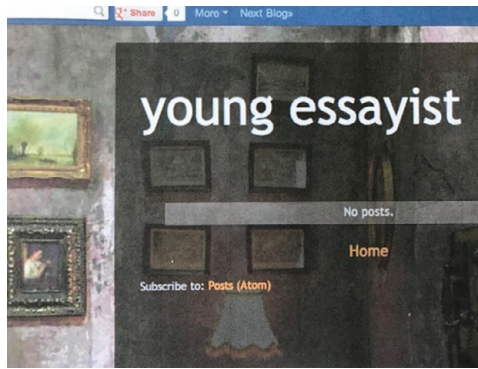


# Chapter 13. How Young Can You Go? Age and Experience and the Personal Essay's Limbo Pole

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The U.S. Census Bureau assigns the category of middle age to anyone aged 45 to 65. The essayist that Graham Good describes in his preface to *The Observing Self*, a historical study of the essay genre, appears to occupy the upper end of that category. Here we find an English gent, wearing a “worn tweed jacket in an arm-chair,” “smoking a pipe by a fire in his private library,” and “maundering on about the delights of idleness, country walks, tobacco, old wine, and old books” (vii). Good’s characterization is meant to demonstrate just how out of touch so many genteel essayists were, writing at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially amid the gathering clouds of World War I. Ned Stuckey-French, in *The American Essay in the American Century*, suggests that this gentleman essayist both reflected and attempted to maintain the positions his archetype embodied: “upper-middle-class values, Christian morality, the classical unity of truth and beauty, and a belief in the progress of (Anglo-American) civilization” (14). In other words, he was not just an essayist; he was a way of (white, upper-middle-class) life, drawing to himself, to the genre, imitators who looked, talked, and thought like him. The result was a genre whose entrenched poster child was a salt-and-pepper-haired maunderer.

More than a decade ago, when my own hair was still firmly pepper, I internet-searched my way to a Blogspot page titled “young essayist.” The background on the blog’s home page featured the sort of room someone much older might occupy, or at least someone whose tastes skew vintage: fine arts paintings in gilded

frames, an oval mirror, an antique wooden wall phone, and a lamp with a silk, fringed shade. But the blog was empty. “No posts,” a gray page banner read. I occasionally checked on the site over the next few years. Still: “No posts.” The blog has since disappeared, likely abandoned or removed for inaction. *Young essayist?* it calls into the void. *What could you possibly have to say?* The answer, apparently, is nothing. Such a question seems absurd in our own contemporary age in which the essay now invites and celebrates a multiplicity of identities—including under-fifty essayists like Roxanne Gay and John Jeremiah Sullivan (born in 1974), Ta-Nehisi Coates and Zadie Smith (1975), Jenny Zhang (1983), Jia Tolentino (1988), and Morgan Jerkins (1992), to name just a few. All of them have plenty to say. But the essay’s history, as it has been consistently framed and delivered, and especially its pedagogy, packaged as advice to the genre’s novices, reveal a persistent problem, even if it is merely one of perception: The literary essay seems best suited to middle-aged ruminators, those who have put some decades behind them.

For many older writers and teachers of the essay (define “older” as you wish), achieving the essay’s most notable markers—deep reflection, self-examination, and knowledge—is especially challenging for younger writers. “We would not want to think of the essay as the country of old men,” writes Elizabeth Hardwick in her introduction to the *Best American Essays 1986*, “but it is doubtful that the slithery form, wearisomely vague and as chancy as trying to catch a fish in the open hand, can be taught. Already existing knowledge is so often required” (xv). In “On the Necessity of Turning Oneself into a Character,” Phillip Lopate outlines ways that “student essayists,” as he calls them, can strive to write the kinds of enduring essays that their literary models have achieved. One such strategy, turning oneself into a character, involves presenting oneself as a person “of a certain age, sex, ethnic and religious background, class, and region, possessing a set of quirks, foibles, strengths, and peculiarities” (72). In this vein, age is not an insurmountable barrier to writing essays. After all, students might well turn themselves into the young characters they are. But the key, as Lopate explains, is for them to look at those selves critically, and deeply, to identify their flaws and present them to their readers. The underlying question is whether young writers can turn themselves into middle-aged reflectors as well. In her essay “Letter to a Young Essayist,” Eva Brann argues that “an ardent young essayist is an oxymoron, like, say, a ‘spirited bureaucrat,’” suggesting from the start that her letter is just a bit of rhetorical dark comedy. Brann’s real audience appears to be older tutors and teachers who share her views about young essayists and who would not lose heart at such a dispirited opening declaration: *Dear Young Essayist, Yours is an impossible existence*. Brann argues in the letter that the young essayist’s dilemma is really tied to the nature of the essay genre itself:

