

The Wound

MY MOTHER HAD TO SEVER some part of herself to let me go. I have felt the wound ever since.

Mrs Winterson was such a mix of truth and fraud. She invented many bad mothers for me; fallen women, drug addicts, drinkers, men-chasers. The other mother had a lot to carry but I carried it for her, wanting to defend her and feeling ashamed of her all at the same time.

The hardest part was not knowing.

I have always been interested in stories of disguise and mistaken identity, of naming and knowing. How are you recognised? How do you recognise yourself?

In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus, for all his adventures and far-flung wandering, is always urged to 'remember the return'. The journey is about coming home.

When he reaches Ithaca the place is in uproar with unruly suitors for his hard-pressed wife. Two things happen: his dog scents him, and his wife recognises him by the scar on his thigh.

She feels the wound.

There are so many wound stories:

Chiron, the centaur, half-man, half-horse, is shot by a poisoned arrow tipped in the Hydra's blood,

and because he is immortal and cannot die, he must live forever in agony. But he uses the pain of the wound to heal others. The wound becomes its own salve.

Prometheus, fire-stealer from the gods, is punished with a daily wound: each morning an eagle perches on his hip and rips out his liver; each night the wound heals, only to be scored open the next day. I think of him, burned dark in the sun where he is chained to the Caucasian mountains, the skin on his stomach as soft and pale as a little child's.

The doubting disciple Thomas must put his hand into the spear-wound in Jesus' side, before he can accept that Jesus is who he says he is.

Gulliver, finishing his travels, is wounded by an arrow in the back of the knee as he leaves the country of the Houyhnhnms – the gentle and intelligent horses, far superior to humankind.

On his return home Gulliver prefers to live in his own stables, and the wound behind his knee never heals. It is the reminder of another life.

One of the most mysterious wounds is in the story of the Fisher King. The King is keeper of the Grail, and is sustained by it, but he has a wound that will not heal, and until it does heal, the kingdom cannot be united. Eventually Galahad comes and lays hands on the King. In other versions it is Perceval.

The wound is symbolic and cannot be reduced to any single interpretation. But wounding seems to be a clue or a key to being human. There is value here as well as agony.

What we notice in the stories is the nearness of the wound to the gift: the one who is wounded is

marked out – literally and symbolically – by the wound. The wound is a sign of difference. Even Harry Potter has a scar.

Freud colonised the Oedipus myth and renamed it as the son who kills the father and desires the mother. But Oedipus is an adoption story and a wound story too. Oedipus has his ankles pierced together by his mother Jocasta before she abandons him, so that he cannot crawl away. He is rescued, and returns to kill his father and marry his mother, unrecognised by anyone except the blind prophet Tiresias – a case of one wound recognising another.

You cannot disown what is yours. Flung out, there is always the return, the reckoning, the revenge, perhaps the reconciliation.

There is always the return. And the wound will take you there. It is a blood-trail.

As the cab pulls up outside the house it starts to snow. When I was going mad I had a dream that I was lying face down on a sheet of ice and underneath me, hand to hand, mouth to mouth, was another me, ice-trapped.

I want to break the ice, but will I stab myself?

Standing in the snow, I could be standing at any point on the line of my past. I was bound to get here.

Birthing is a wound all of its own. The monthly bleeding used to have a magical significance. The baby's rupture into the world tears the mother's body and leaves the child's tiny skull still soft and open. The child is a healing and a cut. The place of lost and found.

It's snowing. Here I am. Lost and Found.

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What stands before me now like a stranger I think I recognise, is love. The return, or rather the returning, named the 'lost loss'. I could not smash the ice that separated me from myself, I could only let it melt, and that meant losing all firm foothold, all sense of ground. It meant a chaotic merging with what felt like utter craziness.

All my life I have worked from the wound. To heal it would mean an end to one identity – the defining identity. But the healed wound is not the disappeared wound; there will always be a scar. I will always be recognisable by my scar.

And so will my mother, whose wound it is too, and who has had to shape a life around a choice she did not want to make. Now, from now on, how do we know each other? Are we mother and daughter? What are we?

Mrs Winterson was gloriously wounded, like a medieval martyr, gouged and dripping for Jesus, and she dragged her cross for all to see. Suffering was the meaning of life. If you had said, 'Why are we here?' She would have replied, 'To suffer.'

After all, in End Time, this vestibule existence of life on earth can only be a succession of losses.

But my other mother had lost me and I had lost her, and our other life was like a shell on the beach that holds an echo of the sea.

Who was it then, the figure who came into the garden all those years ago and threw Mrs Winterson into rage and pain and sent me flying down the hall, knocked back into the other life?

I suppose it might have been Paul's mother, the saintly invisible Paul. I suppose I might have imagined it. But that is not my feeling. Whatever happened that violent afternoon was tied to the birth certificate that I found, but it turned out not to be mine, and tied to the years and years later opening of the box – its own kind of fate – where I found the pieces of paper that told me I had another name – crossed out.

I have learned to read between the lines. I have learned to see behind the image.

Back in the days of Winterson-world we had a set of Victorian watercolours hung on the walls. Mrs W had inherited them from her mother and she wanted to display them in a family way. But she was dead against 'graven images' (See Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, etc.), so she squared this circle by hanging them back to front. All we could see was brown paper, tape, steel tacks, water-staining and string. That was a Mrs Winterson version of life.

'I ordered your book from the library,' said Ann, 'before you sent me anything, and I said to the librarian, "This is my daughter." "What?" she said. "It's for your daughter?" "No! Jeanette Winterson is my daughter." I felt so proud.'

Phone box 1985. Mrs Winterson in her headscarf in a rage.

The pips . . . more money in the slot . . . and I'm thinking, 'Why aren't you proud of me?'

The pips . . . more money in the slot . . . 'It's the first time I've had to order a book in a false name.'

Happy endings are only a pause. There are three kinds of big endings: Revenge. Tragedy. Forgiveness. Revenge and Tragedy often happen together. Forgiveness redeems the past. Forgiveness unblocks the future.

My mother tried to throw me clear of her own wreckage and I landed in a place as unlikely as any she could have imagined for me.

There I am, leaving her body, leaving the only thing I know, and repeating the leaving again and again until it is my own body I am trying to leave, the last escape I can make. But there was forgiveness.

Here I am.

Not leaving any more.

Home.