

## Winged Word

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One day, walking through the repulsive red lockers that lined my high school hallways, my mind kept going back to a word I had discovered. I'd read it somewhere, a while back, and it had stuck in my head. Walking down the red locker hallway, all the words suddenly went into the right order in my head. I realized that they were **my** words. I had known most of the words before, like "am" and "a" and "I," but had never had the last—and most important word. I remember being so stunned that all I could think was "Oh. Well that's cool," and then just continue on to class, but there was this sense of elation that just flowed through me, and an excited buzzing in my head, and I was exhilarated the rest of the day. Every once in a while following that, I would remember that realization, and just feel light.

The word I found for myself is beautiful, one of the most beautiful words in the English language. It sounds like what it means. The letters are absolutely lyrical together. The word harkens back to Sappho, a poet in Greek antiquity, who smashed through preconceived notions of gender, sexuality, and civilization. She is fascinating, but at the same time problematic and flawed. She faced erasure and editing throughout history by those who could not stand or accept what she may have been. Her poetry, to me, is one of the reasons words were invented. The reason language exists. "Winged words/ Winged words/ Words made of air/ I begin/ But words good to hear."<sup>1</sup> The word has a beautiful sound, a beautiful history, and a beautiful meaning, and it was my word, that I had finally found and applied to myself. I was ecstatic.

<sup>1</sup>Sappho, "Poem Fragment 1," in *The Love Songs of Sappho*, trans. Paul Roche (New York; Prometheus Books, 1998), 51.

But I could not share this word with anyone. It was a word that when people said it, they lowered their voice to a whisper, like it was something profane, not to be heard by respectable ears. I was so scared that people would steal my word, and pervert it into something awful, an insult, or a word to ridicule and deride. That they would appropriate the word and fill every letter with hate.

So I never said it. I kept my word inside.

It was still there, though, always just at the back of my throat, trapped behind my teeth. I wanted so badly to tell someone this word, or even just whisper it out loud to myself, because I had only ever said it in my head when in relation to myself. I couldn't, and had to swallow it back and keep it internal and safe instead.

Inside me though, the silence began to fester, and spread throughout my body like a sickness. It hurt to get up in the morning. It hurt to move. My limbs became heavy, and I still have visions of the ball and socket just popping apart. My tongue was numb, dead weight in my mouth. Mumbling. In the wake of continuous silence, it became all I wanted to talk about, but of course could not. I constantly checked everything I said and did to make sure I would not give myself away. Self-censure made conversation laborious and frightening. I worried about talking about all the things that I loved overlong, even if there was only a thread of connection to my word, or none at all. I agonized over wearing my hair a certain way. I held the word deep inside me and felt I would shatter if I could not say my word.

It was sad, but at times beautiful and liberating, what I had to do to exist in silence. I turned to written words and pre-recorded dialog to find my word. My closest allies became superheroes, dragon slayers, sailor scouts, androids. I lived surreptitiously through them. In their fictional worlds, they could be open, and still be accepted, and still fight evil, just as well as

anyone else. I knew no one else like me, so I had only fictitious ghosts to know. There was one comic, *Runaways*, with a character named Karolina who I identified so much with. Basically every day of senior year, I read the part where Karolina told her friends, and was still accepted, and the parts where she battled villainy and bigotry over and over until I had the layout of the panels, the dialog, the colors, everything, memorized. Books and movies compounded the issue of hiding myself. I wanted so badly to share these beautiful things, but I feared I would give myself away in lending them out. Finally, I decided that these things were too wonderful to hide, and that I just wanted someone to ask. I lent *Runaways* out to friends, told them who my favorite character was, hoping they would catch it, and just ask me. I had held the word back behind my teeth for so long that I could not say it on my own. No one asked.

It is sad that I had to fall back to video games, comic books, and novels to live, and that I could only really exist through abstraction. Not to say that these works are not all beautiful, and that I do not still keep these characters in the back of my head for when I need them. I continue to take solace in these things. But my whole being was shunted into only these small things.

When I got to college, I was so excited, because I could finally, with some degree of safety, use my word. I was ready to tell people, and even though the word would get stuck in my throat sometimes, after being trapped there for so long, it was still wonderful to finally, finally use that word.

Some days, when I say it, it is small and tiny, like the people at home say it, a profanity. Shame creeps through my limbs, and I wish I could say it again, loud and beautiful. For some reason, sometimes when I talk, my voice cracks, and recedes; I cry. I believe its lack of practice in talking about myself. Some days, I can say it perfectly, and it makes me happy. And some days, I say nothing at all. Some days it is all of those things, some days I simply

cannot say it, and some days I don't need to. It's a single word, and does not define my entirety, but it colors all the other words in my life. It's a word I bought in a bookstore in print, and can finally say out loud.

And this story has been told numerous times before, but the issues that frame it never go away. Some words are too important to be ignored. They can't be censored from schools, from books and movies. Their history can't be ignored. People can't say them in a whisper. And putting the words in their own separate sections is no better either. It is instantly an outing if you linger in a certain section in the bookstore too long, or watch a specific channel. In the absence of real people, fiction becomes all-important. It is not just entertainment. It is proof that your existence is valid, that somewhere, there must be other people like you, and that stories like yours are worth being told.

#### Works Cited:

Sappho. "Poem Fragment 1." In *The Love Songs of Sappho*, Translated by Paul Roche. New York; Prometheus Books, 1998.

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