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Adventures in the 4th Genre: Creative Nonfiction Essays

Caitlin Vandewater

The College at Brockport, caitlinvandewater@hotmail.com

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Adventures in the 4th Genre: Creative Nonfiction Essays

A Senior Honors Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for Graduation in the College Honors Program

By
Caitlin Vandewater
English Major

The College at Brockport
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Thesis Director: Dr. Ralph W. Black, Associate Professor, English

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Introduction: Some Thoughts on the Thesis Writing Process

When I began my thesis, I had no idea what I would be writing or what kind of challenge it would present. I knew it would involve long hours sitting the library and a lot of self-analysis and time to think about the work and my relationship to it.

I tried to go into this project with an open mind, not expecting anything special to result from it. I didn't have a plan on what I wanted to write, but I figured I would gravitate toward the things I always write about: writing, being a young woman in her early 20s and moments from my childhood or children I know. In the end, I did end up writing about these things, but it manifested itself in ways I did not expect.

The first draft of my first essay "Second Floor Lounge" was initially written as a way to get me into the habit of setting aside time to go to the library to work on my thesis. I did not have any intentions of actually turning it into a section of my thesis, but after some careful revision and discussion with my director, I realized writing about my library cubicle—and all of the weird graffiti and ghostly marks from past residents—was a good way to explore who I am as a writer, student and citizen of the Brockport community.

In hindsight, I love that something I initially wrote as a personal joke—the first draft was just me blabbering on how bored I was sitting in the library, lamenting the fact that I was not writing anything meaningful—eventually turned into something that is polished, yet still relatable. Creating a relatable and human essay became very important during the process of rewriting and editing the first draft. I didn't want the subject matter (me sitting in a library cubicle, bored out of my mind) to be easily discarded. While it's certainly not as memorable as my second essay, "Milestones" I think that it gives the

reader a sense of who I am/was while writing it: in my early 20s, trying to figure out how I fit into the complicated puzzle I call life.

My first essay is very concerned with physical and mental space, and the creation of both. I muse about how poorly constructed parts of my library space were and how in my silent, bored examination of my cubicle, I create a complex and messy mental space. In a lot of ways, the mental and metaphorical space created in my essay is more important than the physical space, weird markings and stories contained in that library cubicle.

Another layer in this essay is my personal relationship to writing and the constant evolution I am going through as a writer. I took a lot of time to think about how I relate to the thousands of writers who came before me, and how even though many of them will never read my work, I still have a duty to both honor and destroy whatever standards they have set for the modern writer. What I mean by this is, I spent a lot of time thinking about how my random, sometime measly thoughts can be turned into meaningful, interesting prose that doesn't repeat (at least not in the same way) the thoughts and musings of the many writers who have come before me. By the end of the essay, I think I came to terms with the idea that I was not going to write an innovative or eye-opening essay, but that doesn't make my work invalid or useless. A huge part of this essay was recognizing, both on and off the page, good writing doesn't have to be completely new or innovative. Creating good piece of writing is less about coming up with new ideas, and more about craftily recycling the millions of ideas of those before you. Maybe this was the wrong mindset to take, but honestly, nothing in "Second Floor Lounge" is anything revelatory,

and I made a point to recognize that, and to point out to the reader I'm just trying to find my niche in the writing world.

I took a very different approach for my second essay, "Milestones." Like "Second Floor Lounge" this essay happened very much by accident. I finished out the fall semester with "Second Floor Lounge" in its final draft, and knew that I would have to create another essay or two over the winter break. Like the first essay, I went into the open process with any open mind, and did not assign myself an essay topic, but rather let it come to me.

I've been writing about current events for a long time, both through my blog, personal journals and in the student newspaper. My writing has been less about reporting a story and more about recording my reaction to current events and issues. And like any major national incident or issue, I really couldn't resist writing about the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting.

Like the first essay, my second essay was very much about recording my surroundings and my thoughts, but it was more about tackling an issue that has been prevalent throughout my entire life—violence in schools and young men with a desire and motive to kill strangers.

At first I did not have any intentions of turning my initial reactions into part of my thesis, but as I got deeper and deeper into my analysis of the issue, it only made sense to use my thesis as a vehicle to broadcast my opinions and experiment with the creative essay as a way to both report and react to current events.

An integral part of "Milestones" was braiding different narrative threads together and drawing parallels between a child's version of reality and an adult's version of

reality. I've found that I gravitate toward writing about childhood and children, mostly because I like looking back and realizing how dorky and ridiculous I was as a child, and how goofy the children I know can be. I also like seeing how little I have changed some of my habits. Writing about who I was as a kid also reminds me of how far I've come as a person, and how far I still have to go regarding certain milestones in my life. I wanted these thoughts to play an important role in this essay, both because it is a personal reflection on my childhood and national events, but also I felt the personal memories help to ground the essay and pull the reader in.

Overall, I think the best part about tackling this project was the amount of experimentation I was allowed to do. While there are many rules I had to follow (staying true to events as I remember them, not falsifying memories, and so on) I liked that I did not have specific topics, and both essays came very naturally to me. Although this project was academically placed, I did not feel the pressure to create a perfect product on the first try. I enjoyed the process of revising and editing each essay and really digging into what it means to crank out a worthwhile and well-crafted essay. This project was very much about digging into what it means to be a nonfiction writer and figuring out what steps you have to take to write something that people want to read, and possibly write themselves. It was very frustrating at times, and for a while I was afraid that I would not find the right topics to write about, or produce work that accurately represented my ideas and writing style. In the end, I learned a lot about myself and the dedication it takes to start and finish a project like this.

