

If you need to step out at any time, please feel free to as this thesis project does talk about sensitive topics such as...

- emotional abuse, psychological abuse, childhood trauma, Self harm, Suicidal ideation, And Self hate talk

In "*The Body keeps the Score*", Bessel Van Der Folks says, "Children are (...) programmed to be fundamentally loyal to their caretakers, even if they are abused by them. Terror increases the need for attachment, even if the source of comfort is also the source of terror."

During middle school, I was taking one on one martial arts lessons with Georgia, someone my family knew through scouting. My dad had dropped me off for my lesson, as he usually would. Georgia could tell that something was off with me and took the time to ask me what was wrong. While I don't remember what happened, it was something that happened often when I was with my dad. She listened intently and after I had finished talking, she said to me "that's abuse, what he is doing is abuse, it's not ok". My first thoughts were no, it couldn't be abuse, he's my dad, he loves me, he apologizes. In school, they taught us that abuse was hitting and touching, so how can this be abuse?

I said this to her, and she explained that what he was doing was not ok. I remembered crying for most of our time together, still holding onto this belief that I had a normal relationship with my dad. She helped me begin to realize that I was being abused.

Quote "The essence of trauma is that it is overwhelming, unbelievable, and unbearable. Each patient demands that we suspend our sense of what is normal and accept that we are dealing with a dual reality: the reality of a relatively secure and predictable present that lives side by side with a ruinous, ever-present past." from "*The Body Keeps The Score*".

*I Have Yet to Heal from This* looks into my past, where childhood abuse took place from late elementary into high school. The intent behind this

work is to take the poems that I wrote during this time, and poems that I have written to my younger self since and bring them into a physical space. Doing this allows me to process what I went through so I can begin to understand and heal from my childhood trauma.

Quote “Being traumatized is not just an issue of being stuck in the past; it is just as much a problem of not being fully alive in the present.” from “The Body Keeps The Score”.

Unknowingly, this project began in spring of 2024 in my ghostly narratives class that I took with Wen. The class looked at ghost stories within different cultures, history, and modern times, by examining what the story was trying to convey and why they chose to tell the story the way they did.

For my final project in class, I wanted to look at my own story, my own horror, and bring it into physical form. Using both my poetry and the poems of others about childhood trauma, I printed them out, ripped them up to cover a foot tall crying ceramic ghost sculpture. The sculpture is meant to showcase the invisible scars that trauma leaves behind and can still haunt you.

Last year when I studied abroad in Ireland, I came across Suella Hollands, an Irish photographer, who had recently created a series of photos surrounding her own childhood trauma called “a joining of self”. The photos were taken in a bedroom in a house similar to her childhood home. In some of the photos, phrases like “No one will believe you” and “you’ll split up the family” were woven into the blinds and the sheets in the room. These phrases were told to her by her abuser to keep her quiet, which allowed the abuse to continue.

There was also a pair of images that captured the foot of the bed, the only difference between the two was one was in focus and the other was blurry. These images remind me of times where I would disassociate from the moment to protect myself.

When I saw the image of a partially ajar bedroom door, which allowed you to see the wall in the next room, my stomach dropped. Because the previous images are taken in the bedroom space, you get this feeling of a fragile barrier. I remember feeling this overwhelming anxiety.

I felt drawn to her photos because of what Hollands was doing, giving physical form to her own trauma in order to face it. It was inspiring to see an artist put physical form to her traumatic memories to face them. Knowing she had shared something so vulnerable made me feel like I was not alone.

To further my research, I looked at different ways people combined poetry and sculpture. A piece that I found intriguing is located on the Corbennic Poetry Path in Scotland called *Forest* by poet Martin Reilly and stone carver Angus Martin. I was drawn to this piece because of how well the sculptural and poetic elements conversed with each other. They seemed to be meant to be together; the sculptural aspect of the work enhancing what the poem was already describing. This is my intention in creating the sculptural pages, allowing poetry and sculptural aspects of each page to be cohesive and not separate entities.

“The lost spells” by Robert Macfarlan and Jackie Morris is a book of poetry that combines beautiful watercolor images with poems, they don’t distract from each other, they each support the story the book is telling, a tale about reconnecting with nature to find what has been lost.

Because of the context of how I’m using my art, I wanted to see how art and therapy can be used. In the article “Depictions of trauma: how art can heal invisible wounds”, Shanley Chien(she-in) Pierce talked about how art therapy gives physical form to the trauma, allowing it to be seen outside the body to then be understood. This is what my poems and my thesis work have allowed me to do, give my abuse a physical form outside my body.

This fall I explored 2 books: Bessel Van Der Folk’s *The Body Keeps the Score*, and Ocean Vuong’s *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*.

