

Unsewing My Lips

a do-for-self care & defence guide
by **atiah** ...and for me too



coming to voice, recovery from abuses of intimacy,
hair, looking after myself, celibacy, abstinence,
ending my silence, fear, learning, confidence,
creating, dropping out of “The” “Anarchist” scene,
London, friends, Queer People of Colour, trees <3

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£1.50

I wanted to write about self-care for myself. So I did.

I was going to write about my recovery from abuses of intimacy, mostly sexist and/or racist speech from white "anarchist" men, who used to be my close friends. And separately I was going to write about hair as a black person, a black woman. And then I thought, hang on -

I N T E R S E C T I O N A L I T Y

Work out what it means to me.

I keep trying to separate out my experiences, but actually, they are intertwined.

I don't experience sexism as a woman, but as a queer black woman - with layers of heterocentric patriarchal white supremacy to unravel. I have a whole bunch of privilege too (cisgendered, abled, British, middle class education/background and probably other things I've yet to acknowledge).

I struggle with the idea of speaking because I expect a rush of microaggressive dismissals. Like a sudden rash of paper cuts.

Deep breath.

So, what's this all about anyway?

I've been to self-defence classes; it was great to feel a bit more confident and like maybe I could have a go at physically defending myself. But I still felt really vulnerable.

And I still kept finding myself with people who abused me & others, romantic/sexual partners who would say unacceptably hurtful things, refuse to take responsibility and continue to put me down until I finally expelled them from my life.

I used to have a poster of *physical* self-defence moves.

I wanted to participate in something that would teach me how to respond to *emotional* violence effectively, to deflect abuses of trust & build my inner strength for self-protection.

And I didn't find something like that. So I created it.

I started writing a journal to help me in my recovery.

At first it was too hard for me to look back over it. But I did get to the point where I could read it all, and feel angry & rejuvenated & proud & creative & self-loving & determined.

And eventually I started to talk to my friends about it.

And I kept remembering that I wanted a guide to help me. So when I thought of things, I wrote them down. Later, I collected them together, which helped me focus on self-care.

And here it is.

I'm ending my silence.

It's a long spiralling road...

Ups,

"It's the start of June and it feels good to write positive things because I feel better. I want to acknowledge how I felt, especially as I still have bad days. I'm definitely in a better place. I'm around people who accept when I'm grouchy and grumpy and love me anyway, who take it in turns to cook dinner, recommended herbal treatments, fix the roof, repaint the bathroom and say encouraging things when I plant things and bake."

Downs,

"I feel pressure to write something with a happy ending. Something that starts with pain and ends with hope. Or the suggestion of resolution. Part of me feels like, yes, things will get better. But mostly I am absorbed in desolation."

"I just bumped into an ex and it floored me. I wish I'd just stayed at home all day instead. So thankful for friends, ranting, dairy-free cheese and tea. Many cups of tea!"

Round and round. It's all part of my journey to find my voice and SING OUT, to heal my wounded sexuality, to build my broken self, to mend and not make do.

Like many African names, emphasise the second syllable of **atiah**: ah-tea-ah.

...and now for some Nina Simone!

"Whatever he'd offer I'd happily take for those big empty promises you used to make, for those memories of you that are no longer sweet, I wish he could haul them all down the street."

– Rags and Old Iron

"I'm gonna leave you, yes I'm gonna, I'm gonna leave you cos I wanna, and I'll go where people love me and I'll stay there cos they love me. No more headaches. No more heartbreaks. I'm gonna leave you."

– I'm Gonna Leave You

"I held back my tears just as long as I could, now my eyes can see it's all over for you and me and holding back ain't gonna do no good. I'm gonna break down and let it all out."

– Break Down and Let It All Out

PS... Note to self: Stop joining organising groups! Supposed to be focusing on self and self-care. Remember? Be well! All the rest will follow.

"You've got to learn to leave the table
When love's no longer being served."