Second Floor Lounge

My unnumbered booth in the library in the library is nothing special: four walls, the desk/built-in table is covered in fading graffiti. The fluorescent bulb above my writing area doesn't work. The desk lamp is ancient, but thankfully, it's functional. My chair is brown and uncomfortable. The door can be locked from the outside with a nickel. The process is kind of like removing batteries from a children's toy. It takes a little patience, but with practice it becomes second nature. I've taken to writing from on top of the counter, one foot pressed up against the opposite wall, the other positioned north of my right knee, providing my with an ample writing surface to lean my notebook on.

The only real color in my rented space is the fire alarm. Compared to the eggshell walls and brown and black speckled carpeting, it's red and menacing. I pray it never goes off while I'm secluded, moody and writing. Nothing like the cry of a wild banshee and flashing light to break the perfect writing trance.

It's 9:24 on a Tuesday night in the beginning of September 2012. The 11th to be exact, so naturally the nation is feeling particularly solemn and patriotic. I'm indifferent, not because this day is unimportant, but because I've refused to watch the news, read the papers or succumb to the flashbacks of the towers falling. It's painful to return to being under five feet tall and helpless, hugging my mother in our playroom, surrounded by the toy pianos and actions figures of my youth. It's been two months since I've written more than two consecutive pages for "fun." The walls of this room are appropriately painted off-white, probably meant to keep the mind clear and focused. I still find reasons to be distracted. It's part of being a writer and an increasingly bored and detail-oriented person. Unnatural light floods in from the transom windows above my head. The rubber doorstep was once painted white, but the dull faded rubber

is now speckled from probably ten years of the door being flung open and tired students chipped away at the paint.

There are two outlets in this room, and at this moment, nothing fills their faces. One is dotted green along the perimeter. The other is colored orange. I wonder what soul was bored enough to color in the vacant spaces of the sockets.

A power line runs perpendicular to the outlet box, extending up the wall to the right of my writing area, providing power for the ancient rotating desk lamp. What looks like a prehistoric smoke detector serves as the housing for the light switch, a little silver button that gets stuck if you push it too hard. A four-inch strip of masking tape sits below the push switch, an “x” neatly scrawled just off the center of the strip. I don’t question the meaning of the “x”. There are too many aspects of this tiny room to fabricate stories from.

It’s been a long time since I’ve sat in one of these rooms, secluded in our large campus library, the muffled voices of students echoing through the thin walls of the cubicles. I am uncomfortable and intent at the same time. My back is sore from 14-hour days at the newspaper office. My feet are callused and red from trying to keep up on my exercise regimen. My mind is at ease and I’m lightly caffeinated, so I can deal with my butt falling asleep and my knees stiffening.

I take solace in these moments, scattered instances of being so exhausted that the double cappuccino I had around eight doesn’t do much to keep me awake and focused. The only sounds I can hear are that of my \$30 Timex ticking and frustrated anatomy students wasting their precious hours memorizing where bones and muscles connect, information about tendons they will only need for one exam. Part of me feels for them. I’ve been in their shoes; I’m not proud of my B- stint in Survey of Anatomy and Physiology, but at least I survived.

I crave these times when it is just me and the off-white walls of my cubicle. It's an unmarked dwelling on the second floor of the library, parallel to shelves of dated accounting books, visible through a sliver of a window next to the door. Something about this room just feels right; everything is old and used. It reminds me of my bedroom at home, not in the way it looks, but in the way it feels, and the way it makes me feel. It functions as a sort of writing sanctuary sandwiched in the middle of all the action. The wall sockets have been colored green and orange. The screws holding the wire covering leading to the outdated desk lamp are painted over. This further solidifies that the contents of this room are trying to be permanent, even though the occupants are not. We're all just drifters and travelers for four years, then we're shoved in the real world or more schooling.

Working in this cubicle is like owning an old house. We can inhabit the space for a limited time, leave our mark and then we are forced to move on, hoping that the next inhabitants don't completely alter or undo all of the progress we make during our tenures.

In the two hours I've spent laying claim to this space, a quarter of it was spent scoping out the surrounding territory, eyeing my neighbors. I'm not dying for muffled silence tonight, but this place certainly gives it to me. I like that I cannot understand the conversations from the groups four doors down. It gives me comfort to know I'm not the only one hidden away among concrete walls and metal shelves.

I used to be able to write with chaos unfolding around me. I drafted the majority of my first novel in front of the TV, during commercial breaks of *Gilmore Girls*, *One Tree Hill* and *Ugly Betty*. In high school, the movements and conversations between my favorite characters on TV was enough to get me to focus. Now I can't even write during a newscast, let alone while *How I Met Your Mother* or *Castle* is on. Four years ago, I could write with my friends and family

surrounding me, encroaching on my personal space and looking over my shoulder. Writing used to be a public event, instead of a private matter. Now I need the silence of my childhood bedroom or a library to make any meaningful progress.

I don't know what sparked this change; it could be with each passing year, I lose members of the audience I held when I was younger. I've moved away from writing fiction and have experimented with capturing reality, writing about those around me. Maybe I'm afraid that my friends and siblings and parents will know I'm writing about them. Or perhaps I just no longer have to prove I'm a writer to them. They don't need to see my writing to know that I'm producing work.

I can hear my father scolding the person who assembled this room. The counter seems disconnected from the wall; it's clear that this has not received proper attention in years, as the caulk lining that hides the blemishes of construction have worn away, revealing a wide seam between the right side of the counter and the wall. An assortment of stale Cheetos and crackers line the gap, along with abandoned straws and a gold twist tie from baked goods sold from the café downstairs. I'm tempted to push a pen into the crack, but I don't have any I'm willing to part with.