Poets and novelists have a double birth: their congenital gift and their self-generating industry. Essays are not born but almost altogether self-made. They may not have in them a propensity,

but a propensity is not a talent. They are the aboriginal un-geniuses in the land of literature.

It is not that essayists cannot achieve genius, she seems to suggest, but with age and experience as genre requisites, they simply must live long enough (past the age of most high school and college students, certainly) to cover their blank slates. By contrast, fiction writers are apparently the teenage boys in that land of literature, enjoying their creative peaks early before fizzling out. In a 2010 essay titled “How Old Can a ‘Young Writer’ Be?” *New York Times Book Review* editor Sam Tanenhaus offers this “essential truth” about fiction writers: “They often compose their best and most lasting work when they are young.” His thoughts occasioned by a *New Yorker* issue featuring 20 writers under the age of 40, Tanenhaus points to a 2009 interview that novelist Kazuo Ishiguro did with *The Guardian* in which Ishiguro suggests that fiction writers reach their pinnacle of creativity before they are 30. “There’s something very misleading about the literary culture that looks at writers in their 30s and calls them ‘budding’ or ‘promising,’ when in fact they’re peaking,” Ishiguro told the interviewer. In his 50s at the time of the interview, and two decades past the year in which he was awarded the Booker Prize for *The Remains of the Day*, Ishiguro agrees that in some ways he has already peaked as well. The only way out of such a decline, he says, is to “change and write different kinds of things” (Aitkenhead). It is not entirely clear what Ishiguro has in mind by “different kinds of things.” Maybe the essay? But maybe not yet. For now, Ishiguro continues to pump out novels, publishing his eighth in 2021 at the age of 66.

In this construction, if poets and novelists are the stuff made of young dreams, the essayist is the stuff made of second chances, midlife crises, and back-up plans. “I don’t suppose many young people dream of becoming essayists,” opines Lopate in a 2013 essay for *The New York Times*. “Even as nerdy and bookish a child as I was fantasized about entering the lists of fiction and poetry, those more glamorous, noble genres on which Nobels, Pulitzers, and National Book Awards are annually bestowed” (“The Essay, an Exercise in Doubt”). While I, too, was a nerdy and bookish child, I was happy to imagine myself an essayist from the time I was 19 years old and took a college course on the contemporary essay that marked my life. I did not receive the message that I should consider doing something else, until a course in my first semester as an M.F.A. student in nonfiction during which my professor, a famous novelist, dismissed my work in front of my older classmates, declaring that nobody cared about my infantile experiences, and advised me to grow up. Perhaps as a counter to my own argument here, it took a few more years before I realized he was right, but also really truly not right. My essays were not subpar because I was young; they were subpar because at that point, I hadn’t read enough or written enough or worked hard enough as a writer. I would have been a subpar poet and fiction writer, too, although I suspect my professor’s criticism then would have been tied to talent rather than to age. At least there was hope for me as an essayist; apparently all I had to do was get older. In

his introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Lopate observes, “While young people excel at lyrical poetry and mathematics, it is hard to think of anyone who made a mark on the personal essay form in his or her youth” (xxxvi). Lopate offers James Baldwin and Joan Didion as two exceptions, with the caveat that Baldwin and Didion “both adopted precociously world-weary personae” (xxxvi). For Lopate, one of the signature traits of the essayist, the ability to organize—examine, reflect, make art of—the mess of life for oneself and for a reader inevitably comes with age:

