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Original Research Article

# Self-Repair and the Poetic Voice in 21st-Century Poetry: Diane Seuss's "Fundamentally Me" and Ada Limón's "Salvage"

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**Abstract:** This paper looks at self-repair as a formal practice in twenty-first-century lyric poetry, through close readings of Diane Seuss's "Fundamentally Me" and Ada Limón's "Salvage." I draw on Heinz Kohut's self-psychology, especially the selfobject, transmuting internalization, and optimal frustration, and set it beside recent empirical research on narcissistic vulnerability and mentalization. My argument is that self-repair in these poems is neither a theme nor a byproduct. It is a mode of voice. Seuss repairs through refusal: she talks herself out of memory's seduction and arrives at a bare, coherent address. Limón repairs through attention: she learns to look at damage without flinching, then turns that steadiness inward as an apology to herself. These are not one strategy in two keys. They are two different answers to a shared problem, which is how lyric voice can take over the holding that a responsive other might once have provided. The paper places this argument within recent work on poetry and mental health and suggests that poetry's therapeutic value lies less in reducing symptoms than in the practice of self-mentalization the poem makes possible. Set side by side, the poems show twenty-first-century poetry of self-repair as a repertoire of formal strategies (refusal and attention, subtraction and addition, admonition and apology), each with its own resources and its own limits.

**Keywords:** self-repair; poetic voice; Heinz Kohut; selfobject; mentalization; Diane Seuss; Ada Limón; contemporary poetry

## 1. Introduction:

### The Poetics of the Mended Self

Contemporary lyric poetry often treats the self less as a stable identity waiting to be expressed than as something made and remade through memory, vulnerability, and other people. In such poems, damage doesn't automatically lead to a story of recovery, and the speaking voice isn't simply reporting an experience it already understands. The poem can become the place where the speaker tries to make experience graspable, through acts of address, shifts in perspective, rhythmic control, and the shaping of difficult feeling. This article asks how that work gets done formally. Instead of treating self-repair as a theme a poem represents, I look at the ways poetic voice can take part in the provisional reorganization of the self.



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Psychoanalytic self-psychology gives us one vocabulary for thinking about this. Heinz Kohut's account of the self stresses the relational conditions that sustain and develop a sense of cohesion. His concepts of selfobject experience and transmuting internalization describe, respectively, the functions another person may perform in supporting the self and the gradual growth of internal capacities through repeated relational experience (Kohut, 1971, 1977). I use these concepts not as clinical explanations of literary characters or authors but as prompts for asking how a poem stages recognition, support, and self-regulation. The distinction matters. A poem is not literally a developmental caregiver, and a lyric speaker can't be treated as a clinical subject. What the framework allows is a way of investigating how literary form figures the need for support and the attempt to take on some of its functions.

Kohut's later reflections on creativity offer a further point of contact with literary study. He describes artistic activity as an effort to gather fragments of experience into a structure that can be felt as meaningful and coherent (Kohut, 1984, p. 286). That account doesn't establish that every artwork is therapeutic, or that aesthetic coherence amounts to psychic restoration. It does invite us to watch the formal operations through which a work organizes discontinuity. In lyric poetry those operations might include the handling of address, the recurrence or interruption of a particular phrase, shifts between first- and second-person positions, and the movement from emotional exposure toward a more sustainable way of speaking.

To name this particular meeting of subjectivity and form, I develop the term *reparative lyric*. A reparative lyric doesn't simply announce that its speaker has healed. It arranges voice and poetic relations so that a provisional self-recognition or self-regulation becomes possible. I offer the term as a literary-critical heuristic, not a clinical category and not a claim that reading a poem produces measurable therapeutic effects. It points analysis toward three related questions: how the lyric subject is made visible to itself, how the poem gives affect a formal structure, and how relations with an addressed or figured other can be reworked into a changed relation to the self.

Diane Seuss's "Fundamentally Me" and Ada Limón's "Salvage" make a productive pairing because they approach the problem through very different formal and relational movements. Seuss builds a voice that addresses and admonishes the self, refusing to let memory become a refuge. Its imperative language and compressed statements suggest inward regulation achieved through distance and refusal. Limón's "Salvage" starts somewhere else entirely, with sustained attention to a damaged madrone tree. The speaker's encounter with this nonhuman presence grows into identification and then self-address, so that looking at an external other becomes bound up with her effort to acknowledge her own life. The tree has to remain more than a convenient psychological symbol; its material and ecological presence is part of what gives the poem's relational movement its weight.

Read together, the poems illuminate two configurations of reparative lyric: inward self-regulation through admonition and refusal in Seuss, and relational self-recognition through attention and apology in Limón. Four questions guide the article. (1) How does lyric voice enact self-repair through formal rather than only thematic means? (2) How do second-person address, imperative syntax, and affective restraint organize the divided speaking position in Seuss's poem? (3) How do ecological attention, figurative identification, and apology shape the

movement toward self-recognition in Limón's? (4) What does the comparison show about the relation between lyric subjectivity, relationality, and provisional self-coherence?

The article makes two contributions. The first is reparative lyric itself, a framework for reading the formal negotiation of vulnerability and self-coherence without reducing poems to therapeutic documents. The second is a comparative analysis that separates inward regulation from relational self-recognition while showing that both depend on how voice is organized. I begin by clarifying the relevant Kohutian concepts and the limits of applying them to literature, and by explaining the method of comparative formal close reading. Then I turn to Seuss and Limón in turn, before bringing the readings together to consider what reparative lyric means for contemporary poetry. Throughout, my subject is the speakers and formal structures of the poems, not the psychological states of the poets.

## 2. Theoretical Framework:

### Kohut, Self-Formation, and Reparative Form

Psychoanalytic approaches to literature have given us rich accounts of desire, memory, conflict, and subjectivity, but they carry a methodological risk. The poem gets treated as evidence of an author's unconscious life, and the speaking voice gets mistaken for a clinical subject. I try to avoid both. Kohut's self-psychology serves here as a conceptual resource for describing relational functions and the formation of self-cohesion, while the analysis stays anchored in observable features of the poems. What I interpret is neither the poet's presumed psyche nor a diagnosis of the speaker. It is the literary construction of a voice that negotiates vulnerability through address, syntax, imagery, and shifts in perspective.