In *The Body Keeps the Score*, I learned about how brain chemistry changes in response to trauma, depending on the person, we cope through fight, flight, freeze, and fawn. When a person is in a state of fear, the logical left side of their brain turns off, and the emotional right side of the brain takes over. I also read about PTSD, sparked by one traumatic event, and C-PTSD, when traumatic events happen repeatedly which impacts the brain differently.

The book also looks at relationships between parents and their children, and how different ways of interacting with a newborn baby impacts how the child behaves as they grow. It goes on to look at how memories are impacted by trauma, memory becoming fragmented or even being completely forgotten till later in life when a trigger brings them to the surface. The last chapters of the book go over different ways one can live with their trauma by looking at the whole body, not only addressing the psychological symptoms of the trauma, but also acknowledging that the body holds your trauma as well, keeping the score.

The second book I looked at was recommended to me by my mentor Wen, which is the poetry book by Ocean Vuong's "*Night Sky with Exit Wounds*". This book looks through the lens of poetry and memory of Vuong's family immigrating during the Vietnam war. A line that I found powerful from the poem *a little closer to the edge* is this,

"Young enough to believe nothing  
will change them, they step, hand in hand,  
into the bomb crater."

Though different from my trauma, there are ties to pain that can't be ignored.

Quote "Mindfulness not only makes it possible to survey our internal landscape with compassion and curiosity but can also actively steer us in the right direction for self-care." from "*The Body Keeps The Score*".

I started writing poems in 7th grade. I always had a hard time finding the words to express my inner thoughts, maybe it was the rules of speech that made it hard. The rules of poetry on the other hand are more like guidelines, things that can be followed but don't need to be, where grammar is thrown out the window, and words can be expressed in ways I couldn't before. It was freeing. So I began to write, to convey these thoughts that were trapped inside that I couldn't express until poetry. My poems became this diary, a history of what happened, a list of emotions and thoughts that would have otherwise been lost to me.

(Breath)

This written diary of history has allowed me to create my thesis, a sculptural poetry book as an interactive multimedia piece. Something that was important to me was to have interactive elements. Not only because I love interactive elements, but also because it invites the audience to be more engaged, especially when this project is so personal to the artists.

Quote "After trauma the world is experienced with a different nervous system. The survivor's energy now becomes focused on suppressing inner chaos, at the expense of spontaneous involvement in their lives. These attempts to maintain control over unbearable physiological reactions can result in a whole range of physical symptoms, (...). This explains why it is critical for trauma treatment to engage the entire organism, body, mind, and brain." from "The Body Keeps The Score"

Now about the sculptural page themselves

- Childhood wall

Many of the stories I know of my childhood are through others, my mom telling me of some funny or weird thing I did, friends telling stories where we are having fun, pictures that were taken on a day of adventures, etc. I do have a few memories that I can remember like a time in 5th grade me and my friend swore that the recess monitors hated our group so we went around all recess pretending to injure ourselves to see if they noticed. It was nearing the end of recess and we hadn't gotten any results so I thought it was a brilliant idea to run full force into the slide to see if they actually did care. As this was one of the few memories that I can call my own, I hold onto it for dear life.

“Childhood Wall” shows how very few memories have slipped through cracks in the wall. For this piece, I cut out foam bricks for the wall, and after laying out the wall shape, I sketched where the cracks would be and carved them into the desired texture and shape, the pictures are from my mom’s scrapbooks seen in the cracks as the physical manifestation of the few memories I have been able to keep.

My brain has constructed this wall to protect me from my past, but I wished that it could filter out the painful memories so I can have the actual memories to the stories that others tell me.

- Ghost steps

Ghost steps is about flashing back into a fear state I was almost consistently in when I was a kid. The first stanza of the poem located on the first foot represents younger me in this state of fear. The second stanza on the second foot represents where I am now and the residual trauma of being in fear. The transparent feet represent the echoes of angry footsteps I heard from my dad.

When you grow up in an environment that has your nerves constantly on edge, they begin to learn to always be on edge, even when they shouldn't be.

- Beast I fear

When my dad was in his man cave, he wasn't hurting us, we couldn't do anything wrong, he was not monitoring us, he was in his space and we were in ours. There is this idea of separation that gives a sense of peace, though not a very strong one because any second the separation could be broken. This is why you have to open and close the door to read the full poem, to both make, break, and remake this idea of separation.

- Why I fear you

I don't remember the exact day I wrote the poem *Why I Fear You*. What I do remember: my dad was yelling at me, and I was shutting down, a normal response I would have, and I said to him that I was "A fuck up", "a failure", to which he agreed.

I remember being surprised that I actually said those thoughts out loud, immediately, then expecting him to slap me or tell me off for saying such awful things about myself. I felt stunned that he actually agreed to what I said. *Why I Fear You* is this potent realization that I feared what my own dad would drive me to do. The sculptural page takes the form of this realization, by allowing the audience member to shine the light and revealing the poem within the cave.