It is difficult to write analytically from the middle of confusion, and youth is a confusion in which the self and its desires have not yet sorted themselves out. A young person still thinks it is possible—there is time enough—to become all things: athlete and aesthete, solider and pacifist, anchorite and debauchee. Later, knowing one’s fate and accepting responsibility of that uninnocent knowledge define the perspective of the form. (xxxvi)

Middle age is the time in which that confusion starts to sort itself out, suggests Joseph Epstein in his introduction to *The Norton Book of Personal Essays*: “The personal essay is perhaps intrinsically a middle-aged or older writers’ form in that it calls for a certain experience of life and the disposition to reflect upon that experience” (15). For both Epstein and Lopate, the artful reflection on the lived experience—which Doug Hesse refers to as “emplotted experience” (208)—also requires temporal distance as it moves from mind to page. In that sense, both the living and the thinking about it are measured in years, and young essayists cannot simply reflect their way out of this dilemma. They can only pass the time.

It is hard to imagine how such messages are received by young essayists, first dipping their toes into the essay genre by way of these well-known anthologies. *You might benefit from reading essays (collected in anthologies edited by wiser, older essayists), but you are unlikely to write them, at least not yet.* The Antiguan American writer Jamaica Kincaid received that message as a student of the essay. In her introduction to the *Best American Essays 1995*, Kincaid describes her first encounters with the essay by way of men “of substantial standing in their societies, men who had time to contemplate an idea, who knew that their opinions might influence events in their day” (xiii). Kincaid’s reaction both to reading these essayists and to being asked to imitate them? “I felt angry, I felt sad, I felt I could never have command over words, I felt I would never have an idea, I felt no matter how big I got, I would always remain small,” she writes (xiii). Yet for many essayists, those big ideas—knowledge acquisition in its most formal sense—are a defining characteristic of the genre. In her introduction to the *Best American Essays 1992*, Susan Sontag roots the greatness of the essay as a literary form in the sermons and public lectures of Jonathan Edwards and Ralph Waldo Emerson, declaring that the best essays display “sheer intelligence of the highest order” (xvii). No wonder young writers like Kincaid react as they do to such framings,

internalizing *I am not there; I may never be there*. While Kincaid later finds value in her exposure to essayists like Francis Bacon, she still finds unsatisfying, even alienating, this presentation of form to her as *the* form—as if the only way into the essay is by way of (white, male) privilege, experience, and age, and the ideas that accompany them.

This notion that age and experience (no less whiteness and maleness) are prerequisites to the kind of interior reflection that the literary essay demands has trailed the essay from its modern beginnings. In 1580 when Montaigne published the first edition of the *Essays*, he was then in his late 40s. By contemporary standards, he was entering middle age. In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century France, however, where life expectancy was 25 to 30 years and a 15-year-old had only a 50 percent chance of reaching the age of 50, Montaigne was lucky to still be alive, and he knew it (“Montaigne on Age”). In his essay “Of Age,” he writes, “my idea is to consider the age we have reached as one few people reach. Since in the ordinary course of things men do not come thus far, it is a sign that we are well along” (237). The subjects of Montaigne’s essays range widely—from sleep to cruelty to drunkenness to war—and yet, they herald the sort of middle-aged gentleman’s concerns that essayists, male and female, would embrace for the next several hundred years. William Cowper was 25 in 1756 when he published “Complaints of an Old Bachelor” (Cowper attached himself to widows during his 68 years of life but never resolved his young man’s complaints). Alexander Smith was 33 in 1863 when “Of death and the fear of dying” appeared. Robert Louis Stevenson was a ripe old 27 when he published “Crabbed age and youth” in 1877. By comparison, in our own modern times, Roger Angell was in his 90s when he published “This Old Man” in 2014. Edward Hoagland was in his 70s when “Sex and the River Styx,” an essay that explores the sexuality of the “dirty old man,” first appeared in 2003. Helen Garner was 77 when, in 2020, she wrote “The Invisible Arrow” about being an old writer.