### 2.1. Kohut and the relational conditions of self-cohesion

For Kohut, the development and maintenance of a cohesive self sits at the center of psychological life. Where other approaches explain psychic experience mainly through intrapsychic conflict, he emphasizes empathic relationships and the functions significant others perform in sustaining a person's sense of vitality, continuity, and worth (Kohut, 1971, 1977). The term *selfobject* names this functional side of experience. It doesn't just designate an external person or thing that resembles the self; it describes another as experienced through the psychological function that other performs for the self. Those functions can include mirroring, idealization, and a sense of likeness or belonging. The concept is relational and functional, not merely a description of how an object looks or what it symbolizes (Baker & Baker, 1987; Strozier et al., 2022).

Mirroring concerns the experience of being recognized and responded to in ways that support an emerging sense of self. It shouldn't be reduced to praise, approval, or visual reflection. In Kohut's account, what counts is the other's responsiveness to the person's developing experience and initiative. The distinction has real consequences for literary analysis. A tree, a remembered figure, or a poem can't be called a selfobject just because it resembles the speaker or appears in a scene of recognition. The better question is whether the poem represents an encounter as performing a function analogous to recognition, affirmation, or the regulation of self-experience, and that analogy has to be earned through the poem's language and structure rather than assumed in advance.

Kohut also describes transmuting internalization, the gradual process by which functions first supported by selfobject relationships become available as internal capacities. Optimal frustration belongs to the same developmental account. It refers to tolerable failures or limits in responsiveness that occur inside an otherwise sufficiently supportive relationship and, over time, help build internal regulatory structures. It doesn't mean self-denial in general, or adversity, or deliberate refusal. Nor is it one dramatic moment when a person simply decides to become self-sufficient. The process is incremental and relational, and the need for selfobject experience doesn't vanish in adulthood (Kohut, 1971, 1977; Strozier et al., 2022).

These qualifications set an important limit on my argument. The poems I consider don't provide evidence of developmental processes in the clinical sense. Their speakers are literary constructions, and a lyric moment can't demonstrate that transmuting internalization has happened. I use the concepts to frame questions about how poetic language represents a movement from dependence on recognition toward self-address and self-regulation. When the word *internalization* appears in this article, it names a literary pattern, a represented movement, and not a clinical conclusion about the speaker (see Figure 1).

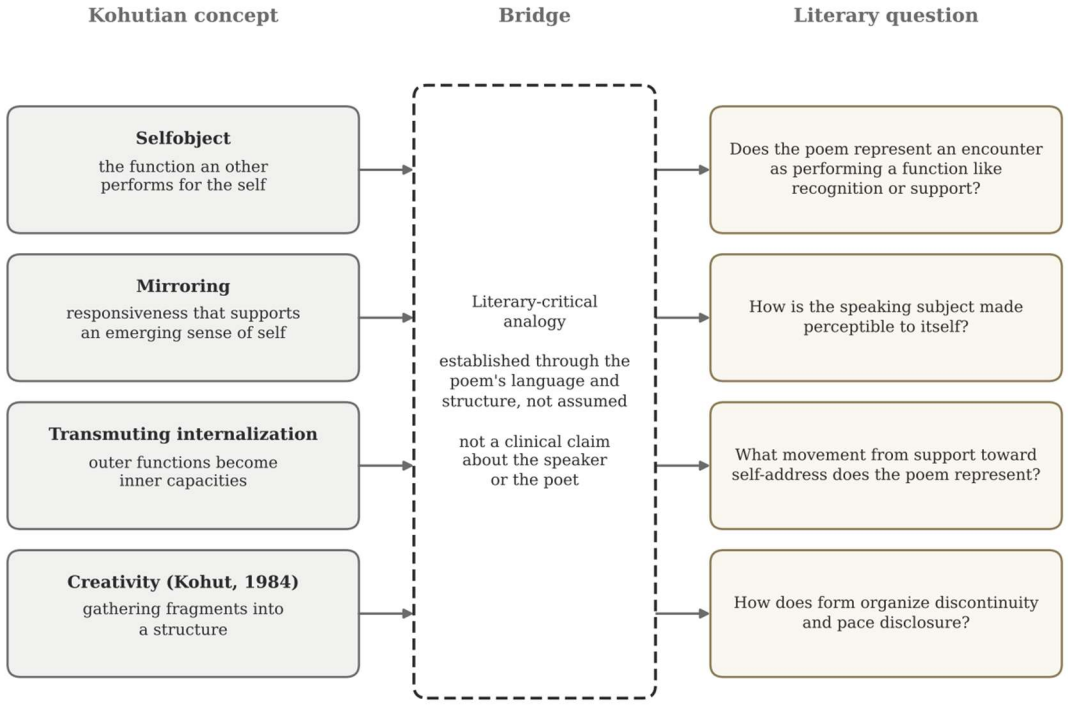


**Figure 1.** From Kohutian concepts to literary questions: a conceptual bridge that preserves the distinction between developmental theory and literary-critical analogy.

### 2.2. Creativity, poetic form, and the work of holding

Kohut's reflections on creativity give us another way into literary study. In *How Does Analysis Cure?* he considers artistic activity in relation to the gathering and organizing of fragmented experience (Kohut, 1984). This lets us ask how a work of art shapes material that might otherwise stay discontinuous or hard to organize. It doesn't license the conclusion that every poem works therapeutically, that aesthetic form equals psychic integration, or that a speaker is

necessarily restored by the act of speaking. The more defensible claim is narrower: poetic form can stage attempts to contain, articulate, and reorganize experience.

So I don't treat the poem as a selfobject in any literal or universal sense. Particular features of a poem can, however, be read as performing functions analogous to those associated with selfobject experience. Direct address can create a position from which the self becomes observable. Repetition can give emotional material a pattern it can bear. Syntax can regulate the pace and intensity of disclosure, and figurative identification can let a speaker approach an experience sideways. Whether any of this produces psychological change is beyond what close reading can establish. What it can show is how the poem organizes a scene of recognition or self-regulation, and what limits stay visible inside that scene.

The same distinction keeps the language of "holding" from turning into an all-purpose metaphor. In the analysis that follows, holding refers to a textual effect I have to be able to specify: affect contained by compressed syntax, an addressed relation that is sustained, or the attention through which a speaker stays with an image of damage. The term describes a pattern in the poem's formal organization. It doesn't claim that the poem offers the kind of responsive environment a therapeutic relationship does.