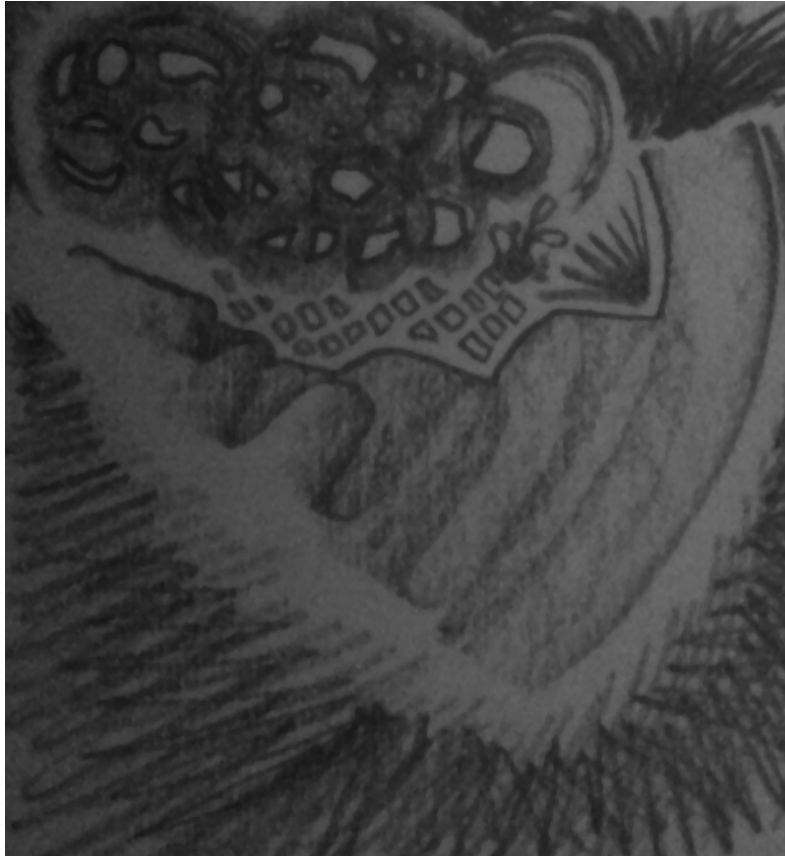
– You've Got To Learn



LIFE.
it just is.
a complicated dance
that no one dancing knows.

i'm first to the stage.





I'm **more fucked up** than I ever realised.

First step on the road to **recovery** is acknowledging it.

aching for
touch

for beauty that's SKIN DEEP.

muscle memory

taunts

me.

I don't know why I'm writing this.



Coming to My Senses.

What it is to be sensual, and -
Yet -
Not sexual.

Never understood it before.

The feel
Of cool metal spirals on my lips -
Of scratchy paper leaves on my chin -
Of beautiful garden stone walls -
Of pressed satiny velvet petals -
Of female voices trilling -

Of my skin on my skin.
Of my skin on my skin.
Of my skin on my skin.

Of my skin.
On my skin.

Lying in a bath
Stretching out my naked legs
Water lapping on my skin
Moist -
Warmth -
Surrounding -
And it's lovely.

Instant,
relaxing,
calming,
softening,
soothing,
enchanted.

My skin.
My skin.

I don't even have sex in my

SEXDREAMS

anymore...



On SEX.

I don't know if I'll ever be ready.

I don't know if I have ever been ready.

I need care and attention and touch.

I need love.

I don't trust myself to know what that is if/when
Sex is involved.

Much less do I trust
You.

I want to get better.

I am.

I

EAT

MEN like air

& then

I'm

SICK

Cycles of abuse repeating.

I feel compassion and pity for my younger self; my younger self feeling lucky that they weren't abusing me some other ways.

Only in abstinence, having time and space to myself, do I reflect on these things and look incredulous at the past. I was glad of what? I was thankful to whom? What the hell was I thinking? And why?

No one deserves abuse. Of any kind. For any reason.

I shouldn't have to say it; but I do.

Breaking the cycle with celibacy.





I have no

VOICE

and I must

SCREAM

I have not learnt how to say

No.

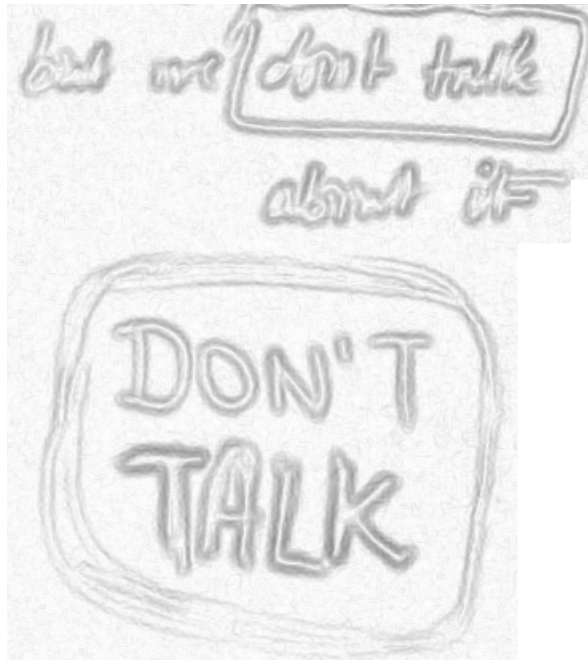
So,

I avoid the possibility of questions.

And, it's half a life,
Which is half a life more than
What I had with you.

I fought for my life.

And here I am.



Like a Whisper...

RELEASED

if I feel like X, instead I could Y

if I feel like watching films/tv,
instead, I could write, listen to music, read...

if I feel like hiding from the world,
instead, I could check if I've eaten & slept, and rectify if not...

if I feel like juice,
instead, I could drink herbal teas, mmm... yarrow...

if I feel like junk food - sweet,
instead, I could drink water, eat dried fruits, drink hot cocoa
with date syrup, bake something with no sugar (stevia!)

if I feel like junk food - salty,
instead, I could drink water, snack on vegetables, make a stirfry
with tamari/ peanut/ chilli, bake something savoury, check
if I've eaten properly & rectify if not...

if I feel like staying in bed all day,
instead, I could force myself out to do five minutes of tidying/
writing/ dancing/ jumping/ any movement, go for a walk
amongst trees...

if I feel like I can't write/ draw/ be inspired,
instead, I could walk amongst trees, stop trying & do something
practical instead...

Alone.
I trust no one.
All around me, villains.

It doesn't matter what you say.
It doesn't matter what you say.
It doesn't matter what you say.

How many times
have I heard the crawling
of lies, lies, lies.

Saying one thing, doing everything but.

You say you care.
But when I'm scared.
You're not there.

Empty arms.
Empty consolations.
All lies.

I want to cry in someone's arms.
But there be no one.

