

Voices  
from  
Prison

CLEAN  
BREAK



# Voices from Prison

**Original poems, scenes and short stories about  
Prison Life, Women's Voices, Prison during Covid-19 and Hope.**

Written by women in prison

**CLEAN  
BREAK**

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Designed by Zeta Fitzpatrick

**Dedicated to all the women  
serving sentences in prison  
during the pandemic.**



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## Content warning for self-harm

The pieces in this collection reflect many of the current experiences of women in prison. Some contain distressing content including references to self-harm, infant loss, family separation, drug and alcohol misuse, domestic violence and mental distress. Please read with care.

### Take your time and make your own choices

This book contains 35 pieces that you can read in your own time, whether that is all at once or one by one. You can skip pieces or whole sections if you want to. Remember it is your choice to read them so do what feels right for you.

### Talk to someone

If you find the content of some of the pieces distressing, try speaking to someone you trust or contacting a helpline, we have included a few on the next page.

### Breathe

Breathing is a great way to reduce anxiety and help you feel calm. Try breathing in for four seconds, holding your breath for four seconds, exhaling for four seconds and holding again. Repeat this for as long as you need.

### Find some nature

Trying looking out of the window or going for a walk.

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## Helplines and support

### Agenda

Agenda is a charity for women and girls at risk of abuse, poverty, poor mental health, addiction, homelessness and contact with the criminal justice system.

**weareagenda.org**

0203 883 7792

### Birth Companions

Birth Companions offers practical and emotional support to women before, during and after their baby's birth in prisons across England and in the community in London.

**birthcompanions.org.uk**

020 7117 2824

### Narcotics Anonymous

Narcotics Anonymous is a society of men and women for whom drugs has become a major problem.

**ukna.org**

0300 999 1212

### Samaritans

Samaritans provides emotional support to anyone in distress, struggling to cope, or at risk of suicide.

**samaritans.org**

08457 90 90 90

### Turning Point

Turning Point supports individuals with a learning disability and complex needs. It offers a wide range of health and wellbeing services and works across mental health, learning disability, substance misuse, primary care, the criminal justice system and employment.

**turning-point.co.uk**

### Unlock

Unlock provides a voice and support for people who are facing stigma and obstacles because of their criminal record.

**unlock.org.uk**

### Women in Prison

Women in Prison supports women affected by the criminal justice system and campaigns to end the harm caused to women, their families and our communities by imprisonment.

**womeninprison.org.uk**

020 7359 6674



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# Contents

## 11 Introduction

## 13 Prison Life

- 14 **The Tricks of the Trade** – Heather, HMP Low Newton
- 15 **Time Lapse Mind** – Maria, HMP New Hall
- 16 **Complications of a Nation** – Lisa, HMP Send
- 17 **Frozen in Time** – Zenab, HMP Styal
- 19 **Realization** – Debra, HMP Eastwood Park
- 20 **For my Mam on Mother's Day '21**  
– Charlotte-Blyth, HMP Low Newton
- 21 **A Quiet Space** – Kate, HMP Send
- 22 **A Family in Prison it Comes in Threes**  
– Justine, HMP Low Newton
- 24 **AIN'T THAT THE TRUTH** – Heather, HMP Low Newton
- 26 **Inside These Walls** – Cathy, HMP Styal
- 28 **Askham Grange** – Debbie, HMP Askham Grange
- 29 **Lady of the Manor** – Karine, HMP East Sutton Park
- 31 **Once upon a time** – Katie, HMP Send
- 32 **Books** – Penelope, HMP Eastwood Park
- 33 **Up at Court** – Jenny, HMP Low Newton

## 35 Women's Voices

- 36 **We will not be silenced!** – Sonia, HMP Downview
- 37 **All the King's Horses** – Francesca, HMP Askham Grange
- 40 **When is my light going to shine?** – Ann, HMP Downview
- 42 **Memories** – Wendy, HMP Askham Grange
- 43 **Despair** – Penelope, HMP Eastwood Park
- 44 **For all the mothers like me** – Vusi, HMP Styal
- 45 **It is I** – June, HMP Askham Grange

---

## **47 Prison During Covid**

- 48 In the Shadows Not Yet Seen** – June, HMP Askham Grange
- 50 My journey begins in jail when Covid-19 starts**  
– Michelle, HMP Eastwood Park
- 51 Lockdown in Prison** – Kalie, HMP Eastwood Park
- 52 Just a Shadow** – Jack, HMP New Hall
- 53 My Life in Prison** – Marnie, HMP Eastwood Park
- 55 Prison** – Amy, HMP Low Newton
- 57 Struggles of prison life...And Covid-19...**  
– Jay, HMP Low Newton
- 58 So you thought this was going to be another inspiring story**  
– Mercedes, HMP Eastwood Park

## **59 Hope**

- 60 Hope** – Tab, HMP Send
- 61 Hope means a lot of things** – Wendy, HMP Askham Grange
- 62 Hope** – Lindsey, HMP Eastwood Park
- 64 Them missions got me making the wrong decisions**  
– Simran, HMP Styal
- 65 Covid-19 Hope** – Kathryn, HMP Eastwood Park
- 66 What is Hope?** – Joanne, HMP Low Newton
- 67 Hope is all I have right now** – Lisa, HMP New Hall

## **68 Acknowledgements**

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# Introduction

Clean Break was founded in 1979 by two women prisoners who believed in the power of theatre to change lives. Our vision is of a society where women can realise their full potential, free from criminalisation. We pursue this vision by producing ground-breaking theatre which puts women's voices at its heart and creates lasting change by challenging injustice in and beyond the criminal justice system.

Since Clean Break's beginnings, working with women in prison has been central to our mission. Running arts activities in prison is often tricky - with limited resources, lengthy security procedures and inflexible regimes. Despite this, we know the work has great value for those who participate: increasing confidence and wellbeing, enabling creative expression, offering opportunities and building new skills and strengths. Over the years we have provided workshops, training, writers in residence, touring productions, and created and staged productions with women in prison. One of Clean Break's projects was *Voices from Prison* in 1987. Directed by Ann Mitchell and produced with the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Barbican, each performance text was written by a woman with experience of prison – including Clean Break Members, and women serving sentences.

