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FIRE TO THE GRASS

PARENTS ARE TREES, in my part of the world. Under their shade, children are protected from the harsh heat and dust of the world: they are supposed to blossom, the fruit of their loins. The loss of a patriarch is painted as the fall of a great tree, a mother dying young is eulogized as a flower nipped in the bud. But familial forests can often prove to be abusively stifling; the towering edifices of tradition and hierarchy denying saplings access to the sun. When children from such environments run away from home, or grow up and shut the door on their families and step away, then there are few trees in the metaphorical landscape they escape to. Estrangement is described as arid and barren—empty of the nourishers that should be there. The world of self-exile is portrayed as one of weeds and dry grass.

When someone leaves an abusive situation, people assume they have left their love for their abusers behind, along with the keys, as if they put on unforgiveness like sunglasses to cover a black eye. Resentment and bitterness are treated like bruise marks—evidence of a past crime, but of no further use, meant to be erased as soon as possible. Children estranged from their parents can at best expect to be sometimes believed when they describe themselves as survivors of abuse. But they are rarely counted among the ranks of loving children. It is as though the act of escape, the act of terming treatment to be unforgivable, erases the concern and caring and attachment they might feel. Victims of intimate abuse have been told so often that true love is forgiving that it feels like a lie to state that their love and unforgiveness can coexist, equally authentic.

The problem with binding love to forgiveness is the implication, which follows, that one cannot love the unforgivable. And so when one sees proof of love and caring, which the vast majority of children and spouses of abusers provide, one assumes that forgiveness has also happened. The tidy conclusion of this dominant narrative then becomes the assessment that the abuse was forgivable. But just as you cannot truly envision the complex reality of what abuse is without granting that a person can be both loving and abusive, you cannot begin to talk about battered love without talking about unforgiveness.

To love someone who has harmed you, *and* to fully name and recognize that harm, *and* to deem it unforgivable, *and* to continue living in some relationship with each other: that is what the vast majority of people in abusive relationships do. As we come to more open and investigative reckonings of abuse, it behoves us to treat unforgiveness as praxis of survival—not as a dirty byproduct of harm, but as a multifaceted philosophy worth theorizing.

Part of the process of theorizing unforgiveness is applying a feminist lens to the way that both forgiveness and its opposite have been defined. The patriarchal weaponization of forgiveness as a way to demand meekness from those abused by the powerful has equated forgiveness with peace—willfully obstructing any recognition that a lack of visible conflict does not necessarily mean that justice and restitution have been achieved. Similarly, a patriarchal definition of unforgiveness equates it with violence, with both self-righteous ethnonationalism toward the enemy as well as with the personal motivation of vengeance. Patriarchal manifestations of violence, like honor killings and religious lynchings, are framed as failures to forgive—as if existing in defiance of dominant hegemony is a transgression that requires tolerance.

A feminist approach to unforgiveness does not involve vengeance. It is not a sword with which to avenge honor; it is the shield of placing a barrier. Radical unforgiveness is not punitive or vengeance work—it is protection and carework and activism. When unforgiveness demands ruptures, whether in the form of divorce, or deplatforming, or boycotts, it is not focused on causing harm to the abuser but on preventing further harm to current and future survivors. Behavior derided as feminine faults—nursing petty grudges, nagging, bitchy backbiting, and gossip—can actually be reframed as nascent attempts at a collective women’s work of unforgiveness. Seen in this light, the spiteful hostility of our judgemental mothers is not warped love but thwarted unforgiveness, denied a full blossoming into reasoned activism and empathy, where the resentment and bitterness has been distributed on a load-sharing basis.

BY RESPECTING UNFORGIVENESS, we do not need to demonize all forgiveness as an unnatural emotion to feel. Forgiveness that happens organically feels like grass that sprouts after a rain—a natural consequence of the circumstances, a response that needed no extra effort to happen. But more often than not forgiveness is imposed by an external authority as an artificial peace. Like a tidy green lawn in a graveyard,

such forgiveness demands immense hidden labor, weeding and watering and mowing and gatekeeping in an endless cycle just to maintain the fiction of a static ending and eternal tranquility.