The newest additions to this room lie above my head. The two fluorescent lights look like giant stereo speakers from the angle I am sitting at. My feet are spread out in front of me, my back flank with the wall across from the pine and tangerine sockets.

I'm tempted to scrawl my name on the back of the door, just to say that I contributed to the public graffiti movement. I doubt that anybody will see the significance in a simple "C. Vandewater" scrolled in tiny letters, but at least I can say I wittingly left my mark on the library. Remnants of footprints sit on the bottom half of the door, most likely from a tired student who

was in a pinch to finish a paper or exiled themselves here to study five chapters for a psychology test.

It is probably unwise to leave this space to run to the bathroom, but I brave it anyway, locking the door with my nickel. All of my prized possessions are sprawled out across the countertop. My watch, iPod, iPad and flash drive are proudly on display. My spare keys are in my backpack. Thankfully I removed my passport before coming to school. I have my cellphone in my pocket and room keys clipped to my pants, partially because I may run down to the café and grab a cappuccino, but also because I feel too light and silent without them. The jingling of my keys as I walk is a reminder that I'm moving, possibly making progress. My phone fits perfectly into any pants pocket. I hate that it functions as a safety mechanism, but maybe I like knowing if my roommate has something to tell me while I am peeing in the library, I can respond instantaneously, not worrying about there being a two-minute gap in our conversation. How awkward.

I skip out on a second cappuccino, not out of sheer willpower, but because the café is closed. Damn food services. No respect for the late night warriors who crave a second double hazelnut espresso shot at 11 p.m. I climb back up the stairs in silent anticipation, eager to see if any of my things have been stolen. More importantly, I want to see if I am truly the only soul on this campus who knows how to unlock/lock the door with a coin. Finding camaraderie in the face of theft is not something I am proud of, but alas, I like knowing there might be someone here that sees the world and all of its quirks in the same way I do. Perhaps the five minutes I'm away from the booth is not long enough to fully carry out this experiment.

At 11:30 p.m. I pack up my things and slide them neatly into my backpack, the folders and books descending from thickest to thinnest. Before I exit my space and lock it, I dig out a

Mark's Pizzeria magnet from my bag and climb on the counter, standing so I can see out of the transom windows normally above my head. I place the green magnet on the sill above the door. It neighbors two cigarette filters and a millimeter of dust. As I position the magnet perfectly, a couple walks by, looking strangely up at me as I pretend to be curiously inspecting the sill of my cave, or taking in the landscape of dusty bookshelves and ancient textbooks. I'm sure they'll forget my face by the end of the night.

When I return to the room, I find it's just as I left it: white, barren and dark. It remained locked for two days, letting whatever dust and ideas I stirred and generated resettle. I'm kind of disappointed that no one successfully unlocked the door.

It's funny how different the room seems, even though nothing has been messed with. The sockets are still green and orange, but previously unnoticed math problems and pen marks surround them. The chair is still brown, but there is a small tear along the left side of the cushioning. I'm still twenty and restless, and as I settle back into the room, removing my shoes, watch and bracelet, I begin to notice the remnants of tape scattered across the walls and a heart carved to the right of the doorway. As I turn on my computer, I wonder what love story is behind its fading curves.

I find it odd that I'm attracted to this space, but it's not surprising. I've spent the last 48 hours looking forward to this moment, to the character of the room. My first visit was about getting away, about investigating a room that has been inhabited by hundreds, if not thousands, of other people. It was about finding a way to write about boredom without making a boring work of prose. But perhaps most importantly, it was about claiming my own space, finding a box

that was untouched and tread upon by friends and family. This place shouldn't feel sacred, but it today does.

I'm twenty years old and this is the first time I've have my own space, uninterrupted by loved ones. Like most things in my life, it's inherited from others, and my lease is only temporary, if not fleeting. I don't mind. I'm just happy to be alone, far enough from people to feel isolated and alone with my thoughts, but close enough to hear their muffled conversations. Sometimes I forget how important space and time are to being a writer. Writing is a delicate process. It's not that I'm incapable of stringing words together, I just struggle with finding the *right* words, the magic combination of syllables that sets my work apart from those around me. This isn't just my problem; it's a burden that every writer faces at one point or another. It's a hard thing to come to terms with, the idea that nothing we create is ever truly original, that we're always parodying those who came before us. Writers can come across as being strong and sure of themselves, but in all reality, it's a gargantuan defense mechanism. We're not only competing with each other, we're competing against ourselves, with every statement we've ever put on a page, with every train wreck of a paragraph we've ever deleted from our manuscripts. Creating good prose is a constant battle against time and the inevitable line of hurdles that come with sorting through a steady stream of random, disjointed, and often useless thoughts. It's nowhere near simple. If essays were easy to write, I wouldn't be sitting in this room overanalyzing graffiti, pretending I have a connection with whoever scribbled, "1-800-Get-A-Life" on the wall in front of me. Attempting good writing is a dangerous and gross task. It means taking your deepest—or most superficial—thoughts, placing them on a chopping block to slice and dice them until they can be kneaded into some sort of coherent narrative. It's not pretty. Most of the time it's downright messy, if not outright maddening.

As a writer, I have become an expert in not allowing myself the time and space to develop and hash out my thoughts. Superficially, all I want to do is pass my classes and hang out with my friends. Beneath that sense of normalcy, there is something rooted inside of me that wants to burrow into a corner of this library, refusing to emerge until I finish a novel or craft the single best essay written in and around or about Brockport. I don't have the heart to tell my loved ones that I'm tortured by the lack of my own room, of a space that is solely my own for my thoughts and words. Sitting in this room is a small way of reconciling that, of embracing the fact that I need time to just be physically alone, left to observe and ruminate on the lives and stories unfolding around me. It's a terrible thing to want to live a passive life, constantly taking a back seat to the excitement, but I think as a creative individual, it's important, if not vital, to give yourself enough space where you can sit and hear the people around you without having to worry about conversing or changing the course of a conversation.