When the pandemic hit in 2020 Clean Break was working on a National Lottery Heritage Funded project to celebrate and document our 40 year history. Uncovering the original *Voices from Prison* project through our archive we decided this was a timely moment to revive it, to ensure women prisoners experiences during Covid-19 would be documented and heard. During May 2021 we invited women from all 12 prisons in England and Wales to submit poems, short stories and plays about prison life, prison during covid, women's voices and hope. We assembled a panel reflecting Clean Break's community – Clare Barstow (Clean Break Member), Eno Mfon (Clean Break Playwright), Ellie Kendrick (Clean Break Trustee), and Esme Allman

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(Clean Break Participation Associate) – and tasked them with selecting a range of pieces reflecting the breadth of experiences, voices and creativity of women in prison. The pieces you will read in this booklet are emotional, honest and raw; some share a strong sense of anger and frustration at the system, others reflect on the impact of imprisonment on mental health – and there is certainly some humour and optimism in there as well. The pain of the last year in prison is very clear, and care needs to be taken when reading some of the work. We have signalled this in the booklet.

We were not able to include all the pieces we received but we want to thank everyone for participating in the project and we acknowledge each woman's bravery in sharing her words with us. We really hope you value reading the selection included here.

10 of these pieces have been performed by Clean Break Members for a short film which is available via Clean Break's website [www.cleanbreak.org.uk](http://www.cleanbreak.org.uk).

**By Anna Herrmann and Maya Ellis**  
*Joint Artistic Director and Project Coordinator*

The image features a circular, textured background with concentric rings and a central white area containing the text "Prison Life". The overall appearance is that of a stylized, possibly hand-drawn or painted, circular motif. The central white area is irregular and contains the text "Prison Life" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The surrounding area is filled with various shades of gray and black, creating a complex, layered texture. The background is composed of numerous overlapping, irregular shapes and lines, giving it a sense of depth and movement. The overall effect is that of a textured, circular frame or a stylized eye, with the text "Prison Life" positioned in the center.

# Prison Life

## The Tricks of the Trade

by Heather, HMP Low Newton

Milk, sarnies and penguins, a feast to behold.  
I could ask for another if I'm feeling quite bold.  
One fruit or a biscuit is all that's allowed.  
I keep pinching from the counter, I'm feeling quite proud.

We came in as a victim, feel like trash from the bin.  
We're innocents really, devoid of all sin.  
Learning new tricks and skills, more strings to our bow.  
By the time we get out, there'll be nowt we don't know.

We'll all be the wiser, without a shadow of doubt.  
We knew nowt when we came in,  
but we'll know it all going out.

## Time Lapse Mind

by Maria, HMP New Hall

My mind adjusts  
Like eyes to light from darkness  
I sit and contemplate  
a river of pollution and good flows through  
In amongst the weeds and waste  
runs a myriad  
thoughts  
feelings  
emotions  
but no escape  
I deal with this babbling brook as it overflows  
to eventually burst its banks.  
Ever becoming the waterfall...  
Strong  
Immense  
Loud  
tis me  
tis me.  
Veins like rivers through the countryside  
The dam...  
My heart  
my will  
my strength  
tis me  
tis me.  
To overtalk your inner voice  
takes a strong voice indeed.  
Leading your river to flow restful  
and your undertow be calm my dear.

## **Complications of a Nation: The story of a foreign national through the system.**

by Lisa, HMP Send

- Mediation - It didn't work so
- Retaliation - She went berserk. In
- Mitigation - It was said that
- Litigation - filled her with dread. So to prison for
- Rehabilitation - she was sent. Dumbed down with
- Medication - and 'made better by'
- Education - she learnt about
- Repatriation - what no-one explained, was the utter
- Devastation - that was brought about by
- Deportation.

From an abusive relationship - she stuck out in a country, she knew none of the ways or the language. She was isolated, punished. The system didn't catch her. There was no help for her. Now, her head is hung low with shame, she is flown back to a country she no longer knows. Isolated once again.



## Frozen in Time

by Zenab, HMP Styal

So, prison life? 'It's what you make of it really' is the one phrase you will get absolutely tired of hearing. For the journey! You're bundled into the back of the police van, head bowed scrutinized, isolated, labeled and alone.

'It's what you make of it really'?

You arrive at the remand centre. The smell of bleach, unflushed toilets and slept in clothes invades your nostrils. The silent shuffle of the police staffs' footsteps.

By the time you are presented into court and the judge bangs his gavel on the phrase, 'Remanded into custody', by now you have no idea what that means, all you know is now you have formed a lifelong and ever deepening hatred with the colour white. Time stops. Frozen.

You arrive in an alien place, little like the first day in secondary school surrounded by hundreds of other women. You are unable to think of anything but how your poor ears feel exposed to the high sound frequencies. If you thought children are loud, think again.

As time goes on you start to forget how to open, close and lock your own doors. Sometimes I find myself waiting in front of a toilet door. Seriously!

But, 'it's what you make of it really.'

The place where you have to live is named the wing. Wing? They're for flights aren't they? One of the ways of freedom, but we're locked up in prison. It's 'wing' though, singular like one wing has been cut off, struggling for survival. I have learnt a lot.

I really had no idea a 'sanitary' towel could have so many uses, seriously you might frown but they're used as window blackouts, floor polishers, sound mufflers, bandages, the list is endless. I will never use a sani pad for just one thing.

I have to mention the food here too. Daily dosage of soggy veg, 3 portions of carbohydrates, chapatis the size of buns. I finished my first chapati in one flat bite, then had the curry with a spoon!!!

Time becomes connected to you in more ways than one. Come out of the shower on time! Get your lunch on time! Everything is so timed you have to time yourself on the loo. Definitely doing 'time', that's for sure. There's no clock in your room, and what on earth does a watch look like, and yet you're doing time! Bath? Shower? No difference in prison really. As your lifelong ever present enemy time will never leave.

Electrical appliances and water have minds of their own. If you don't like watching programmes on repeat, tough! Get used to it! Coz it's what you make of it!

