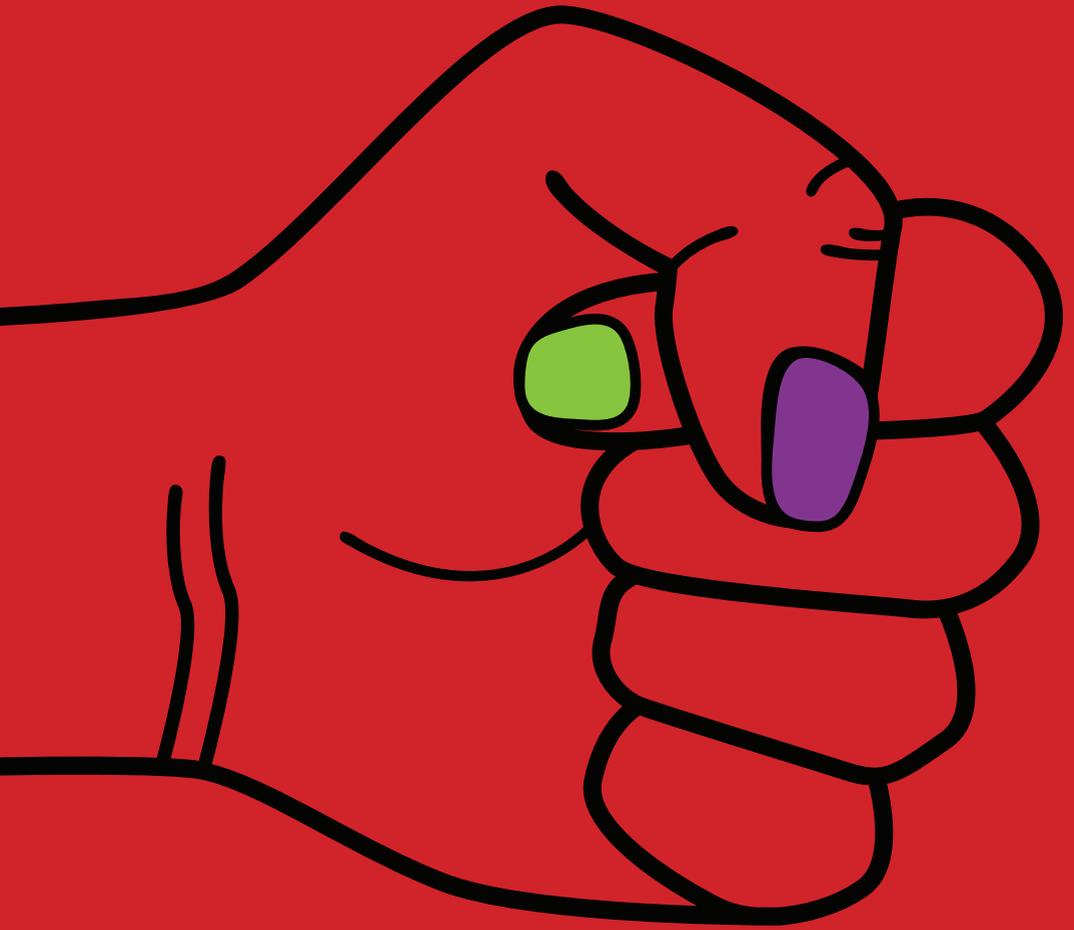


FIGHTING



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Artlink

From the beginning of March 2020 through to the present we have asked different artists and thinkers to respond to issues that were being unearthed as Covid-19 took its toll on our communities. Each writer was asked to respond to a simple brief that in some way related to their lived experience, providing the opportunity to open up these issues, to better understand what we could and should have in common.

Content note: descriptions of transphobic violence, police violence and autistic meltdown.

I'm in the Headmaster's office, reading a book. My body is on fire. I'm seven, or ten, or twelve. This is my punishment for fighting, again. I have to sit here by myself each breaktime and lunchtime for a week. I'm forbidden from playing outside, but that's more relief than punishment. It's quiet here, and I can read without having to worry about other people. The world is reduced to a tiny room, little enough input for my senses to cope. Just the page, and occasional footsteps outside. What does feel like punishment is the shame. It's a hot crawling across my skin, a burning in my gut. I've been bad, I've done wrong, I've let everyone down. I am bad.

