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Part of my senior work is a play called *TimeHoles*, which is about TimeHoles. I wrote the play for Sherry Kramer's class Time, Memory and Meaning Making, in which we explored the ways in which people perceive time and form memories. In the play, TimeHoles are physical breaks in Time that people can fall into and become trapped in, but they are also moments. TimeHoles are moments when our ability to perceive time fail us, when we honestly cannot tell how long we've been somewhere, or how long we've been doing something. The reason I bring this up is because graduation is one hell of a TimeHole.

Graduations, like funerals and weddings and the other great rituals of life, are moments that call special attention to the passing of time. They are moments in which we are both overwhelmed with feeling, and yet uncertain of what to feel. The scope of life broadens. The monotony of daily routines gives way to an abyss of introspection that sends time stretching out before us. The future rises up like a wall, a wall that we are hurtling towards at unimaginable speeds, but that we never seem to hit. And the past drops out from under us like a mine-shaft, our memories fluttering down into it, crying out to be saved and held. "*Never forget me*" the past whines, in an ethereal, reverb-drenched voice that echoes between our ears like the best song on that one friend's BandCamp page. "*I'm coming for you!*" the future growls, like a beast caged by school and home and our parent's good intentions, now finally ready to prey upon us.

In short, these are moments when you could use a good speech. Preferably a speech with some sort of lesson. It's no surprise to me that the times in which we feel least certain about where our lives will go, when our ideas are directly challenged by reality, that we turn to people standing behind podiums to tell us what we're supposed to make of it all. There's something

about a speech that seems dishonest, an assertion of knowledge in a time of deepest unknowing. When I was selected to stand behind this podium over six months ago, I struggled to find some sort of lesson, or theme, or something else from essay-writing class, that would help me encapsulate the experience I have shared over the past four years with this fascinating group of individuals, and I found that the more I tried to sum up, the more I left out. For every experience spoken to, another was ignored. For a group of people with so much in common, our experiences have been remarkably different, and oftentimes contradictory.

My struggle with capturing Bennington in a speech bears some similarity to my own experience here. It is a place where I feel a more genuine connection to the people around me than anywhere I have ever been, and it is also the place where I have felt the loneliest I've ever felt in my entire life. It is the place where I caught the first glimpse at what the best version of myself might feasibly look like, and also the place where I learned exactly how low I could sink. This place has given me the greatest joy and the greatest sorrow I have yet known, which is to say, it is the place where I lived between the ages of seventeen and twenty-one.

The point being that the years we spend at Bennington are among the most tumultuous of any person's life. They are moments of becoming, of transformation, and in that way, there really isn't anything coherent or conclusive to say about them, especially since they're not over. That's why graduation is a TimeHole. It's an artificial marker that tells you that something is ending, that your life is changing. It's the moment of transformation we've been waiting for since we started got here. But the fact that we focus our attention, our emotion, our spectacle, on this moment rather than any other, is completely arbitrary. When I was a freshman, I wondered what I'd be like when I was a senior. As a senior, I wonder what I'll be like when I'm not a

student anymore. And my best guess for what I'll be like is someone very much like the person you see today, only a tiny little bit different. Like any of life's great anticlimaxes, graduation is an event where you wake up the morning after feeling mostly the same, and maybe even a little disappointed about that. You expected the event, the actual day and time that it happened, to be the transformation. It isn't. We spend most of our lives waiting to be transformed, waiting for the moment that will prove that we're different, but numb to the transformations that we undergo with every second that we live.

"Trying to be different" is a phrase which I think could describe most if not all of the Bennington student body, and I don't mean this in a bad way. It's part of what makes the Bennington experience so difficult to categorize. Difference takes many different forms, but it is at its heart a reconciliation between the world and the self. I chose Bennington because I was dissatisfied with the world and my place in it. I stayed at Bennington because I was dissatisfied with myself, and I wanted to be transformed. I arrived at Bennington, and I was instantly surrounded with people who felt the same way. And for those reasons, I thought I had found in Bennington, *my* place.

