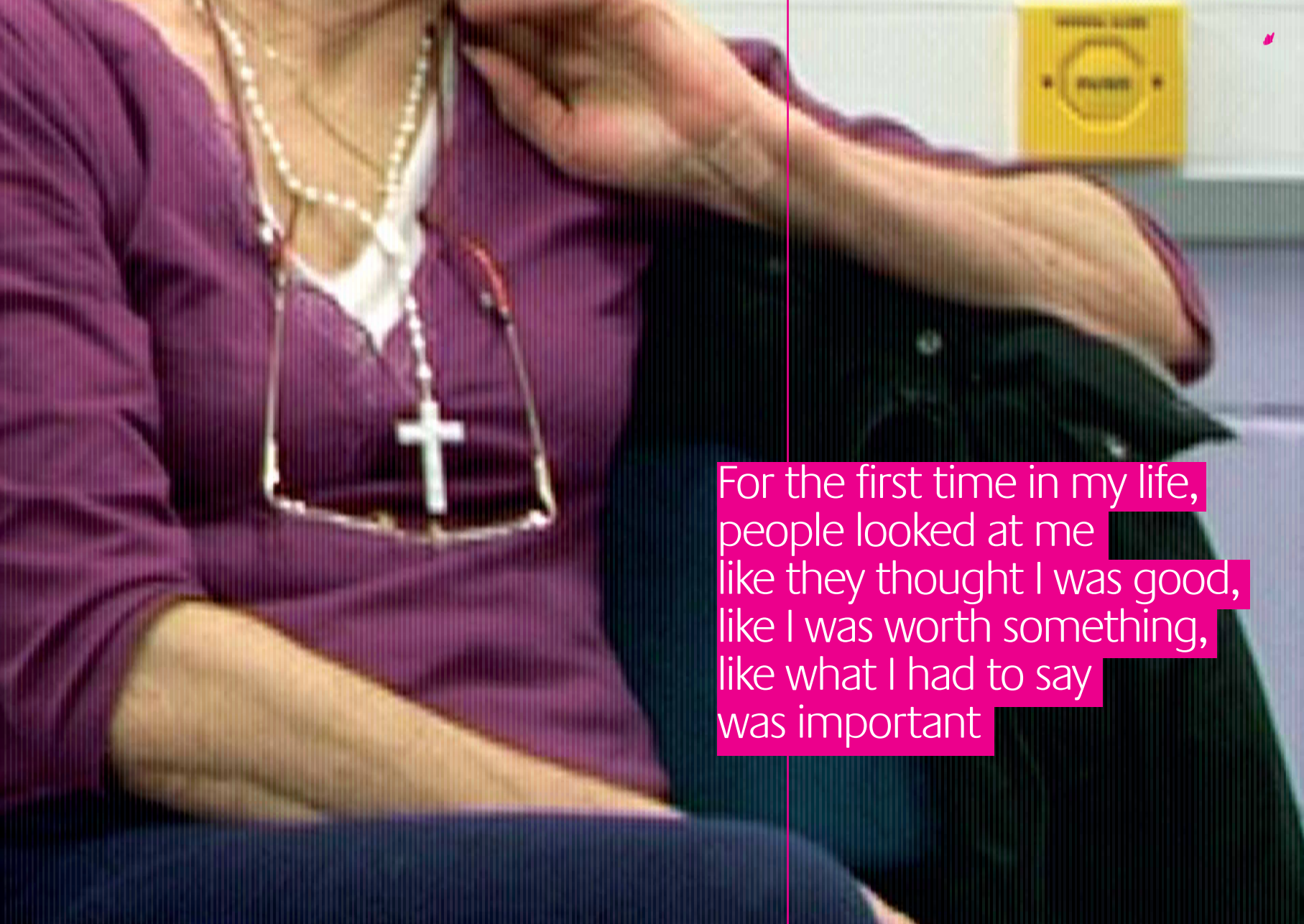
between hub and spur

between her and her and her

there are no words

or there are words

but they are not heard



For the first time in my life,
people looked at me
like they thought I was good,
like I was worth something,
like what I had to say
was important

About self-harm | Georgina Campbell

Self-harm is complicated. There's always at least one reason why a woman self-harms and it is important to understand what that might be. By getting an understanding of why she self-harms, a woman has a better chance to stop hurting herself.