### 2.3. Mentalization as a supporting, not diagnostic, concept

Mentalization offers a complementary vocabulary for talking about how inner experience gets represented. Broadly, it is the capacity to interpret behavior in terms of mental states such as feelings, intentions, and beliefs. It matters here because the poems don't merely display affect; they create speaking positions from which affect can be observed, named, questioned, or redirected. The emphasis stays literary, though. I don't infer a mentalizing capacity in the poets, and I don't use psychological findings to validate a reading of any particular line. Empirical studies of mentalization and poetry-based interventions can give context for interdisciplinary conversation, but they can't stand in for textual evidence or establish the clinical effects of these poems.

For that reason I keep the discussion of pathological narcissism and narcissistic vulnerability deliberately at the margins of the framework. Those constructs belong to specific psychological research traditions, and they shouldn't be carried into readings of Seuss's or Limón's speakers without compelling textual and contextual justification. Neither poem is treated as the representation of a psychiatric condition. The more useful terms are vulnerability, self-recognition, affective regulation, and relational address, each understood as a feature of the poem's constructed situation and not as a diagnosis.

### 2.4. The reparative lyric: an operational framework

Building on these distinctions, I propose *reparative lyric* as a literary-critical term for poems in which the organization of voice and form stages an attempt to negotiate vulnerability and reach provisional self-coherence. "Reparative" doesn't mean that the poem repairs the speaker completely, reverses injury, or guarantees a therapeutic outcome. It names a formal orientation. The poem makes a vulnerable or divided subject available for renewed recognition by arranging relations among address, affect, imagery, and temporal perspective. The framework is meant to travel beyond these two poems while staying open to other configurations that different corpora might produce.

It moves through three connected dimensions. *Self-mirroring* concerns the ways a poem makes the speaking subject perceptible to itself, whether through self-address, the response of an imagined other, or an encounter that prompts recognition. *Self-regulation* concerns the formal means by which affect is shaped: syntax, rhythm, negation, repetition, tonal restraint, and the pacing of disclosure. *Relational recognition* concerns the way the self is reconfigured through an encounter with another person, a nonhuman presence, or an addressed version of the self. These aren't stages every poem must pass through, and they aren't direct translations of Kohut's developmental categories. They are interpretive questions meant to guide close reading. Figure 2 sets out the three dimensions and shows how each poem answers them.

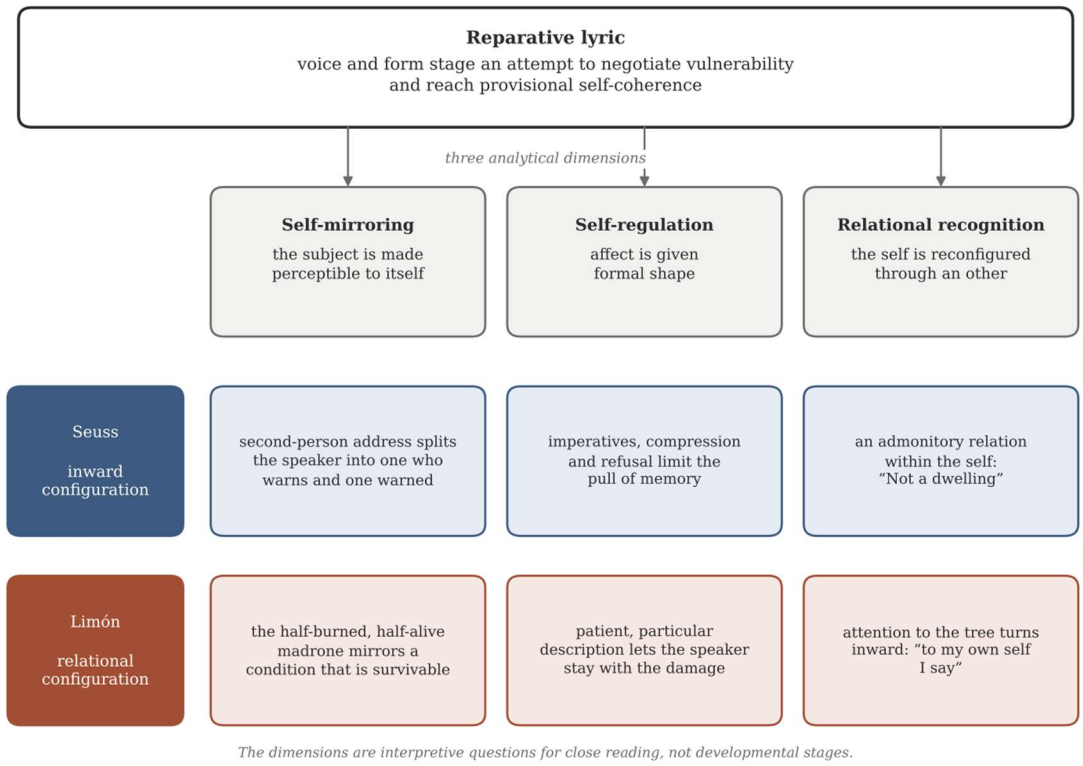


**Figure 2.** The reparative lyric as a formal model: three analytical dimensions and two configurations developed in the readings of Seuss and Limón.

Applied to this pair of poems, the model yields two configurations. In Seuss's "Fundamentally Me," the main movement is inward. Second-person address, imperative syntax, and refusal create distance from the seductions of memory and set up an admonitory relation within the self. In Limón's "Salvage," the movement is relational: sustained attention to the damaged madrone, figurative identification, and the eventual apology turn the speaker's attention toward her own life. I'm not claiming that Seuss and Limón exhaust the possibilities of reparative lyric. They offer a comparative demonstration of how different formal resources can stage different routes toward provisional self-recognition.

The framework, then, combines Kohut's account of relational self-cohesion with a formalist attention to what a poem specifically does. Kohut helps name the problem of support, recognition, and the slow availability of regulatory capacities; close reading decides how, and whether, a particular text organizes those concerns. That division of labor is essential.

Psychoanalytic concepts sharpen the questions, but the poem's language remains the primary evidence. The next section turns to those questions as they apply to the first poem.

## 3. Methodology:

This study uses comparative formal close reading. The corpus is two poems: Diane Seuss's "Fundamentally Me" (2022) and Ada Limón's "Salvage" (2022, in *The Hurting Kind*). The pair was chosen because the two poems approach self-repair through very different formal and relational movements, which makes the contrast between them analytically productive. The corpus is deliberately small, and the study does not claim that these poems exhaust the possibilities of reparative lyric.