It wasn't always like this; in high school, I made a point of setting up my writing space out in the open, in the presence of others. Some writers can say they wrote their first novel while working as a janitor or in between raising three kids and being a good wife. I wrote my mine from a twin-sized mattress in a room that had an equal ratio of stuffed animals to books until I left for college in fall 2009. I learned to type in the dark, on a laptop that was old, slow, recycled and perfect in its own way. I've always been attracted to old and pointless things, and as I wrote that first novel—scrolling out 79,000 words in the matter of two months—that laptop felt as important to me as one of Hemingway's typewriters.

Writing seemed a lot easier then. My life and mind were less cluttered. It was easier to set aside time to write, and personal space was not as important. Quality didn't matter as much as length did. My love of words set me apart from my friends and gave me an identity separate

from most of my peers. My work in high school was less about creating the perfect essay, blog post or novel, and more about proving I could commit to putting words on paper, even if they couldn't compete with my favorite authors. Now, it's almost the exact opposite. I don't write for as much for quantity, but man, does quality matter. I'm not trying to be the next Annie Dillard or Tracy Kidder, but I'd rather be lumped with the likes of them instead of Nicholas Sparks or some mainstream, in-it-for-the-money kind of writer.

As I sit in this room, listening to my Timex tick the seconds, hours and minutes away, I wonder how I fit into the grand scheme of writers, how my presence will be remembered on this campus, in this silent community of cubicles. Almost every writer I've ever come across has had a place like this, a space where they feel emotionally and mentally free here. To be personally and publically successful, we need a space to let our dreams and stories and insanity flow onto the page. Many have written about a simple nook in their lives that revolves around words and the creation of sentences. Annie Dillard had an empty library room much like this one while writing *A Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Stephen King had a gargantuan desk and an addiction to alcohol and cocaine. Virginia Woolf had *A Room of One's Own* and would later fill her pockets with rocks and drown herself. I'm quite sure I will not be travelling down either drug-infused or suicidal path, but my point is they had space to write and work and be alone. More importantly, they recognized that they needed the space. Whether or not it helped their sanity is another story.

It's easy to grow bored in a space like this. I've got blank walls surrounding me and no one to talk to. When I truly lose focus, I scribble in the margins or catch myself staring at the ceiling, trying to absorb the paint and watermarks from my post in my worn brown chair. I find myself trolling Dictionary.com for the definitions of the strange words passing through my mind. Like the classic *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* children's book, I end up going through a series of

rituals, only to end up right back where I started. I check my email and go to Facebook, reading the pointless stories on people's walls, only to head back to my email, finally deciding that it's time to print off my work from the previous Tuesday. The result is a two-minute journey to the printer downstairs. I begin it by locking the door with my nickel, neglecting to put on my shoes, feeling rebellious.

I shouldn't be this comfortable dirtying my socks on the worn, charcoal speckled rug. It should really creep me out that I'm stepping on the dirt and germs of hundreds, if not thousands of people. The library is a disgusting place. Between the gum stored on the bottom of the chairs to remnants of half-eaten chips in my room, it's a marvel I'm not constantly dousing my digits in hand sanitizer. At least I'm not barefoot.

I retrieve my papers and walk through the half-full library like I own the place. I know at least a dozen people hope they make a mental note that I look like an idiot. I know I've got some witty, cheesy, overly enthusiastic smile on my face. I'm walking around in my socks and an old t-shirt. I look unfeminine and frazzled in my fading capris, but that's exactly how I want the people around me to remember me as. I'm imperfect and proud and my appearance doesn't matter to me at the moment. Being happy does.

I must look like a dork as I bound up the stairs, skipping every other step, but I don't care. I've painted the perfect picture for myself in my cubicle: laptop open on the counter, blue water bottle half-full behind it. My cheap Wal-Mart clipboard lies in the corner, a pile of papers strewn across it. I'm in a stale smelling library, writing and alone, even though I am surrounded by people. It's intoxicating, feeling like this, temporarily unafraid to bare it all on the page. I know my thoughts aren't anything revelatory, but it's been awhile since I let my mind run wild, and filled a room with my thoughts. Right now, it doesn't matter that this isn't the best thing I'll

write, or that I'm getting increasingly distracted. Following a thread until it leads to a gem of an idea or a bunch of crap words is part of the process, part of learning to be a writer. Let's hope it's more of the former.

When I settle back into my chair, I want to mock the person who wrote "1-800-Get-A-Life" in fading purple ink. I have a life. And for two and a half hours now—closer to six if you count my first visit—it has revolved around this room, around writing an essay. Yes, about half of that has been consumed by writing and rewriting pointless sentences, and pretending the graffiti in this room does not fascinate me, but I don't think that warrants telling me and all future users of this cubicle that we do not have a life. I'm sure I'm overanalyzing the boredom behind the marking, but whatever. I've spent enough time in here to earn a little room for speculation and imagination.

For most of my tenure in this room, I've sat in silence, trying to calm the buzzing in my head. Until half an hour ago, I didn't need music to tune out the sounds coming from neighboring rooms, but unfortunately some asshole has decided to conduct a phone interview in my sacred row of the library. I take refuge in my iPod, then grow sick of musical words and turn to Pandora and Beethoven.