Here are some reasons some women self-harm. If you find things that are true of you in the pages that follow, you might like to show them to an officer, a friend or even members of your family. It could help them get a clearer idea of what's going on for you.

To survive the past

'At the time I began to self-harm, I was looking for a way to get myself clean, as I felt very dirty. My dad had abused me from when I was six and a half.'

For some women, self-harm may seem to be the only way that they have to survive thoughts and feelings that have been pushed down for years. Many women have faced and survived horrific, and sometimes unspeakable, experiences and it can now seem safer to cut themselves off from their emotions. At the beginning of every group session I ran, we would have a 'check-in', where the women could say how they were feeling. Many said that they did not know how they felt, or that they felt nothing, just numb.

For some women, self-harm makes them feel alive. Seeing blood or scars from an act of self-harm is proof that they are still alive, even if they cannot feel it. And many women say that they would prefer to feel the physical pain of self-harm, rather than the mental pain of memories and flashbacks and negative thoughts.

Women talked of feeling isolated and lonely. Isolation can come in many different forms – isolation from feeling like you do not fit in with people, or not knowing your place in the world; isolation because you feel like you are not heard, you are not understood; isolation because you feel you have to hide yourself away, so other people will not judge you negatively. The thought of being locked up at night alone in a cell is enough to make some women feel the need to self-harm.

Some women might have started self-harming once they were taken in to custody – on the outside they do not need it as a way of dealing with feelings.

'Prison makes it worse. I hate being locked up, I feel so alone. Night times, I want to hurt myself.'

For many women, experiences of violence and physical, sexual and emotional abuse have been dismissed by others, ignored, not believed, or trivialised. Some women say that self-

harm is a way of proving to themselves that awful things did happen. Scars that are left behind from self-harm show that horrific things happened, or continue to happen. The scars help them believe it, even if it seems that no one else does.

To relieve anxiety and release anger
'Cut, insert, friction burn, burn, head bang, starve, punch walls, punch myself, pick, cut, tie a ligature, overdose – all to escape the chaos in my head.'

Self-harm can be an almost involuntary response to anxiety and a way to calm it and relieve it. For some women, feelings of anxiety are very intense. Women describe their thoughts as being 'like a bomb waiting to explode'. They describe how difficult it is to quieten their thoughts – their mind is always racing and spinning.

Many women feel that anger is a dangerous emotion to express and, considering their past experiences of abuse and violence, a dangerous emotion to receive. Anger can be associated with being overwhelmed, violent, out of control, scared. For some, self-harm seems like the safest way to release their own anger.

'If I did not do this to myself, I would have hurt someone else.'

It is as if feelings of anger mean they either have to hurt other people or hurt themselves.

There are other ways to express anger. For example:

- Gym staff can design a workout programme for women to release their anger safely. They do this by working one-to-one with women to make sure that they get their physical fury out, without increasing their feelings of anger
- When they are angry, women can be encouraged to talk to others, like friends or Listeners or trusted officers
- Women can write and scribble angry thoughts and words, without censoring and with no judgments, just to get the thoughts out of their head and onto paper. Sometimes it works to rip the paper up and jump up and down on it
- Meditation can be a way of taking charge of negative thoughts and realizing that you do not have to react to the feelings of anger and violence. Breathing deeply can help a woman take a step back and give herself time to ask questions like 'What am I angry about?' or 'Is it worth the potential damage that I could do to myself?' or 'Is there another way to look at this?'

Women can be supported to find safe outlets for anger, such as punching a mattress, rather than a wall; squeezing or cutting fruit; screaming (letting officers know ahead of time that they might do that, so that they do not get into trouble); flicking themselves with rubber bands or holding ice cubes against their wrists.