The analysis is guided by the reparative lyric framework set out in Section 2.4. For each poem, I ask how the speaking subject is made perceptible to itself (self-mirroring), how affect is shaped through syntax, rhythm, negation, repetition, tonal restraint, and the pacing of disclosure (self-regulation), and how the self is reconfigured through an encounter with another person, a nonhuman presence, or an addressed version of the self (relational recognition). Heinz Kohut's concepts of the selfobject, transmuting internalization, and optimal frustration are used as heuristics that sharpen these questions, not as clinical explanations. The poems' language remains the primary evidence.

Interviews with the poets (deNiord, 2022; Drake, 2022) and the empirical literature on mentalization and poetry-based interventions are used as context for interdisciplinary conversation. They are not used to validate readings of particular lines or to establish clinical effects. The object of analysis is the speakers and formal structures of the poems, not the psychological states of the poets. The study is a textual analysis and involved no human participants, so ethical approval and consent procedures did not apply.

## 4. Findings:

### 4.1. Diane Seuss's "Fundamentally Me": The Voice That Refuses Respite

"Fundamentally Me" is a short poem, barely a page, and it moves with the clipped urgency of someone talking themselves out of a bad idea. The opening is blunt: "The danger of memory is going / to it for respite" (Seuss, 2022). It sounds less like a lyrical proposition than a warning the speaker issues to herself, counsel delivered in the second person because the first person is standing too close to the fire. "Respite risks entrapment," she continues. "Don't debauch yourself by living in some former version of yourself that was more or less naked" (Seuss, 2022). The voice is sardonic, a little cruel, and unmistakably protective. It belongs to someone who knows how seductive the past is and has decided, for now at least, not to give in.

What makes the poem so useful for thinking about self-repair is that it turns down the easiest version of repair lyric poetry has on offer, which is nostalgia. It doesn't console. It never says the past was better, or that the wound has healed, or that the speaker has made her peace with what happened. It says nearly the opposite. "What can memory be in these terrible times?" the speaker asks. "Only instruction. Not a dwelling" (Seuss, 2022). There's a hard-won clarity in that answer, the clarity of someone who has learned that going back to the scene of injury isn't the same as understanding it. The poem insists that the present tense is the only place repair can happen, even as it admits that the present is, in its own way, unbearable.

Kohut's account of the self helps explain why the refusal matters. For Kohut, the self isn't repaired by returning to an earlier state of wholeness, because there never was one. It is repaired by building structure, by slowly internalizing the functions that were missing or damaged (Kohut, 1971). "Fundamentally Me" enacts that process at the level of voice. The speaker doesn't soothe herself with memory. She instructs herself, and the instruction becomes a kind of selfobject function performed in real time. The voice that says "don't debauch yourself" isn't a parent's or a therapist's. It belongs to a self that has learned, through long practice, to perform the holding function on its own behalf, and the poem is the record of that performance.

There's a resonance here with recent work on narcissistic vulnerability and mentalization. Blay et al. (2024a) found that the capacity to mentalize one's own states, to hold them in mind without being flooded or evacuated, is impaired in narcissistic vulnerability, and that this impairment is what drives dysregulation. Read that way, "Fundamentally Me" is an exercise in self-mentalization. It takes a dangerous affective pull (toward memory, toward respite) and puts it under scrutiny. It names the temptation, describes its risks, and redirects the self toward a different stance. "You were smaller," the speaker tells her past self. "You were not better" (Seuss, 2022). That isn't self-punishment. It corrects a distortion, the romanticizing of one's own suffering, that keeps the self stuck.

The poem's closing movement is quiet and strange. After all the admonition, the speaker permits herself a single concession: "Or if you must dwell: The sweet smell of weeds / then. The sweet smell of weeds now. / An endurance. A standoff. A rest" (Seuss, 2022). The repetition is doing something important. "The sweet smell of weeds then" and "the sweet smell of weeds now" are almost the same words but not the same thing. The first is memory, the second is presence. What the poem reaches through that small shift isn't a resolution but a rest, a temporary suspension of the struggle. In Kohutian terms, this is the moment when the selfobject function has done its work and the self can, briefly, stop working so hard at holding itself together.

Seuss has talked about this side of her poetics in interviews. "You either counsel yourself or go mad," she told Daniel Drake in *The New York Review of Books*. "It's almost contrapuntal" (Seuss, as cited in Drake, 2022). The word *contrapuntal* is telling. It suggests a voice always in dialogue with itself, always answering its own propositions, never settling into a single register. This isn't the voice of confession, which assumes a listener who will absorb and absolve. It's the voice of self-repair, which assumes the only reliable listener is the one inside the poem, and that the work of being heard has to be done, in part, by the speaker herself.

What "Fundamentally Me" shows, then, is a mode of self-repair that works through refusal. It refuses nostalgia, self-pity, and the consolations of a past that was never as good as memory makes it. And in refusing them, it builds something. The voice that emerges isn't warm or tender, but it is coherent, and it holds together. It performs the function Kohut attributed to the selfobject: gathering fragments into a structure that can be lived in, at least for the length of a poem. The repair isn't permanent, and the poem never says it will be. But it shows what repair looks like when it happens at the level of the line, the sentence, the turn of address. It looks like a voice that has learned to speak to itself without flinching.

### 4.2. Ada Limón's "Salvage": The Voice That Learns to Apologize to Itself

If Seuss's repair works through refusal, a voice talking itself out of memory's seduction, Limón's "Salvage" moves in almost the opposite direction. It begins with attention, slow and unembarrassed, to something outside the self. "On the top of Mount Pisgah, on the western slope of the Mayacamas," the poem opens, "there's a madrone tree that's half-burned from the fires, half-alive from nature's need to propagate" (Limón, 2022). The specificity is nearly documentary: the mountain, the slope, the species. This isn't a speaker hurrying toward metaphor. It's a speaker who has learned that repair sometimes starts with looking carefully at something that has survived, and letting the looking take its time.

The tree is described in halves. "One side of her is black ash and at her root is what looks like a cavity that was hollowed out by flame." Then comes the turn: "On the other side, silvery green broadleaf shoots ascend toward the winter light and her bark is a cross between a bay horse and a chestnut horse, red and velvety like the animal's neck she resembles" (Limón, 2022). The pronouns shift to *her* and *she*, and the tree becomes a body, animal and human at once. The description never resolves the split between the burned side and the living side. It keeps both in view. That is the poem's first act of repair: not denying the damage, not insisting everything is fine, but refusing to look away from either half.