Which punishment am I remembering? Which reprimand or suspension? They blur together now. I can't remember how many punishments there were – plenty enough – or which punishment came for which behaviour. Was this when I had a meltdown in the playground, meeting taunts with flailing pre-teen violence? When I screamed in the classroom because there was too much noise? When, at a Christmas party, burning up as other children threw rubbish at me, I grabbed the nearest boy round the throat? When, frustrated because I couldn't make my hands follow woodwork instructions, exhausted by relentless bullying, I, a child in a room full of sawblades, grabbed the child teasing me and hurled him into a vice? Which of the many times that I grew terrified of my own anger, the many times that rage lifted me from consciousness into something impossible? And how true are these memories?

I remember the quiet, I remember the shame, and I remember being the problem. Remembering now, I can still feel the burning feet scuttling up my

arms, the swarming in my chest, the sharp wings in my belly.

I don't remember being given any tools for understanding what was happening to me or for reacting any differently. My autism was a problem for teachers to make judgements about, not a frame I could use to understand myself. My violence was the problem, not the bullying that triggered it. A support worker in an empty classroom told me simply to count to ten and walk away. When I tried, I got as far as the number five before I exploded again. The bullies knew the system of my body far better than I did: which points to press, what words to say, and when to jump backwards out of the way.

*

I'm walking through the dark winter streets of town, seventeen years old, in a long black coat and floral shirt, with hair around my shoulders. Drama club finished early, and I'm waiting to be picked up. I'm outside the town hall, opposite the red stone cathedral. I hear an old sound: jeers. I turn around, and there are three boys, around my age, swaggering up to me. "Hey, faggot!" says the oldest. "Why is your hair so long, faggot? Cut your fucking hair, faggot!"

I react before either of us knows what I'm doing. I grab him – he is six inches shorter than me – and lift him up against the wall. The other two hang back, shocked. "Don't you speak to me," I say. "Don't you ever come near me again." I let him go. We're all dazed. I walk away. The boys retreat in the other direction. Their leader shouts something, but none of us hear it.

I sit on the low wall next to the cathedral. I am sick. There's bile in my throat.

Adrenaline, and then, following hard, shame. I'm disgusting. I'm violent. I'm wrong. I'm a problem. There's a fire in my brain, hot feet scuttling up my arms. I'm going to be punished. I should be punished.

Ten minutes later, my Dad's car pulls up and I get inside. I say nothing about what's happened. I never tell.

This is the last time in my life that I lay hands on another person in violence, in attack or defense. When, years later, I learn the slogan "Queers Bash Back", I think, "Do I?"

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I'm sat on the ground in the heart of London's financial district, arm in arm with comrades. I'm twenty two and I fight the world every day. I have fought in meetings and in the streets. I have helped invade a power station; I have held the line against police. Tonight, I am holding the line against police outside the European Climate Exchange, demanding radical action against global warming.

Earlier, there was dancing, music, poetry, debate. I perform Shelley on the blockade as the lines of armoured police form: "Rise like lions after a slumber in unvanquishable number." The crowd builds; protestors with banners and cameras scale the walls of banks and shops. Our demands ring through the city.

From 11pm the police advance, pushing back our human blockades. Under the street lights, the truncheons come out. The police surge forward. They swarm over our tents and sound systems, like predators over a kill. Our lines

break, we fall back. I turn, and a shield smashes into my head. Later, much later, my friends tell me that they tried to hold on to me, grabbed my legs as the police grabbed my arms, my body ragdolling between the lines. I don't remember: I blacked out.

When I come to, a police medic is cutting open my clothes to check my heartbeat. Seeing that I am alive and recovering, he asks me questions to check my mental function. Where am I, what is my name? I stammer out a fake. He stands me up and lets me go. Concussed, my clothes hanging open, I stumble through the wreckage of the camp. I search the darkness for anything familiar. It is two in the morning, the street is shining and I am alone. Seven hours earlier and 200 metres away, while we were dancing, a policeman stationed at the protest struck a newspaper vendor who was passing by, forcing him to the ground, killing him. The vendor's name was Ian Tomlinson.

*

I'm perched on top of a siege tower built of wood, papier maché and corrugated iron, yelling instructions as rope crews ease it down a hill towards police vans. I'm in an anonymous crowd in white paper biohazard suits, forcing our way up to a bank's headquarters and smashing its windows. I'm dressed in glitter and black, chasing a fascist street gang off the streets of a post-industrial Scottish town.