Like the room I sit in, the classical composers that dominate parts of my Pandora station help me to transcend whatever state of mind or setting I am in. These walls are white, my handwriting is messy and there are no words to the music playing. I feel like I'm watching *Fantasia*, with cartoons playing out in my head as the concerto changes tones. I'm content again, thankful that ol' Ludwig van was here to save the day. When the interview ends thirty minutes later, I'm bored again, staring at the blank page again. My first impulse is to draw circles in the

margins, which then turn to letters, eventually morphing into the compulsive signing of my name.

I've had a long fascination with my signature, both in and away from situations where I am terribly bored. There is just something really special for me in the looping of the "C" in my first name and the ups and downs and curls of the subsequent "a-i-t-l-i-n." Since it's inception when I was 16—at a time where I dreamed of being a published author by the time I was 22—I have changed the structure of the movement, the neatness of my letters and the interconnectedness of everything. It has gone from a very methodic, jumbled mass of letters to a quick swipe of a "C" and a smooth curve of a "V." Forget the "a-i-t-l-i-n." The "V" then progresses into an "a" and so on, until everything deteriorates at the first "e" in Vandewater. This is where I grow lazy—or perhaps the pen loses all consciousness—and the "e-w" becomes a slanted "w" or "v" and the "t" is swallowed by the second "e" and "r." It forms a sort of "<" at the end of my name. Over the past few months, I have tried to scale back, trying to make the last six letters of my name distinguishable, but my campaign has been pretty ineffective. Old habits die hard.

My signature is the only thing I truly care to write long-hand because in all honesty, it's the only set of letters that I truly own, the one script I have that sets me apart from other writers. Yes, I'd like to one day sign it into books or magazines or on pretentious pictures of myself, but for now, I'm okay with scrawling it messily into the margins of his notebook, ignoring the fact that I'm not making any progress on this essay.

When the paper loses its allure, I move onto my hand, laughing lightly as the pen tip licks and leaves a gloppy black residue on the folds of my palm. One temporary tattoo is enough for now, so I impulsively scrawl my name on the counter, only to immediately regret it.

I have a momentary second of pride in how beautiful my name looks, still shiny and blotched from the ballpoint of my pen. It's a truly beautiful signature, every letter legible and clear. And then I panic a little. I'm tired and "Night on Bald Mountain" is playing on my radio. My mind is bubbling with thoughts as I calmly panic and run to the bathroom—after locking the door of course—and soap up a paper towel and grab a few extra to wipe away the excess suds. I shouldn't feel guilty about signing my name on a counter already littered with other people's lethargic thoughts. But I do. I've never left such an obvious form of graffiti more, and it doesn't help that my name is actually known on campus, that my face is in every newspaper on campus. I know no one else will give my pen mark a second thought—it actually might make them laugh a little—but I care, so I walk briskly back to my pad. "Night on Bald Mountain" is still playing as I sit down. It adds to the growing tension in my gut. I feel like I did when I scratched the bumper of my Mom's car learning to parallel park. I'm feeling stupid and liberated, and in hindsight, I'll probably blame the intensity of the music and the exhaustion that is washing over me. When "Night on Bald Mountain" fades away and a series of overtures by Cherubini begin to play, I feel like collapsing into my chair. It may be time to call it a night.

Milestones

As with any year of my life, the school year I entered first grade was crammed with milestones. It was the year I became obsessed with getting “A”s on assignments and papers. I learned the word “butt” from some farm kid who always wore overalls and had the beginnings of a snaggle tooth. I contracted chicken pox sometime between February and April 1998 (I’ve always blamed Angela Anuzewski, the girl who sat next to me for most of the year, but I’m sure my mother would argue that I got it from my younger siblings). It was the year I became afraid of going to the school bathroom alone. It was located three doors down from our classroom and there was a rumor flying around the first grade that it was haunted by a dead lady named Mary. She lived in the mirror.

First grade was the year I read my first chapter book and found out my mother was pregnant with my youngest sister. I was devastated at the time, claiming we didn’t need another baby. I guess it all worked out in the end. I got another sibling to boss around and she got to be the only one born and fully raised in our Folk Victorian home. I’m kind of jealous of her for that. She doesn’t appreciate its character.

Shortly after we moved into our home in late 1997, my father began to sand and remove lead paint from our current living room and dining room. It was the first of countless home improvement projects, and one of the few I did not help execute. Because of this, we lived in only half our house.

Until early 1999, our family would take up residence on the second floor, spreading out as much as we could across three bedrooms and the tiny in-law apartment at the back of the house. It’s a strange notion to think that our lives were contained on a single floor, considering how full our home seems now. As a six year old, it didn’t matter that I played and ate and

watched TV in the same space. The faded, worn wall-to-wall carpeting in the tiny living room and bedroom of the apartment was new and different from the white carpeting in our previous house. The room I shared with Bailey was a lot bigger, and on Saturday mornings, we would collapse the trundle bed and play for hours with Barbies and Beanie Babies on the floor. Back then, our cramped space was spectacular. The loot under the Christmas tree was more mountainous. We were constantly finding marks and dings from previous owners, inhabitants we would never get to meet. Our new house was an adventure, a series of mysteries our family is still trying to solve.

I was the only one in school at the time, and I don't recall if I loved it or not. I do know that I suffered from separation anxiety for the first few years of school—my parents argue this persisted until college—and was terrified of riding the school bus, only because the bus driver was an old fat guy who had a habit of forgetting to stop in front of my babysitter's house. I guess it was easy to forget someone as tiny as me, and I did nothing to remedy the situation. I let the older kids pipe up and scold him for me.