I want to start over.
But history of abuse be too long to overcome.

Melancholy.
Despair, loneliness and fear.

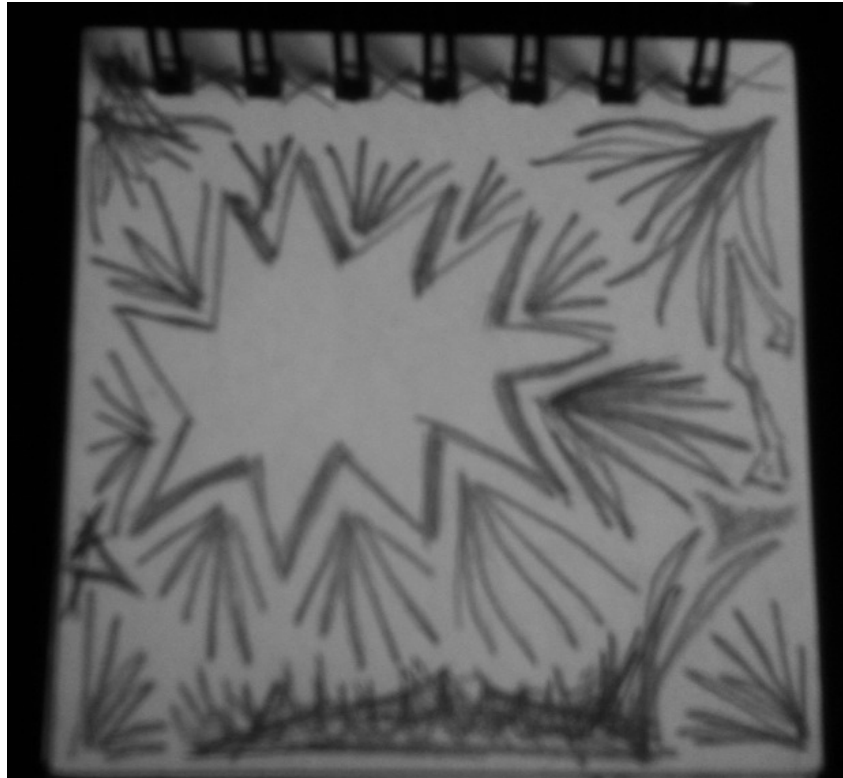
Struggling.
Except there's no fight left within.

Sleepless nights of tears.
I want to cut myself open.

But I remain closed.

I'm **looking** for ceramic knives

To carve **space** for my voice.



I am
fighting
for
my
life

He who wants to be heard,
Must raise his voice.
But -

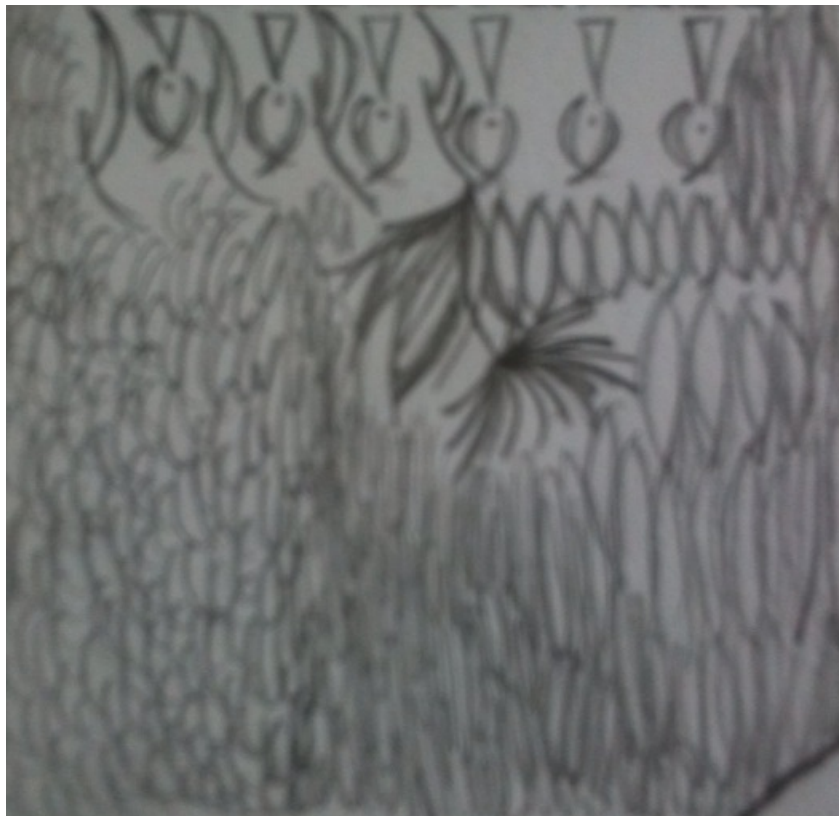
She who wants to speak,
Must kill the voice that says,
Be silent. Be still.

And will anybody hear?

Listen.

...with a nod to Jared Angira's poem, Pomads: Minor ping-pong:

"He who wants / To be heard / Must create / The tone of the bell"





Definitely time to go outside of the scene. London is massive but if you go to the same places you see the same people.

And I already know I'm sick of them.

Goodbye anarchist scene. Goodbye vegan scene and vegan capitalism. No more products. No more restaurants.

Hello days and nights in.