The easy story would be that, after I was beaten by police, I decided to stop going to protests, stop putting myself in harm's way. The truth is that I kept throwing my body into the fight, even as I drifted further and further from my

body, got sadder, grew thin as a ghost. The truth is that after each encounter I took longer to recover, and the flashbacks – the noise, the shields, the stagger through London – grew harsher, more intrusive. The truth is that I withdrew from my friends and myself.

I lived with the people I organised with, and collective housing was a political project. I remember conflicts over chore rotas, bills, responsibility, ideology, relationships. I remember bowls of stew and long musical nights. I remember hiding in my room, frozen in social panic. I remember the time I threw all the dishes in the house at the wall in a meltdown over the washing up. The time I freaked out about the rules of a game and ran away from a party. The time I hid for weeks because I was ashamed of not completing the action point assigned to me at the meeting. The many, many times I stewed in anger, unable to talk to my friends about what I was feeling. Rage ate at my guts, and shame ate at my skin.

*

Eventually, I break. I put my life on pause, end a relationship, take myself out of political organising, move to a flat by myself, and try to learn who I am. Within a year, I have my autism diagnosis and start getting a diagnosis of gender dysphoria. Or, I name some of the ways my brain works as “autistic” and some of the feelings I have about my self as “trans”. Or, I start wearing ear protectors to shops and parties, and begin shifting my body from one seen as male to one seen as female.

Struggle, then crisis, then finding oneself. It is true and it isn't. I could instead tell a looping narrative of how a psychologist gave an opinion that I was

autistic when I was a child, and I didn't find out til I was seventeen, when I rebelled against it, only to return to diagnosis in my twenties. I could offer a messy plot arc about a teenager in frilly shirts and make-up, an activist in black drab, a refusal to take any label offered me. I could talk about ways I enjoyed my life before transition and ways that I struggle with life after, ways I don't fit into diagnostic criteria and ways I resist psychiatrists. I could tell a lot of stories.

But this story will do, for now: I started to be an autistic woman, and I grew happier. I went to therapy regularly and learned about myself. The more I embraced my autistic and trans self, the more I understood how I fought. I started to understand what frustrated me and what made me shut down: simple things like noise, or being asked too many questions at once. I started to understand how much I had been alienated from my body, how not wanting to have a body had made me fling it into social struggle without worrying about the effects. I also started to understand what my ways of being had to offer.

The outsider fear that made me hypervigilant of social dynamics also made me, counter to stereotype, a careful and observant negotiator. My need for social clarity also made me good at asking people what they needed, once I stopped being afraid. And once I stopped being afraid of what I wanted to wear, how I wanted to change my body, what I wanted to be called – once I began growing into myself – I could meet other people as they were too. When you accept something that's difficult and stigmatised about yourself, it's suddenly much easier to accept difficult and stigmatised things about other people, and full of joy. When you want to have a body, you can look after it and be stronger in struggle. When you're no longer fighting yourself, you can

choose where you truly need to fight.

*

I hop off my bike and onto the pavement, a few streets away from home, where a low bridge crosses a dirty river. There's a couple right in front of me: the man as tall as I am, but far broader; the woman as slight as I am, but far shorter. His face goes red, and he shouts: "What the fuck are you doing? Watch where you're fucking going!" I stare blankly. He looks me up and down. "Fucking tranny idiot."

I'm thirty two, my body shifting between man and woman, between someone seen as a source of violence and someone seen as a target of violence. I'm still learning what that means, learning the changing strength in my limbs, learning the new flow of my moods. I'm still learning what's safe and what isn't. I haven't yet accepted that I shouldn't walk the streets alone. I shout back.

The argument escalates. He puffs up; she shrinks back. My arms go wide, gesticulating. And then his hands are on my jacket and he lifts me from the ground. "Leave us the fuck alone," he says, quietly, "Or I will drop you off this bridge." He lets go. I freeze. They walk away. I gather myself together and stagger home.

I tweet about it. The screen buzzes with messages of sympathy. "Are you OK?" Am I? "Are you safe?" Am I? "I'm so sorry." I stare at the screen. The insects are crawling up my arms again. I thought I was calmer now. I thought the hormones had changed who I was. It's my fault. I shouldn't have fought

back. I should know better. I'm wrong, wrong, wrong.