To feel in control

'I was rejected by my birth and adoptive parents. I wanted a mum to cuddle me and a dad to protect me and anyone to love me unconditionally. I first cut up when I was nine. It was like I had some control.'

In prison, women have very little control over their day-to-day lives and self-harm can be a kind of control. They can decide how, where, when, how much and for how long they self-harm. It can be the only bit of control that they feel they have over themselves, their bodies and their emotions. Self-harm becomes something private, that the prison system can not regulate.

To punish themselves

'During self-harming, I believed all this badness would come out.'

Some women may self-harm in order to cope with and survive intense

feelings of shame connected with their past or present. Others may feel shame over the fact that they use deliberate self-harm, a sense so acute in some that it can fuel the anger, sadness or anxiety that they can only release by using self-harm. They may get into a cycle of feeling bad and then self-harming, which makes them feel bad so they self-harm more. The shame self-harmers feel, and the fear of being judged by others, can leave them isolated and secretive.

Some women, especially those who have been abused, have been made to feel bad, contaminated or evil. They may feel they deserve to be punished and self-harm becomes a way of punishing themselves.

One of the most common problems women express are other people's reactions to self-harm. The women often felt others were judging them, misunderstanding them, not listening to them, hating them, getting frustrated with them. Others might try and stop a woman self-harming by telling her that she is bad or 'mad' for doing it. Even if it is not intentional, these reactions can have a devastating impact on a woman and can create a sense of shame and add to the existing reasons that she might already criticise and hate herself.

To care for themselves

'After cutting, it's the only time I'm kind to myself.'

Self-harm can also appear to give women the opportunity to comfort and care for themselves. Some women said that after they had self-harmed at home, they would be able to dress the wounds and look after themselves, and it would be a chance for them to care for themselves and their injuries – something they did not usually allow themselves to do.

To communicate

'I don't always tell the officers because it makes me feel that little bit better when I hide what I've done. And I don't have to go through the embarrassment of showing a nurse.'

Self-harm can be a form of communication. Sometimes it can be used as a way of punishing other people, as well as influencing other people's behaviour. For example, other people's reactions of disgust or fear can ensure that they will stay away from the woman who is self-harming, which may be exactly what she feels she wants to have happen.

Many women state that they will not ask someone else for help, as they believe asking for help is a sign of weakness, which could lead to them being hurt, mistreated or abused as

they had been in the past. And even if a woman recognises that she needs help, she may feel so discouraged by past rejection that she thinks 'What is the point in asking? No-one will help.' Many women say that they have no idea how to ask for help or how to receive it.

Others can become focused on the fact that a woman is self-harming, forgetting that she is only self-harming for a short time every day, every other day or even every few weeks. It is possible to forget the hundreds of hours during the rest of the time that she is using other coping and survival strategies. It is as if the label 'self-harmer' has become her sole identity in the prison.

