

this is my story
and no one can tell it but me

Writing my Future Behind the Iron Gates

by

Aristeidis Kleiotis

“Looking for Arcadia”

April 23rd, 2019,
22:53,
Days Inn, 27E:

after letting the door slide closed,
arteries running hollow,
the curves of my forehead glazed with cold sweat,
in a fragment of a second I let the suitcases hug the ground,
but did I have anyone to embrace except- by threats bound;
with whatever willpower left I walked towards the bed
in the dark
hotel room,
gazin' out the window,
ponderin',
time stood still for a second
before it let hell unfold:
that night I had storming panic attacks,
I had a weight on my chest,
my lungs lacked air,
my stomach dropped to my knees,
I was being squeezed through a very tiny tight tube into a
Pandora box to be (sobbing) to be shut-

on the board with *diplomatic slugs*,
in the bathroom with *miracle drugs*,
I was drowning in my abyss,
cold and alone in analysis paralysis:
“the silence depressed me,
it wasn't the silence of silence,
it was my own silence”¹

I immediately succumbed to the need to roost
under a hot shower:
the water that poured misty over and around me,
with every drop that perched and rolled down my body,
inside of my cosmos a gentle hearth I grew to bury.
Yet, like an apparition,
regretful 'n scared,
hiding amidst the sultry steam,

1 Lines drawn from Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar*, which was first published in 1963.

the desert of my body grew fummy,
unearthly,
shivering
with the sound of gaslighting-

the water that braced my body like a warm bathing suit
could not break the ice crystallized:
i closed the tap
found me a towel
put on my Hermès
opened the door
slid fast into bed
with eyes wide shut
facing towards the tar-black sky of the hotel room
as I thought to myself:
(I love life and I do love my life
but the burden of that curse
bestowed upon me
on that fateful eve
ruffling the feathers of my mind
urging me to draw the curtain
and wake up
from that psychomare
in Atlantica
in an academia
in America
back to my homeland, Arcadia)
~~America, please, bear me a miracle to Arcadia~~

"Writing My Future Behind the Iron Gates"

May, 2019- September, 2020

"Hush, hush!"

afraid to speak up or speak out,
to articulate it,
to name it,
to baptize it in truth
before it baptizes you in silence:
(the secret you keep
will sink you in deep)

No!

To allow a series of fiends
burn down your dreams
and write your own personal story?

No!

Your art, a cage of birds,
your mind, a mill of silence-
maybe...not...

maybe...yes, this time,
I may speak out,
I may open my mouth
not to unleash
fluttering flowery butterflies, but
thunderclaps of melodic bombs.

As I'm writing this and other poems
I'm writing my future;
I'm a modern day scholar
in a weak constitution
bearing my body to writing prostitution.
Catch me if you can,
working on my craft,
like an evasive wisp
like a reverie you've never seen
clapping back by the sound of a dramatic piece-

these thoughts make me swoon, for sure,
I'm a wan swan sunbathing in my fervor,
feeling fear froth over me in sweet sugary honey waves,
I'm neither sad or happy,
but at the least I'm happy that I'm happier than last year

"Chemtrails Over the Academia's Club"

July 14th 2021, 09:59,
check time-

written on the script of life,
always boiling with the steam of life,
a living poem;
rarely stagnant,
mostly scribbling
on the geography of my body;
an idyll in elegiac solipsism-

pensive in Lake Placid,
contemplating god under the
chemtrails over the academia's club,
writing my future in fractured languages,
ponder-on-ponder until I melt,
melt into a pond of thoughts-

turned-off lights,
burned-out candles,
time to manifest:

two black holes pulsating through the Mercuries of
your cool blue steel eyes
antiquaries
academias crumble
the detritus of which owes everything to your sprawling rule
I stand straight like an angel with a halo in halation
watchin'
unmovin'
at the pinnacle like a fiery beacon
warding off gargoyles, ghouls and demons

bells ringing
chernobyl,
Serendipity hung like a mobile
oscillating,
my body a map of academias burning-

a cherubim – a cherubim
hung from a fig tree
at the foot of Mountain Heal
hung by hand by her herself
for the whole academia to see;
a pillory-

"a pillory", they screamed
as the earth beneath me screeched
'n they chanted lies that she uttered
as kerosene dripped – dripped from my skin

with their bodies next to me,
vaping next to me,
gaslighting me,
fueled with fear
I had to disappear
now observing by far as a sightseer

"Sealing the Iron Gates"

Today

There's a picture on the wall
of me looking down on you,
smirking at your thrall
and your colossus' pale hue;
o delusions of grandeur,
what a sneer!

There are flowers dry in gloom
hanging from the sage green banisters
with their petals fallen, strewn across the stairs,
withered out of your narcissistic doom.

Standing stoic, blue in terror,
you're looking in the mirror,
a cracked map of silver sliver.
Why you look older and somber,
pondering on the collapse of your ivory tower?

Now everything is pure and perfect,
nothing left to do,
your detritus my paper,
I grow all over you,
your detritus my paper,
a bed of wildflower wildfire.

