



## STUCK WORDS, MUTE HANDS: On Losing My Voice & Finding It Again

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Last spring, I lost my voice. It's well into autumn now, and I'm still searching for it. I find bits and pieces, but it's like scooping up water in my hands. Flipping through notebooks, I find myself asking the same questions, singing the same lamentations. Where did my voice go? Why can't I write anything but my inability to write? Was writing ever anything less than trying to move mountains, squeeze blood from a stone, extract pieces of my flesh from my chest and carefully label them? On a notebook page from this summer, I declared, "I AM NOT WHAT I AM." This is Shakespeare's voice, Iago's voice, not mine. I had something to say, but I could only find borrowed words.

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When I was losing my voice, I wrote spells and rituals to try and heal whatever part of me was broken.

When I was losing my voice, I stayed in bed, wallowing in my certainty that nothing I could write would be good enough, would be cool enough, would be worth the effort of having written it.

When I was losing my voice, I twisted myself like a washcloth but only wrung out a few poems. Mostly they are about stumbling around in the dark.

When I was losing my voice, I wrote these lines:

*voice won't emanate, voice is too scared  
to come out, especially when it's important.  
voice won't voice what needs voicing.  
voice throbs when it has to raise up.*

...

*voice belongs to a person, maybe, or a persona, but  
persona with no sona is just per.  
without voice, an in-between. a pass-through.*

*without voice, a liminal body per  
echoing softness of a cat, echoing a growl  
echoing echoes, echo echo  
into empty.*

To get these lines, I culled, sifted, and rearranged. I kept deconstructing and reconstructing my writing until it seemed close enough to cool, or far enough from me, to be shared. I took all the “I”s and “me”s out of it so criticism of my poem couldn’t possibly be criticism of my self.

When I was losing my voice, I felt empty.

When I was losing my voice, I was really just noticing that I’d been losing it for a long time.

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On the notebook page that starts “I AM NOT WHAT I AM,” I wrote:

*it seems like a loss, a lost  
thing but I’m not sure I ever had it  
I looked under the bed and under  
the folded down back seat  
and under the meds on my desk  
but the thing I think it’s really under  
is my college education  
which isn’t to say it’s crushed by postmodernism  
or suffocated by experimentalism  
it benefitted, I think, I hope  
it’s a pressed flower  
I hope it hasn’t crumbled to powder*

I wrote these lines just for me. I never edited them, never planned anything for them, never sought to take myself out of them. I needed to think on the page, because sometimes there isn’t enough room in my head. I am tempted to edit them now, but I want them to be what they are: a testament to how much more can be thought in writing than in the mind alone, a testament to how much more fruitful it is to just start writing words than to agonize and plan a piece that doesn’t even exist yet.

Writing those lines was the moment I realized: studying creative writing, trying to find my unique, idiosyncratic, original, special, personal, creative voice, might have stomped on or swallowed up the very voice I wanted to cultivate. I wanted my writing to be better, so I became consumed by revision. But editorial instinct and perfectionism can disguise insecurity and anxiety. Of course, revision is a valuable part of the writing process. No work of genius has ever emerged fully formed in the first draft. But neither has any work of genius ever emerged from a writer so crippled by uncertainty that they can barely stand to put pen to paper at all.

This moment of realization was also the first time my writing anxiety took the shape of a weight. The weight was a stone, the weight was my own body, the weight was intellect; the weight is still here, shifting and heavy. But when did this happen? Wasn't there a time when the empty page was my playground? How did it become this vast and terrible no-man's-land?

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At Evergreen I took a program called *Writing as Experimental Practice*, probably after experimental author Thalia Field's piece by the same name, which also served as our first reading assignment. The essay introduced me to a whole new perspective on writing. In it, Field writes:

The blank page has been the location of much excitement or trepidation. Fear of it can result in a writer's retreat into stale and prefabricated choices

. . . . I think the traditional writer fills in the blank page as though it were a pre-formatted space awaiting content. A sentence makes sense. A character emerges in a situation . . . . Pretty soon, one finds oneself in a conventional fiction or poem . . . .

I think the blank page for the experimentalist doesn't exist to be 'filled in' in the same way. Because form and content are indistinct, one does not conjure the work from the imagination as though it were something detached from the world it emerges into . . . . Writing in this sense is a finding, a following, a listening. The many ways one enters the conversation with the world's shadows and sounds provide the myriad of forms experimental writing takes. Finding content is never other than finding form.<sup>1</sup>

When I first read this passage, it thrilled me. I wanted nothing more than this organic, playful, mindful process of not-knowing, of listening, of contextualized imagination. I wanted to invent or discover new forms. I wanted notebooks with no lines so my words could travel in spirals. My heart swelled and my pen raced.

It doesn't feel that way anymore.

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A few years ago, I was cleaning out my childhood bedroom and found a poem from the third grade. It was an artifact of pure feeling, the product of a thin-skinned kid whose emotions were too big for her body but not for her vocabulary. I hadn't revised, or edited, or written a second draft. It was just my melodrama on paper.

As I got older, I kept on writing. I read my work at high school open mics and submitted feverishly to the literary magazine. I posted my poems online, on a site whose name escapes me, where writers could comment on each other's work. I remember posting a poem about a crush. I wrote the line, "Your beauty may not launch a thousand ships / but it would certainly stop them in their tracks."

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<sup>1</sup> Thalia Field, "Writing as Experimental Practice," *The Handbook of Creative Writing*, ed. Steven Earnshaw (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 307-308.