Forgiveness certainly has a place in our social strategizing and mental toolkit; however, deglamorizing its status as a mark of born-again Bodhisattva will help to prevent abusive demands for it. To legitimize unforgiveness, it is necessary to start by toppling the idol of forgiveness: a virtue enshrined in several religious traditions and wielded with particular brutality by modern Christian ideologies against anyone with the temerity to hold the powerful accountable. If we remove divinity from the equation, it is clear that both “to err” and “to forgive” must be analyzed strictly in profane terms of power.

Theological underpinnings aside, forgiveness is often a survival strategy. Like flight, fight, freeze, or fawn (all of which are valid reactions to a violent situation), forgiveness is often the most practical, efficient way that a victim can preserve their sense of agency. Once a survivor has removed themselves from the situation of abuse, however, it may then, like the other reactions, become overcompensating. Tolerating and accepting and normalizing abuse is a survival strategy. As such, radical unforgiveness is a scaffolding that builds alternative ways to survive. It supports the efforts of flawed, failing victims to change their mindset and gives them the strength and security to be able to call out abuse.

It helps to look at unforgiveness as a resource offered to victims that helps to achieve their goals. Has their survival tactic of forgiveness helped to break the cycle of abuse? Has it benefited other survivors? Has it reformed the abuser? Has it healed the survivor’s trauma? If the answer to any of these questions is no, then we can continue to offer the survivor additional tools and resources, and one of them is radical unforgiveness.

WHEN AMERICAN BACKYARD conservationists first began to let their waterg-uzzling, pesticide-ridden lawns “go to seed,” they noticed that weeds took over. Weeds are first-responder plants—the toughest and hardiest species that take root in a soil devastated by toxicity and abuse. But as ecological studies have shown, weeds are just the first stage in a process of active replenishment. To look at an empty lot and call it “overgrown,” rather than an emergent ecology, is akin to pathologizing the immediate emotions that arise when an act of abuse is defined as unforgivable. Anger, hate, fear, bitterness, resentment, grief . . . these

are weeds. Instead of uprooting them and attempting to impose order on a mental landscape, it behooves us to take the time to observe them. Which will wither away on their own, as taller plants cast their shade over them? Which are invasive species that do need to be replaced? And which, eventually, will end up summoning butterflies?

Finding the strength to change reactionary habits translates into a new awareness: it is possible to thrive without forgiving. Some people stop there, at the personal level, marking certain individuals in their lives as unforgivable. But the real justice work happens when we push unforgiveness towards the political, as a collective ideology. To be a useful resource unforgiveness must be transformative: in order to be radical, unforgiveness must be liberatory.

We can start by considering the first step: the practice of unforgiving as both naming and auditing. An unforgivable act is a broken bone—many of us continue to walk beside the people who broke them, sometimes taking their hand because we need assistance, sometimes helping them. Radical unforgiveness recognizes the fact of the broken bone—it was broken. Perhaps it needs to be rebroken and reset. Perhaps the crack is only noticeable through X-rays. Perhaps the limb hurts only when it is cold and raining. Perhaps mobility has been an issue ever since, and assistive devices can help. Unforgiveness recognizes the break; radical unforgiveness acknowledges the complexity of survival beyond the break.

UNFORGIVENESS IS CULTURE-CHANGING. If you accept what happened to you as normal, as a survival tactic, then you will pass it down to other people. Radical unforgiveness renames your experience from acceptable, and therefore good enough for others, to unacceptable and not to be replicated. For parents to say that hitting kids is unacceptable requires an act of transformative unforgiveness; it reframes “we turned out OK” into “it was not acceptable for my parents to hit me.” When you apply radical unforgiveness to intergenerational trauma, you name all the connected and cascading acts of harm as harmful, rather than creating a punitive balance sheet of wrongs suffered to wrongs perpetuated. Then you can say that both the things people did and the things that were done to them are unforgivable. The spiteful hostility of our judgemental mothers then gets redefined as not warped love but thwarted unforgiveness, denied a full blossoming into reasoned activism.