## Realization

by Debra, HMP Eastwood Park

Take her down  
the cuffs are on  
the walk of shame  
until they're gone

The bare cell walls  
the wooden bench  
pitiful looks  
the sterile stench

They call this the sweatbox  
and confined in here I know why  
I sob my way to prison  
no chance to say goodbye

I'm in the system now  
I have a number  
scared to death  
can't afford to slumber

Slowly I'm recovering  
and I'm learning my strengths  
I have new skills  
and will live through my stretch

Never again will I be naïve  
not let a man abuse my trust  
getting things in perspective  
live for me not love or lust

## For my Mam on Mother's Day '21

by Charlotte-Blyth, HMP Low Newton

Well I never thought I'd spend today like this,  
Mother's Day without a hug or kiss.

It's just not right, not fair or okay  
and the day we both dream about seems so far away.

But don't you worry the day is soon to come,  
the day that I'm reunited, with you, my mum.

For now the letters you receive in the mail,  
the ones I send you from Durham jail

They will have to do for in the meantime,  
like the one you'll get when you read this rhyme.

The reason I wrote this poem was to say,  
I love you,  
Happy Mother's Day

## A Quiet Space

by Kate, HMP Send

Someone's banging on their door  
Someone's ringing their bell  
Do me a favour  
Open their door  
Take 'em to the bin\*

See the thing I miss most is peace  
I try being awake at night  
Early hours when the noise may cease  
There is no escape  
From the chaos these walls hold  
There is no escape  
From hearing others' dramas unfold.

'Assistance required'  
'Code red', 'code blue'  
Staff putting out fires  
Literally and metaphorically too

Please grant me some peace  
A quiet space to think my thoughts  
To let me heal  
To let me mend  
To consider my future in a world less fraught

\* bin: seg/the block/separation & care - where the really naughty ones go.

## A Family in Prison it Comes in Threes

by Justine, HMP Low Newton

*A play*

**ELLA** Come on it's association time, Bingo tonight, if we win, a Cadbury's Dairy Milk that's a pound.

**PAT** It's gambling though and we've an addiction on outside.

**SHARON** Well you can count me in, nothing else going on.

**ELLA** You'll get addicted to chocolate, but that's alright.

**PAT** Aye, you can worry about your weight later.

**SHARON** Remember when I worked at that arcade years ago. I was a Bingo caller, and you used to come in and you won prizes, sets of pans, or a clock.

**PAT** That's how I started gambling through playing the Bingo, now it's horses, roulette, bandits and Bingo. It all started through going to Bingo Club with Mum.

**ELLA** What was he like your Dad? Always grumbling when I went to Bingo. He didn't grumble that night when I won though and I gave him some.

**SHARON** Oh I know it was funny that, Dad asked the usual 'have you won anything'? And Mum said no, and he said told you it's a waste of money, and you went over to him and said is it, and threw a thousand pounds all over him.

**ELLA** Oh yes he was like cat with cream, he got best steak from butcher's. I made him a lovely meal, those were the days, mind you not long after he would grumble over my smoking, or perfume smelling. I once placed five cigarettes in my mouth not lit though, to shock him.

**ELLA** I think we should have Bingo every week now, especially after this lockdown business, it would be something to look forward to.

**PAT** Well I don't mind, I'd like to run a Prison's Got Talent competition too, for prizes, it would go down well.

**ELLA** We could have singers, comedians, magicians, like Tommy Cooper, oh mind you no bottles or glass, haha.

**SHARON** There should be stuff like this, especially for long termers, there's not enough stuff to do in prison, we are punished already, but these things would work, and inmates wouldn't be as bad with mental health.

**ELLA** I've visited a psychiatric hospital, our Sean was put in years ago. When you was in Iran, well when it was called Persia, then, when Shah was on throne. It was like One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, only this was really happening.

**PAT** I know, a patient asked me for a light and he was an arsonist, and the staff said don't give him anything, and he was took away from us. I know I'm laughing, but it was funny in there.

**ELLA** Remember that woman who asked us if we would like some tea, and she kept lifting her skirt up showing her underwear. It's a shame that's mental health, poor thing, they are helpless too.

**PAT** Come on then it's Bingo, and it's my turn to win tonight. I'm feeling lucky, or am I not beating my addiction do you think eh?

## AIN'T THAT THE TRUTH

by Heather, HMP Low Newton

YOU COME THROUGH THE GATES  
AND YOU HEAR THAT LAST CLICK  
YOU SEE ALL THE BARS  
IT MAKES YOU FEEL SICK

YOU GET TO RECEPTION  
THEY TAKE YOUR DETAILS  
YOU'RE SITTING THERE SHAKING  
AND BITING YOUR NAILS

THEY GIVE YOU A FOB CARD  
WITH NUMBER AND NAME  
THAT'S WHEN YOU REALISE  
THIS ISN'T A GAME

YOU'RE GIVEN A ROOM  
A BED AND SOME BARS  
AND IF YOU'RE REAL LUCKY  
YOU MAY SEE THE STARS

YOU'RE LIVING YOUR LIFE  
IN A 4 BY 4 CELL  
WHAT HAVE YOU DONE  
TO BE LIVING THIS HELL

IF YOU DO THE CRIME  
YOU MUST DO THE TIME  
THAT'S WHAT THE LAW SAYS  
SO YOU COUNT OFF THE DAYS



WE'VE ALL BROKEN THE LAW  
THERE'S A PRICE TO BE PAID  
THE JUDGE PASSED THE SENTENCE  
HIS DECISION WAS MADE

SOME OF US KNOW THAT  
IN HELL WE WILL BURN  
BUT IF YOU'VE GOT BRAINS  
YOU'LL NEVER RETURN

## CONTENT WARNING FOR SELF-HARM

## Inside these Walls

by Cathy, HMP Styal

Every day is the same, same shit just a different day  
Inside these walls, yet again we are isolating  
Covid-19 has a lot to answer for  
Inside these walls, struggling inside my head  
So much stuff going on, I try to distract myself  
Inside these walls, tears of pain, tears of trauma  
Emotionally pain, inside these walls  
It gets too much the flashbacks  
The pictures in my mind, like a video playing  
Inside these walls, punishing myself, I deserve it  
Self-harm is the answer, getting the razor  
Summit compels me to do it, inside these walls  
Tiredness consumes me  
Exhausted trying to do different things not to self-harm  
Knitting, art, writing inside these walls  
But my head feels like it is going to explode  
So I take a razor, I try to cut deep, but I can't do it  
I feel the pain, the redness of the blood  
Inside these walls, on an Acct off an Acct it never ends  
Why can't I stop, coz it's an addiction  
I'm addicted to destroying myself, my own mother destroyed me  
Now I'm doing it to myself, inside these walls  
My anger is like a red mist, making me not recognise myself  
My therapy is helping, inside these walls  
Life is too much in here  
But I'm scared to go outside in the real world  
Coz of my self-destructive behaviour  
Inside these walls, this jail is shit but I feel safe  
There's no drink, I can't overdose, I am getting the help that I need  
I want to kill myself, but I also want to live inside these walls  
Then one day I have a letter from the Koestler Arts

