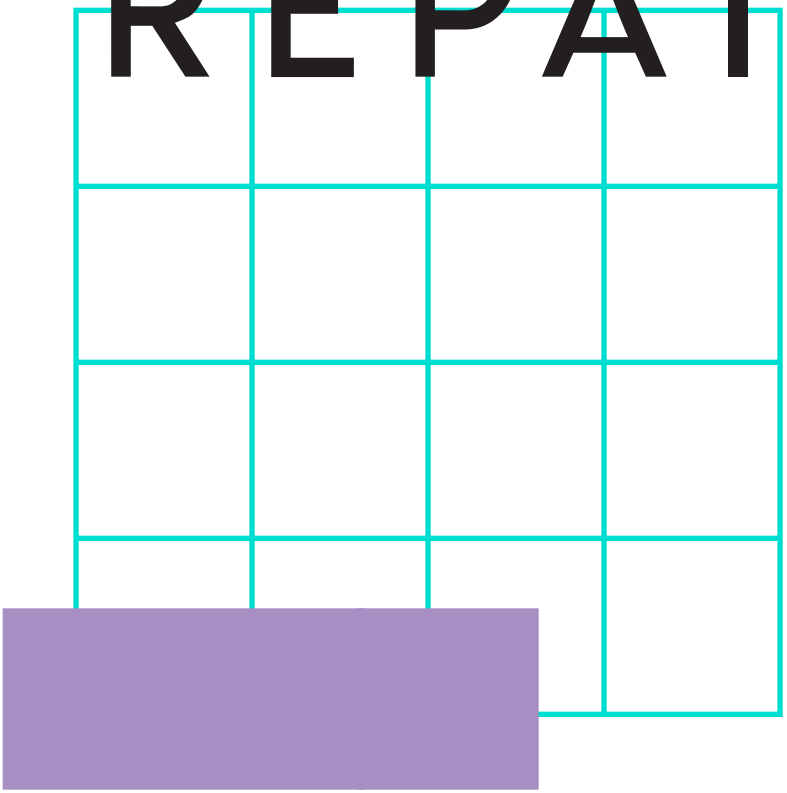
REPAIR



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Repair

by

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CW: Graphic Description of Child Abuse, Physical Abuse

"***Punishment is not something that happens to bad people. It happens to those who cannot stop it from happening. It is laundered pain, not a balancing of scale***"

– Porpentine Charity Heartscape

The first memory I have of my father hitting me was when I was seven. I remember his hand in motion, backhanding me across the face, and the hardness of the wooden floor when I fell to my knees. He'd hit me before, almost constantly since I was born, but this memory stands out in my mind as the beginning of the pain I feel in my body. The pain is a physical ache, made of shame and rage that feels larger than any other emotions I have.

He kept hitting me as I grew older. Every day, I would try to avoid his gaze, wishing myself as small as possible. I could never escape him. I would try to run away, but I didn't have anywhere to go. When he found me wandering the town, his punishments would make me scream and beg for forgiveness. I tried pushing furniture in front of my bedroom door to keep him out. He battered it down while shouting. I practiced crying louder and louder in hopes that my mother or sisters would stop him, that the neighbours would notice and help me. Nothing ever worked.

Whenever he would beat me, every sensation became more vivid. I could smell the rain outside the window and hear the laughter of other children playing down the street. I could feel the cold air on my naked skin, the flush of heat and pain as his hands reached me, and the sound of my own cries caught in my throat. My whimpers always made me feel so ashamed, humiliated by my weakness. Desperate to survive, I would hold onto the rage and terror in my body as tightly as I could, praying for their intensity to numb me to what was happening.

Sometimes I would disassociate from my body, floating above him to the ceiling of my bedroom. I craved the feeling of release that disassociation brought me. It would lift me up, away from the pain and powerlessness, into the soft blue nothing of empty air. The terror and rage roared beneath me like an ocean waiting to drown me. Disassociating didn't always work. If my father used his belt instead of his hands, it was harder to get away from the pain. Hands are blunt, making bruises and radiating dull aches through the body, but belts sting and burn. Sometimes the belt would wrap around my body, striking the soft inner flesh of my thighs or my genitals. I couldn't help screaming when this happened, torn back into my body from the safety of my mind.

Looking back on my childhood memories, I'm struck by how pervasive the violence was. There was always a ritual to his abuse. He would drag me into my bedroom, force me to strip naked and lay my clothes out on my bed. Then the blows, each hit getting stronger and more frantic until he wore himself out. I would have to count aloud, begging him stop between breaths and numbers. This ritual of violence was the only predictable part of my father's abuse, the only pattern that I could anticipate.