Hello intentional communities. Hello studying. Hello parents. Hello zining. Hello drawing. Hello parallel play and study groups. Hello collaborative journalling.

Hello black feminist queers, who may or may not be dykes. Hello visibility and audibility. Hello cis, ableist, class, education, nationality/ citizenship/ status privilege acknowledgement. Hello wholesome cooking. Hello pottering around in the garden. Hello poking around in the soil.

Hello walking amongst trees.

Hello foraging. Hello garlic on my windowsill. Hello rustling leaves. Hello books. Hello breath.

Hello LIFE.

If it is not over,

It is

not the time

to be

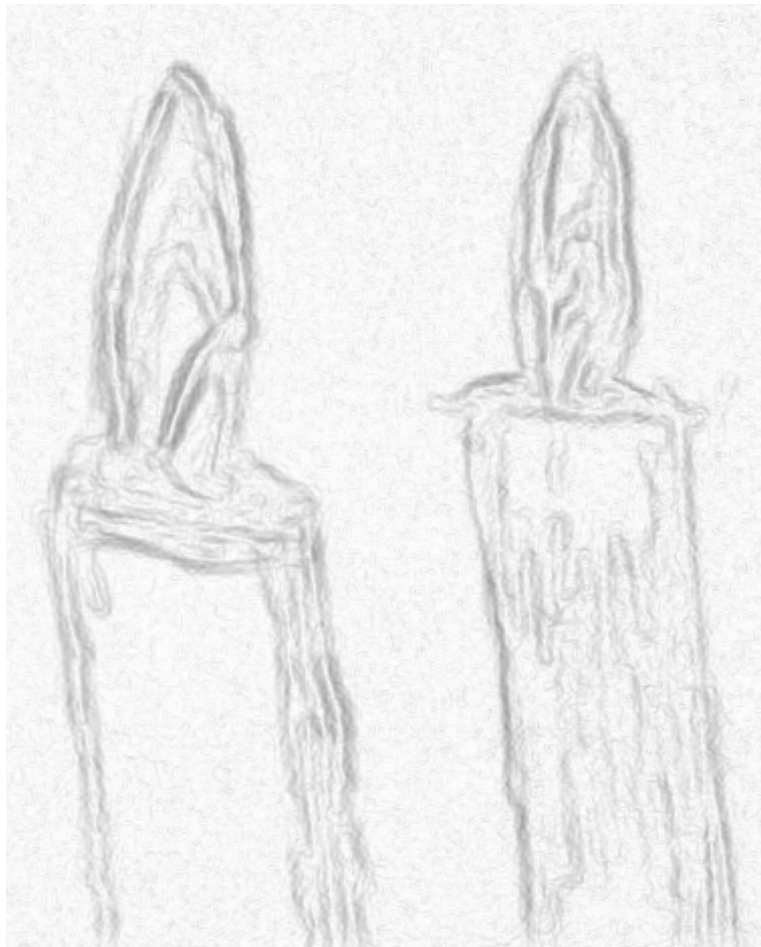
over it.

She says,

& I breathe.

Thanks Audre.

