Double Plus Unfree – Margaret Atwood

“A Robin Redbreast in a cage, Puts all Heaven in a Rage,” wrote [William Blake](https://www.theguardian.com/culture/william-blake). “Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall,” wrote [John Milton](https://www.theguardian.com/books/johnmilton), channelling God’s musings about mankind and free will in the third book of [Paradise Lost](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2011/dec/05/john-milton-epic-sacred-paradise-lost). “Freedom, high-day, high-day, freedom … !” chants Caliban in The Tempest. Mind you, he is drunk at the time, and overly optimistic: the choice he is making is not freedom, but subjection to a tyrant.

We’re always talking about it, this “freedom”. But what do we mean by it? “There is more than one kind of freedom,” Aunt Lydia lectures the captive Handmaids in my 1985 novel, The Handmaid’s Tale. “Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don’t underrate it.”

The robin redbreast is safer in the cage: it won’t get eaten by cats or smash into windows. It will have lots to eat. But it will also not be able to fly wherever it likes. Presumably this is what troubles the inhabitants of heaven: they object to the restriction placed on the flight options of a fellow winged being. The robin should live in nature, where it belongs: it should have “freedom to”, the active mode, rather than “freedom from”, the passive mode.

That’s all very well for robins. Hooray for Blake, we say! But what about us? Should we choose “freedom from” or “freedom to”? The safe cage or the dangerous wild? Comfort, inertia and boredom, or activity, risk and peril? Being human and therefore of mixed motives, we want both; though, as a rule, alternately. Sometimes the desire for risk leads to boundary-crossing and criminal activity, and sometimes the craving for safety leads to self-imprisonment.

Governments know our desire for safety all too well, and like to play on our fears. How often have we been told that this or that new rule or law or snooping activity on the part of officialdom is to keep us “safe”? We aren’t safe, anyway: many of us die in weather events – tornados, floods, blizzards – but governments, in those cases, limit their roles to finger-pointing, blame-dodging, expressions of sympathy or a dribble of emergency aid. Many more of us die in car accidents or from slipping in the bathtub than are likely to be done in by enemy agents, but those kinds of deaths are not easy to leverage into panic. Cars and bathtubs are so recent in evolutionary terms that we’ve developed no deep mythology about them. When coupled with human beings of ill intent they can be scary – being rammed in your car by a maniac or shot in your car by a mafioso carry a certain weight, and being slaughtered in the tub goes back to Agamemnon’s fate in [Homer,](https://www.theguardian.com/books/homer) with a shower-murder update courtesy of Alfred Hitchcock in his film, [Psycho](https://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/oct/22/psycho-shower-scene-hitchcock-horror). But cars and tubs minus enraged wives or maniacs just sit there blankly.

It’s the sudden, violent, unpredictable event we truly fear: the equivalent of an attack by a hungry tiger. Yesterday’s frightful tigerish threat was [communists](https://www.theguardian.com/world/communism): in the 1950s, one lurked in every shrub, ran the message. Today, it’s terrorists. To protect us from these, all sorts of precautions must, we are told, be taken. Nor is this view without merit: such threats are real, up to a point. Nonetheless we find ourselves asking whether the extreme remedies outweigh the disease. How much of our own freedom must we sacrifice in order to defend ourselves against the desire of others to limit that freedom by subjugating or killing us, one by one?

And is that sacrifice an effective defence? Minus our freedom, we may find ourselves no safer; indeed we may be double-plus unfree, having handed the keys to those who promised to be our defenders but who have become, perforce, our jailers. A prison might be defined as any place you’ve been put into against your will and can’t get out of, and where you are entirely at the mercy of the authorities, whoever they may be. Are we turning our entire society into a prison? If so, who are the inmates and who are the guards? And who decides?