

# The Effect of Abuse On Perception

The human family as a unit cannot exist without anger. Conflict and frustration are both vital to and inevitable in any family, though their severity and impact vary vastly among families, according to each members' capability for empathy and emotional control. Many children, though, grow up only experiencing the harshest extremes of the anger spectrum, which can heavily affect their views on the other side later in life. In her poem "Family Stories," Dorianne Laux's unlikely opinions towards stories of anger serve to demonstrate how toxic anger can seem harmless to one who has been harmed terribly.

The first section of "Family Stories" explores the author's opinions towards her boyfriend's recountings of moments of conflict in his family. Within the opening lines of the poem, Laux describes the anger in her boyfriend's household, how "an argument once ended when his father/ seized a lit birthday cake in both hands/ and hurled it out a second-story window" (2-4). This excerpt employs particular diction and imagery, as Laux chooses to populate it with words with aggressive connotations, such as "seized" and "hurled," in order to properly communicate the excessive, explosive anger present in her boyfriend's home. The description of the father grabbing a birthday cake, with candles still burning, seemingly unaware or uncaring of the possible burns inflicted upon him serves to demonstrate the pure belligerence that plagues the family during (assumedly) one of its members' birthday party. At this point in the poem, the narrative takes a sharp, unexpected turn away from popular reason: to most, the boyfriend's story portrays a family (or at the very least a father) that struggles with anger management, creating a toxic environment for anyone to live in. Laux's opinion, sadly, was the complete opposite; she believed that it was "what a normal family was like: anger/ sent out

across the sill, landing like a gift/ to decorate the sidewalk below” (5-7). In this excerpt, Laux uses opposing word choice to the previous lines, employing words with positive connotations, such as “gift” and “decorate.” Laux’s specificity in describing how the anger is sent out, away from the house and its inhabitants, serves as a dark allusion to the very different situation in her own home, where anger is kept within the threshold, directed at the occupants instead of away from them. Having experienced the worst extreme of the anger spectrum, having suffered wrathful abuse, Laux views her boyfriend’s experience as almost beautiful, simply due to the absence of human violence.

The origin of Laux's concerning viewpoint –that of finding beauty in rage and toxicity– is clarified further in the second section of “Family Stories,” which delves deeper into the abuse and neglect she was subjected to by her own family. The section begins aggressively, with Laux describing her own household (in a notable parallel to the first line), saying: “In mine/ it was fists and direct hits to the solar plexus,/ and nobody ever forgave anyone” (7-9). Every previous line has muddled meaning, containing multiple plausible interpretations, but this excerpt presents the reader with undeniable confirmation to their germinating suspicions: Laux was beaten, neglected, and unloved–abused in the worst ways by her own family. The lack of poetic devices is in itself a poetic device, as the bleak, literal language forces the reader to comprehend those seventeen words of terrible, inescapable truth. As Laux continues, although she expresses her belief in the love present within her boyfriend’s family, she begins to describe in further detail his family’s states of belligerence; recounting how they

shoved their feet  
through cabinet doors, or held a chair like a bottle  
of cheap champagne, christening the wall,

rungs exploding from their holes (11-14)

In accordance with the theme from previous lines, Laux draws attention specifically to the destruction of furniture (a “cabinet,” “chair,” and “wall”) as a method of indirectly illustrating how the same actions taken against objects in her boyfriend’s household were taken against humans in hers. Laux was likely more used to people shoving their feet against her ribcage, rather than cabinets, or being “christened” with a chair, rather than a wall, or having shoulders wrenched from their sockets, as opposed to rungs from their holes. In order to bleakly demonstrate the tragic nature of her experience, Laux ensures that fantastical or romantic poetic devices are few and far between, as the most eloquent word choice (“christening”) is present simply to relate the motion of swinging a chair at a wall to that of breaking a bottle of champagne against a maiden seaship. Again, of course, the absence of poetic devices brings no such absence of clarity, as Laux’s disheartening personal experiences are further revealed.

