

Self-Made Shackles and Self-Made Keys

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WR 121

As I look desperately for the keys to free myself to grow as a person and as a student, I've learned that most of my shackles are self-made. I crawled onto too many branches that broke under me. I met too many wolves in the woods. After years of these dangers, I found it was a lot less scary to chain myself to my comfort zone. I could do enough from there. I could work mediocre jobs and get good grades. I could make people like me as long as I never disagreed with them. I could live like this. Eventually, though, I grew tired of this mediocrity. I didn't want to be liked by everyone just for doing nothing wrong. I wanted to be more. I wanted to matter. To not be hated by anyone is to not have made any impact. So I decided to be more, to speak aloud what I think. Yet, something still stopped me from creating more. Over these months in writing class, I have learned that when it comes to life and writing, it is my own fear of imperfection and

meaninglessness that keep me from creating anything that matters. If I can let go of the rules I give myself, I can create something wonderful.

I entered this class with these shackles still on my wrists, and even in the first bluebook assignment, I could feel how my hands chafed as I attempted to write about my own thoughts. I felt the metal strain as I resisted the urge to regurgitate what the author wrote and to do so with as little bias as possible. I worked against it and as I wrote, the strangest thing happened. I wrote how I felt. It was unnatural and stiff, but it got easier. As I kept going, the chains lengthened and I could go a little further. By the third line, I was impassioned. I felt so free, and as I took a step out of my comfort zone, I discovered how fresh the air was outside. Unfortunately, I was still stuck, the cold links only giving me enough room to leave the doorway. My chains let me take a step outside, but now I longed to run free.

When I wrote my first essay this term, an essay about our own lives and the events that shaped our literacy, I struggled to think of what to write about. I am not bilingual, and I felt I did not have struggles hard enough to complain about. I looked back and found nothing special about my life to write about. The sun set outside my comfort zone and as red eyes came into view, I had found my first wolf this term. Its teeth were sharp and well

known to me. I wore their mark in silver scars all over my skin. What if I didn't have anything to say that matters? What if I didn't have anything to say at all? This wolf was first made physical a few years ago, in a friend I once had. We were discussing poetry and poetic souls. He looked me in the eyes and bared his teeth. On them were written the words: "Some people have complex thoughts they will never understand and spend their whole lives searching for the words to express. Those are poetic souls. Some people have thoughts you would find on a sign in Hobby Lobby." And with his look of pity, the teeth bit down. According to him, my thoughts belonged on a cheap sign in a strip mall.

When I saw it again this time, I stumbled back inside. I was so afraid of the wolf that I could no longer breathe the joy of fresh air. I was shackled, after all, and I had no weapons to protect me. Even when the sun rose again, I feared stepping outside the door. Then I was given exactly what I needed. In class, we read a piece called "Shitty First Drafts." In it Anne Lamott wrote, "The first draft is the child's draft, where you let it all pour out and then let it romp all over the place, knowing that no one is ever going to see it" (528). A shitty first draft was what I needed. To write without looking, to let my ideas flow without the fear of others' judgment. I didn't even have

to see it until the end. I used this tactic like a blindfold. I wrapped it around my eyes and took a step out again. I would not fear what I could not see. Then, I ran. I wrote and wrote without stopping, spilling every thought onto my paper with no care in my head about whether the thoughts were “good” or not. Before I knew it, I had a whole essay worth of ideas. I took off my blindfold and prepared to revise. Looking back, I found the wolf defeated, strangled by the chains which extended as I ran. I have plenty to say.

The next assignment came and I chose a topic I cared a lot for. I was going to write about talent and inspiration, two things I felt strongly about. But as I tried to write, I found something stood in my way. It was a tree, tall and strong. I planted it myself when I was a kid. Carved into its wide trunk was its name: *perfection*. It seemed that the more I tried to climb it—the more I tried to reach perfection—the taller the tree grew. I cared so much about my essay topic that it paralyzed me. I wanted more than anything to do it justice, but the tree looked far too tall. I put on my blindfold anyway and started to write, but found it didn’t help. I needed a new tool. When I read “Ten Ways To Think About Writing: Metaphoric Musings For College Writing Students,” a specific line stuck with me. The author spoke of adapting to the audience and the purpose you are trying to fulfill. They

wrote: “When we write this way, we write *rhetorically*: that is, we pay attention to the needs of the *author* and the needs of the *reader* rather than the needs of the *teacher*— or the rules of the textbook” (Reid 4). With this new tool, I decided that the person who needed to be convinced more than anyone, my chosen audience, was myself. Every line in that essay was a letter to myself to keep going because writing wasn’t easy. No matter if my piece was good or not, I was still a writer because I wrote. It materialized like an axe in my hand. With every reminder, every quote I used, another swing hit the trunk. As I wrote my last line, I felled the great tree: “But writing isn’t what comes out at the end. Writing is the process.”

Through these assignments and readings, I freed myself from two of my greatest enemies. Now I find myself at the end of this essay, my third and final one for this class, a heavy handed metaphor with all of the makings of a fairy tale. I’ve made it so far. I truly can be proud of myself. But every good story comes in threes, and my shackles still bruise my wrists. I don’t know how to end this story, how to resolve my metaphor. Is this how it ends? Always extending my chains while desperately trying to ignore the pain they cause? No. This class gave me one last tool, one I needed all along. *Reflection*. I learned to reflect after every assignment, but

I never really looked too deeply at my thinking about anything I did, let alone my writing. I did it for the grade until I read a piece by Sandra L. Giles. She felt the same as me, like reflecting was something only to be done to please the teacher. But as Giles said, when she started truly reflecting, “New habits and ways of thinking formed” (193). When I started truly reflecting, I found the same thing. This essay was my reflection on the entire class, everything I made and learned, and upon writing this tale, that’s when I realized what this class had truly taught me. I created the wolf. I created the tree. I even created the shackles around my own wrists. I wrote this fairy tale and every obstacle in it. That’s the thing about being the author: you are the protagonist and the villain. The thing standing in my way all this time was me.

So now I’m truly at the end. I look towards the horizon and jingle the chains that hang like lead from my hands. I am the author. I can write a better ending for myself, just as I wrote all of my tools into existence before. So here it goes: I stick my hand in my pocket and pull out a key. I stick it in the lock and it clicks. As I type these words they come to be true: I had it with me all along. The shackles fell to the floor.

Works Cited

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