In “Emerson and the Essay,” William Gass notes that many of the earlier practitioners of the essay projected an image of “effeminate and sickly” men, “full of resentment and weakness, procrastinators, passive as hens, nervous, unwed” (26). Such a characterization further distances the essayist from virile youth. Moreover, it is a characterization that many (young) women essayists, at least in the first three centuries of the modern essay’s life, readily adopted. In other words, the essay as a de-masculinized, middle-aged man’s space helped to open a space for women essayists as well. In 1838, Gail Hamilton, for example, put a pipe between her lips and donned the essayist’s tweed jacket in “Happiest Days.” Her essay is a rollicking condemnation of the notion that childhood is the happiest time of one’s life. Notably, Hamilton claims, it is the wisdom and experience that come with age that make growing older the real treasure, not remaining young. Like Lopate, Hamilton finds that “Every year evokes *order from confusion* [emphasis added], till all things find scope and adjustment. Every year sweeps a broader circle for your horizon, grooves a deeper channel for your experience” (435). Hamilton was

25 when she published “Happiest Days.” Elisabeth Woodbridge Morris was just over 40 when she wrote “The Embarrassment of Finality,” a humorous meditation on how she wished to spend her last moments. “Live as if each moment were my last? Not at all! I choose to live as if each moment were my first, as if life had just come to me fresh,” she decides (60). Morris lived another 50-some years after she wrote this essay. It is too simple to counter that Montaigne and his descendants, having necessarily reached the age of maturity far ahead of young people today, also necessarily focused on middle-aged topics. No, the essay itself, at the moment Montaigne made his 40-something self the matter of his book, seemed destined for middle-aged thinking and reflection, no matter the essayist’s age; once established as such, those who came after ran with it, knees creaking all the way. Even in the *Best American Essays 2015* volume, editor Ariel Levy remarks on just how many of the essays she considered for inclusion in the volume had to do with aging—perhaps, she suggests, because the essay genre is occupied by so many baby boomers (xvii). Levy, an essayist in her 40s, remarks that she appreciates “sitting on the shore watching the pros do what they’ve been practicing for decades,” although she also recounts the “joy” she feels—though “in a different way”—reading a younger essayist who is just beginning a career but manages to mount the barrier of youth to “get it right” (xvii).

Perhaps ironically, the idea that experience, fine-tuned with age, could share the genre’s platform alongside other types of knowledge was novel in Montaigne’s time. In his essay “Of Experience,” Montaigne upends prevailing philosophical notions by suggesting that experience matters when it comes to constructing knowledge. He uses experience to justify his act of writing (about himself), but he also seems to suggest that this experience validates the reader paying attention. In other words, the reader can trust Montaigne because Montaigne’s reflections are attached to the life he has lived and the experiences he has accrued. Those experiences make him an expert of himself, but that self-expertise, he argues, is also legitimate knowledge. And here, Montaigne nods to Plato:

So Plato was right in saying that to become a true doctor, the candidate must have passed through all the illnesses that he wants to cure and all the accidents and circumstances that he is to diagnose. It is reasonable that he should catch the pox if he wants to know how to treat it. Truly I should trust such a man. For the others guide us like the man who paints seas, reefs, and ports while sitting at this table, and sails the model of a ship there in complete safety. Throw him into the real thing, and he does not know how to go at it. (827)

In many ways, this analogy of doctor-patient is important to understanding the dilemma for young essayists. We trust the author because the author has lived the experience. We trust the author because the author has thought their way deeply into—and usually out of—the experience. Thus, an essay that begins “Years



ago” or “When I was younger,” seems to situate itself on much firmer ground than the one that begins, “Earlier this year” or “When I was a sophomore.” Young essayists then have an ethos problem from the beginning. Who are they, whirling around in their chaos and confusion, their brains (according to science) not fully formed until the age of 25, who are they to tell us anything? In the natural order of things, young people sit at the feet of their elders, not the other way around. Perhaps that is why so much advice to young essayists is to go out and live some more—then come back when you have something of value to offer.