The second step of radical unforgiveness is to consider it the start of community response. “How do you live with the unforgivable” should

not be a rhetorical restatement of tragedy, accompanied by a wondering shake of the head that implies “Oh, I just couldn’t, I would die!” We must instead make it an actual question, asked earnestly and with respect for the many many ordinary people who have survived commonplace abuse. And radical unforgiveness demands a follow-up question: What would make such lives easier? More comfortable? More just?

Unforgiveness is a step toward rebuilding communities with intergenerational trauma. Because you start from a place of truth—unforgivable things happened. Now, how do we live with them? If we have the permission to call their actions unforgivable, it is easier to accept the pity and sorrow and empathy we also have for our fucked-up parents and grandparents. When movements do not demand forgiveness of individual abusers, it is easier to analyze and organize against shared oppressions. When forgiveness is removed from the negotiations, it is easier to continue to make national and international calls for reparation and restitution.

One of the most insidious ways that forgiveness is weaponized is through community judgment offering forgiveness by proxy. When we permit abusers to maintain relationships with us without any disruption, we imply that they seem forgivable to us—a collective response that further estranges a victim from support and solidarity. Often, forgiveness by proxy is an admission of culpability. Sons can often forgive and therefore forget their father’s abuse of their mother because it was a way of forgiving themselves of their own patriarchal inclinations and habits. But learning to be gentle and compassionate to ourselves does not mean that we can appropriate the right to describe our abuses as forgivable. Learning to name the things we did as unforgivable and then figuring out how to live with it will help us demand accountability from others.

WHEN WHITE PEOPLE from the rain-drenched island of England surveyed the Indian subcontinent, their practical, colonial surveyors looked at vast tracts of land covered in thorny bushes and brown grass and marked it down, with their meticulous maps, as “wasteland.” (They had a certain savant genius for genocidal taxonomy.) And so, for over two hundred years, the incredibly complex tropical savanna ecosystems were looked at only as the negative space of degraded forests. Modern afforestation projects followed the same philosophy, planting alien ornamental trees with desperate certainty that a tree, any tree, was a more nature-affirming sign of ecological success than stubby stalks of grass that only a goat could feed on. If it was not forest, and it was not farmland, then

it was, for the longest time, considered useless. (The nomadic pastoralists and indigenous people living alongside savannas have always found them useful, but they are not the neo-colonial urban elite who get to govern the grass.)

We have been told that unforgiveness is useless so often that it can be hard to redefine what productivity looks like when marginalized and derided forms of labor are taken into account. Holding space, bearing witness: these are seemingly passive forms of productivity. It takes energy to stand still in a crowd that pushes you to move on. The unforgivers are the ones who stay petty, who don't just get along, and they are the ones who force changes through in organizations where it is easier to let it go.

Here's a freeing thought: What if one has a responsibility to unforgive, what if one is achieving some measure of restitution by being a stone against the flood that tries to wash away the evidence of wrongdoing? By not being able to forgive, you are not failing at humanity. You are reforming humanity—by being a record keeper, by bearing witness. Unforgiveness is not the negative space of the absence of a thing; it is a concrete, voluntary action, a choice. Broken relationships are not failures; they are proof of the work of unforgiveness.

Radical unforgiveness presents a way of looking at ruptures not as failures but as restorative processes. A divorce is often a restorative rupture: in nations where such data is collected and analyzed, women's access to no-fault and unilateral divorce has consistently reduced both female suicide and homicide. In situations of intimate abuse, where violence is statistically likely to escalate at the time the victim attempts to leave, facilitating restorative ruptures can save many lives. Domestic violence shelters, shelters for runaway children, and rape crisis centers are at the forefront of the labor of radical unforgiveness. Their founding values are a statement that says, "You who cannot forgive the violence against you, you are welcome here. This is a space to shelter your unforgiveness."