Standing stoic, blue in terror,
you're watching me through the mirror:
my hair silken,
flaxen,
blessed by the breath of our eternal fair sun;
my fingertips gently,
delicately
made of Aphrodite's tender beauty;
pressing the letters of the typewriter with a vision,
with decision,
with precision
for my placid recreation-
I'm finally living:
my dreams blooming,
my eyes twinkling,
my cheeks flushing,
my lips sealing
the iron gates with the warm breath of life-writing

The Testimonial Poetry of *Writing My Future Behind the Iron Gates*

This reflective essay attempts to contextualize and elaborate on the writing process of my short poetry collection, *Writing My Future Behind the Iron Gates*, which is part of *Echoes*, issue 11. Before I delve into an in-depth exploration of *Writing My Future Behind the Iron Gates* thematically and content-wise, I would like first to explain the collection's connection with life-writing as a genre,¹ specifically testimonial writing and life-writing as a process of negotiating trauma to achieve healing. Testimonial writing, or else *testimonio*, as a form of life-writing also emphasizes personal experience. According to George Yúdice, “testimonial writing may be defined as an authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation . . . of exploitation and oppression” that the witness experiences (17). By exploring one's trauma and pain, testimonial writing seeks a “rereading of [the] culture [of oppression]” (Yúdice 26) in order to attain “self-constitution” (19). Additionally, *Haunted Narratives: Life Writing in an Age of Trauma*, one of the major academic scholarship that discusses life-writing's association with trauma and healing, particularly views personal narratives as a recording of pain and trauma, while testimonial confession is treated as a liberating, healing process. Therefore, *testimonios* as literary texts can explore the writer's healing trajectory as he or she narrates their pain and trauma induced through oppression.

On a personal level, as a creative writer I started experimenting with testimonial writing in 2018 when I started studying queer-crip life-writing. What I still admire in queer-crip personal narratives is the reclaiming of one's agency and voice amidst systemic, institutional oppressiveness. Though thematically my short poetry collection of four poems, *Writing My Future Behind the Iron Gates*, has nothing to do with queer-crip experience, it does address and discuss my personal trauma as a young scholar within the academic environment. Specifically, through my testimonial poetry I have come to face and explore the psychological torture that derives when one's individual voice is stricken to silence by an institutional power system.

Moreover, *Writing My Future Behind the Iron Gates* starts exactly where my poem “Psychomare” from the 9th issue of *Echoes*,² “Un/making Health: Reflections on Wellbeing,” leaves off. As Vinia Dakari claims, “[in] his poem ‘Psychomare,’ Aristeidis Kleiotis ruminates on the impact traumatic life events have on an individual's inner state and the struggle to cope with mental challenges and

1 “Life-writing” refers to a wide variety of non-fictional autobiographical and biographical texts, including memoirs, diaries, journals, testimonies, letters, autobiographies, personal essays, and sometimes also biographies” (Rippl et al. 5).

2 The poem can be accessed here: www.asrp.gr/articles/Aris_Kleiotis_Psychomare.pdf

restore equilibrium” as the poem becomes “a textured narrative of loss and restitution of the self” (3). However, *Writing My Future Behind the Iron Gates* further ventures into these topics through its four testimonial poems, which by order are: “Looking for Arcadia,” the homonymous “Writing My Future Behind the Iron Gates,” “Chemtrails Over the Academia’s Club” and last “Sealing the Iron Gates.” These four poems attempt to paint a more holistic portrait of the traumatic events that caused the psychomare in the homonymous poem. Whereas in “Psychomare,” the narrator appears engulfed by fear and awe, silenced, unable to act, the four poems in *Writing My Future Behind the Iron Gates* provide more space for the personal story to unfold.

In particular, by exploring my personal traumas, *Writing My Future Behind the Iron Gates* has transformed into a textual oracle that reveals painful sentiments hidden in the unconscious, but at the same time allows for unprecedented strength to arise as I started acknowledging and interpreting the traumas. While pain can be a discouraging factor in discussing one’s psychological turbulence, writing about it has allowed me to observe it, capture it, hold it and give shape to it. This certainly has given me a sense of agency and power that I lacked when I was writing “Psychomare.” As the epigraph of *Writing My Future Behind the Iron Gates* writes, “this is my story and no one can tell it but me.” The epigraph lays out the intention of the collection clearly: I am becoming the agent of my story as I am revealing fragments of it in their most eloquent rawness. By narrating my traumas, I am finding solace and catharsis.

Also, before I briefly discuss the poems, I would like to spare a moment to comment on the title of the collection. Though the title, *Writing My Future Behind the Iron Gates*, suggests an emphasis on the future, the collection is deeply rooted in past events and sentiments. The intention was that by revisiting, reliving and untangling my past I would be able to gather enough power to become capable of looking onto the horizon of the future, free from the shackles of the past. The *Behind The Iron Gates* segment suggests that the narrator is speaking from within the institution, that is the academic environment, not outside of it. Therefore, the future the narrator is writing about is a future in which he is part of the academia, not excluded from it. As for the poems themselves, they present the path to solace and catharsis in a climactic way. Information about the date, time and/or place of reference is inserted on the top left corner of each poem, more or less resembling a diaristic entry. In this way, starting from the first poem, “Looking for Arcadia,” then to “Writing My Future Behind the Iron Gates,” to “Chemtrails Over The Academia’s Club,” I chronicle the different stages of restitution of myself from past to present before I reach a place of agency, strength and liberation in last poem: “Sealing the Iron Gates.”

As a last note, I would like to thank *Echoes* for the continuous support to my creative writing experimentation that gives me the key to keep unlocking more and more aspects of myself as ... *I'm Writing My Future*. Though the four poems have allowed me to publicly document glimpses of my traumas, fears and the therapeutic transformation of them into self-constitution, I intend to continue experimenting with my craft to further expand this short poetry collection into a vast textual land, vast enough to nurture more personal stories.

Works Cited

- Dakari, Vinia. "Editorial: Un/making Health: Reflections on Well-being." *Echoes*, issue 9, 2019, pp. 1-4, www.asrp.gr/articles/echoes9-Editorial.pdf. Accessed 10 Apr. 2020.
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- Rippl, Gabriele, et al., editors. *Haunted Narratives: Life Writing in an Age of Trauma*. U of Toronto P, 2013.
- Yúdice, George. "Testimonio and Postmodernism." *Latin American Perspectives*, vol. 18, no. 3, 1991, pp. 15-31.