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Saying my art and poem is going to be in a gallery  
Inside these walls, I was gob smacked and happy  
Also thankful that god and my guardian angel had shown me a sign  
To keep on going, not to give up and that my writing and my art is a gift,  
Inside these walls  
I still struggle, I still self-harm but I try to talk how I feel  
Not to destroy myself there is hope  
It's just sometimes hard to find the light in the darkness  
But don't ever give up there is always hope  
INSIDE THESE WALLS

## Askham Grange

by Debbie, HMP Askham Grange

The cherry Blossom budding upon the tree  
To the wonderful delight of the Bumble Bee.  
The apple blossom floating down to the ground,  
As the bushy-tailed squirrels run playfully around.

I see a pheasant, a grouse and a bunny rabbit hop.  
I smell delicious aromas from Fairbairn's coffee shop.  
The grass a lush green and the sky summer blue,  
A day in Askham Grange just starting anew.

Residents going to work, house cleaning to be done  
As the day begins under the warm summer sun.  
The ducks walk around and there's crows in the trees.  
The wind fingers lightly the leaves in its breeze.

# Lady of the Manor

by Karine, HMP East Sutton Park

It's early morning. My first morning in the Manor.  
I open the curtain into a staggering panoramic view across  
the countryside.

Breathtakingly uninterrupted view from my enormous window into  
a perfect English countryside and all the way down to the Channel.  
Whether it is the pristine clean air or the dazzling autumn sunrise, or the  
audaciously unrestricted display of freedom that bring tears to my eyes.

The Manor rooster crows finally. "Ha! I beat you, old boy!" No matter  
how late or hectic my night was, an alarm clock is surplus to my  
requirement. Having lost with me, the rooster is adamant to wake the  
entire community.

My companion grumbles over the rooster's enthusiasm, or more  
likely, my antisocially early morning custom, then drowns back into  
slumber trance. I quietly retreat outside. Stepping down to the regal  
staircase with stunning centuries-old oak panels and intricate wood  
carvings, savouring every detail of the gorgeousness, feeling myself  
like a lady!

The coffee, I was told, can be found in the Butler's, a fair distance  
away: down the stairs, then up the stairs and down again...I am lost  
in this labyrinth of history and utter beauty, welcoming for once my  
topographic idiocy and loving every step towards my much desired  
coffee fix. A room service or even a 'butler' would definitely fit in  
perfectly here.

The uniformed gate attendant, John, salutes me back. Enquiringly  
watching the new resident, oddly early riser! I enter the ever more  
stunning drawing room, trying not to splash my coffee on the carpet.  
The centuries old past is so well preserved here that I can not only

observe it but also smell it. I wish I took my history at school more seriously. What do I know about Jacobean era? Zilch! I must find some information about the Manor and the flamboyant Lord of the Manor who so lovingly and tastefully created his magnificent home. What happened to him and his heirs and how did his grand boudoir become the temporary bedroom of the likes of me?

Fresh newspapers laid neatly on the table. An almost forgotten pleasure of touching and smelling the fresh newspaper mixed with coffee aroma, what a life! The headlines screaming “Covid this...”, “...number of deaths that...” “Stop! Sod off you all. I am safe here. No Covid may enter my castle and it will vanish by the time I leave this palatial sanctuary, sure thing.” Alright, life will never be the same for me or for anybody for that matter. Positively different for me. Better, for many reasons, when I eventually depart the Manor for good. For good!

John’s deep military voice interrupts my thoughts. “Miss, it’s nearly time. You ought to be in your room for a roll check.”

Roll what? Oh, yes of course, it’s a morning roll check, like in every prison. Despite deceptive glamorous ambience, smell of real coffee, fresh newspapers, endless green fields and far reaching view, uninterrupted by bars and barbed wire, in reality, I am still a prisoner and not quite the ‘lady of the manor’. So, I step off the dream and step back onto the regal staircase and back to the room where my pad-mate is dreaming her own dreams, loudly snoring.

## Once upon a time

by Katie, HMP Send

Once upon a time there was a girl.  
She could have had everything, any diamond or pearl.  
Instead she chose a big white rock,  
not knowing she'd be standing in a dock.  
She would do anything for a pipe,  
her innocence was taken when it was perfectly ripe.  
Not knowing what she was getting into,  
there's nothing that this girl wouldn't do.  
Who would have thought she would end up this way,  
chasing the buzz every single day.  
Crying herself to sleep every night.  
Looking in the mirror and getting a fright.  
Hating herself for the things she would do,  
crying, telling the rock that they are through.  
It took prison to learn her lesson,  
prison's not a curse it's her blessing.  
Without it she would be dead.  
She couldn't escape from her head.  
She's taken the plunge and is finally free.  
Once upon a time, that little girl was me.

## Books

by Penelope, HMP Eastwood Park

Maslo says the basic needs for civilisation to take root are security, food and water. In prison there is a fourth element access to books.

A book opens a door onto a path that can lead anywhere, knowledge, self knowledge, joy, sorrow and escape. Sorrow expressed in a book allows one to shed your own grief for a time; a priceless gift.



