

Left with my thoughts, I ponder, as one so often does, on a word. *Bard*. It is a word too short, too abrupt, and has the peculiar habit of coming to a halt just when one expects it to continue. What *is* Bard, or more precisely, what is *a* bard? The word when consulted is defined with confidence: a bard is a poet that recites epics, a custodian that guards the sanctity of Word if you will. It is all very embellished and entirely unhelpful.

The first “bard” I’d ever encountered was Venti—a character from the game Genshin Impact—who only further unsettled, and even mocked, my impression of a high school named after such a term. Venti is small; he wears poofy shorts; he plays the harp. And yet he is the God of Freedom. It was absurd: the essence of freedom was entrusted to someone so light which appeared agreeable in theory though my thought refused to settle.

All the wandering bard does is tell stories and sing truths that are partly disguised within melody. And somehow, this constitutes divinity. I wondered whether this freedom was not attained by force nor granted by decree, but lived in the simple act of speaking and being heard. The notion seemed almost insulting in its simplicity. Was there not more to freedom than this effortless exchange?

It was only upon entering the red-trimmed halls of Bard High School Early College Manhattan that I began to recognize the subtlety of this act, this act of freedom. The institution prides itself on collaborative discussion, on the premise that the thought must be spoken to be fully realized. I had assumed that discussion would confirm me, that I would arrive to class with polished ideas and confidently leave with them intact. However, Seminar, I quickly realized, is not a mirror. Sometimes thought cracks; sometimes it stretches and becomes elongated. A thought once uttered in Seminar no longer remains wholly yours. It floats and it bends; it shifts into a form you can hardly recognize. And the vehicle that drives this metamorphosis of thought is nothing more, nothing less than a single word: why.

It is through this word that the texts we read in Seminar began to unravel in ways I had not anticipated. I remember, during my third year of high school and my first year in the Bard College curriculum, sitting in class with *Beloved* open before me certain that Sethe was an atrocious mother. I was certain that to ruthlessly take a life, especially that of one’s own child could only ever be condemned. But Seminar does not allow for that certainty to remain untouched. One of my peers suggested that, to Sethe, perhaps death was a mercy to a life in slavery. Sethe, having been a slave herself, saw it in a way to spare her child. The idea, initially, seemed grotesque. Yet I could not entirely push it away. I could not deny the strange concept that Toni Morrison had woven into the fabric of this world, in which protection and harm, love and violence, are no longer separate but completely entwined.

As the discussion continued, my initial judgment began to feel insufficient, quite naive. The certainty I once had begun to dissolve, like water slipping through my fingers. What I read as a moral failure became entangled in questions I could not easily answer. What does it mean to mother in a world that denies your humanity? What was the future Sethe was saving her child from? What if my own definitions of right and wrong were too narrow to account for the realities I've never experienced? And yet in this dissolution, in sitting with discomfort, I began to recognize that there is never one objective answer to a question. The answer is not a rigid structure but something that grows in the space between voices, in the act of speaking and listening and reconsidering, and in that space, a new multifaceted meaning begins to emerge.

It was in this space—between words, between ideas, between myself and my peers—that Seminar revealed its true nature. Seminar is an exercise in living thought, an experiment that allows your bard spirit to breathe, to speak, to stumble. It allows you to feel the edges of what you know and what you think you know slipping, bending, folding into someone else's voice, their words brushing against yours, tugging, pulling, readjusting, until it is no longer yours, no longer theirs, but something that floats between all of us. And in this trembling, in the letting go of certainty, I began to become a bard, not with harp or song, but with thought itself, continuously moving and alive, carried forward by hearing, by listening, by speaking, by simply being.

And that, I realized, is the essence of the Bard Early College experience. To be a bard was not a title to uphold nor a role to play, but rather a state of continual becoming. A state in which one lives within the ebb and flow of thought itself, and in that becoming glimpses a freedom too delicate for definition.

*A piece by Zafnah Unaisah*