After clarifying the origin of her unusual opinions towards toxic situations, Laux uses the last section of “Family Stories” to further emphasize the vast difference between the opinions of her and her boyfriend, especially how she perceives terrible things with an aura of beauty. Immediately, Laux provides two polarized opinions from her and her boyfriend, with her saying that it

sounded harmless, the pomp and fury  
of the passionate. He said it was a curse  
[...] and when he  
looked from that window what he saw was the moment/  
rudely crushed. (15-19)

Laux employs clear contrast in this excerpt, in both the poetic sense and the literal. Poetically, Laux continues her pattern of opposingly connotative language, and chooses words such as “pomp” and “passionate” to portray how she views such situations as dramatic: an extravagant façade, nothing more than an empty show of power. The word choice on the boyfriend’s side is more clear cut, with “curse,” “rudely,” and “crushed” all having obvious connotations, although the latter also serves as a callback to the cake being crushed on the sidewalk. In the literal sense, much more simply, Laux believes her boyfriend’s family to be completely harmless, while he sees them as toxic, believing their anger to be a curse. Laux finishes off the poem by returning to the incident from the first section, wherein the father of the boyfriend threw a cake out of a window. Laux launches into the lines of the poem most populated by imagery and other poetic devices, saying that

all I could see was a gorgeous  
three-layer cake gliding like a battered ship  
down the sidewalk, the smoking candles broken, sunk  
deep in the icing, a few still burning. (19-22)

This final excerpt will likely leave readers confused, and produce a plethora of new questions: Why bring the focus in for the last lines of the poem, instead of widening the view? Why describe the intricate details of the cake, when it at first glance has no relation to the theme of the poem? The answer is, expectedly, abstract and multifaceted. Laux chooses to compare the “gorgeous cake” to a “battered ship” as a metaphor for herself, as the abuse she endured left her innately beautiful self bruised and broken. She likens her spirit to the candles with the phrase “a few still burning,” affirming that she had escaped the hell of her family with her life tossed and battered, but not extinguished. The second layer of the segment occupies the same space as the

first, but with a different message. This layer relates back to her boyfriend's story, all but literally placing Laux in the moment that the argument climaxed. The phrase "all I could see" is one of Laux's signature saying-without-saying descriptions, as it states to the reader (without directly saying any of it) that she was completely blind to the conflict 'around' her. To her, the flying cake is something of noteworthy beauty, so why would she focus on the equivalent of a calm conversation in her household? Laux proceeds to go into three full lines of hawk-eyed detail, further placing herself in the moment, and showing how the entirety of her focus is directed towards the cake, akin to a child engrossed in a book completely tuning out the ruckus of a younger sibling. During the final segment, Laux seems unsympathetic and disdainful, but it is important to note that her attitude was not purposeful; she was simply not capable of comprehending how the argument in her boyfriend's home could be harmful.

Throughout "Family Stories," Dorianne Laux goes in depth regarding the abuse she endured from her family, and the way it impacted her view of anger and harmful situations in her personal life. Having suffered in one of the worst ways possible, without love or a true family, Laux became desensitized to the suffering (albeit less severe) of others, and believed that any situation without physical violence was harmless, and even beautiful. Unfortunately, it's common knowledge that terrible harm can occur mentally if one is exposed to toxicity and bullying, but at the time of the poem, Laux hadn't grasped that idea yet, having only experienced the worst abuse. Laux's story, shocking as it may be, is no uncommon thing. For ages, soldiers maimed in battle disregarded the PTSD of their otherwise unhurt comrades, with a similar belief to Laux's: If the wounds cannot be seen, then they must not be there at all. As human beings, each and every one of us must recognize the suffering of those around us, no matter how hidden or harmless it may seem. On the other hand, we must try to understand those in Laux's position,

those who know nothing more than the worst harm, and recognize why they may have difficulty acknowledging the damage of others. At the baseline, the harm that every person experiences in their lifetime is what shapes much of their views and personality, and that is an absolute truth of the human race.

### Works Cited

Laux, Dorianne. "Family Stories." Poetry Foundation. Accessed March 2, 2022.  
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/55604/family-stories>.

### Poem

[I had a boyfriend who told me stories about his family,  
how an argument once ended when his father  
seized a lit birthday cake in both hands  
and hurled it out a second-story window. That,  
I thought, was what a normal family was like: anger --5  
sent out across the sill, landing like a gift  
to decorate the sidewalk below.] [In mine  
it was fists and direct hits to the solar plexus,  
and nobody ever forgave anyone. But I believed

the people in his stories really loved one another,  
even when they yelled and shoved their feet --11  
through cabinet doors, or held a chair like a bottle  
of cheap champagne, christening the wall,  
rungs exploding from their holes.]  
[I said it sounded harmless, the pomp and fury  
of the passionate. He said it was a curse --16  
being born Italian and Catholic and when he  
looked from that window what he saw was the moment  
rudely crushed. But all I could see was a gorgeous  
three-layer cake gliding like a battered ship  
down the sidewalk, the smoking candles broken, sunk  
deep in the icing, a few still burning.]