## Up at Court

by Jenny, HMP Low Newton

Up at court, the gavel comes down  
The sentence passed, I start to frown  
It's my fault, I did the crime  
Now I begin to do my time  
As I'm led downstairs to wait  
To be taken to my fate  
Low Newton, HMP  
For two years, it's where I'll be  
Led along to my cell  
My only contact is the bell  
The Guard comes past to check the door  
Another arrives to check it more  
As I lay in my bed and drift off to sleep  
My punishment I begin to reap  
Behind my door, twenty three hours straight  
I look forward to the date  
I've been punished for my crime  
And the door is opened the final time

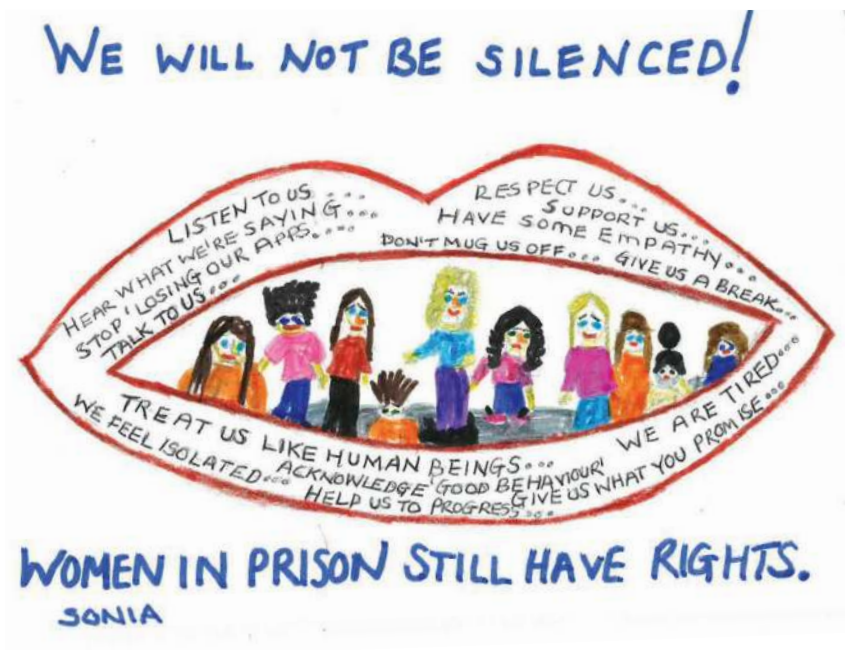




# Women's Voices

## We will not be silenced!

by Sonia, HMP Downview



# All the King's Horses

by Francesca, HMP Askham Grange

Fuck the patriarchy  
Isn't that what they say?  
Marching  
Over-arching  
To get our voices heard  
Hush now women  
Don't be absurd  
Women marching like it's 1912  
When it's actually 2021  
Votes for Women  
Or have we forgotten that one?  
Feminist  
Dyke  
Rebel  
Cause  
How long do we keep our revolution  
On pause?  
Quiet down ladies  
Don't cause a scene  
Let the men talk  
Make law  
Break more  
A bore  
All that you are  
All that you stand for  
Your values  
Your worth  
Fill your mouths with their words  
As they push you in the dirt.  
Whore  
Tease  
You're only here to please  
Pleasure  
Measure

Your arse  
Your tits  
Let us ogle  
Let us grapple  
At all your womanly bits  
Pankhurst nation  
Abject deflation.  
No.  
Anarchy  
Rise up  
Speak up  
Hitch up  
And fight  
Your rights  
Your safety  
Your worth  
And liberty  
Let no man gag you  
Or grab you  
Tell you, you can't  
You must  
Silence your sounds  
Push back  
Fuck that  
Take down the system  
The oppression  
The obsession  
That women are less  
And men are more  
Equality. Justice. Truth  
Are the things we fight for  
Decency. Not degradation  
In this, a new era  
A women's nation  
New found occupation  
Instigator not influencer  
Or peaceful protest  
Filled with fire

With fight  
For what is right  
For suffrage  
For suffering  
Let the new dawn begin.

In honour of all the women who have cruelly and unjustly lost their lives  
at the hands of men and for all the women who fight the injustice and  
inequality that remains.

## CONTENT WARNING FOR ABUSE

## When is my light going to shine?

by Ann, HMP Downview

From the time I've known myself, there's always been a darkness over me, around me, underneath me, in front of me and behind me.

I can only tell you the truth, how I can connect, sense and feel from those who have been down the same path as myself.

You have a voice that no one wants to hear.  
You can shout, yell and scream all you want.  
NO ONE is listening, NO ONE cares.  
Yes the truth hurts - CONFUSED.

All what's happening, you have the sense of hiding it all. Being called names, how useless you are, how worthless you are, how ugly you are, NOBODY likes you, NO ONE will ever love you - REFUSED.

I was only a child, what did I do to deserve this? If it's not mentally, then physically, and after that it's WORSE. BAD.

You get beaten until there's no tears left, your skin, becomes so tough that you feel NOTHING. Your heart is ripped out, you feel empty, your eyes lose their smile and soul. It gets to a point where you wish you were dead - ABUSED.



The scars will never go away, these scars  
will never heal. It's a feeling that troubles  
your heart, troubles your mind, troubles you  
itself, until you become the TROUBLE - USED.

Most of us are weak, as we let the devils  
and evils take over our lives.  
But you can stand strong and speak for  
The weak, because we know, we've been there  
Done it and past it

Only thing to hang on to -

WHEN IS MY LIGHT GOING TO SHINE?

## Memories

by Wendy, HMP Askham Grange

I feel sooo sad, I wanna cry,  
I'm asking myself, why oh why,  
Am I feeling my life is done, wanna die?

Partner, and I, kids, made four,  
Our lives were, so, evermore,  
But to me, it all, became, a bore,  
So, I go raving, partying, galore.

Mixed up in drugs, and many, affairs,  
Roaming around, without any cares,  
Off my head, thinking, nothing compares  
To the drink, the drugs, the illicit, affairs

Never was it any of my fault,  
Always blaming others, and then, I bolt,  
To all the wounds, who, cast the salt,  
But yeah, it was I, 100%, all my fault,

I will never get back, what I once had,  
Which will carry on, making me sad  
But there are things, that make me happy, glad,  
Which are all the memories, of what, I once had.

## Despair

by Penelope, HMP Eastwood Park

Despair is not a feeling, it's a wave  
Appearing from an otherwise tranquil sea  
It comes robbing you of breath, self worth  
and hope. Sometimes a single wave, other  
times wave after wave. But always it  
passes, eventually, an eternity later. The  
numbness passes gradually you fill up with  
the everyday. The sea is calm.

## For all the mothers like me

by Vusi, HMP Styal

For all mothers who like me have lost a child and feel pain that never goes and being behind bars with time weighing like a devotion to a memory.

One day the earth will fill my mouth and eat my cries and my child and I will be surrounded with love --- once again.