I never knew what would set him off. Sometimes it was something I said or did, but often it was random. There would be periods of relative peace where I wouldn't be hit for days. Then without warning, it would start again. My father would come into my room at night, rousing me from sleep to hit me in the half-dark of our house. He slapped me in public in front of other people. I must have been marked with bruises as a child, but no one ever said anything. I prayed every night to be rescued but eventually I realized that God wasn't real.

Or if God was real, this is what he thought I deserved: to be punished, broken open daily, left to bleed and suffer alone, forever.

I'm recalling my childhood because I want to write about "repair." The incompetence of social workers from my childhood tainted my association with it, but as I gotten older, I've turned back towards repair. Repair is the interpersonal process that we use to resolve conflict, heal wounds, and strengthen attachments. It is an essential skill for relationships as well as everyday life. People who grew up with loving and healthy families usually learned this skill from watching their parents resolve conflicts with each other and their children.

For those of us who didn't come from safe family environments, repair is something we have to learn through other means. It's hard to learn the skills of repair from a book or an essay. Often, we have to learn those skills from other people through relationships, friendships, and professional mentorship. Loving a survivor of childhood abuse and family disconnection is difficult. We constantly test the limits of care, mistrust others at every turn, and often react with emotional violence when hurt or threatened. In essence, we rely on the skills that helped us survive our childhoods even when they are no longer useful, trapped in cycles of rupture, retaliation, and abandonment.

Therapy is important, but it's often inaccessible because of cost or because it's not culturally appropriate. For queer and trans BIPOC folks, therapy and institutional spaces are often actively harmful or dangerous for us. We usually rely on other

community members for care and conflict resolution when challenges happen. When no one is disposable, we have to become more skilled at repair.

While many other writers and thinkers have talked about the importance of repair, I still think we're not always listening deeply enough. Particularly within queer and trans spaces, we often turn towards ideas of justice and punishment-based models for resolving conflict. While I don't discount those models for certain kinds of harm, I think repair is a more humanizing and appropriate framework for interpersonal conflicts within community. We're all incredibly vulnerable, but it seems like the most vulnerable people without the social capital to fight back are the ones who are punished most.

I wonder if the ways that we weaponize social justice language against each other is related to the experiences of profound powerlessness that we've had to endure. Many of us have never been able to heal from the deprivations of our childhoods. Being able to rationalize why someone is *bad* and deserves to be punished is a way to reclaim power in a world that actively disempowers us. I'm not suggesting, as some alt-right folks have done, that the work of naming or critiquing systems of oppression is wrong nor am I suggesting that we need to be more civil. I believe strongly in resistance to state violence and oppression as a necessary condition of our survival.

I am interested in expanding our collective emotional awareness about how our traumas, ongoing and past, inform the ways that we engage in the work of advocacy and justice. What does it mean to acknowledge that many of us never had safe spaces to learn how to process complex emotions or manage intense conflict without relying on our fight or flight responses? How can we love ourselves and others while still holding everyone accountable to the values of liberation? I don't have perfect answers to these questions, but I still want to ask them.

Unlike punishment, repair is uncertain. It relies on asking questions and listening to the answers. It asks us to hold competing claims to harm equally, using our empathy and intelligence to look for a shared understanding. There are no rigid criteria for rightness, no algebra of oppression to add up, and no easy formula for deciding what should happen. Repair relies on the social space of our relationships to each other rather than an institution or a jury of onlookers. It is outside of the nation state and can't be reduced into a simple list of instructions.

I'm not naïve about the danger of trying to repair relationships. I know a knife can sometimes stop violence from happening through the threat of further violence. There are moments in life where a knife is all you have. A sharp edge can mean the difference between suffering immense harm or walking away alive. Of course, the

trouble with a knife is that once you pick it up, you can never put it down without fearing retaliation from the other party. You look for bigger knives and sooner or later, someone's blood is on your hands.

Repair gives us options beyond violence or the threat of harm. It deescalates situations. It makes room for all our hurts. It opens up the possibility of love. It is a skill that many of us have been kept from learning by intergenerational trauma, racism, transphobia, and colonialization, but it's an essential one to reclaimed. Repair says that we don't have to be perfect to deserve love. We can make mistakes with each other. We can take risks.

While a knife can save your life, repair can make that life worth living.

My father was a survivor of childhood abuse, domestic violence, and alcoholism. He internalized the lessons of his childhood deeply. As a very poor racialized working-class man, he never had access to therapy and was distrustful of any institution. He read voraciously but only wood working books, trade and mechanic manuals, and the Bible. He didn't know to manage his emotions or parent a child. Whenever he was overwhelmed, he lashed out with what he had: his hands or objects around him.