Someone commented, very simply, “Ships don’t have tracks.” As soon as I read it, I realized what a basic mistake it was: mixed metaphors. It was obvious, but I hadn’t caught it. If I could find that poem, that post, I could use it as a timestamp. April 2008, I could say to myself, before you developed a critical eye, before you stopped editing to make your writing better, and started editing because you’re afraid your writing is bad.

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My first college creative writing class was an upper-level workshop at an exclusive, preppy East Coast school. There were only eight or nine of us, and on our first day, we ripped into a poem so hard the writer never came back. In the traditional writing workshop format, the writer asks any questions they have or states what type of feedback they’re looking for, then the work is read aloud, then the group discusses the work. During the discussion, the writer does not speak—the point is to understand how readers react to the work without the author’s input. This process is valuable, but doesn’t make much space for working together to understand the writer’s goals, to improve the piece, or to cultivate hope in the writer.

Our feedback that day was constructive in the sense that it illuminated the problems of the poem. We noted that its appropriation and alteration of a news story about suicide seemed to deny the agency and tragedy of a dead teenage girl, and its rhyming verse seemed to mock its serious subject matter. I stand by our criticisms, but I doubt that they made the writer feel encouraged. I think this class is where the doubt began to write itself large over everything else. See, in that moment of throwing the stone, I realized my glass house. I realized the stone, even, for the first time. It was little then. It fit in my hand and it was something I could use. Now it is big and it sits on my chest and uses me, growing fat on my fear.

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I’m an overthinker and to some degree I always have been. I’ve also always been sensitive, perceptive, and intensely emotional, and when I was younger, it seemed impossible to rein it in. I’ve learned strategies and techniques for coping with my own intensity, but it’s come at a cost: it’s another thing for me to think about. My thoughts are full of what-ifs and carefulness; I’m always watching myself to make sure I’m doing it right. Thinking nonstop about what’s happening and how to respond, about possible choices and goals, about whether I’m being too honest or not honest enough, about hypothetical scenarios, about predicted actions and reactions.

Studying critical theory gave me new ways to think, especially about language and literature. I’m grateful to have learned so much, but adding tools to the overthinker’s toolbox is risky when those tools can so easily break instead of build. Having so many ways to take apart literary work, including my own, reacted powerfully with my already crippling self-awareness, and together they formed a stone.

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My second quarter at Evergreen, a classmate wrote an essay about which I remember nothing, except for the phrase “cool critical theory punks.” I guess I laughed, but I didn’t really know who he was talking about. Throughout that quarter, I started to get a sense of who he meant. I realized I really did think they were cool. I didn’t yet realize that I’d end up comparing myself and my writing to them for the rest of my time at Evergreen, always finding myself lacking.

I tried to write more like the Cool Critical Theory Punks because faculty seemed to love them and because their work sounded more like the books we read than mine did and because it was a way to avoid the stigma of confessionalism and the things I’d confess. But most of all I wanted my writing to be cool. I wanted to be cool.

The more I tried to sound like the Cool Critical Theory Punks or the authors on my booklist, the less sound came out of me at all. Thinking about writing took over, but thinking isn’t writing. I was too caught up in how I wanted to sound and seem that it barely mattered what I wanted or needed to say. Instead of working on the ambitious creative project I’d loosely imagined last spring, I lay around feeling like I’d lost my voice, fixating on its perceived absence, loathing and disparaging what remained. I never finished my project because of my obsession with impressing my teachers and my peers, with writing something original and cool. And my failure made the weight on my chest that kept the words from coming out grow larger.

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My professor said “just write without thinking about it” when I met with her in the spring about my stuck words and my mute hands. “What’s something you don’t think about?” she said. “Brushing your teeth? Putting the kettle on?” At my anxious worst this made no sense. Trapped inside my head, I think through everything: *What’s the most efficient route from kettle to toothbrush? What if I don’t make tea? What if I brushed my teeth already? What if I write something and it’s stupid? What if I write something and it’s accidentally plagiarized? What if I write something and it comes across wrong and someone gets hurt? What if I write something and it comes across wrong and I get hurt? What if?*

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The thing is, I’m pretty sure you can’t become cool by trying. I’m pretty sure that not trying, or at least appearing not to try, is the essence of cool. I’m even ready to hypothesize that cool is inherently a quality of others, and never of the self, because it requires a mystique and a detachment that interiority precludes.

So I am ready to give up on becoming cool. Or more accurately: I’m ready to stop thinking about it.

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I spent a lot of time putting off writing this essay. Thinking about it was nauseating. Talking about it was exciting, but tinged with apprehension. Planning it was confusing and not very effective. Sitting down and doing it wasn’t bad at all.

I don't know exactly how or why, but writing is getting easier. I think I'm coming to understand what my professor said when she told me to write without thinking. It's easier to write when I'm exhausted because I don't have enough energy to overthink. It's easier to write with my friends because we spark each other, and because we make each other thoughtless-giddy with laughter. It's easier to write if I promise myself I never have to show anybody, and sometimes I even end up with something I want to share.

Slowly, I'm breaking down the rock on my chest. Words flow like water and erode it. Words slam down like pickaxes and chip away at it. Words speed along like jackhammers and crack it. The rock turns to pebbles in the field. I hoe the rows, tuck words into the soil. Voice seeds sprout. Slowly, soon, maybe, they'll bloom.