My father worked at Stonebridge Iron and Steel, a steel fabrication company located a few miles away from Baby Chicks, the daycare where two of my siblings went until shortly after Hadley was born. My mother was Soft Lines manager at the Kmart in town. As a six-year-old, I felt like I never saw her. I know this is untrue, but I honestly have more memories from that time with my dad. This is probably more out of coincidence than truth because my mother has never been absent from my life, but she was kind of absent from my school routine that year. She'll say that she couldn't be part of my school routine, not because of work reasons, but because of my inability to separate myself from her. As much as I'd like to deny that I was a clingy child, there is paperwork that proves it. My pre-kindergarten evaluation is a comical disaster. The school

didn't think I was ready for kindergarten because of my refusal to leave my mother's side, but I'm positive that if my parents hadn't forced me to go, I wouldn't be a functioning part of society today. I've always been the kind of kid that needs a good push every once in a while.

Taylor Kelly was my best friend that year. We met in kindergarten and I'm pretty sure she lived about two blocks away from me until sixth grade, when she moved to Lake George or Elmira. She was a bigger girl, not quite overweight, just chunkier than I was. Granted, everyone was chunkier than I was. I wasn't a picky eater or anything. I just didn't hold onto my baby fat the way other kids did. She had dirty blond hair and light brown skin and a loud, infectious laugh. Whenever we played house in Mrs. Macwan's class the year before, she would always be my daughter and I would put her in charge of the baby, a naked African-American doll I think we called Lucy. Throughout the remainder of her time in Greenwich, we oscillated between being friends and acquaintances, partially because we weren't always in the same class and I rarely went on play dates. I was Facebook friends with her for a year or two, but like our first grade friendship, it crumbled because of distance and lack of interest. I don't know where she is now, but I'm sure she's got her lip pierced and an ugly tattoo taking up real estate on the small of her back. She's not a bad person, I'm just a little more straight-laced than she is.

I don't remember my favorite color or what my favorite movie was (it probably bounced between *The Lion King* and *Beauty and the Beast*). I couldn't tell you what I wanted to be when I grew up or what my favorite TV show was. I can only remember random things, stupid details like getting a B+ on a quiz when Mrs. Gardephe substituted for a week or hugging a line of acquaintances as I left the cafeteria each day after lunch. What I do know is that I was happy, healthy and always felt safe—with the exception of my trips to the bathroom at school. Mirror Mary scared the shit out of me.

I believe at any stage of life, when tragedy or happiness hits, we will always remember the mood of the room or setting we are in. Depending on how tragic or happy the moment is, the time of day may also be permanently carved into our memory. When I found out my mother was pregnant for the fourth time, the entire family was huddled in what is now my youngest sister's room. Mom was sitting on our wooden, wide-backed rocking chair. Dad stood somewhere in the room, probably holding my brother. Bailey stood or sat next to me, eager to hear the news. The room was well lit, so it was either mid-afternoon on a weekend (that's when the sun shines the most in Hadley's room) or after dinner, when all the lights would be on in our bedrooms. The night I found out my Pop died, I was sitting on the pine green cushion I write this essay from, in our mustardy green living room. It was around 8:00 pm on a Tuesday. The first time I saw the Twin Towers fall, I was standing twenty feet away in our playroom, hugging my mother as I tried to make sense of the scene that played out on our tiny television. It was around 2:45 on another Tuesday. It was really sunny that day.

When I learned of the Sandy Hook Elementary school shooting, I was sitting one cushion down from where I am now, halfway through Tina Fey's *Bossypants*—a 2011 memoir/laugh factory of a book—and partially listening to a thrilling game of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*. I don't normally keep the TV on during the day, mostly because Mom sanctions it during daycare hours. When it is on, preschool shows are playing. My viewing *Millionaire* was a rare moment. The living room was devoid of small children. I could listen to the game show and read my book in peace.

I've been dealing with little kids running around our house since the end of second grade. Our family went through a lot of change between December 1998 to December 1999. Even more

so between December '98 to April '99. Hadley was born just about two weeks before Christmas '98, rounding out my parents' quartet of children. My mother left Kmart in March '99, right around the time we moved downstairs and began our new, decompressed life in the whole of our home. The introduction of daycare kids came soon after. Moving downstairs and the start of daycare are forever tied together in my mind. I don't remember a time where strangers' children weren't sleeping on our couches in the early afternoon or eating all of our animal crackers before they went home.

My mother's intentions with starting daycare were fueled by her desire to witness Hadley's full childhood, without cutting off a source for money. For my early years, my mother was the breadwinner, sacrificing time with me so my father could finish college and figure out his career path. Because of this, I suffered separation anxiety and my Dad stayed in school for a total 12 years. I don't want to say that Mom solely stopped work because she wanted to compensate for lost time with Bailey, Riley and me, but it definitely played a role.

Like most Fridays of my winter break during senior year of college, I planned on spending the day on the couch, reading. As I would tell anyone willing to listen, it's incredibly hard to read recreationally during the school year, especially as an English major. I would spend my break reading anything I could get my hands on, tuning out small children and my family in favor of Tina Fey's childhood and Pat Peoples' struggles to piece his life back together in *The Silver Linings Playbook*. Unfortunately, the NBC News Special Report that interrupted *Millionaire* ruined those plans.

There is something alarming about a news segment splicing into daytime television, the strong voice of Lester Holt reporting that there has been a massacre just three hours away from your home. It's numbing to hear that 20 to 25 children have been shot and possibly more are

dead. It was 10:30 in the morning and the nation—possibly the world—wants to know why someone would open fire in an elementary school.

I've lived in a time where school shootings and murder-suicides are an unfortunate public and social norm. Some people blame it on a lack of gun control. Others say it is because of the mistreatment and misunderstanding of the mentally ill. I believe it oscillates between the two, and while my immediate opinion may not matter in the grand scheme of things, I know that gun violence is a motif that has been prevalent throughout my life.