He hated my femininity. I think he loved me, but his love expressed itself as violent attempts to make me into a man who could survive the cruelty of the world. Instead of making me stronger, he taught me to fear and hate men while desperately seeking their love. My father had a rule against hitting women. As a boy, he had watched my grandfather beat my gookum into submission. Instead of hitting my mother or sisters, my father hit me, never imagining that his son would eventually become his estranged daughter.

When I got older and fought my way into university classes, I learned there were words to describe what was wrong with my family. Colonization, intergenerational trauma, and poverty were not abstract scholarly concepts to me, but rationales that I clung to. They made living with what happened easier. Finally, after a childhood of not understanding why I was hurt, I could articulate the reasons why. Naming the violence that shaped my life didn't help me heal from it, but it gave me a language to talk about it.

I remember when my father's daily beatings stopped. I hit puberty and was finally almost as big as he was. One day, he rushed at me in the kitchen, upset over the refrigerator door that I didn't close completely. I don't know what shifted inside me

as I watched him lurch towards me, but I grabbed a butcher knife off the counter and raised it towards him. "If you ever touch me again, I'll kill you," I said as the knife wavered between our bodies. It sounds brave but I was terrified.

His eyes widened. We stood there for a few seconds, waiting in silence for something to break. Then my father backed away from me and left the room without saying anything. He never hit me again, but from that moment onward, we were strangers to each other. For the next two years, I slept with the knife underneath my pillow, ready to kill him whenever I had to. It feels surreal to write about this memory, as if I'm describing a scene from a movie.

Maybe it's easier for me to live with what happened if I pretend it's just a story I saw, but some part of me—the terrified little girl that checks the locks on my apartment door twice before going to bed—remembers the truth.

I'll probably never fully heal from my childhood. If I hear the sound of a child crying in the grocery store, I start to panic and tears rush to my eyes. Whenever a man touches me, I imagine him hitting me, not because I want to but because I can't stop my mind from seeing the danger. I've spent years in therapy, but I struggle to not replay the same patterns with my lovers and friends. Repair is a skill that I'm always working at.

My childhood haunts me. I'm drawn to men like my father, boys who desperately want to be good but don't know how. I try to trust them, but they always let me down. Many of them feel that I set them up failure, waiting for any mistake to harshly punish them. I used to think this was just what love was like: joy, pain, fear, and inevitable loss. Only now, after years of therapy, I realize that love isn't a feeling that runs between bodies. It's a skill that takes practice. The men I love are men who've never felt safe enough to be vulnerable with anyone, much less a girl like me. While calling my ex-lovers "transphobic" or "abusive" may be accurate, it doesn't help me hurt less.

I wish I remembered more from my childhood, not just the moment of my father hitting me but what happened afterwards. Did my mother comfort me or tell me that it wasn't my father's fault? She always talked about how hard he worked to keep us fed. I remember her looking at me with her wide childlike eyes and saying "He's a good man. He's never laid a hand on me." All of us, my mother and my sisters, made excuses for him. We had heard the stories from my aunts about his childhood. We knew how my grandfather chased my gookum and the kids through the night with a

shotgun, firing randomly at their fleeing bodies.

How different would my life have been if my father had never beat me? If he'd learned how to say "I'm sorry"? If my mother was braver and tried to stop him? If I wasn't a trans woman? I'll never know the answers to those questions.

All we have is the present moment, the emergent life that we create together. What would it mean if we said "I'm sorry" more to each other? If we were braver to face injustice, not just the injustice that we experience but the injustice that we do to others? If we made space for everyone to be held in their precarity: victims, perpetuators, and bystanders?

We rarely do this work with each other. As the ongoing violence of capitalism and climate change erodes our possibilities, we fight over the same resources with an increasing intensity. Success may improve our lives in meaningful ways, but it doesn't repair the core wounds that many of us carry. Despite my accomplishments, the shame and rage from my childhood is still inside me. Whenever I am threatened or demeaned, it floods out. I can't back down from a fight. I see my father in every conflict, trapping me with his hands around my throat.

I don't think I'm alone in my relationship to conflict. Many of us see our abusers in every conflict. The stakes always feel like life and death for us, even when we have other options to manage our interpersonal struggles. We're hypervigilant against harm, naming every microaggression and trading tiers of oppressions back and forth in hopes of definitively deciding who is bad and who is good. Even if we're "right," it often seems like the only outcome that we want from conflict is the complete destruction of the other person.