Perhaps the question of difference at Bennington has less to do with who the students actually are and more to do with how they see themselves. In her feedback on the last draft of my speech, the wonderful and patient Nicole Arrington invoked the "island of misfit toys" from the immortal Christmas special *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, to describe my characterization of the Bennington populace. I shared this with some friends, and they all thought that "island of misfit toys" fit pretty well. I think it's telling that there is a tendency among the Bennington populace to view their uniqueness as its own kind of illness, one that requires special coping

mechanisms and moments of deep introspection. Within the insular world of Bennington, we have nowhere to run from the things that make us unique, whether they be our talents or our flaws. The work I've seen here is the work of people who are deeply engaged with the frightening and uncomfortable aspects of themselves and the world. This engagement produces outbursts of joy and despair in equal measure, and with them, beauty that leaves me breathless, just when I need it most.

I have said, with complete sincerity, to my friends, to my parents, to random people I meet, and even to the committee of administrators which was deciding whether or not to expel me, that Bennington is my favorite place in the world. Holding this belief so blindly and with such confidence has been, in retrospect, a mistake, one which has marred and narrowed my perspective. The rush of discovery I felt in my freshman year, the instant kinship with the people I met, the unprecedented freedom to express myself and become involved in the frenetic creative energy of the campus, all convinced me that Bennington was the only place I would ever truly belong. I sold myself short, and dangerously so. Bennington became my world. Then my world shrank.

I had once felt at home on the whole campus. Then gradually, I came to feel at home only in Stokes, the house where I lived. Eventually, I felt at home only in my own room. This transformation happened gradually, without me noticing it. It wasn't the one I had been waiting for, the moment where I would finally become the person I wanted to be. But I became the person I did. I came to Bennington wondering what my place in the world was, and by my Junior year, I had determined that it was a very small one. Most things in life just weren't for me. The fact that I adopted this viewpoint, at a school where taking class and doing work in a field in

which one has no experience whatsoever is practically a prerequisite, speaks to the subtle and insidious transformation that had occurred in me without any conscious intention.

At Bennington College, a music teacher named Kitty Brazelton made me write a song on an instrument I didn't know how to play. I didn't know, until she made me do it, how much I'd wanted to write a song. Because of her, I learned how to play an instrument, I learned how to sing, and I started writing songs.

At Bennington College, a playwriting teacher named Sherry Kramer taught me how meaning works. She gave me the words I needed to think like an audience member when crafting my work. I began performing experimental standup comedy where my relationship with the audience was the main subject of the performance.

At Bennington College, a literature teacher named Becky Godwin told me to write for at least fifteen minutes a day, just for myself. She said write by hand, in a notebook, and don't edit. Don't judge what you write, just write. When I was in her class, I did it for her, sometimes. When I was in rehab, I did it for myself, religiously. I wrote what would become the final story in my senior thesis, one day at a time, by hand, thanks to Becky Godwin.

These people are among the faculty who made my world larger than I ever believed it could be. And yet, learning these things in the classroom wasn't enough. I was writing plays, and stories, and songs. I was doing standup comedy. I performed and wrote and collaborated with my friends and peers, even during the period when my personal life was on a rapid decline. I was proud of my work, but dissatisfied with my life. My world was too small for my work. I left no

room in it for the people who loved me and cared about me. And because of this, my work suffered, as did I and the people who cared about me.

At Bennington College, a literature teacher named Annabel Davis-Goff makes every student in her class bring in a question about the reading, and an observation. Not a point, but an observation. All it takes to participate in one of Annabel's discussions is to read the book, wonder about something, and notice something.

What I have for you now are observations. They are not true for everyone, but they are true for me, and without them, I wouldn't feel like I was giving an honest speech. I'm finally at a point where I love myself enough to say that I've done a lot of great work at Bennington, which I am incredibly proud of, and to which I owe a huge debt of gratitude to both my teachers and my friends. But none of this academic and artistic work would have existed without the existential, psychological and emotional work I did to complete myself as a person and reconcile my relationship with my community and the world at large. And, I would argue, this is actually the work that constitutes the key element of the Bennington experience.

At Bennington College, my adviser, Dina Janis, told me to stop beating myself up about my work habits. I would come into her office week after week, each time in a panic about some new assignment which I had yet to begin and which was due in a matter of hours. "You're a procrastinator" she said, "and you might just have to accept it. Some people just work like this." I was furious at myself to the point of pulling my hair out at how impossible it was to get myself to do my work without some sort of pressure, either from an impending deadline or a helpful

collaborator. And yet the work always got done. People seemed to like it. I was even proud of it sometimes, even if I finished it minutes before I walked into class.