On November 1, 1991—eleven days before my birth—Gang Lu, an University of Iowa graduate student opened fire on an astronomy and physics faculty meeting, killing four faculty members, later killing the associate vice president for academic affairs and injuring a student employee before taking his own life.

On my brother's second birthday—April 20, 1999—Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold opened fire in Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, going on an hour-long shooting rampage before turning the guns on themselves. Their original plan had been to blow up the school, which would have killed at least 500 people. I was too caught up in listening to the Spice Girls and eating my brother's birthday cake to know that 14 students—including the shooters—and one teacher had been killed, with 27 others wounded. I'm sure it was one of the rare nights of my childhood where my parents did not turn on the evening news, for fear it would ruin our festivities or scare the wits out of us. Truthfully, I probably wouldn't have paid attention.

It wasn't until a year after Columbine that I became acutely aware of violence in primary and secondary schools. This was because of a string of bomb threats in my middle and high school. Luckily, nothing ever resulted from the threats—typically caused by someone writing “bomb” in a bathroom stall or locker—but I lost count at how many lockdowns we had that year,

and how many times the high school was evacuated into the middle school auditorium. Third grade was another year I was afraid to go to the bathroom. I was terrified of being the kid who found the dreaded “bomb” graffiti written next to a toilet or sink.

This sort of violence is not restricted to the past two decades. The deadliest mass murder in a school in United States history occurred in 1927, when Andrew Kehoe blew up his house, killed his wife and then set off a series of bombs around the Bath Consolidated School in Bath Township, Michigan. While my parents can’t recall any major school shootings, their childhood and adolescence was populated with assassination and murder attempts.

The year they turned two, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on the Hotel Lorraine Balcony in Memphis, Tennessee. When they were 14, John Lennon was murdered outside of his New York City home by a crazed fan. Five years before, there were two separate attempts to kill President Gerald Ford. Both occurred in California, September 1975.

Nothing condones the murderous behavior behind these tragedies and assassinations, and while all are shocking, the Sandy Hook shooting really struck a chord with me. It’s not that incidents like the Virginia Tech Massacre of 2007 are any less tragic, but because the primary victims were children, I spent a portion of the afternoon feeling like I was going to vomit. Those kids were barely old enough to read and write or tie their shoes. They lived in a place that was on the short list for the best places to live in America in 2005. The violence in their worlds was from cartoons and squirt guns, not semi-automatic rifles that can fire up to six bullets a second.

I’m far enough away from being a parent that I cannot even begin to imagine the pain the families of those 20 first graders are going through. I’m close enough to know that they’ll always live with holes in their hearts, always wondering what kind of people their kids would be as adults. They’ll wonder who they would marry, where they’d go to college and what kind of

music they would listen to as angsty teenagers. They'll always remember the rainy days of playing with Legos or building tents in the living room. I'm witness to these moments whenever I'm home. I spend my holiday breaks surrounded by other people's children, kids who think our house is the safest place on Earth, second to their beds at home or their parents' arms. The children that filled my house over that winter break probably feel safe at preschool too. They are surrounded by their friends and kind teachers, so they don't need to worry about the outside world and all of its horrors. That's the beauty of being a child, the undying faith in all of the good in the world. The kids that died that day were probably too focused on what Santa was going to bring them to realize that our nation is still at war and our economy could still use a little boost. The bigger picture doesn't matter to a child because it doesn't have to.

Those kids' lives will be cherished and memorialized in their community forever. Newtown, Connecticut will be listed in the history books as the site of the second worst school shooting in recent U.S. History. On December 14, 2013, NBC or ABC will probably do a special on how the Newtown community is healing and all of the charitable efforts and possible organizations that resulted from the tragedy. No doubt a group of parents will start their own foundation or scholarship fund and begin crusading the country, preaching about gun control and ways of preventing and ensuring things like this never happen again. And that's the thing; these things can be prevented.

Over the next few years, Adam Lanza's face will continue to be plastered across the media as reporters and authorities and psychologists dig into his mental health records. We'll learn of his achievements in high school and if he was bullied as a child. The fact that he was autistic might take center stage and pictures of him as a kid will probably be featured as a way of gathering sympathy. More importantly, attention will be called to the fact that this incident—this

massacre—was not a random event, but a well thought out, and executed plan by a mentally deranged young man. The same thing can be said about Columbine, Virginia Tech and the Iowa State shootings. It all comes down to mentally disturbed young men who have access to guns, and motive to kill. All of them could have been prevented.

In the wake of these events, our first instinct is to ban the guns, to cast the blame on the accessibility of firearms. Certainly guns play a role in these tragedies, but as the saying goes, guns don't kill people. People kill people. And no matter how many laws are passed, no matter how strict firearm regulation becomes, that doesn't change the fact that mental health problems form the foundation for almost all these incidents, and that they could have been prevented if someone took the time to recognize that these young men needed serious help, and they shouldn't have been around or allowed access to guns. Yes, maybe we need to curb the way people go about obtaining firearms, but we also need to recognize that owning a gun is like owning a car or getting a driver's license. There is a level of responsibility that comes with owning firearms and learning to drive a car. Every time you get behind a trigger or steering wheel, you are risking injury to yourself and those around you. Sure, there are many careful and safe drivers and gun owners, but there are plenty of men and women who abuse their right to both. As with most things, it's the careless, reckless gun owners and drivers that give regular law-abiding citizens a bad rap. Even worse, it's the fact that men like James Holmes—individuals who clearly are mentally unstable, and exhibit behavior that concerns other people—are able to legally buy firearms because they don't have a criminal history. We don't let blind people drive, so why should we let mentally disturbed men and women have access to dangerous weapons?