*

I write a manifesto for trans struggle and it's published online by an art gallery. I'm proud of the work: it's about what makes trans lives exciting, how we look after each other, and what we're fighting for. I think it's fun, joyous, liberatory. But that section of the internet that is very preoccupied with trans people finds my manifesto, and they do not like it. I receive hundreds of abusive messages across social media platforms and in my inbox. "The writer needs tranquilizers or ECT," said one person. "I know a nice volcano," said another. "What the fuck is wrong with you?" said one email, in its entirety.

As a trans person with just a minor public profile, this is now routine. When I'm commissioned for a new piece of writing, whether it's about trans life or not, I make an action plan with the organisation for what we'll do if trolls take notice. I ask for the comments to be turned off, to not be tagged on social media, for someone to give me a call a week later to check in. I've put emotional support in place for dealing with organised abuse when it happens. Because the attacks are routine, I have a routine response. I never respond. I never fight back. I tried sarcasm, I tried reason, I tried mockery, but now I close my eyes, count to ten, and walk away from the computer.

Walking away does nothing to heal my hurt or bring about justice, and the anger still sits in my belly. But letting out any of my rage only makes the situation worse: any careless word will be saved and thrown back at me later as justification for what's happening. I want to fight, but I feel small and alone. I can be silent and let the abuse continue, or fight back and be blamed for the

abuse.

The experience of online abuse is common for anyone with a public career and a social media account, especially for women, racialised people, disabled people and LGBT+ people. It's a version of the same abuse that all marginalised people face in public. I'm sure that some of the people who attack me have their own experiences of it.

I grieve for a friend I lost in fights over trans politics. Once, when I wrote and asked to meet, to try to resolve our conflict, she refused, saying "You believe in violence." I understand her own fear, even as I hate it. Little she said could have hurt more. Those words go straight to what I am most of afraid of in myself, and what I least know how to live with.

*

I'm no longer the person who fights without thinking, and I don't want to be. I don't want to be someone who flings herself in harm's way without a sense of vulnerability, and yet, having willed my own body into something more vulnerable, into the kind of body that is doubly marked as both a target of violence and a source of fear, I wish it weren't so. I needed to make my body this way, but why does that have to come with so much risk? I don't go to protests with heavy policing. I don't walk the streets by myself at night. I don't use public toilets alone. I am still fighting the world that makes these statements true.

What I do have, now, is a set of tools for coping with the world and for choosing how I respond to violence. I've learned how to calm myself with

breath, not so that I can walk away from conflict but so that I can engage in conflict well: choosing my reactions, extending compassion when I can, speaking my truth when I must. I've learned how to name my feelings and to let them be, so that I don't lose as much energy struggling with myself. I've learned how to ask for simple things like "turning down the music" and "giving me time to respond", so that I'm less likely to have a meltdown in public. I've learned that people around me are, more often than not, struggling with many of the same things I am, even if their experience isn't the same as mine. When I remember that, I feel much less shame.

As Lama Rod Owens writes in *Love and Rage*, a generous and practical reflection on working with political trauma, "Anger is actually trying to tell us something". I know now that when I am angry it is because I am hurt, because something has reminded me of where I hurt. "My anger is a precious and beautiful thing," because my anger is showing me what is wrong. If I look after my anger, I can choose to act wisely in response. Precious too is the understanding that when people show their anger to me it is because they are also hurt.

I don't know, yet, how to respond to the stranger who emails me abuse, or the powerful man who mocks me to his staff, or the potential comrade who sees me as a threat, or the friend who is now afraid of me. Fighting hurts too much, but not fighting is impossible. Knowing that those who hurt me are themselves hurt doesn't tell me what to do. My compassion and capacity have limits. Sometimes all I have is the old, insufficient lesson of walking away. I am still the hurt child, reacting to cruelty with rage. But now, when I feel the rage, I can (sometimes) breathe and choose how I respond. I am still the radical teenager, driven by fury at injustice. But now, when I feel the drive, I

can (sometimes) check my energy levels and make careful decisions about what I take responsibility for. I am still the depressed adult, frightened of the world and of conflict. But now, when I am afraid, I can (sometimes) move past the fear and ask for help. I am still trans and autistic, and that means that I face threats and violence that go far beyond my ability to cope. There are many times I just can't do what I have learned to do. But how I am, and how I am angry, is precious, because my anger has something to tell the world, and my hurt gives me something to fight for.

Artlink

Established in 1984, Artlink is an arts and disability organisation. We believe participation in the arts has an important role to play in realising personal and social change.

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