

5-1-2020

Open My Mouth

Annie Shi

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/intertext>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#), and the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Shi, Annie (2020) "Open My Mouth," *Intertext*. Vol. 28 : Iss. 1 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://surface.syr.edu/intertext/vol28/iss1/16>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Intertext by an authorized editor of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.

Open My Mouth

Annie Shi



At the front of the room, the professor brings up the reading from last night. It's a loaded one—about intersectional disability—and no one raises their hand.

“What does everyone think?” she asks. You think it's great that the reading addressed the representation of marginalized groups in modern media, that as a fervent advocate for diversity in contemporary media, you were ecstatic to see your passions reflected in a classroom discussion. You want to say all that, but you don't.

It's not like she'll throw you out for saying the wrong thing. I can't raise my hand. There's not even a right or wrong answer. She's asking for your opinion! I can't.

“Anyone have anything else to say?” the professor asks kindly, her gaze lingering on you. *I do, you think. I have something to say.* You smile, nod, and look back down onto your laptop screen—a

decade-long rehearsed performance.

I have something to say. It would be so easy to say it.

The topic of discussion slips away, the conversation continuing without you—on and on.

—

If you've been taught your whole life to sit down and shut up, how do you start letting words out of your throat again?

Before I started primary school, I was friends with the most beautiful girl in the world. To this day, the image of bliss in my mind's eye is this: her, staying over for the night; us sitting on the hardwood floor, finger-painting on printer paper, and making up stories with our stuffed animals. She was always the leader between the two of us, taking my hand and leading me into our

kingdom of ixora shrubs and playground swings. We woke each other up before sunrise, giggling all the way to the 24/7 convenience store down the road, stuffing things into our t-shirts to sneak through the back door. I yearned to share her confidence and imagination, to be worthy of her.

In retrospect, I should have realized I wasn't straight a lot sooner, but that's a story for another memoir, I think.

Then, we started primary school together. I couldn't ask for anything more. We shared curry puffs and rice during recess, blew raspberries together (and got punished, together) during the most boring parts of morning assembly. We were in different classes—me in 1F and her in 1D, but then, they were just numbers.

After the third grade, they weren't. All primary 2 students had to take an exam and un-

dergo *fen ban* (literally dividing classes)—and each eight-year-old child was put into a class according to their grades. I was for the “gifted” kids and A, the least academically inclined. I was sorted into J and my best friend into E. These characters became our scarlet letters—and with the honest viciousness that only children raised in toxic circumstances could muster, they became how we ranked each other. In our little schoolyard hierarchy, I was now different from my best friend. She teased me about being a nerd, but the frustration was clear in her voice, a reminder of her school-assigned-failure every time she looked at me. We stopped talking, slowly, then altogether.

No parents questioned the mental burden of labeling and sorting children into a ranking system, with full grades tenderly exposed for all to see. At eight years old, your grades could determine the rest of your

Layout by Jung Won Nam. Art by Annie Shi.

life. It was just the way things were there; to teach the children discipline, to keep us chasing infinitely after that highest letter.

—

Three years ago, a decade after our first sorting, my best friend, the first girl I had ever loved, broke down to me about the effect that all this had on her.

I remembered her to have been the most outgoing, stubborn, creative person I had ever known throughout my childhood. It was she who led me to become a content creator today.

She had dropped out of secondary school and cried in bed as her parents tried to drag her out, refusing to step into the schoolyard. After keeping up that cheery facade for years, the debilitating self-worth problems had finally torn through her, its seeds planted by a system that devoured children.

—

In the “upper letter” classes like mine, the teachers were given free reign of their classes. They had to produce results, after all. Asking the “wrong” questions, producing the “wrong” answers, or even making a single spelling mistake would mean “arms out, in front of the class.” Not a single student in their right mind would willingly put themselves in the line of fire by making a sound in class, asking a question, or offering any answers. I remembered seeing a classmate simply burst into tears when she was called on.

Despite my attempts at laying low, I had somehow managed to catch my teacher’s eye. Before I knew what mental disorders even

were—before the words “high-functioning” and “spectrum” ever crossed my mind—all I knew was that I had trouble concentrating in class. I was most comfortable when I had something to fiddle with—a pencil, a splinter on the side of my desk, or even my own hands.

All my teachers knew was that I was being deliberately insubordinate by fidgeting in class after being beaten for it time and time again.

On good days, they sent me to stand outside. I would use the dusty lockers as my table to keep writing, peering through the windows and straining to hear what the teachers were saying. Some weeks, I spent more time studying the patterns on the dusty panes from outside, rather than inside the classroom. But I was rarely lucky. Even as I write this, my right hand hurts so much from the memories—so badly, that I have to take breaks from writing. On my twelfth birthday, I remember going home and showing my parents a palm more purple than pink.

Today, they tell me that they wanted to go and give the teacher a piece of their mind. They really wanted to, but that no other parents went to complain—that’s just how things



were then.

Last summer, on my annual visit back to my hometown in Singapore, gripped with a sudden impulse, I googled to see if my Primary 6 English teacher was still teaching at the school. She had been one of the most brutally strict, and from all the daily insults she had hurled at me, I was convinced she genuinely, uninhibitedly, hated me. At my graduation, she had taken me by the shoulder and told me that I would become a better writer than she ever was, with a smile. I couldn’t believe my ears. If my parents hadn’t been there too, I would have thought I imagined it.