The powerful often individualize abuse as a pathology. Whether abuse takes the form of intimate individual action, or dispersed structural violence, abuse is not an illness that cannot be helped, it is an ideology that one always chooses to follow or reject. As a method to combat ideology, radical unforgiveness can be the equivalent of a protest march, loudly disrupting normalcy and stating that a problem exists. When a safety violation happens, we don't focus on forgiveness, even though often we do forgive the terrible accidents, the injuries and maimings that happened because of carelessness or haste or ignorance.

Like OSHA, investigating a harm done, we talk about protocols and standards, about fines and consequences. That's what radical unforgiveness for emotional injuries needs to look like. It is a failure of processes that has led to harm, and personal forgiveness has nothing to do with the correct institutional response.

And if one allows the discomfort of unforgiveness to really enter a room and take up space, radical unforgiveness can also instigate conversations that were too long suppressed for the sake of maintaining the status quo. If unforgiveness becomes a community task, then those less emotionally traumatized can start from the assurance that "that action was unforgivable" and collectively negotiate what happens next.

THE THIRD TASK of radical unforgiveness is memory work. Too often, victims are their own solitary witness; in order to survive, they exile themselves and the unforgiveness they carry in a state as torturous as solitary confinement. To be the only one who remembers abuse, who holds on to it in the face of denial and indifference from everyone else, is exhausting. A life lived where you are the only one feeling sorry for yourself is a life filled with bitterness and grief. Oftentimes a victim finds it hard to heal from abuse because their somatic and psychological reactions to triggers, their adaptive personality, is the only proof that abuse happened. To change yourself, even for your own betterment, is to erase your own testimony. Yet if there is never any restitution, then letting go of the memory doesn't feel just either. It feels like giving up, an acceptance that the lions have won and will tell their own story.

That's why radical unforgiveness must be community action. If everyone carries the weight of remembrance, then the primary victim can set aside their trauma—without the fear that the memory will be lost or their healing will be perceived as forgiveness. Collective memory work starts with creating safe spaces, communities where abuse survivors trust that sharing their story will increase the number of witnesses, rather than accusers. Bathroom walls and group DMs are some of the places where radical unforgiveness can be witnessed. Memory work continues with victim advocacy: facilitating justice without retraumatizing a survivor and ejecting abusers from common spaces, so that the victim doesn't have to retreat. A glance at the rash of libel cases across continents filed to silence survivors of sexual violence shows how the patriarchal defenders of the right of speech to offend do not extend their support to a feminist, unforgiving right to bear witness.

WITH EMERGENT ATTENTION paid to grasslands, there is also an emergent danger of romanticizing the terrain in willful ignorance: the sort of tourist gaze that sees an invasive *acacia tortilis* tree in an Indian desert as a symbol of survival. Grasslands cannot simply be ignored as undifferentiated tracts of pristine perfection. We owe them our full, rigorous intellectual involvement and the ongoing negotiation of how to grapple with the invasive species that our species have propagated. Equally, not all unforgiveness is benign. As with any form of collective action, it behooves us to acknowledge that radical unforgiveness has the power to be both a tool and a weapon.

Weaponized collective unforgiveness is also the source of identitarian abuse: as seen in the modern Hindutva project of imagining the persecution of a nonexistent unified Hindu identity from historical Muslim rulers, while entirely erasing the factual enslavement of oppressed castes. “They raped our women” weaponizes memory work to perpetuate violence across identities. Ethically understood, unforgiveness must be held up to the light and scrutinized against the demands of human rights and justice; otherwise, it loses its potential to achieve radical liberation.