### My Story

She didn't look up she turned her head  
to see her baby on the ground with his  
face pale between the folds of the blanket.  
He'd kicked his tiny foot out, his toes  
all in a line like new peas in a pod.  
Because she couldn't hold her son in her  
arms she tried to hold him with her  
eyes and she willed him to be quiet to  
be SAVED.

To my son, James

## It is I

by June, HMP Askham Grange

It is I  
Do you see me?  
It is I  
Do you hear me?  
It is I  
Do you feel me?  
It is I  
Do you value me?  
It is I  
Do you care for me?  
It is I  
Do you understand me?  
It is I  
Do you love me?  
It is I  
Do you know me?  
It is I  
Glance in a mirror  
You will see  
It is I





# Prison during Covid

## In the Shadows Not Yet Seen

by June, HMP Askham Grange

In the shadows not yet seen  
I see you wonder  
I see you stare at the TV  
I see you turn the radio up  
Listening, watching, waiting  
Information received  
But not understood or believed  
The world held their breath  
It's a mistake  
Just an isolated case  
It's not that bad you say  
I have the flu jab  
I'm protected you say  
A lot of fuss for nothing  
You tell family and friends  
A mountain being made from a molehill  
Nothing to fear  
I see you carry on  
Shopping, meeting friends  
Having family around  
Ignoring the signs  
You do your own thing  
Not get swept away by society  
But soon a close one caught Covid  
Thought they were protected  
Yet didn't wear a mask  
It's not for me they said  
Didn't disinfect surfaces  
Or wash hands regularly  
It not make a difference they said  
Spreading Covid one to another  
Some have symptoms many not  
So invisible to others  
Yet life changing too



Now I see you realize  
Your selfish ways  
Impacted on many  
Now I see you frightened  
Now I see you panic  
Now I see you cry  
When a loved one dies  
I see you thinking why me  
All I can say is  
Be aware, the signs were there  
You thought you're immune  
But I'm a virus, I can mutate  
I don't discriminate  
A choice you must make  
In the shadows not yet seen  
I'm Covid  
Ready to take control  
So don't hesitate  
To change your ways  
Don't ignore any more  
For I'm in the shadows not yet seen.

CONTENT WARNING FOR SELF-HARM

## My journey begins in jail when Covid-19 starts

by Michelle, HMP Eastwood Park

My journey begins in jail when Covid-19 starts in March 2020. The jail had to change, shielding wing was formed, the biggest wing in the jail, 109 women. Anyway I was fine but then started to feel ill, tired, being sick, losing weight, loss of appetite. But then the worst came, I found a lump in my right breast! I didn't say anything for a while! But then it took all my will to say something. Anyway, four weeks later I went hospital, while there they did a mammogram, but straight after came the worst part, a biopsy. Soon as they did all this I knew myself it wasn't good. One week later two days before my b'day, [REDACTED], I went back to the hospital and my worst fears were confirmed. I had stage three aggressive breast cancer! I was devastated, didn't want to cry, didn't want to speak, how was I going to cope. In jail with cancer everything taken out of my control. I had a big journey ahead of me, could I do this or not!

My eldest son was in Stocken jail at the time and breaking this to him on the phone was gonna be hard trust me, but everything was put in place on their side!

Everything was out of my control. My hospital appointments, my treatment, my rights that I had to fight for to be put in place. In jail at the same time. Not being able to do nothing being so weak. Having to rely on prisoners! And have some say that I was lying that I had cancer. Yes I did try to kill myself, but some people are small minded but then when they saw me deteriorate they wanted to know but my reply - no thanks!

I couldn't have my two boys by my side just officers. It hurt.

But 1 year later I'm in remission and getting on with it. I would like to say thank you to officers on Res6/Res5 for their support! God Bless =)

## Lockdown in Prison

by Kalie, HMP Eastwood Park

The Covid restrictions are hard for everyone out there,  
But lockdown in prison is a real nightmare.  
23 hours a day locked up in your cell,  
The prison regime is now a living hell.  
There's no education, and jobs are few,  
Sat in your pad with nothing to do.  
It's purple visits now to see your loved ones.  
Lack of physical contact breaking down bonds.  
Keeping in contact with letters and by phone,  
Anything just not to feel so alone.  
I know prison aint meant to be fun,  
Half an hour or so outside just to see the sun.  
There's only so much reading and colouring you can do,  
Or watching TV and having a brew.  
Prisoners' mental health is getting worse,  
Waiting weeks just to see a doctor or nurse.  
Constant jangling of keys is getting too much to bear,  
Feeling so down and bored I could pull out my hair.  
I hate always feeling so down, wearing a constant frown.  
Counting down the days till I am free,  
To finally get back to normal and feeling more like me.

## Just a Shadow

by Jack, HMP New Hall

A story of life as a prisoner in lockdown

I am nothing but a shadow  
I am a shadow in the darkness of winter  
I am a shadow in the darkness of summer  
I am a shadow in the darkness of my mind.

I am a shadow at my parents' table  
I am a shadow at the bar in my local  
I am a shadow at my desk in the office  
I am a shadow online on social media.

Am I real?  
Am I really living this life?  
Am I real to my friends and family  
so far away?

Where did I lose myself?  
When did my hope, faith and courage leave me?  
How do I find myself.  
In the darkness of my life?

I am an empty void  
I am a human, but not a being  
I am a dark shape, stumbling  
I am just a shadow of my former self.