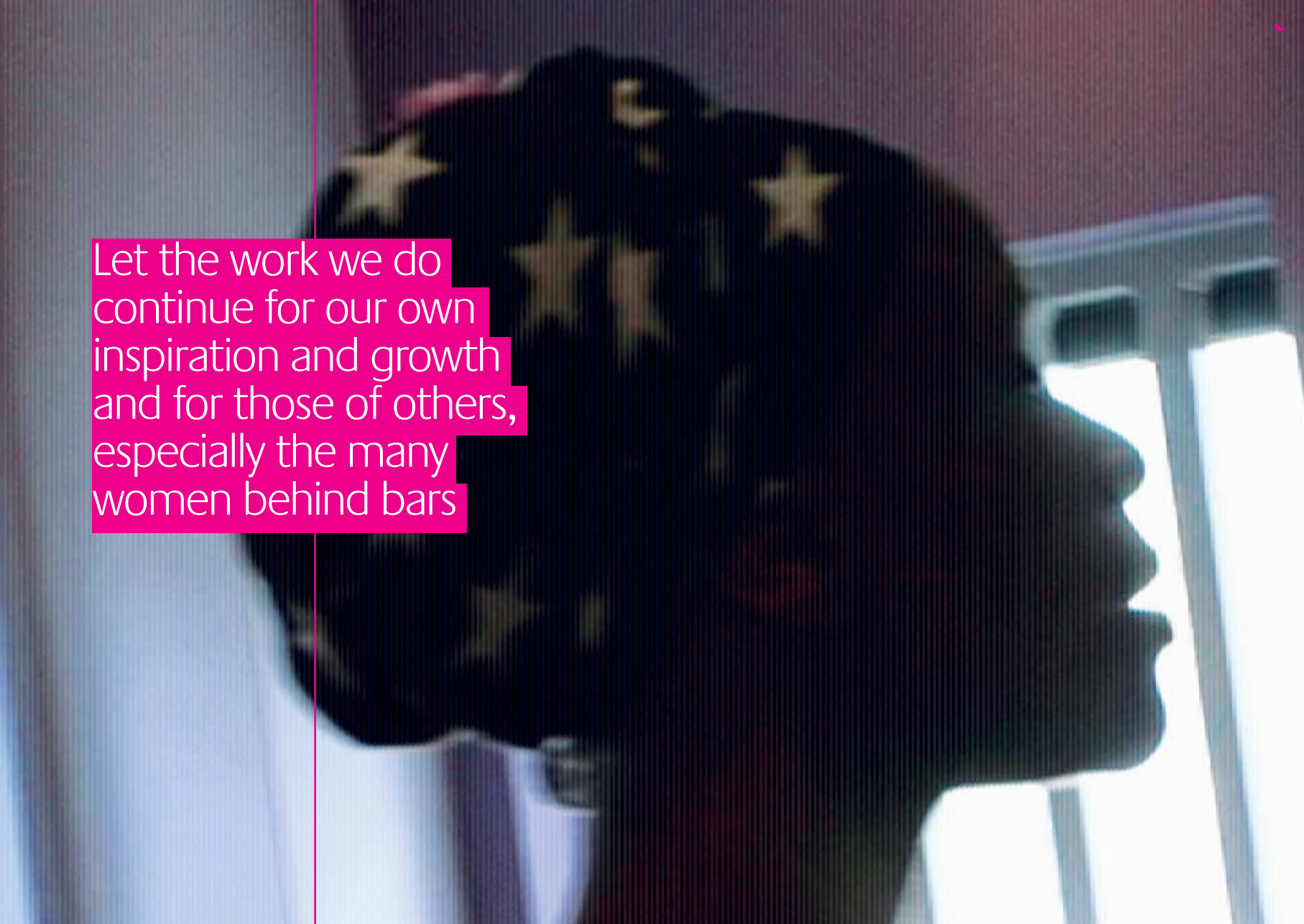
Women who self-harm need to be reminded frequently of their strengths and successes. One reminder we used in the groups was:

'Self-harm is just a small part of who I am. There is so much more to me than just self-harm.'

Self-harm myths and truth

Myth	Truth
Self-harm is an attempted suicide	Women who self-harm are not usually trying to kill themselves. Self-harm is usually used to avoid suicide. It is used to survive, not to die
Women who self-harm are just trying to get attention	Everyone wants, and needs, attention. Even where self-harm is a cry for help or attention, it is not the only reason women self-harm
If the wounds aren't 'bad enough', self-harm isn't serious	Self-harm is always serious, whether the wounds are deep or not
Only teenage girls self-harm	Anyone can self-harm, whatever their age, gender, background or culture
Someone who self-harms can just stop what they're doing, if they really want to	Some women can stop immediately and never self-harm again. But others cannot. Even if they do not want to self-harm, it has become an addiction, a way of surviving, like using alcohol, cigarettes or drugs