Sites of historical genocide are potent regions for memory work in either direction. Vengeful unforgiveness selectively weaponizes them. Hindutva zealots and liberal Indians alike have appropriated the forced exodus of Kashmiri Pandits without demanding equal accountability from those in power for the preceding genocide of Muslims in Jammu and for the ongoing colonial genocide of Kashmiris (including Hindus of a less oppressive caste). On the other hand, some of the most liberatory unforgiveness theorization can be found in the work of Jewish Holocaust survivors who draw meticulous connections between the conditions of Nazi Germany and those in Zionist Israel. Their work protests the genocide in Palestine precisely because the Shoah was also unforgivable, and it challenges the misappropriation of unforgiveness as a justification for apartheid. Fascist fantasies of unforgiveness frame it as a reaction so threatening that it justifies preemptive violence—the Zionist propoganda mischaracterizing a Palestinian call for decolonization as a retributive genocide of Israeli Jews demonstrates exactly how corrupt such rhetoric is. Meanwhile, actual decolonization looks like the ethics of the radical unforgiveness practiced by the First Nations’ Land Back movements, which incorporate climate justice and anti-capitalism into a restoration of native sovereignty.

RADICAL UNFORGIVENESS is a way to build a coalition between the theory and the reality of restorative justice. In communities under threat from a hostile (often genocidally colonial) power, forgiveness was a ruthlessly pragmatic compromise: one agreed to live together because survival of a shared culture was deemed the greater good. This is still the value system at work in communities built upon resisting various systems of oppression—casteism, racism, capitalism, imperialism. Radical unforgiveness in such spaces can be a complex tangle of interpersonal tensions, where competing definitions of survival and resistance challenge each other. It is hard, painful work, and difficult to do, as any form of coalition building tends to be.

Meanwhile under the umbrella of the modern nation-state, restorative justice practices like mediation and diversion methods are often driven by organizations that work with offenders. Their goals are to mitigate the effects of carceral punishment on offenders who are often marginalized by age or identity, and these programs are often situated alongside formal legal systems of probation, parole, and imprisonment. Their agenda, often explicitly stated as such, is to rehabilitate the offender. What often gets left out by those imagining rehabilitation is what that future means when forgiveness is not on the table. Radical unforgiveness demands refocusing attention on victims and their needs and desires.

Ideally, radical unforgiveness is one of the ways to achieve liberation and justice. It does not seem kind, because it is not meant to be so. Abusers never want to admit that their victims are being kind to them, because it reveals their entitled claims to a victim's forgiveness as a lie. When we say that something is unforgivable, we are saying that any empathy we may offer the abuser, any support or continued relationship, does not figure on the balance sheet of abuse and accountability. And yet—radical unforgiveness does not extinguish the possibility of kindness and compassion, of carework and love. It demands transformation, but it does not place limits on the possibilities of change.

IN RECENT DECADES, ecologists influenced by decolonization and ecofeminism have begun studying grasslands with less inherited bias, and one of the most remarkable developments has been the change in their attitude toward fire. These attitudes had never been universal; it was only the neocolonial scientific establishment that had derided as ignorant savages the peoples who intimately knew the grasslands—the

indigenous and the pastoral natives who would, with deliberate intent, periodically start fires.

Ecologists have learned that savannas are distinguished from dry forests by the presence of a range of trees specifically adapted to the occurrence of fires. They have learned that, whereas forests store carbon in their trunks and leaves, thus devastating the climate when they catch fire, grasslands sink carbon into their roots, fixing carbon in the soil, even after a fire. They have learned that grasslands thrive on fires. A long-overdue fire, raging after an artificially imposed oppressive peace, can indeed cause harm, but when those who live with grasslands light it up, they warm up the soil. Fire releases nutrients back into the soil, controls invasive species, facilitates habitat diversity, and stimulates new growth.

For those of us inhabiting emotional landscapes that feel arid and barren, because our love is not the lush green forest of the fairy tale, radical unforgiveness can feel like fire in the grass.