<3

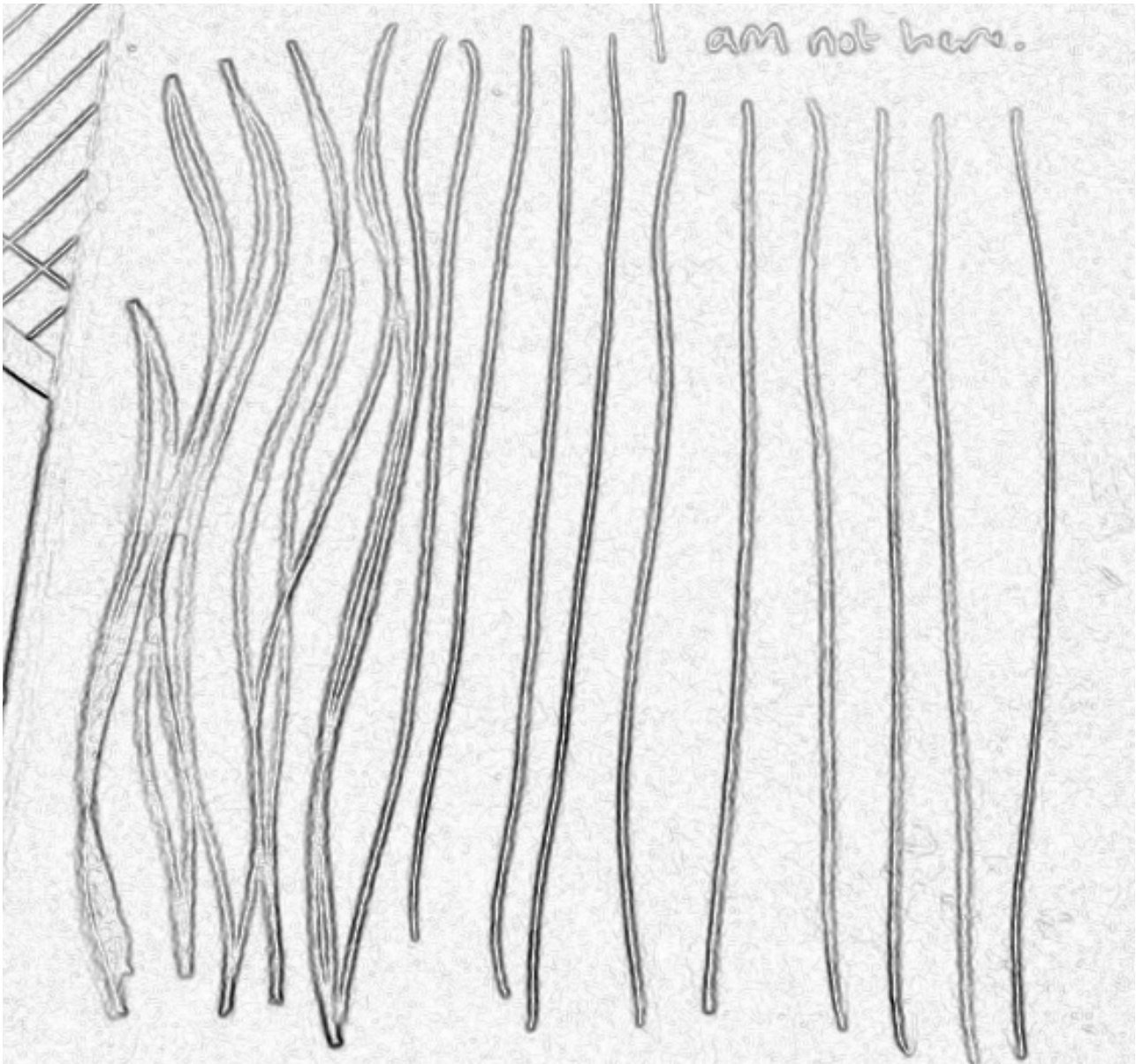


am
I am
willing to fight
for
what I think is

REAL

&

RIGHT



And I do not trust people.

I always felt I trust easy, but once betrayed, it's hard to win back. But now?

Now I sit cocooned in my room, wrapped in avoidance, trusting only myself and those who have proved themselves understanding; survivors; black feminists challenging patriarchy & white supremacy with anger, strength & compassion; queer people of colour creating spaces for nurture & revolt.

Separatist?

Right now, I'm in the midst of recovering from so much pain.

In any case, why was I generally around straight people? And why was I spending nearly all my time around white people? And why was I spending my sexual & romantic energy on mostly men? Mostly straight white cis men.

At a party.
I am the only **black face** in the room.
1 of 2 people of colour.

I hover by the other Other.

And fend off drunken assaults
From middle class middle age white men
Who mean well,
Are well-connected,
Well, are friends of the family -
No, family of the friends -

So, hush now.

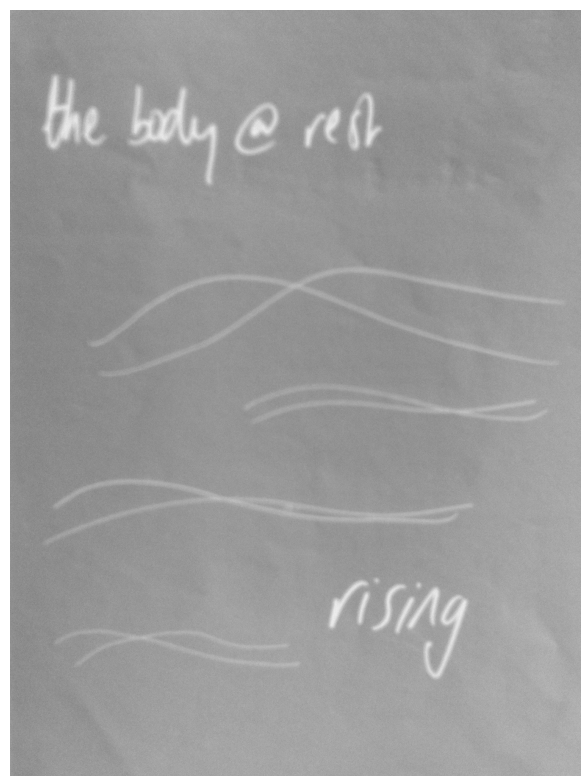
And no one hears when I say it's uncomfortable
to be the only black person.

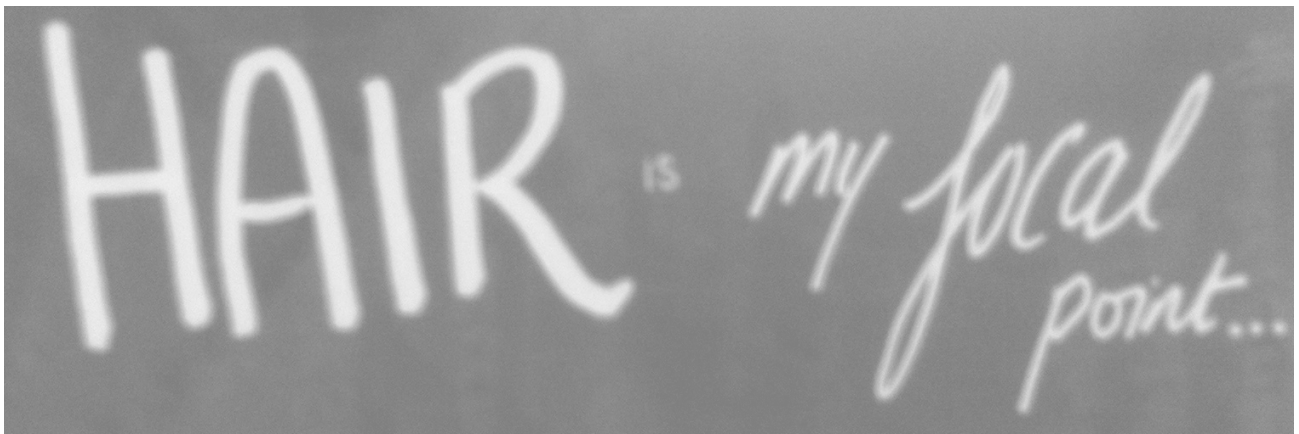
But.

