

## The Wound Whisperer

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This is a quiet personal piece. Born amidst an epidemic, my entrance into the world left a permanent bookmark in my mother's life story casting a complicated gloom on the past and aborting her future. While pregnant with me, my mother contracted polio. She mourned the woman she would never be and never accepted the woman she became. The daughter of a disabled Mother, I have a filial affiliation with unhealed wounds.

Ashamed of her condition, Mother shrouded her atrophied left leg under long garments. Her affliction was unnoticeable until she walked. Each step was a lopsided gamble. One misstep, and she would crumple to the sidewalk. She'd flail about like a person drowning on land failing to get upright due to that floppy leg. At age five, I'd sit bewildered on the ground with her counting her bruises.

An indifferent virus had left a young mother and her child anxiously looking up from the pavement for some unknown hero to save us. Relying on the chance passing of a stranger to pull her upright wounded us and with each fall we both left a little blood behind. Decades later, after one cruel stumble, she never stood again. Precarious as it was, I missed her walk.

Mother preferred not to speak about polio. Even though I was vaccinated against it, whenever I got sick, she would ask me to move my chin to my chest. It wasn't until medical school when I learned that a stiff neck was a polio sign. Around this time, I discovered photos of Mother as an active youth. Bedridden then, she refused to look at them, most likely to keep those memories safely repressed. Even now, though she is gone, speaking about her polio seems a violation.

Each trauma is a living voice. I explore the notion that wounds are not inert but live in parallel to our lives in my painting, the *Final Seconds of the Sewhol*. On April 16, 2014 over three hundred students were lost when the ferry sank. This disaster left a wound so gaping it contributed to President Park's downfall. The ship that launched a thousand sorrows created an incalculable hurt that is humanly impossible to stitch close.

While painting this piece, I reflected on my mother's love of water. The buoyancy was a blessing for her mobility, Earth gravity, her enemy. I see my mother in the waters alongside that boat, trying to save herself from the undertow of memory.

She is the muse of wounds.

After she died I found a frayed letter from the "March of Dimes" requesting to enroll me in the program. Although my mother never signed it, she stored it with her important papers her entire life, perhaps as a talisman.

The scars of COVID-19 will also be deep. for both the stricken and for those who are left to finish the paperwork. After an unquiet year, I hope for a woundless 2022 or at least a quiet peace. Few of us walk without trauma. To live is to remember and sometimes the only respite is to follow the source of that wound to the womb. Talking out loud has the power to drown out the whispers and allow us to stagger forward.