She was still a teacher there, her email and class schedules stark against the buzzing white of my screen.

I remembered the Facebook invites I had gotten while I was in the United States, all of my old primary school classmates trying to organize a summer primary school meet-up. “To thank our teachers for teaching us discipline and nurturing us, for helping us get into good schools,” one of the descriptions read. As though all of them—each and every one having been beaten and humiliated and sent to stand outside and peer in through the windows—had gained some unfathomable wisdom. As though all that mistreatment could be overlooked as stepping-stones to success. I declined, each time, feeling more and more guilty that I couldn’t feel the gratitude and maturity they all seemed to have developed.

I hovered my cursor over her email, even started a draft, telling her what I had been up to. That I was on my way to becoming a writer, that I had found a passion for the written word. That maybe I should finally thank her, like everyone else had, for instilling in me the foundations of success, an unwaveringly disci-

plined work ethic. Maybe I had finally grown enough to sweep those years of fear and abuse under a carpet, like all of my peers had.

After a moment’s hesitation, I closed the browser window. I haven’t reconsidered it since. I don’t have to be strong enough to forgive.

—

While I was growing up, I knew about ADHD and dyslexia. I knew it was what made the “problem kids,” the ones my teachers and family mocked behind closed doors, the “thank God you’re not like that” unsaid but clearly heard.

But the disorders that go unseen are the ones that make “good kids.” The inability to socialize means no disruptions during classes, no note-passing and raucous whispers. The unhealthy hyper-fixations on tiny details during activities, the recognition of patterns in math problems, the intense, tunnel-vision passion for a subject or craft—a Venn diagram of the model “good, quiet” student and one plagued with a high-functioning learning disorder.

Attentive, quiet, concentrative—*good, good, good*. Loudly expressing your feelings—*bad, bad, bad*. In my pursuit of praise, I never learned how to communicate properly. I grew up swallowing my emotions, lungs swollen with words unsaid, and a heart ripe to burst.

—

When I learned that we were moving to the United States, the land of freedom, I didn’t feel much. A bird kept in a cage her whole life doesn’t know about the vast, hungry, universe overhead. I was plopped into a high school

two days after arriving at our new house, in the middle of the semester. Ashamed of my accent and struggling to communicate, I found myself a stranger to Western culture and to all the already formed cliques. I had already been an avid reader and writer—my books and laptop filled with Word documents, the only constant in an inconsistent lifestyle—but now, in the United States, I found writing to be one of the few platforms from which I could commu-

nicate myself clearly. In English classes, after an assignment or two, I found myself met with acknowledgement instead of pity.

But most of the time, I sat in a corner, silent, the fear of saying the wrong thing still pounding in my veins. My teachers seemed to expect that I couldn't speak English, quickly giving up on calling on me—and when they did, I would stammer nervously to the point of incoherence, an unpleasant affair for everyone involved.

One of my earliest memories:

Sitting on my mom's bed, her braiding my hair. "I think I like girls more than boys," I told her. "Is that possible?" There was a pause, a sharp pain as she wrenched at my hair particularly hard. "别废话— Don't talk about garbage like that," she snapped. "You don't know anything."

One of my best high school memories:

Kissing a girl in the back of the dimmed auditorium during a Hamlet play.



By the end of sophomore year in college, I was spending entire nights googling for reasons to justify dropping out. I was still too afraid to ever speak, my participation grades plummeting. Every lecture and workshop passed with my hands trembling with each effort to raise them and speak up, but I simply couldn't. I didn't understand why. I was tired, stressed, second-guessing my chosen field of study for the umpteenth time.

I forced myself to partake in lives that made me deathly uncomfortable—parties and heteronormative romantic relationships so toxic they could only be described as self-destructive. Eventually, I began missing class after class, ignoring emails and calls, chiding myself with every day that started and ended with me staying in bed.

On the brink of withering away, at the start of junior year, I made the conscious decision to make an effort to get better—a choice that I went back on several times. I could not have continued, even remotely, without incredible friends who promised to kick the door down to get to me on bad days, to professors who made an effort to understand, gave me alternatives to class discussion, and encouraged me in all the right ways.

This year—a new beginning. I emailed professors at the start of the semester to explain my situation, pleading for their understanding, and assuring them that I would give it my best. I found accommodations and understanding in the most surprising places. It's still horribly difficult; the thought of leading a discussion

in front of a physical crowd still makes me shiver on the best days, and the idea of getting dressed and out of the door are insurmountable tasks on the worst.

But I've been taking small steps out of my comfort zone, and I'm proud of myself for them. I've been stifled my whole life. It would be silly to start doing it to myself.

—

At the front of the room, the professor brings up the reading from last night. It's a loaded one—about the unethical representation of mental illness in modern rhetoric.

"What does everyone think?" he asks.

You think that it's disgusting that the mentally ill are often the villains in horror movies, with behaviors commonly associated with psychological disorders. You want to tell him that. There are no right or wrong answers. You've written pages on online forums arguing this point; you've done your research, you know your stuff. The silence grows oppressive.

It would be so easy to raise your hand and just say something, anything.

So I