We're a community of survivors from many different forms of violence. Sometimes we make mistakes with each other. We are often oppressive because we grew up in profoundly oppressive worlds, internalizing the violence around us. Of course, we must work to deconstruct our own oppressive actions and be accountable for them, but all of us deserve the chance to learn how to love and be loved.

It isn't lost on me the danger that writing this essay places me in. I'm a trans woman writing about violence and love, inhabiting extreme vulnerability in public. I find myself second guessing every sentence, because I know I'll be violently punished if I make any mistakes. Trans women have a very limited shelf life and I've already surpassed mine. Writing this essay—openly questioning how many in my communities engage with each other—is an enormous risk with no benefit for me.

But when I'm finally discarded by community, canceled or driven even deeper into economic and social precarity, I want to feel that I tried to write towards love and liberation. I'll never have a "normal" life, but I can try to live a brave and thoughtful one.

When my high school finally notified Children's Aid in Grade 9, it was already too late to save me from the worst of the abuse. The social workers said some stupid things, asked me invasive questions, and decided to place me into institutional care until "things calmed down". They used the words "repair" constantly, as if my relationship with my family could ever be recovered. I bounced around between different homes, institutions, and wards until I ended up back into my parent's house. There just wasn't anywhere else for me to go.

A few months later, I fled my home again because I thought my father was going to kill me. My mother had screamed at me for hours because she'd seen me dancing with a boy from school, her face bright red with rage as I stared at the floor. That night, I heard my dad's gun case in the basement open, the sound of bullets being shuffled and loaded. I threw some clothes into a plastic shopping bag and climbed out the window. I wandered the town alone until dawn came, hiding behind houses and crouching by garden beds. When the high school opened up, I went to the boy I had been dancing with and told him what happened. I hid with his family in another town for a week until the social workers came to find me.

This became the pattern of my adolescence: in and out of my father's house, living out of plastic bags, running away until there wasn't anywhere left to run to, sleeping on friend's couches. Then I won a scholarship to attend university and was able to leave my childhood house. I was so happy for a moment, imagining that my life could be different. I thought freedom meant that I would finally be loved. I was wrong.

Love, as it turns out, isn't something you are given, but something you earn. I had no idea how to love anyone, nor how to be loved. My father taught me that there was only three ways to handle conflict: hurt them until they stop hurting you, surrender, or run away. His greatest gift to me was an intense fear of being vulnerable. I haven't seen or spoken to him in almost ten years now, but his gift still lives inside me. I've spent much of my life trying, desperately and without much success, to never be hurt again.

I went to a literary event last week. Someone I used to love was in the room. We don't talk anymore, a by-product of an intense breakup that left us with scars. Whenever he's in the same space as me, my skin starts to burn and my lungs tighten in my chest. The room gets smaller, shrinking as my field of vision narrows into just him and me. Seeing his familiar face sends an immediate shock through my nervous system. No matter how prepared I am for the possibility of encountering him, I always feel out of control around him.

Like gravity, his presence draws me towards him even as the anticipation of pain pushes me away. I can't help feeling powerless. Whenever our eyes meet by accident, I want to die. I feel like everyone is watching us, noticing how my hands tremble whenever he's beside me. Time stops working, speeding up and slowing down until I barely remember where I am. Every movement he makes with his body, shifting in his chair or texting on his phone, sends waves of panic through my spine. I'm not scared of him, just terrified of either hurting him or being hurt.

Sometimes when someone hurts us, they leave an indelible mark on our souls, an echo that doesn't dissipate with time or space. He said something transphobic to me once and made some mistakes, but I think he cared about me deeply. I tried to hurt him when things ended between us, sending him cruel text messages and threatening to tell our mutual friends about our secret relationship. Neither one of us is a perfect victim or perpetrator. During the literary event, I sit silently across from him and try to rationally process the situation.

Then our eyes meet again. I almost start crying. My heart hammers as I feel a sudden urge to vomit. This is a trauma response, an automatic trigger that sends my nervous system into fight or flight mode. He briefly looks at me with anger and disgust before averting his eyes back down to the floor. Shame floods through me, replacing the wave of adrenaline that came before it. I have a flashback to the memory of my father, looking down at me on the wooden floor as I lay beneath him. I'm not a child anymore, but some part of me will always be a seven-year-old girl with a split lip, crying alone in her bedroom.

I have several ways to address the situation. I can call him out online or in person, use the words "transphobe" or "abuser." Neither word is appropriate for the circumstances, but it could rally folks to my side. I can go up to the event organizers and demand that he is banned from future events. Or I wait until the event is over and leave the space, never to return to literary events in my city again because I can't guarantee that he won't be there. Maybe, if I feel brave enough, I can reach out to him again and ask if he's willing to try repairing what broke between us enough that we can share space safely.

