

Sally Bunch
Free Writing

Taking his regular spot near the white board, Wen Liang Liu awkwardly bends his knees and swivels his hips to sit in the plastic seat. He has learned that if he approaches this piece of furniture known as a desk from the right side, he won't be impeded by the bar that vaults up diagonally from the chair to the limited work surface. It's fourth period, time for the English class where the pretty young teacher in tight black clothes makes her students sit in a circle and doesn't teach them any English.

In his former school in Wenzhou, his teachers changed rooms, so students were spared the hourly ordeal of being herded through the halls, like cattle to market, and there was enough room at the long tables for his dictionary and textbook to be always on hand. He pulls in his gangly legs to avoid tripping any of his younger classmates, who fly around like buzzards seeking a mate, temporarily landing on one seat before soaring to the next. When Wen's grandfather was seventeen, he had already married and fathered his first child. Now at the same age, Wen finds himself a ninth grader surrounded by fourteen year olds, still waiting for his Chinese transcript to be verified so he can be promoted.

Wen suppresses a desire to walk over to the window to watch the lightly-falling snow, now that Ms. P. has come in from hall duty. With a mixture of disappointment and relief, he notices that the dragonfly tattoo on her shoulder has been covered with a sweater. Wasting no time, she beckons his classmate Armando to leave his small group of Brazilian friends still chatting at their desks near the window, motioning him to a seat next to Wen. Armando reclines and winks at her, but the teacher rolls her eyes and then glares at him. After a smattering of "C'mons" from scattered classmates, Armando finally complies. Wen shimmies his desk slightly away from his new neighbor and contracts his body tighter.

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Ms. P. tells the class that today's activity is "freewriting," which involves writing continuously about anything for ten minutes without stopping. Yet another activity that is supposed to help students find their "true voice," as she puts it. Wen finds the idea odd, considering that people don't talk when they write. Not to mention the existence of a class full of immigrants that is called English but is missing the grammar and pronunciation practice he received in his old country. How will freewriting teach him more of the language?

"Open your notebooks to a blank page," Ms. P. instructs over heavy sighs and groans. In an attempt to make the act appear accidental, Wen flings his open to the back pages, to the refuge of his running word list: apartment, accident, affect...But nothing seems to escape Ms. P.

"Can you find a blank page?" she interjects.

"Yes, sorry," he replies.

"Okay, everyone begin."

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Wen glances around to see some heads cupped in hands, other lying in the crooks of arms, on the edge of sleep, but eventually, most hands are quietly pushing pens across the page. As much as he understands that most of his classmates have been here since September and know the drill, he can't help but wonder if he is missing out on something, as if Ms. P. had given everyone a secret code, but by the time he arrived, it had already slipped her mind.

"Wen?" she asks, looking up from her grade book. "Why aren't you writing?"

"I don't know. Nothing," he replies.

"I'm done!" Armando suddenly announces, shutting his notebook with a flourish.

"No, you're not. We've got five minutes." She strolls over to him. "Let's see what you have."

"No!" he yells, clutching the notebook to his chest.

"Okay, but I will see it later," she says as she crosses the floor to help another student.

"Wen man, look," Armando whispers, flashing a page full of clumsy script. Wen catches the words "breast," "body," and the phrase "sleep with her," and heat floods his body. He jerks his head back toward his own notebook. Any sympathy he feels toward Armando vanishes. He imagines the boy in a Chinese classroom, the ruler slamming down on his hands.

"Dude, I know you like it!" Armando murmurs, loud enough to elicit a few giggles.

"Armando, that's enough!" Ms. P. says.

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Wen stares at the clean white paper, the blank blue lines stained only by the choppy, erratic lettering of his name and the date. Another blank page from a new life full of the much-touted freedoms and directions of his own choosing. His parents' expectations of perfection persist, but the fatigue brought on by multiple jobs beneath their credentials has affected their ability to put pressure on him. It would be shameful to express to them more immediate and banal goals: to read a social studies chapter without getting lost, to get the right size of coffee with the right amount of milk, to shush a noisy classmate without mockery as retaliation. Control and survival.

The Dunkin' Donuts is his only detour from a well-worn path to the pile of textbooks on his side of the room he shares with his grandfather. Thirty-year old hardcovers with titles like *English Grammar and Composition*, discovered on a family visit to the church donation room. His trusty trail guides, even with no one present to acknowledge those extra hours of exercises, of practice.

Anticipating Ms. P.'s return, he falls back to familiar ways:

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Today is Tuesday, January 8. Today we go to consider the audience when writing a personal narrative. I want to write good voice, word choice, sentence variety...

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"Wen, are you copying from the board?"

He freezes, looking down over the edge of his desk. Startled at the proximity of his sneakers to Ms. P.'s black boots, his feet retreat.

"Write what you are thinking about, right now," she says in a soft near-whisper. He raises his head to look at her in the eyes like Americans do, but his gaze only reaches the buttons of her sweater before falling back to the page.

"Okay, Miss, I try. Can I use my dictionary?"

"No, if you keep stopping to look up words you'll lose your thought. You can use it later when you revise."

"Revise?"

"You know, when you check over your work, your ideas."

"Oh, right."

Ms. P. seems to ignore that the ten minutes are up. Resigned, Wen picks up his pencil.

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Ms. P. is a very nice lady, good teacher. But I think I hate this freewriting. Ms. P. need to teach more. Because I write no good. I need my dictionary. I want more English words.

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"Okay, you can stop now," Ms. P. announces. As some students finish their final sentences, Ms. P. manages to snatch Wen's notebook before he can pin it down. "Can I see?"

After reading, she nods and looks him in the eyes. He looks down.

"Wen, this is powerful."

Armando overhears her. "Read it!"

Without looking at Armando, she waves him off and continues. "Wen, you are learning English. Just in a different way."

A naked shame overtakes him. He can't name it, but somehow it goes beyond merely questioning the teacher.

"Do you remember around Thanksgiving, when you first started? You didn't understand a word of what people were saying to you. I think you understand much more now. And from what I see here, you can express yourself more freely, and defend your position."

Though the meaning of her last sentence escapes him, Wen considers this assessment of his English. He recognizes his ability to follow directions and class rules; they have served as the life raft that keeps him afloat. But freewriting? He stares at the word on the board, honing in on that

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first syllable. Ms. P. covers writing every day, but how will Wen know when he has mastered freedom? It has not appeared as an objective on the board, not yet. For two months he has seen his classmates take the idea in different directions: freedom to ignore their parents, freedom to write filth in their notebooks, freedom to talk during a class.

Aware of the attention this exchange has attracted, Wen is relieved when Ms. P. calls the class to order. But then she asks the students to take a line that they've written that stands out, copy it onto a page, and continue freewriting.

Wen closes his eyes for a moment, then opens them to the words, neither memorized nor copied. His words. He has stepped off the path, and the familiar panic almost sets in, until he realizes he's still here, in the classroom, not lost. Not yet.

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