What happens next is where Kohut becomes indispensable. The speaker has been staring at the tree "for a long time now," and the staring produces a recognition that is also a loss. "I am reminded of the righteousness I had before the scorch of time. I miss who I was. I miss who we all were, before we were this: half alive to the brightening sky, half dead already" (Limón, 2022). *Righteousness* is a strange and exact word. It names a former state of integrity, less moral superiority than a kind of wholeness, a sense of being justified in one's own existence. The fire has taken that. And notice that the speaker doesn't say she was burned; she says she was scorched by time. The damage is temporal, cumulative, ordinary, the damage of living long enough to become half-dead.

Kohut's account of the self helps explain why this recognition is structural and not only descriptive. The speaker isn't just observing a damaged tree. She is meeting an external form that mirrors her own inner state, and in that mirroring something becomes possible. Kohut argued that the self is built and repaired through selfobject experiences, through the responsive other who reflects the self back in a way that makes it feel coherent, alive, and worth holding (Kohut, 1971). The tree in this poem functions as a selfobject. It isn't a symbol of the speaker's damage; it is a form that performs the function of holding damage without being destroyed by it. The tree is half-burned and half-alive and still standing, and that standing is the mirroring the speaker needs. It says, without saying: this is survivable.

The final movement is an act of address that is also an act of self-repair. "I place my hand on the unscarred bark that is cool and unsullied, and because I cannot apologize to the tree, to my own self I say, I am sorry. I am sorry I have been so reckless with your life" (Limón, 2022). The syntax does something crucial here. The speaker can't apologize to the tree, which is not a person and can't receive an apology the way another person could. So the apology is redirected: *to my own self I say*. The self becomes the recipient of care that was first aimed outward. This is the moment Kohut called transmuting internalization: the external function, here the act of attending to a damaged other, is turned inward and becomes a structure the self can use (Kohut,

1971, 1984). The speaker has been holding the tree in view. Now she holds herself in view, and speaks to herself with the tenderness she might have offered the tree.

“Reckless with your life” is devastating in its gentleness. The speaker doesn’t say *I have ruined everything*. She says *reckless*, a word that implies a lack of care, a failure of attention, a driving too fast past the things that mattered. It’s an accusation, but a soft one, addressed to the self as if the self were someone else, someone who deserved better. This is the voice of a self that has learned, perhaps through the practice of poetry itself, how to be a selfobject for itself. The poem doesn’t claim the apology fixes anything. It claims the apology can be made, and that making it is a form of repair.

Recent work on poetry and mentalization supports this reading. Blay et al. (2024a) found that self-mentalizing, the capacity to hold one’s own states in mind with curiosity rather than judgment, is a protective factor against the dysregulation that characterizes narcissistic vulnerability. “Salvage” is an exercise in exactly that capacity. The speaker holds her grief, her regret, her sense of having been diminished by time, and she doesn’t flinch from any of it. She names it, gives it a form, and then offers it something like comfort. The poem doesn’t cure the scorch. It provides a space where the scorch can be acknowledged without the self falling apart.

Limón has spoken about this dimension of her work herself. In conversation with Chard deNiord, she described her poetry as an attempt at “holding up” others, an effort to honor the things and people of her life in a way that lets readers do the same for theirs (deNiord, 2022). “Holding up” is a selfobject phrase. It describes a function: the poem holds something up so that it can be seen, so that it can be borne. In “Salvage,” what gets held up is not only the tree but the speaker’s own damaged self. The poem becomes the holding environment she couldn’t find elsewhere. It isn’t a dwelling, to borrow Seuss’s word. It’s a place to put your hand.

Where Seuss’s voice refuses respite, Limón’s practices a different kind of repair, one made of attention, of apology, of the slow work of learning to speak to oneself as if one were worth speaking to. The two poems don’t contradict each other. They describe two modes of the same basic task. Seuss’s speaker talks herself into coherence through admonition; Limón’s talks herself into coherence through care. Both use voice, its rhythms, its addresses, its shifts in register, to perform the function a responsive other might once have performed. Both are building, line by line, the structure Kohut called the self.

### 4.3. Two Modes of Repair: Refusal and Attention

Reading Seuss and Limón side by side, it’s tempting to say they’re doing the same thing in different keys, that both poems are about repair and the difference is merely tonal. That would flatten what’s most interesting about the comparison. The poems don’t just describe two attitudes toward damage. They enact two distinct mechanisms of self-repair, and the gap between those mechanisms tells us something about the resources available to the twenty-first-century lyric when it tries to hold a self together. Figure 3 traces each poem’s movement as a sequence of stages.

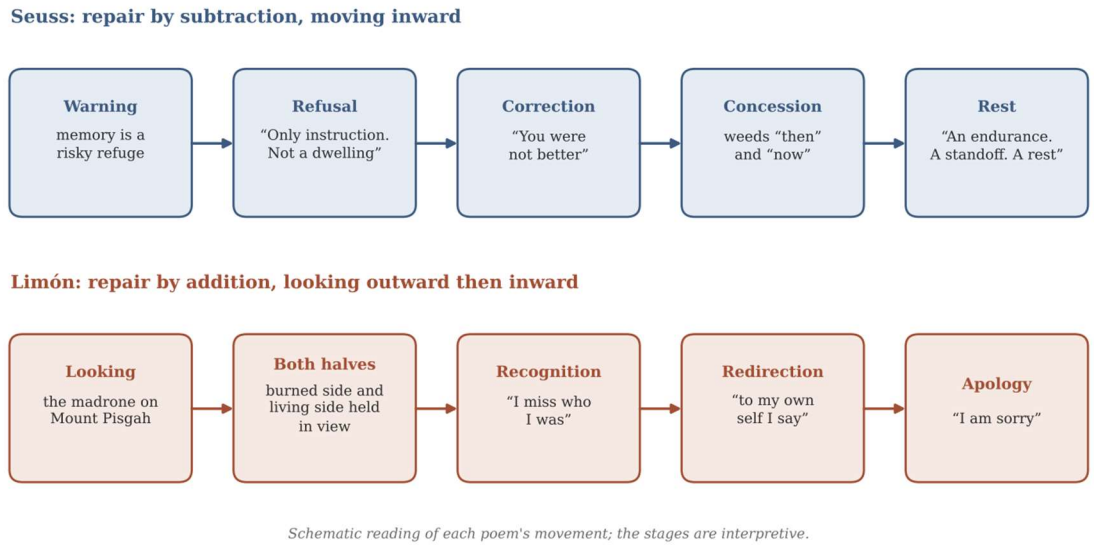


**Figure 3.** The movement of each poem as a sequence of stages: Seuss moves inward through subtraction, Limón moves outward and then inward through addition.