The night of the Sandy Hook massacre, I found myself fleeing the nonstop news coverage, reading the final pages of *Bossypants* and watching *The Graduate*. The ending of the book was bittersweet, mostly because the humor soured after I heard about the shooting. It's hard to enjoy someone else's happy moments when over a dozen families are being consumed by unimaginable grief just three hours away from your home.

My family was scattered across town; Mom and Dad had gone out for their final Christmas shopping trip. Riley was off at a track meet. Hadley was at a basketball game and Bailey was at the back of the house, watching a movie online. The dogs slept soundly beneath my feet as I tried to focus solely on my book and movie, but images of my favorite first graders kept flashing through my mind, disturbing the quiet peace that had spread through our house.

The five 4 year-olds that occupied our house that Friday all had siblings—mainly sisters—of first grade age. I've spent over a decade, sitting, listening and marveling in the stories small children make up, watching dozens of kids grow up playing with the toys I had as a child. It amazes me how they are consistently able to imagine new stories and scenarios for the dolls and action figures my siblings and I filled our playroom shelves with. Their lives are centered around play and imagination. They feel safe as long as they are surrounded by people and things they love.

I had spent most of the day on the couch, pretending I was enjoying my book, trying to suppress the anger and sadness I felt as the events of the day came into focus. I kept the TV off for most of the day, for fear that the daycare kids would catch wind of news and suddenly have a million questions as to why the world is the way it is. When 6:30 rolled around, I reluctantly flipped on the news, even though I knew it was only going to upset me even more.

Normally half an hour long, the December 14, 2012 broadcast of *Nightly News* was an hour long and virtually commercial free. Flashes of Obama tearing up and sighing in microphones had dominated the 5 o'clock news hour, and for the first time that day, I watched the entirety of the President's remarks, the long pauses between statements, his steady hands wiping away tears from the corner of his eyes. It's a task to keep your emotions at bay when the leader of the free world can barely keep his composure, and the news team you've grown up with looks cold and suddenly aged. After the clip of Obama was over and the scene had cut back to Brian Williams, I sat on the couch and silently sobbed, glad I was alone with my thoughts and the dogs. Like a majority of the American population, I just wanted burrow into a hole a sleep for a few weeks, waking up to a world that hadn't just lost 20 children, 6 adults and 1 mentally disturbed young man.

I grew up in a household that has always valued the news, and respected the people reporting it. Tom Brokaw and Matt Lauer were an essential part of my childhood. Their faces appear in between segments of our home movies, our memories erasing their newscasts and highlights of a time that seems so much simpler, kinder, slower. If I had the chance at school, I'd probably eat my dinner while watching *Nightly News* and tune into *Today* each morning as I ate my Frosted Flakes. These programs remind me of home, of the safety of our kitchen and the comfort of my squeaky wooden bedframe. Keeping up on the news helps me to keep things in perspective, to respect the opportunities that have been given to me, but most of all, it has taught me to look our society in the face and question why horrible, unfortunate and tragic things happen to innocent and good people.

In the days and months that followed September 11, there was an overwhelming need—both in our household and across the nation—to know every detail as it happened. I remember

going for what I thought was weeks of constantly watching CNN or other 24-hour news networks, searching for new answers to the large, looming questions that the 9/11 attacks left our country to answer. I was nine when the attacks happened, and barely aware that one day everyone I know and love will die. Shortly before starting school that year, I had the startling realization that one day I will die, and every second that passed signaled my steady, slow crawl toward death. Watching the looping footage of the Twin Towers falling, the Pentagon's damage and the wreckage of Flight 93 did nothing to ease the worry I had about death. Watching the news the day of the Sandy Hook shooting was a lot like being in fifth grade again, wondering why the hell people would want to destroy the New York skyline, let alone attack our country.

It's perhaps an understatement to say that Americans are a proud people, and when tragedy hits, we have a habit of banding together, of momentarily setting our differences aside to support one another. It's always striking to me how an undying sad, nostalgic and powerful human spirit arises from whatever horrors are witnessed, experienced or are exposed to our nation or world. It's a horrible notion, but in the wake of tragedy, people and communities and the global population grows closer. It's disheartening to think that it takes unfortunate circumstances to make people open their eyes and start broader conversations, but we have a habit of not confronting larger issues until they confront us. I've never been witness to or a victim of gun violence first hand, but I've sat in classrooms of first graders and seen and been part of the innocence their worlds are made of. It's no secret that this is why this tragedy is so huge, why we, as a nation, need to reevaluate the way we view our precious Second Amendment rights and the way we treat the mentally ill in this country. The aftermath of this massacre has the potential to change the landscape of so many issues: gun control, mental health, security in our schools and so on. Focusing on one subject isn't going to solve the problem. This incident is

not solely related to the accessibility of firearms, or the status of mental healthcare in our country. It's a complicated braid of these factors, and no doubt many others. And while it will take a lot of patience to untangle and rearrange the facts to form the realer version of the truth behind this act of violence, it's our job as citizens and parents, siblings and friends to look in the mirror and question the real impact of this tragedy.

We know that children aren't supposed to die and they certainly aren't supposed to be senselessly murdered. No one is. But more importantly, they aren't supposed to die in a place they consider to be as safe as their homes. For the amount of time children and teens spend in school buildings, they shouldn't have a fear to enter a classroom or hallway each morning. I'd like to think we carefully filter the men and women we allow to teach our children in this country, and that no one in their right mind would even consider opening fire anywhere near a school or public building, but that's the thing. Adam Lanza wasn't in his right mind, and he certainly should not have been able to get his hands on that gun and enter that fucking building. You would think we would have learned after Columbine to start filtering and locking down the way guns and weapons trickle into the hands of the mentally ill, but until the shootings stop, I don't think we're really making any progress.