Yesterday,
I saw a whole bunch of my friends,
Queer People of Colour.

So, I do not crumble to dust,

Today.

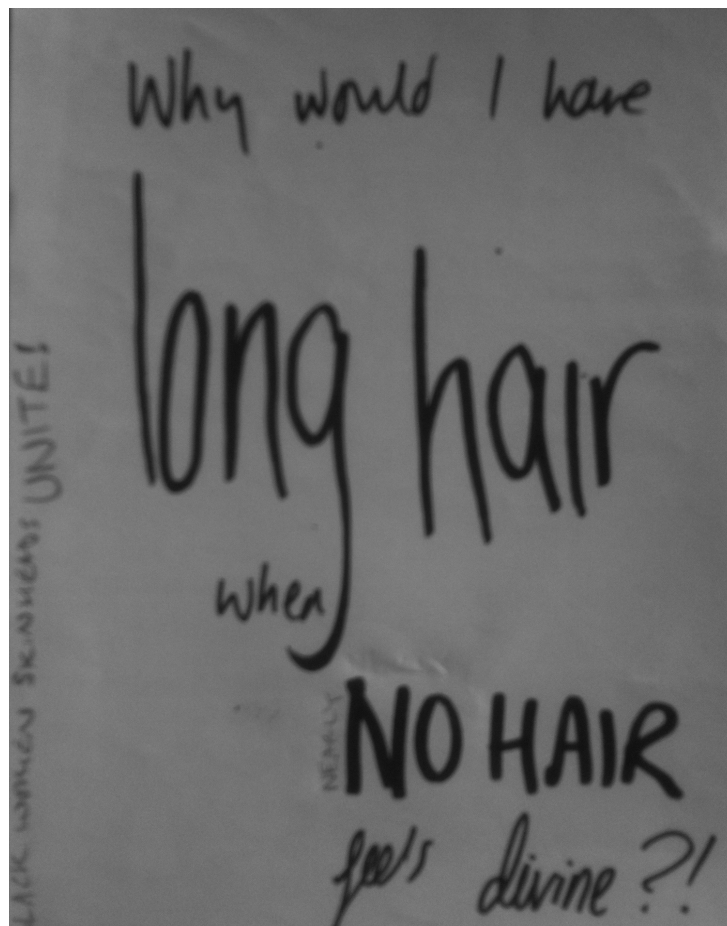




Looking after my hair has been a concrete way to look after my health when I was finding it too difficult to directly look after my health for my own sake.

Such as... I didn't drink enough water; but I started to because it's good for healthy hair.

Looking after my hair was a way to focus on myself, for myself, and so to increase my self-esteem and confidence and pride and connection with my body and connection with my West African and pan-African history, background, culture.





As long as I am

NAPPY

on my head

I
realise
know
overstand

I'm beautiful the way

I am.

I am.

Reading, and reflecting, over some of what's happened this year - but particularly my feelings and how despairing I've felt - I'm thinking about what's helped me get through.

Good people, but when I was less social, I found it hard to talk to even my closest friends.

Eventually I started to feel a bit better. By...

- # Spending time by myself
- # Reading
- # Writing
- # Eating properly
- # Looking after my hair
- # Shenzi (the best dog in the world)

Journalling; I started one specifically for my recovery. It started very dark, focusing on trauma; & grew reflective/ angry/ beautiful/ strong/ brilliant.

Drawing; I have an A3 drawing pad, for squiggles, quotations, sketches and whatever else I feel like.

Once I occasionally felt a bit better, it was a slow, long road to feeling better and better.

Sometimes I have days where I feel depressed, lethargic & frustrated with myself.

But I try to give myself a break.

More stuff that helped:

Moving to a supportive household; with really supportive friends nearby. I can't overestimate the importance of my surroundings. But more on housing in another zine.

Zining! The new place is really helping with this, the living room is quiet, with comfy seats and a desk. My bedroom is even better and all for ME!

Hanging out with queer people of colour; oh wow, what an absolute relief; I didn't realise how much I needed this. Now we meet regularly. :)

Baking amazing vegan/ gluten-free/ soya-free sweet stuff; cakebook to follow...

Escaping; 2 weeks out of the country were really stressful, but it was still great to have a break from London & from feeling stuck. The jolt from my routine meant I returned with clarity to make positive changes, like:

Limiting work time to no more than 2 days a week (After all, I get paid a pittance and it doesn't increase if I work more).

Limiting tv time; instead of downloading & chain-watching series, I'm listening to music/ writing/ reading. Difficult, but I persevere.

Eating properly; it's up and down, but now, I eat at least one proper meal each day.

Stuff I'm striving for:

- # Regular waking (day time!) & sleeping (night time!) hours
- # Meditation
- # Going up to my room in the evening *before* I'm tired
- # Working (e.g. zining) at a desk in my awesome chair
- # Going to parks and sitting on the swings!