Seuss's mode is refusal. "Fundamentally Me" is built on a run of negative injunctions: don't go to memory for respite, don't debauch yourself by living in a former version of yourself, don't mistake smallness for goodness (Seuss, 2022). The voice is admonitory, almost prosecutorial, and it turns the full force of its intelligence against the speaker's own nostalgia. What's refused isn't the past itself but the use of the past as a hiding place. "What can memory be in these terrible times?" the poem asks, and answers its own question with a correction: "Only instruction. Not a dwelling" (Seuss, 2022). The repair here is structural in Kohut's sense. The speaker does the work of what Kohut called optimal frustration, not by waiting for an external other to fail her but by actively frustrating her own wish for respite (Kohut, 1971). She becomes, in effect, her own selfobject, not by soothing herself but by refusing to let herself off the hook. The poem ends not in comfort but in "an endurance. A standoff. A rest" (Seuss, 2022). Rest isn't the same as respite. Respite is what you take from the work; rest is what comes after the work has been done, briefly, before it begins again.

Limón's mode is attention. "Salvage" doesn't open with a prohibition. It opens with a description so patient and particular that it feels close to devotion. The madrone is named, located, divided into its burned half and its living half, and the speaker stays with it: with the black ash and the cavity hollowed out by flame as well as the silvery green shoots (Limón, 2022). The staying is the repair. Where Seuss's speaker talks herself out of a bad habit, Limón's looks herself into a different relation to her own damage. The tree functions as what Kohut would call a mirroring selfobject, reflecting back a version of the speaker's condition that isn't catastrophic, because the tree is both burned and alive, both scarred and shooting (Kohut, 1971). The speaker doesn't need the tree to be whole. She needs it to be both, and to still stand. That is the mirroring she has been missing.

The difference between the two modes is clearest at the moment of address. Seuss's poem speaks to a *you* that is really an *I*: "Don't debauch yourself," "you were smaller," "you were not better." The second person does the work of distance, letting the speaker address herself as if from outside. Limón's poem moves from third person (the tree as *she*) to first person ("to my

own self I say") in one quiet gesture (Limón, 2022). The address to the self isn't admonitory but apologetic. "I am sorry I have been so reckless with your life" (Limón, 2022). The *your* is the self, and the apology comes with a tenderness Seuss's voice would probably find suspect. But the tenderness isn't softness. It results from the speaker having first practiced care on something outside herself, the tree, and then turned that care inward. This is what Kohut meant by transmuting internalization: the function is first experienced in relation to an external object and only afterward becomes available as an inner capacity (Kohut, 1971, 1984). Limón's speaker can apologize to herself because she has first learned to attend to the tree. Figure 4 sets the two structures of address side by side.

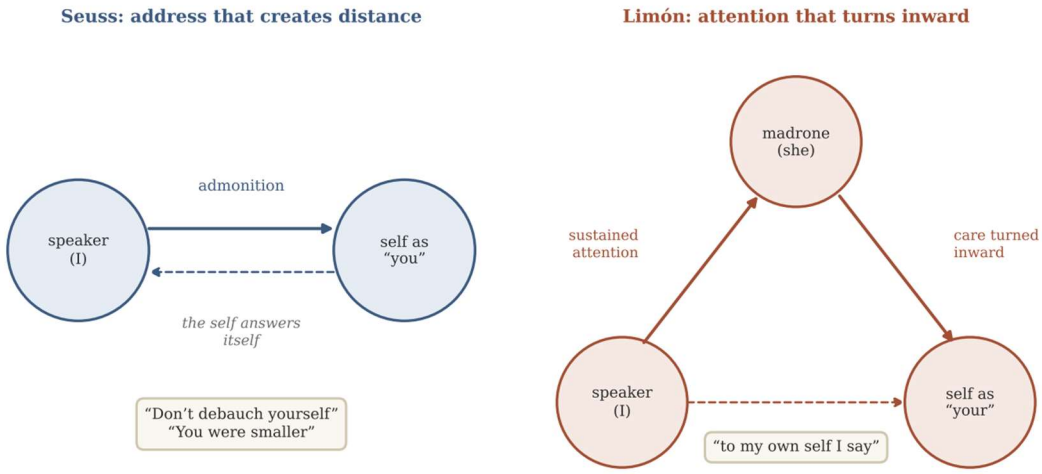


**Figure 4.** Structures of address: Seuss's second person creates distance within the self, while Limón's attention to the madrone is redirected inward as an apology.

Recent work on poetry therapy helps name what's happening. Tangerås (2025) describes a process of "gradual transmuting internalization of intertexts," in which the formal resources of prior poems become part of the writer's own inner furniture (p. 18). Something similar goes on in both poems, though the "intertext" here isn't another poem but a stance, a way of holding the self borrowed from a cultural form and then made one's own. Seuss inherits the confessional mode and refuses its most seductive gift, memory as sanctuary. Limón borrows the pastoral tradition's attention to the nonhuman, but turns it toward the self in a way pastoral usually forbids. Her tree isn't a symbol of feeling. It's a practice of looking that she then applies to herself.

What the comparison finally reveals is that self-repair in these poems isn't a theme they happen to share. It's a formal problem, and each poem solves it differently. Seuss solves it through a poetics of subtraction, stripping away the consolations that keep the self stuck and leaving a voice that is bare and coherent. Limón solves it through a poetics of addition: she brings an external object into the self's field of attention, lets that object do some of the holding, and then internalizes the holding as a way of speaking to oneself. Neither solution is permanent. Neither poem promises the repair will outlast its final line. But both demonstrate that lyric voice can do the work Kohut attributed to the selfobject. It can gather fragments into a structure that, for the length of a poem, can be lived in.

The larger claim this comparison supports is that twenty-first-century poetry of self-repair isn't a single phenomenon but a repertoire. Seuss and Limón aren't doing the same thing in different keys. They draw on different resources within the lyric tradition, the confessional and the pastoral, the admonitory and the attentive, and put them to different kinds of psychological work. What unites them is function, not tone or theme: both poems use voice to do something the unaided self can't do alone. They hold the self up long enough for the self to recognize itself, and that recognition, however fleeting, is what repair looks like in a poem.