I realized that I would never get anything done if I was in a constant battle for who I was. The transformation I had envisioned for myself as an incoming freshman was one in which I would become a highly productive, highly motivated artist, cranking out work and submitting it everywhere, left and right. This vision was highly incongruous with who I actually was at the time, an anxious, disorganized person whose creativity expressed itself in unexpected bursts of frantic energy, before dissipating into the ether. Dina helped me to accept that I would never become the person I had dreamed up to meet the expectations of others. Bennington doesn't just teach us how to work like professionals, it teaches us how to work as ourselves. It teaches us how to collaborate with other people, and also that we must first collaborate with our own quirks, proclivities, and mental idiosyncrasies, no matter where we lie on the neurological spectrum.

These past few weeks, joy has exploded from the campus like fireworks. This is time of year is a sumptuous feast of creativity, tinged with an ephemeral sadness. A year's worth of work is transformed into concerts, gallery openings, exhibits and performances, a festival of passion. The people who you've awkwardly nodded to countless times on the way to class, who held up the line in the dining hall with their conversations or forgot to leave the washing machine doors open in the laundry room, become storytellers and dancers and rock stars and researchers. You get a glimpse of everyone at their best, putting their time and their effort and their courage into something that becomes bigger than themselves, even if just for a moment. These moments are filled with awe. We gather in a space, we are told we will see something familiar. We are told some of our friends will be here. But when we see our friends beside their work, they look

different. They look bigger. They look more like themselves than they've ever looked before, and yet we are convinced that this is nothing more than an honest expression of who they were all along.

There is so much more to this work than what we see on display, and that is what makes it great. Aside from the hours of labor that went into constructing the sculptures in Usdan, or writing up the studies on the walls of Dickinson or composing the pieces that ring through the hall of Jennings, there are countless more hours, devoted to reflection, self-care, and existential agony, that give this work its vitality, its significance, and its uncompromising uniqueness.

When I say that graduation is a TimeHole, I mean that it's a moment that's got us by the throat. We see people show their work, their truest selves shining through, and then we realize that we might never see them again. We continue in our daily routines, getting coffee, going to class, going to the dining hall, acutely aware that this way of life will soon end. I want to savor these moments, the mundane and the fantastic, the last tastes of a place that has seen so much becoming, so much transformation, but my enjoyment is marred by these thoughts of impermanence, by the sweeping, throat-stopping sensation of things coming to an end. This is a TimeHole, where things are ending but not over, beginning but not yet begun. The heart strains at its yoke, desperate to pull forward, to escape the agony of anticipatory grief, then stumbles back to bask in the afterglow of a catharsis dissolving into luminescent dust. Time seems to strip the skin back from the bones of life, and we see the skeleton, the superstructure of years and days, hours and minutes, coursing and pulsing its way towards who knows what. We gather under a tent with our respective progenitors, the people who made us who we were before we came here, all finally here at the place that made us who we are today. We catch a glimpse of



bigger things, versions of ourselves that have not yet emerged set alongside versions of ourselves that died long ago. And we wonder: what will become of us?

Sometimes it seems cruel to me that fate put me on this hill with so many amazing people, and yet I can't take you all with me when I leave. It seems like a harsh and artificial construct of Time, to throw people together into the intimate experiment of transformation and rip them apart after four short *long* years. College begins with convocation, ends with commencement, and lasts about four years if you're lucky. In that sense, it's not *real time*. It's a massive, four-year long TimeHole, from which we are just beginning to emerge, as if from a dream, blinking in the sunlight of reality. But these markers of time cannot be trusted. We know, from the fluttering in our guts and the gentle throbbing of our chests that the transformation is happening, *always*, that we are at the crest of a wave that will raise us up and throw us down again and again until we die. We know it because it's always been happening to us, not just since we got here, but since we were born. This feeling, which seems beyond our comprehension and control, is just the sensation of us noticing and wondering at the pulse of life which we have gathered to observe.

I leave this college for a world that I am already and have always been a part of. I leave knowing that there is no *one* place for me, no single person or group of people who are meant only for me. But to the people here, under this tent, who I now say goodbye to, I'd like you to know that I truly believe we were meant for each other. But I also believe that we were meant for people we've never meant, for places we've never seen, and things we've never done. My friends, there are no words for how grateful I am to have known you. You are more than the sum of your talents, your beauty and your illnesses, you are more than your failures and you

successes. I am grateful for everything you've done, everything you've been through, for without it, I would never had a chance to know you as you are now. The world is as much yours as it is anyone else's. It's filled with people waiting to be transformed. Maybe they're waiting for you. Go out, and show them what you've become.