How to escape shit

- # I know that ceasing contact with shitty people helps.
- # Having time and space to myself helps.
- # Only spending time with people I actively choose helps.
- # Writing helps.
- # Planting stuff to watch it grow on my windowsill helps.
- # Trees help.
- # Water helps.
- # Eating properly helps.
- # Sleeping properly helps.
- # Doing productive things helps.
- # Doing practical things helps.
- # Being physically active helps.
- # Listing things I've achieved helps.
- # Reducing my responsibilities helps.
- # Reminding myself to be putting myself first helps.
- # Reminding myself I'm in temporary recovery helps.
- # Drinking herbal teas helps.
- # Not getting another job helps.
- # Spending time in libraries helps.
- # Reading books by & about black women helps.
- ... And if they're dykey, that helps!
- # Making lists of things that help, helps.
- # Taking multivitamins daily helps.
- # Drifting through gardens and parks helps.
- # Drawing candles and their flames helps.
- # Drawing trees helps.

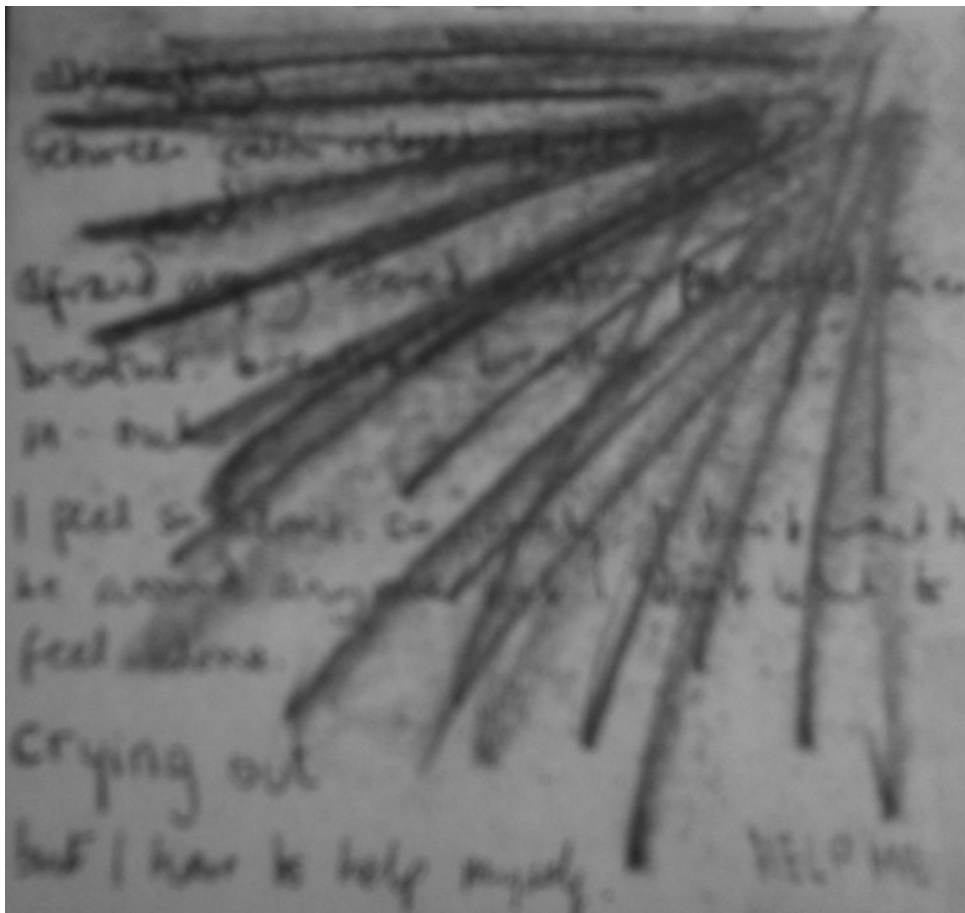


Recovery
is slow

process
and healing
hurts.

Crying out.

I have to help
myself.



I search for the right words for "sexual abuse" "sexual assault" "sexual violence"; I feel like those words hide the truth. They make it sound like it's about sex, but it is not. It's about power and domination and subjugation and no respect. I want to call it abuses of intimacy, because that's what happened. Not stranger danger, but brutal, heinous, violent betrayals of trust. And yes, unredeemable.

Too afraid to reject it, I was.
Too afraid to reject -
You.
But it came later.
Wisdom
And self-preservation.

And now,
Here I lie,
Healing myself.
Gently. Slowly. Haltingly.

I need trees more than ever.
I need water.
I need air.
And I breathe.

But the difficulty of getting out of bed sometimes overwhelms me,
knocks me back.

I watch birds in the trees from my window.
I draw
And love.
And I try to give it to myself.
And I struggle to remember
And of course I am worthy
But maybe it's a lesson I never
learnt.
Thanks dad.

I deserve it.

And I write. And I write. And I write.

Finally.
Finally out it pours.
Like tears.
And I need it.

Rejection.

You tore my spirit to pieces,
Whipping me with your words.
And the recovery is hard.

You tried to destroy me,
Pouring loathing upon me.
You saw my vulnerabilities; twisted them into a
noose.

And I was scared.
And you poured scorn upon my fear with
sneering,
hateful
fury.

I keep telling myself:

I
do not
deserve
you -

Your ridicule. Your bile. That rage.
It's a battle to convince myself.
But I do.