## CONTENT WARNING FOR SELF-HARM

## My Life in Prison

by Marnie, HMP Eastwood Park

So since I was young I was getting into trouble with the police. Then on the [REDACTED] I was produced in court via video link. The judge declared for me to be remanded in custody. I really didn't expect to be coming to prison. My mental health started to deteriorate, due to my separation anxiety and other mental health issues. When I arrived in HMP Eastwood Park I couldn't control myself from crying as I knew it was going to be a while before I would be back with my family again. For the first 7 days I felt so down and depressed as I couldn't speak to any of my friends or family and due to Covid-19 I couldn't socialize with anyone either. I didn't eat or sleep because I was so distraught, I have previously been a self-harm user and due to feeling so alone I started to self-harm again. I didn't trust professionals so felt I had no one to talk to. Being locked in a cell the size of a toilet room, so a room with a toilet and sink only, for 23 hours a day, staring at the same four walls day in day out is driving me insane. The officers would say that if you're feeling down and depressed that you can always speak to them about your problems, but every time I have done this they always say they are busy and they will come back but never do. We get 30-45-60 minutes a day to go out in the yard to socialize and get fresh air, but in that time you have to also have a shower and do anything you need to do in that time such as clean your cell. Prison life is 10x harder due to the Coronavirus, but even then prison is an awful place. There is officers who take their problems out on you, who treats you different as if you are not human. There has been a lot of times where we haven't been allowed to shower for 3 days which is so unhygienic especially if you're sharing with someone. There's been times where the officers have forgotten to let me out for dinner and when they finally come to answer my bell the food would be all gone and they would go to get a microwave meal and it wasn't anything I liked, so I would tell them and their reply would be you get what you are given if you don't like it then throw it away and wait until tea. Being in prison has an effect on your life, once you have been released due to employees not taking you on and people despising you because they see you in the

paper. It can ruin your whole career. There is a lack of toiletries including tampons and pads. They say they help you to live a stable life but my experience in prison has been nothing but a disaster. It's my first and last time in prison and I feel for every person that has to go through this.

# Prison

by Amy, HMP Low Newton

Prison, a place full of character, full of opinions, a place people come when in need, a cry for help. A place filled with mental health, women and men in need of help, and not all receiving the help they need. Mental health is becoming a massive problem, especially throughout the lockdown period, it is not to be underestimated, or ignored, it won't just go away on its own, it's suffocating you, like a jungle python wrapped around your air pipe. Mental health has spiked, extremely.

23 excruciatingly painful hours, locked in an 8x8 cell, with nothing but a TV, with poor signal, as entertainment. Repeating a mantra of 'I'm not alone', 'I'm not the only one,' through your mind.

The silence is deafening, but so is the noise. The 'Slam, Bang, Crash' of the gates closing and locking. The jingle of the keys you can hear, but cannot touch. My thoughts plead to be let out, but barely a word comes out my mouth.

The hour of exercise is barely enough. It's boring, it's deteriorating, it's messed up beyond words. The 'knock, knock, knock' of your neighbour's fist pounding the wall, to make sure you're alright, reminding you you're not on your own.

The laughs, the giggles, the chatter from window to window, rattling the wings' exterior. Family support, mental health team, drug and alcohol team, and peers, all here when you are in need, of anything. 'I'm not alone', 'I'm never alone', 'I don't feel alone', repeating round my head louder than the speakers at Glastonbury!

"Are you okay?" (Knock, knock, knock) "I'm fine, thank you." Those 3 little words, 'Are you okay?' bring a smile to my face, and mean so much. But are you ever actually okay?

I stare at the clouded window, at the bars between  
each slim pane, read all the names written in pen,  
some carved in the plastic of the window.

I turn and read the names written on the door, on the  
wardrobe, and the walls.

So many people.

I wonder what they are doing now?

Imagine they have amazing lives. That's what I aspire  
to have. An amazing life. Beyond these 4 painful looking  
walls, that have housed so many people, beyond the razor  
wired fences, and beyond this prison.



CONTENT WARNING FOR SELF-HARM

## Struggles of prison life... And Covid-19... Locked Up & Locked Down

by Jay, HMP Low Newton

Some say it's wrong, some say it's right,  
It's not the end of the world, it just helps to win their fight,  
I know it's a way of coping, some say it even feels nice,  
Just a way to express and cope with the jail lockdown life.

Some say it helps them to feel,  
Anything to help them mentally deal,  
It's like opening your favourite sweets and breaking that new seal,  
It's like a release that allows their emotions to heal,  
I don't know it myself personally but either way this shit's real!

Some don't do it because it hurts too much,  
But something's going on and it can't be easy feeling as such,  
Another fucking feeling...but this one's sharp to the touch...  
An escape from those feelings...but one that'll leave you with cuts!

Some may think they're not a pleasant sight,  
Well, that's their opinion and everyone's entitled to that...right?  
But to you the scars are a reminder,  
you've got through the worst of the fight,  
Now it's time to move on with your life, in a first class flight...

Straight out of HMP on your own two feet,  
Boarding pass, baggage and safely seat-belted to your seat,  
Where you'll see all the exits are clear, so just sit tight,  
Because in the end you'll realise you've dealt with a lot of shite,  
And once you get beyond those gates you're going to be perfectly alright!

## So you thought this was going to be another inspiring story

by Mercedes, HMP Eastwood Park

So you thought this was going to  
be another inspiring story  
it will be just not as one expected  
sit back discover be ready to  
uncover  
Keys clanging  
doors banging  
locks turning  
101 questions burning  
inmates screaming  
I'm NO longer gleaming  
23 hour bang up  
WASSSUP?  
another long day  
with zero jobs to pay  
I will be the one to get this  
story told  
Is this the end?

Hmm maybe it's time to  
MEND



**Hope**

## HOPE

by Tab, HMP Send

It's never too late people say,

You've got loads of time.

But have I?

Have I got time to make up to

My children? All the pain I've

Caused them? Will they love me?

Come to me? Will they even need

Me? Forgive me?

What will I do with myself on my

release? I will constantly be in

recovery. I'm 54 my body hurts

I know it's all the self abuse, alcohol,

drugs, maybe all the DV is an

added factor. Or is this just how it's

meant to be, a 54 year old body? I'm

getting on. Thirty years left, twenty of

them managing, ten might be harder.

People say, "You're never too old", too old to what?

Dance, be famous, have sex, earn money, be

rich, be a household name, have me own business.

A gardener, a potter on the side, making money

saving, living, not just existing anymore.

I have a bucket list. I want to ride a horse, build a

house, own a house. HA! Travel, learn how to drive

meet the one, marry the one Ha-Ha-Ha! Find some

friends (what are they?) Who knows? I can only hope

I have passion and drive. I'm alive. I smile

and laugh. I get angry, only with myself

And I strive I live in HOPE!

---

# Hope

by Wendy, HMP Askham Grange

Hope means a lot of things, hope he's  
good when he sings, hope he's good at chess  
and steals the Kings, hope he's coming  
as something good, he always brings...