Myth	Truth
Women who self-harm have been abused	Some women who self-harm have been abused but not everyone who self-harms was abused. The reasons for self-harm are individual and unique.
Women who self-harm use cutting to do it	Cutting is not the only form of self-harm. Some self-harmers burn, punch, pull their hair. Anything, like relationships and alcohol, can be used as self-harm if a woman uses it with the intention of hurting herself
Once a woman stops self-harming, the problem will go away	Self-harm is a 'symptom'. It is not a cause or the problem. It is a result of underlying issues and a woman who self-harms needs help to face feelings like fear, frustration and anger
Self-harm is the same for every woman	Different women do it for different reasons. And different women use it to fulfill different needs at different times



Let the work we do
continue for our own
inspiration and growth
and for those of others,
especially the many
women behind bars

Appendix 1 | Contributors

Leah Thorn

Leah is a spoken word poet, writing for performance in collaboration with dancers, musicians and film makers. At the heart of her work is the autobiographical exploration of culture and identity.

Leah is also an experienced workshop leader. Her workshops are a fusion of spoken word poetry, autobiographical writing, listening exercises and performance skills. She uses creative writing as a tool for self-exploration, self-expression and empowerment.

For examples of her work visit www.leathorn.com

Georgina Campbell

Georgina studied Psychology at Newcastle University and has worked for charities in Argentina, Colombia and West Africa. She has an MSc in Psychological Research, researching the bonding process between mother and child and how it is interrupted by post-natal depression.

Appendix 2 | Support and information

WISH

WISH supports women through the psychiatric and prison system and offers further support in the community on discharge/release.

Please write or contact them at:

WISH

77 East Road
London N1 6AH

Telephone 020 7017 2828
www.womenatwish.org.uk

Women in Prison

Women in Prison supports and campaigns for women offenders and ex-offenders. The organisation assists women with housing, work, education, mental health, legal rights, benefits, debt, domestic violence and more.

Please write or contact them at:

Women in Prison
Freepost RSLB-UABE-TYRT
Unit 10
The Ivories
Northampton Street
London N1 2HY

Freephone 0800 953 0125
Telephone 020 7359 6674
www.womeninprison.org.uk

Writers in Prison *Network*

The Writers in Prison *Network* places writers in prisons, employing writers who are experienced or established in particular literary fields. Many have been creative writing tutors, or have worked in publishing, as storytellers, in the theatre, television, radio or journalism. The writers are there to enrich the whole prison, available to work with both staff and offenders. They have created a legacy of magazines, anthologies, audio, video and live drama productions and other projects, which have helped project a positive image for the prison.

Writers in Prison *Network* wishes to develop communication channels not only between prison staff and writers, but also between residencies, with other artists and arts organisations working in prisons, and with educational institutions offering arts in prison courses.

www.writersinprisonnetwork.org

Appendix 3 | Further reading

Cathy Birch
Awaken the writer within
How To Books, 2001

Dorothy Brande
Becoming a writer
Papermac

Julia Cameron
The artist's way
Pan Books, 1995

Ann Gawthorpe
**Write your life story
and get it published:
Teach yourself**
Hodder Education, 2010

Margaret Geraghty
The five-minute writer
How to Books, 2009

Natalie Goldberg
**Writing down the bones:
freeing the writer within**
Shambhala Publications, 2005

Maggie Hamand
Creative writing for dummies
John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2009

Jack Heffron
The writer's idea book
Writer's Digest Books, 2000

Tristine Rainer
Your life as story
Tarcher, 1997

Tristine Rainer
The new diary
New Edition, 2004

Myra Schneider & John Killick
Writing for self discovery
Element, 1998

Myra Schneider & John Killick
Writing yourself
Continuum International, 2010

Mslexia magazine
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PO Box 656
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NE99 1PZ

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Cover image: Butterflies©Linda 2007/U-Turn/PhotoVoice, from Change the Picture: a self-advocacy project with vulnerable women

Penny Bennett,
WISH

Georgina Campbell

Josephine Hocking,
Women in Prison magazine

Clive Hopwood and Pauline Bennett,
Writers in Prison *Network*

Philippa Johnston,
The Writer's Compass

Xenia Mason,
Safer Custody Officer

Katie Southall for the use of her poem,
'The Scars On Your Arms'

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the right stuff

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'release'

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