Punishing him for making me feel powerless might help me feel powerful again. Maybe if I hurt him back, I would feel less ashamed of myself. I wouldn't have to face the overwhelming humiliation of encountering him in public if I got other people to push him out of our shared community. He's already terrified that I'll reveal our past connection, exposing him to the intense stigma of being romantically associated with a trans woman. If I even named him publicly, it would change how people saw him. Maybe that's why he wouldn't even look at me anymore.

I've recovered enough from my childhood to know that punishing him wouldn't make me feel better. It might temporally help me recover some of my self-esteem, pushing down the intense disgust I feel about my own desirability and worth, but it wouldn't be just. I would know it was wrong, even if everyone believed me. More importantly, his life matters as much as mine does. Hurting someone I used to love because I can't safely manage my own emotions won't heal me. It just traumatizes him and I—and everyone around us—further.

If I truly believe in love as a practice, I have to embody that in the world. Of course, there's a reasonable chance that he will refuse to attempt repair. Maybe he sees my attempts to repair as a coercive threat. For many people, particularly BIPOC queer and trans folks, refusing to engage is a valid survival tactic. How many times has the state taken away our bodily autonomy or forced us into dangerous situations? I remember what it felt like to be forced to recount my trauma to the social workers, knowing that they would never help me and didn't care.

Repair doesn't guarantee that talking about what happened will make things better. In fact, it could make things much worse. Facing the reality of what we've done to each other requires tolerating very unpleasant emotions. Do I want to sincerely admit how I hurt him, not just in the past but also in the present? Could he ever trust me enough to be vulnerable again? Out of all of the options we have, repair feels like the most dangerous one. Yet, if we truly are committed to each other's liberation, wouldn't we be willing to take those risks?

I don't know what to do. I spend days after the event stuck in a mental loop, replaying every moment of our interaction over and over in my mind. One of my friends asks me to go with them to another reading, but I politely decline because I can't bear the risk of facing him again in public. I'm haunted by our inability to make it better. Every time I talk about it with anyone, I feel like I'm breaking his trust, becoming the villain in our storyline.

There isn't any resolution to this story. I dissociate from my body when I write

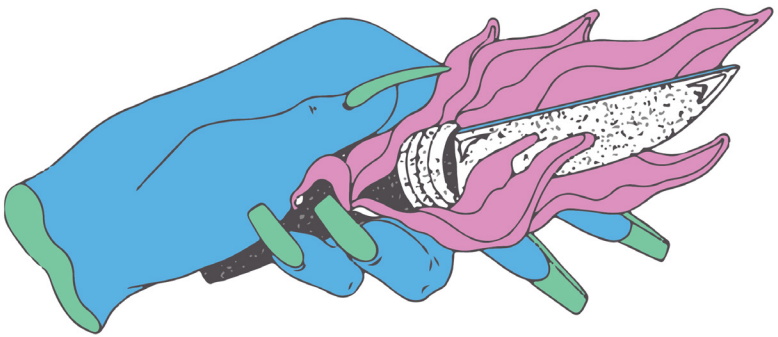
this part of the essay, floating somewhere above the page, because my trauma isn't something that happened to me once. It's a story that keeps happening, a broken thing inside me that needs to be repaired constantly.

You see, everyone I love always hurts me. And I hurt everyone I love. In this story, I'm the angry father and the terrified little girl, simultaneously bound together in a wound that won't be healed until I die.

There are no easy answers. There is nuance behind every word that I've written in this essay. There will always be exceptions and other important voices to consider. Perhaps the conditions of our oppressions prevent the possibility of repair. Maybe we don't ever have the luxury of learning how to be vulnerable with each other. I resent how trans women and femmes are the ones who have to do the work of care. I always feel as if I'm one more bad day away from death, caught between suicide, unemployment, violence, and discrimination.

I still have a knife in my purse, but now there's something more: a torn slip of blue paper wedged between Belmonts and a pink lighter. It's a handwritten note from an ex-lover that says, "be gentle with yourself and others (please)". I know that gentleness isn't always possible, but I want to believe that it's always deserved. Nothing I've lived through in my life has ever shown me that punishment and pain brings change.

As my friend, Kai Cheng Thom, writes in her essay on the application of justice, "no apology, or amount of money or punishment can give me back the person i was, the body and spirit i possessed, before i was violated. only i can do that". I turn back to her words over and over again as I try to find my way home to my body. She ends her essay with the simple phrase, "i hope we choose love", and I want to repeat her call to action here.

I hope we choose love. Not for my sake, but for yours.

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