Hope can be like a wish, my wish so  
hopes, she buys the china dish, I wish,  
and hope, it's my favourite fish, wish,  
and hope, the babies named Trish...

Hope in prayer is also used, forgive  
and hope, they're not accused, give help,  
and hope, for those confused, give hope,  
and guidance, for those abused

Hope is special in what it sends, it  
gives us faith, as it mends, as long as  
you believe in hope, then, it depends, as  
Hold On Pain Ends, is the best hope you  
can comprehend.

## Hope

by Lindsey, HMP Eastwood Park

I was managing to cope every day,  
that was until Covid came out to play,  
It's been a year now of near total lockdown,  
I always seem to bear a frown.  
It took me months to build up strength,  
I packed lots of coping skills into that length.  
Being away from home is punishment enough,  
that in itself is the definition of tough.  
I'm paranoid, depressed, anxious and glum,  
this is no life, not an ounce of fun.  
I'm holding on to a tiny fraction of hope,  
that is in my little scope.  
We're easing out but it's hard to see,  
I feel like people have forgotten me.  
Ring, ring, ring goes the telephone,  
they're out there but no one's home.  
I can only hope they nipped to the shop,  
I need to talk, my racing thoughts are on top.  
I think I'm a burden to friends and family,  
I feel like they may have forgotten me.  
Then around comes the past again,  
it's my turn, a little surprise from them.  
Ring, ring, ring, are you up for a video call,  
It will feel like I'm the other side of the wall.  
Please say you can make some time,  
it's only 30 minutes, I can pretend I'm fine.  
I'm so excited, I can't wait to see you,  
I'll put on some mascara and lippy too.  
The truth is I am barely coping  
But equally I'm not done hoping.  
This is not forever, that's what I tell myself,  
I'll use my time well, better my mental health.  
All we can do is have a little hope,  
It's only a little more time, we have to cope.

---

We will be able to hug again,  
We will again walk the coast one day,  
We will go for a drive around the countryside,  
We will jump out of a plane to feel alive,  
We will once again dip our toes in the sea,  
We will have our time, you and me.  
For now all we can do is hope,  
I will do my best, I promise I will cope.

## Them missions got me making the wrong decisions

By Simran, HMP Styal

Them missions got me making the wrong decisions, I couldn't see the vision and I didn't want to listen, ending up in prison. I had to keep on wishing. Praying to the stars, because they were glistening.

I got through, thinking it is, what it is, life gets tough but I'll carry on to wish. I'm grateful for the hot food on my dish. If it's not positive, then you have to get rid.

I've fallen to the ground, so many times that I've lost count. One thing I know is that can't take off my crown. Fighting everyday, there's been too many rounds.

I had to be wiser, because I want my future to be brighter, in my heart I'm a born fighter and my mind's been a born survivor. I have to keep looking in the mirror, to remind myself the picture's going to be bigger.

Doing that time inside, got me sat thinking about life. It's been a bumpy ride. But I've got angels by my side. Glad that I made it through the dark night.

It's a tough war, even the strongest soldiers are alone. Raised to survive because that's how I was born. Getting through life, even when there's no one by your side. Praying to the sky, glad I made it through the dark night.

I have to be grateful for another day, and my stomach full, I know sometimes it all looks dull. And it may seem impossible, being labelled as a criminal. It feels like being stuck in a tunnel. Learning to stay out of trouble. Because every moment in life is special. I have to keep shining, because I want my star to keep its twinkle.



## CONTENT WARNING FOR SELF-HARM

## Covid-19 - Hope

by Kathryn, HMP Eastwood Park

During this pandemic, I've held onto hope,  
Hope has stopped me from thinking of that rope,  
It's in the little things to look for every day,  
a positive outlook is definitely the way...  
Instead of obstacles I see opportunity,  
the nation must stick together in this emergency,

It's been an opportunity to get to know myself better,  
to pick up my pens and write that overdue letter,  
to have a friend who stands by me,  
my children's love has been the key,  
to finally get round to reading my book list,  
and to emerge myself in yoga, I've got the jist

I look out the window no matter the weather,  
and I feel hopefully and as light as a feather,  
things are starting to come right,  
I've had my first vaccination, it kept me up all night.  
Groups have started where you can mingle  
that feeling of hope makes me tingle,  
to have someone to ask me if I'm ok,  
a little chat sets me up for the day.

We have all stuck together,  
I tell myself it won't be forever,  
there's light at the end of the tunnel if you look,  
you realise the things for granted you took,  
I am grateful for everything,  
each day has a new hope to bring.



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## What is Hope

by Joanne, HMP Low Newton

I went to a pub  
And had a few jars  
I'm soaking in the tub  
This room's got bars

I got caught  
With a little dope  
I'd only just bought  
I've got no hope

Four years is what I've got  
Previous the judge he said  
I've brought some in not a lot  
I need to get off my head

In jail you can get anything  
If you know who's who  
You can sell them your wedding ring  
But they still tell on you

Best that you don't trust  
They'll make a song and dance  
They shine at first then rust  
Don't be put in a trance

I'm going to kick this hab  
And then I will be free  
Or go work in a lab  
Then it's just you and me

# Hope

by Lisa, HMP New Hall

Hope is all I have right now  
For what a year it's been  
It's hard to think straight  
Everything seems just like a dream

Chorus:

I hope one day to be free  
To walk back through your door  
I want to live my life again  
Just like it was before

I hope to fix all that's been broken  
To make up for lost time  
Make my family proud again  
And put the past behind

Chorus:

I hope one day to be free  
To walk back through your door  
I want to live my life again  
Just like it was before

I hope to walk on the beach  
Feel the sand between my toes  
Take my grandchildren with me  
Be there wherever I go

Chorus:

I hope one day to be free  
To walk back through your door  
I want to live my life again  
Just like it was before

---

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Clean Break is a British theatre company  
set up in 1979 by two women in prison.  
It exists to tell the stories of women with  
experience of the criminal justice system,  
and to transform women's lives  
through theatre.

'This poem is about the thoughts that overtake my mind at all  
times, but because of lockdown due to covid they were worse.  
Thank you for taking the time to read my work.'

*Maria, HMP New Hall*

'I have never written a poem before, I thought I couldn't do it  
but felt a bit of inspiration so thanks for encouraging me to  
explore writing.'

*Jack, HMP New Hall*

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BREAK**

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