And I reject you.

I thought it would be terrible to be without you...
But I realise, to be with you, was to be without me.
Much WORSE.

The fate of hating loneliness is to end up worse than alone.
And the way to change my fate is to adore and worship and respect myself.

To love life but to love **my** life.

Me.

I will

MEND

&

I will NOT

Make Do.

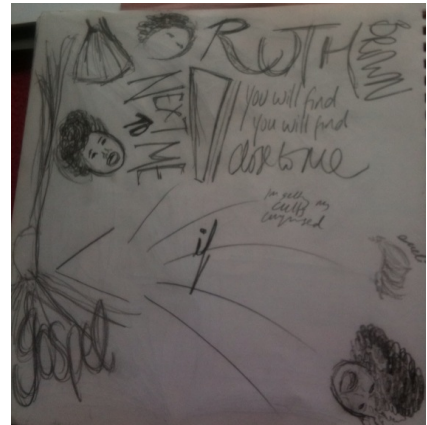
... More Health Kicks!

Plant things...

- # Sprout pulses (chickpeas have pretty leaves) & plant them; they're easy & fast to grow
- # Garlic cloves; they're easy to acquire, grow easily and quickly, and I love garlic
- # Wild flowers; they're easy to grow & only need a shallow container & yay flowers!

Listen to amazing black female musicians...

- # Ruth Brown
- # Nina Simone
- # Tracy Chapman
- # Ella Fitzgerald



Write about...

- # Things I love
- # Things that are bothering me
- # Things I'm angry about
- # The way I'd like things to be
- # What I can do to bring about change

Read books by, and about, black women. With bell hooks and Alice Walker I can alternate between hard-hitting social commentary and life-affirming poetry. Audre Lorde too! Inspired. :)

Find out about herbs and make different teas...

- # Ward off hayfever with nettles, soothe throat with calendula (marigold) & thyme
- # Chill out and relax with a tea of camomile, lemon balm, peppermint and similar...
- # Rub teeth with sage – good for gums & makes my teeth feel super-clean!
- # Grow my own herbal window box

Stuck in shit? LEAVE!

It's not easy, but it's vital. So, whatever I need to do to get out, I need to do it.

No event organising. No voluntary work. If (when...!) I sign myself up, leave!

I flip from despair to functioning. My life feels a struggle for survival, the challenges to last through the desperate times, minimising rage turned inwards, until I feel better.

I read Maya Angelou, and I cry.

And I love Tracy Chapman.



Thank you some friends who...

- took my unfriendliness in stride when I said I was having a tough time,
- gave me loads of space but kept in touch,
- never judged me, and
- loved me anyway.

"Now the days stretch before you with the dryness and sameness of desert dunes. And in this season of grief we who love you have become invisible to you. Our words worry the empty air around you and you can sense no meaning in our speech. Yet, we are here. We are still here. Our hearts ache to support you. We are always loving you. You are not alone."

- Maya Angelou: Letter to My Daughter, 111-2

NO.

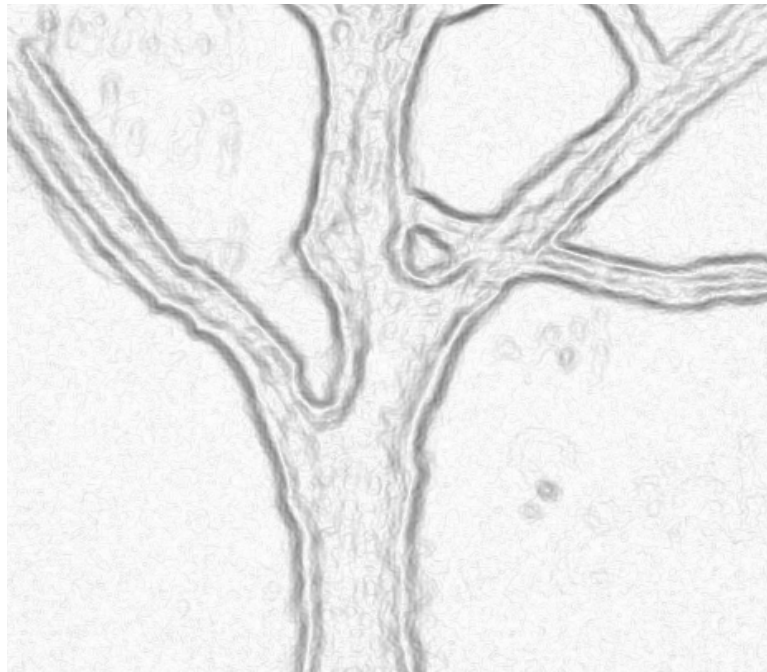
is a complete sentence

...and NOW?

I love letters; sometimes I'm slow to respond, write to me anyway!

How to Zine: How I do/did it...

- # Write & draw whatever / whenever I feel like
- # Talk / think about it for ages
- # Forget about it and do other things
- # Start to look over it all & pick what to include
- # Put it in order & add page numbers
- # Check the number of A5 sides is divisible by 4
- ... ('cos an A4 sheet has 2 A5 sides on each of 2 sides)
- # Edit it all together
- # Save & backup obsessively
- # Use scrap paper as a mock-up to work out how the heck to print it
- # Print
- # Rejoice & feel proud
- # Freak out whenever anyone says they want to read it



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