## 5. Discussion:

### Implications for Twenty-First-Century Poetics

What does all this ask us to reconsider about how we read contemporary poetry? When a poem works through damage, the temptation is to reach for the language of therapy (healing, recovery, resilience), as if the poem were a container for something that happens elsewhere, in a clinic or a support group. Seuss and Limón suggest otherwise. In both poems, repair isn't something the poem contains. It's something the poem does, in the grain of the voice, in the turn of address, in the refusal to let a sentence resolve too easily. The implications aren't merely interpretive. They touch on how we understand the work of the lyric at a moment when the self is widely felt to be under threat, fragmented by grief, by precarity, by the sheer accumulated weight of living.

### 5.1. Self-Repair as a Lyric Mode

The first implication is that self-repair should be understood not as a theme but as a mode of lyric writing, a way of organizing voice, address, and figuration around the task of holding a self together. That's different from saying a poem is "about" healing. A poem can be about healing and do nothing of the kind; it can describe recovery in tidy metaphors while leaving the voice untouched, unchallenged, unfragmented. What distinguishes Seuss and Limón is that repair happens at the level of form. Seuss's clipped admonitions, the way her sentence keeps turning back on itself ("Don't debauch yourself by living in some former version of yourself"), the refusal of the consoling image: these don't illustrate a psychological process. They are the process (Seuss, 2022). Limón's patient attention to the madrone, the shift from third person to first, the apology offered to the self as if the self were someone else: these don't represent care. They are care, performed in language (Limón, 2022).

This matters for how we read the contemporary lyric more broadly. Recent criticism has stressed how twenty-first-century poetry complicates the closeness of voice to self. The lyric "I" is no longer naively transitive, pointing beyond itself to a stable speaker, but intransitive, pointing to the self constructed in the poem (see Synnes et al., 2021; Stahlschmidt, 2024). If that's right, then the self that emerges in a poem isn't a pre-existing entity being expressed but a structure being built in the act of expression. Seuss and Limón are exemplary of the shift. Their speakers aren't confessing a self that already knows what it is. They are using voice to find out what the self can become, line by line.

### 5.2. Voice as Vulnerability, Voice as Agency

The second implication concerns the double nature of voice in these poems. Voice is where vulnerability is most exposed, in the quaver of Seuss's admonitions and the tenderness of Limón's apology, but it is also where agency is most fully exercised. The speaker who says "I

am sorry I have been so reckless with your life" isn't passive in her regret. She is doing something with the apology. She is making a bid for a different relation to herself, one in which care is possible (Limón, 2022). This is what Kohut meant by describing the selfobject as a function rather than a person: the poem performs a function the self can't yet perform alone, and in doing so gives the self a taste of a capacity it may later internalize (Kohut, 1971, 1984).

Work on mentalization and literary form helps clarify why this matters beyond any single poem. Galgut (2025) argues that literary form facilitates mentalization, the capacity to hold one's own and others' mental states in mind, by containing difficult emotions in structures that make them bearable. The poem doesn't remove the difficulty. It gives it a shape that can be held. Seuss's "Fundamentally Me" is a case in point. The poem's tight, almost claustrophobic syntax isn't a symptom of the speaker's dysregulation but a way of managing it, a formal container that keeps the affect from spilling into incoherence. The voice is vulnerable, yes, but also in control, not in the sense of mastering the feeling but in the sense of finding a form that can carry it without breaking.

That double nature, vulnerability and agency at once, is what makes these poems so useful for thinking about the wider landscape of twenty-first-century poetics. In a cultural moment that often treats vulnerability either as a performance of authenticity or as a failure of resilience, Seuss and Limón show a third possibility: vulnerability as the material of a formal practice. The voice doesn't transcend the wound. It works with it, in it, through it, and in that working something like agency emerges. It isn't the agency of overcoming. It's the agency of making.

### 5.3. Confessional, Therapeutic, Reparative

The third implication is historical. Both poems inherit the confessional tradition, but critically. Seuss's speaker refuses the confessional consolation of memory as sanctuary; Limón's refuses the confessional equation of exposure with truth. What they offer instead is a poetics of repair that is neither confessional nor anti-confessional but post-confessional in a precise sense. It takes the confessional investment in the damaged self seriously while rejecting the assumption that the poem's job is to display that damage for a reader's consumption. The repair isn't for the reader. It's for the speaker. The reader is allowed to witness it, but the witness isn't the point.

This has consequences for how we understand poetry's therapeutic dimension. The evidence for poetry's clinical benefits is growing, but it is also uneven. Kassab et al. (2025) found moderate-to-large effects on PTSD and depressive symptoms but non-significant effects on resilience, and the trials they reviewed were small and heterogeneous. What Seuss and Limón suggest is that poetry's therapeutic value may lie less in symptom reduction than in the practice of self-mentalization the poem makes possible, the slow, formal work of representing inner states so that they can be held rather than evacuated (Blay et al., 2024a). Stahlschmidt (2024) makes a related point: poetic language revitalizes psychotherapy not by offering catharsis but by restoring the figurative density that clinical language flattens. The poem doesn't cure. It complicates, in a way that makes cure thinkable.

### 5.4. A Repertoire, Not a Rule

The final implication is methodological. If self-repair is a mode rather than a theme, then the critic's task isn't to judge whether a poem successfully heals its speaker, an impossible and

inappropriate judgment, but to describe how the poem organizes voice around the task of holding. Seuss and Limón offer two distinct solutions to that task: refusal and attention, subtraction and addition, admonition and apology. Neither is normative. Together they suggest that twenty-first-century poetry of self-repair is best understood as a repertoire of formal strategies, each with its own resources and its own limits. The critic who reads for repair isn't hunting for a theme. She's listening for the work: the way the voice catches, the way the sentence turns, the way the poem makes a space in which a self can, for a moment, be held. Figure 5 summarizes the repertoire the two poems offer.