- Precious bed

Precious bed was one of the first personal poems I wrote back in 7th grade. When I was at my dad's place, I would often go and hide in my room. In a home where I was constantly walking on eggshells, it was one of the few places that I could control. This made it comfortable and safe for me to just be myself for even a little bit.

The poem is a thank you to my childhood bed. I chose to use my childhood bed sheet to hold the poem. This is accompanied by some of my childhood stuffies who kept me safe through cuddles and allowed me to escape through play.

- Smaller

Sometimes, the only way to be safe is to hide. Each ceramic shell gets smaller, hidden by the previous shell, but also offering a variety of shells to hide in. The hard ceramic shell and the soft yarn wrapped around the bottom of the ceramic shell offer protection and comfort. This creates the perfect hiding place, something that I wish I had more of as a child.

- I am

As kids, we have this innate desire to bond with our parents. They show us how to be human, show us how to take care of ourselves, build our beliefs about the world, and sculpt who we are. That is their job. So when a parent tells a child that their a fuck up, maybe not directly, but indirectly, the child believes it's true. He's your parent after all, who are you, the child, to disagree?

So I begin to weave this lesson into who I was as a person, how I saw myself, and how I thought others saw me. I began to think that there was something fundamentally wrong with me, that it was impossible for me to do anything right. That's why I got yelled at, why I got in trouble, why I broke things, why I couldn't fix things and every little thing that went wrong only solidified this idea that I was a fuck up, a failure.

I gave the ceramic figure a blue shirt (blue being my favorite color). Taking away the head adds to the depersonalization of how I saw myself. I then wrote the poem on edited versions of the "Hello, My name is" stickers because being a failure, a fuck up, were thoughts imposed onto me, so childhood me labeled themselves with these thoughts.

- Longing for burning

As a child, I wanted to quiet the anxiety and suffering I felt inside that couldn't be physically soothed. But this is not the only thing that this piece represents, it also holds this longing to feel the sense of quiet that came from self harm, knowing I shouldn't, but still longing for it.

I wanted to show the history of my self harm by completely melting several candles, allowing the drips to build. To show the longing, I created a mold of my hand reaching out to the candle with an already burnt out match.

- Numb

When your nervous system is so overwhelmed that it needs to reset itself, it turns off. The unfired clay figure is reaching out to the colorful emotions, wanting to feel anything: sadness, anger, happiness, fear, anything. Still in a changeable state, and having this desire to change, it is blocked by a window, so the figure can see these emotions, but is unable to touch them.

- Death is calling me

Suicide felt like a form of permanent escape to me. It wasn't scary; it was this compassionate final option. Death was an abstract voice that would comfort me, letting me know it was there, for when things became too much. I choose the phone to represent this voice of comfort, of compassion. Though the audio from the phone has an eerie creepy feel to it, I find it strangely comforting. It reminds me of a quote I've heard within the art community:, "art is meant to disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed." I also wanted the phone to feel as if it was death's phone by giving it the appearance of a gravestone.

- The Dear younger me poems

I didn't want to just have poems of the past, I wanted to also include poems that are recent and relevant to me now. I realized that the first 10 poems

were like “Little Me” talking to me “Big Me”, and I wanted to continue the conversation.

I wanted to tell them that they are loved, that they are not a fuck up. To tell them that they are a child and that they are meant to make mistakes, that they are amazing and perfect the way they are, and that there is beauty at the end of this.

I created a space that "Little Me" would have liked. While they read the letters I wrote, they have the stuffies to hug for comfort.

Quote “One day he told me that he’d spent his adulthood trying to let go of his past, and he remarked how ironic it was that he had to get closer to it in order to let it go.” from “The Body Keeps The Score”.

I feel it is important to say that the intended first audience for this work is me. This project has allowed me to look into my past, to begin to understand and heal from it. No one else can do that for me. The secondary audience is others, whether they have faced a trauma or not. I want to allow space for the audience members to reflect, if that be on their own past abuses or tragedies, or that of another, or maybe they don’t reflect at all. A teacher once told me, “once you put art into the world, it’s no longer truly yours.”

Quote “As long as we feel safely held in the hearts and minds of the people who love us, we will climb mountains and cross deserts (...).” from “The Body Keeps The Score”

I wish to thank my mentor, Wen, for walking me through the thesis process and helping me in getting my thesis project where it is today. I am deeply grateful to my wonderful mom, who raised me and supported me through both personal and school struggles. To my friend, Ame, who, graciously and lovingly, helped me through my anxieties and struggles that I faced during my thesis project and personal matters. And to my other friends, too numerous to list, who also supported me throughout the years. To Andrew

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Thank you