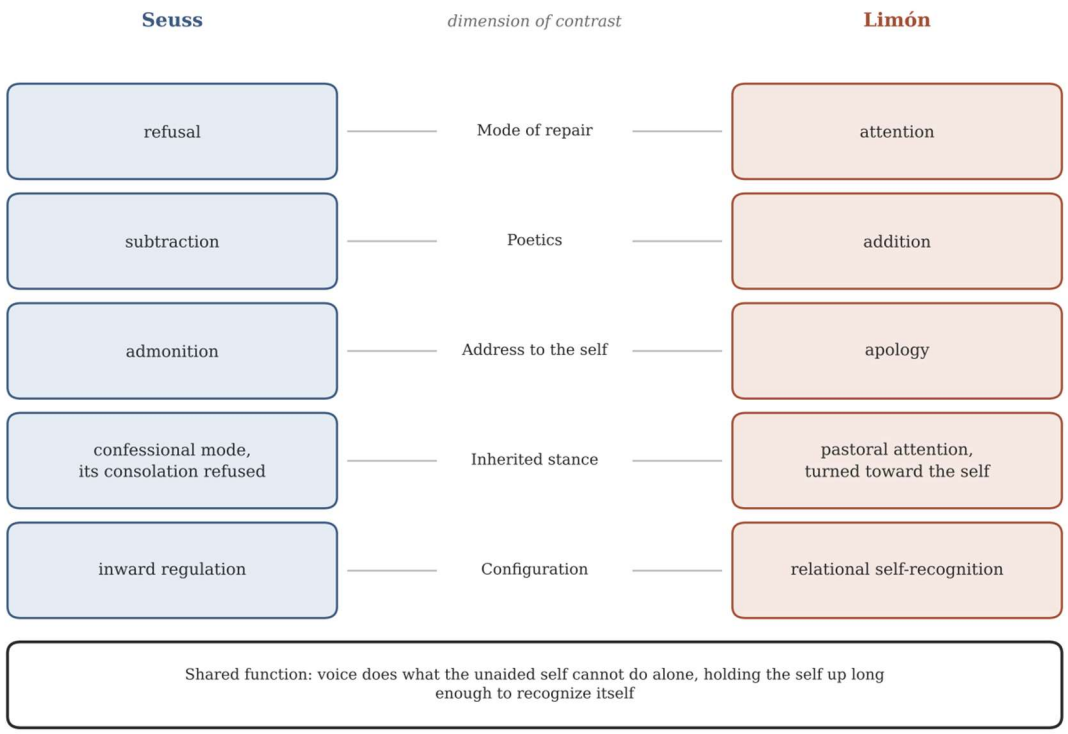


**Figure 5.** A repertoire of strategies: the two poems differ in mode, poetics, address, and inherited stance, but share the function of letting voice hold the self.

That work is quiet and easy to miss. It doesn't announce itself as healing, and it doesn't promise the damage will be undone. But it's there, in the grain of the line, and it asks us to read differently: less for what a poem says about survival, and more for how the poem practices it.

## 7. Conclusion:

### The Quiet Work of Holding

There's a moment, near the end of thinking through these two poems, when the critical vocabulary starts to feel insufficient. Selfobject, transmuting internalization, optimal frustration: these terms do real work, and I've leaned on them. But they don't quite capture the texture of what happens when a voice turns toward itself with something like care. The poems do. Seuss's "an endurance. A standoff. A rest" and Limón's "to my own self I say, I am sorry" aren't illustrations of Kohutian theory. They're events in language that theory can illuminate but can't replace (Limón, 2022; Seuss, 2022).

What I've argued across these sections is that self-repair in the two poems is neither a theme nor a byproduct but a formal practice enacted at the level of voice. Seuss's mode is refusal, the

voice that talks itself out of memory's seduction, strips away consolations, and arrives at a bare, coherent address. Limón's mode is attention, the voice that learns to look at damage without flinching, borrows the function of holding from a half-burned tree, and then turns that holding inward. These aren't the same strategy in different keys. They're distinct solutions to the same problem: how to use the resources of lyric voice to do what a responsive other might once have done.

Kohut gives us a way of naming that work. The creative person, he wrote, gathers "fragments of the self" and attempts "to create a new, whole structure, complete and significant" (Kohut, 1984, p. 286). On this account the poem functions as a selfobject, not because it soothes or consoles but because it performs functions of containment, articulation, and integration that the unaided self can't manage alone (Kohut, 1971, 1977). What Seuss and Limón show is that this function isn't abstract. It happens line by line, in the way a sentence turns back on itself, in the shift from third person to first, in the refusal of a too-easy image. The repair is audible. You can hear it in the grain of the voice.

The empirical literature on poetry and mental health supports this reading, though it also asks for care. Kassab et al. (2025) found significant reductions in PTSD, depressive, and anxiety symptoms across poetry-based interventions, but effects on resilience were non-significant and the trials were small and heterogeneous. Poetry, it seems, doesn't "heal" in any simple, measurable sense. It supports specific functions (meaning-making, emotional articulation, the reorganization of experience) that are central to repair without being reducible to symptom reduction. Blay et al. (2024a) add a crucial piece: self-mentalizing, the capacity to hold one's own states in mind without being flooded or evacuated, is impaired in narcissistic vulnerability and appears to mediate the relationship between vulnerability and dysregulation. The poems I've read here are exercises in exactly that capacity. They hold the damage in view and don't flinch, and in that holding something like coherence becomes possible, not permanently or reliably, but for the length of a poem.

The larger claim concerns how we read twenty-first-century poetry. Self-repair, I've suggested, is better understood as a mode of lyric writing than as a theme: a way of organizing voice, address, and figuration around the task of holding a self together. This shifts critical attention away from what a poem says about healing and toward how it practices it. The critic who reads for repair isn't looking for a therapeutic narrative. She's looking for the work, the way the voice catches, the way the sentence turns, the way the poem makes a space in which a self can, for a moment, be held. That work is quiet and easily missed. It doesn't announce itself as healing. But it's there, and it asks us to read differently.

Seuss and Limón don't offer a template. They offer a repertoire: refusal and attention, subtraction and addition, admonition and apology. Other poets will find other modes. What unites these two, and makes them exemplary for the larger argument, is that both use voice to do something the unaided self can't do alone. They hold the self up long enough for the self to recognize itself, and that recognition, however fleeting, is what repair looks like in a poem.

If there's a final thought to take from all this, it may be the simplest one. Repair isn't a destination. It's a practice. It happens in the middle of things, in the ordinary work of speaking to oneself with something like honesty, in the refusal to look away, in the willingness to say *I*

*am sorry* to the person you have been. The poems don't promise that the damage will be undone. They promise something smaller and more durable: that for a few lines, a voice can hold. And that, for now, is enough.

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