In her introduction to Lee Gutkind’s *In Fact: The Best of Creative Nonfiction*, Annie Dillard provides a list of tips for young novices dabbling in the genre, from focusing on mechanics (“Learn grammar.” “Learn punctuation.”) to buying books from independent booksellers rather than from chain stores. But many of Dillard’s tips mirror the sort of “go out and live more” advice young essayists are often given: live a year in a different part of the country, buy books and read for pleasure, register and vote. And, significantly, she tells young writers: “Don’t write about yourself.” Why? Because, she says, “Boring people talk about themselves” (xv). Dillard’s advice is not without merit. Live more, do more, think more, write more—certainly such advice can only serve to benefit an essay, and a life. And Dillard’s are certainly livelier tips than those offered by Brann to the essayists she doesn’t believe exist: “Drink green tea. Occupy the bathtub. Carry a notebook. Seize on a phrase” (Brann). But surely “boring” touches a nerve in young people already plagued with worry that their lives are too boring (not enough age and experience) to create essays. And this current generation of young people in particular carries additional baggage that must feed their self-doubt: statistics show that compared to previous generations, they are slow to get their licenses, move out of their parents’ houses, seek paying jobs, get married, start families, and achieve other traditional milestones that mark adulthood (Twenge and Park). In fact, there is some suggestion that young people—and their parents—have so internalized this concept of delayed adulthood that it has become a self-actualizing promise (Henig). It is not a big leap to wonder if something similar might apply to essay writing. Young people hear “you are too young to write essays,” and so they don’t dream of being essayists. As teachers of nonfiction, as critics and essayists ourselves, we need to assure them instead that not living, doing, thinking, or writing as much as they might eventually live, do, think, or write does not preclude a good essay. We can only write from where we are, and where we are is no less adequate than where anyone else is. And while perhaps Dillard would also advise adults to avoid writing about themselves, her advice here to young people seems particularly suspect. In the creative nonfiction classroom, we feed our students a steady diet of essays in which older essayists (and not boring ones) spend a great deal of time—whole essays, whole books even—writing about themselves, and writing well. Why should our young essayists not do so too?

The long and short of it is that people younger than 45, 35, 25 are perfectly capable of writing profoundly good essays, no matter how old they are or what

experiences they have thus acquired. Furthermore, the spaces we invite them into in order to create these essays, the critical discussions and craft talk we simultaneously present, must suggest they are not too young to bend themselves under the essay's limbo pole. After all, their metaphorical young bodies are far more likely to do so without falling to the ground or throwing out their backs. And so, if the young essayist is indeed capable of writing essays, the problem may be instead with the (old) receiver. In a review of books by several contemporary essayists—Davy Rothbart (born 1975), Sloane Crosley (born 1978), John Jeremiah Sullivan (born 1974), Sheila Heti (born 1976)—Adam Kirsch finds the work of these essayists (save Heti) lacking. The essay of old (by the old?) engaged with the world, he argues; the new essay, on the other hand, “is exclusively about the self, with the world serving only as a foil and an accessory, as a mere staging ground for the projection of the self.” For Kirsch, the failings of this new essay are tied to the generation producing them, a generation, he says, “now on the cusp of 40, an age when it is no longer charming for one's heart to be an idiot.” In other words: time to grow up. There are similar arguments to unpack in the concluding paragraph of Laura Bennett's “Generation Whine,” in which she examines the work of two 20-something bloggers, Emma Koenig and Ryan O'Connell, and decides—with some caveats and complexities—that Koenig and O'Connell are stand-ins for an entire generation of 20-somethings who are caught in the “self-affirming echo chambers of social media”:

[R]eading Koenig and O'Connell, it is hard not to think that such smart, funny, articulate, motivational twenty-somethings are wasting a decade's worth of creative energy, that they would be better off living outside their own heads for a while. But they want to be artists, and they want to be heard, and they are adrift between their own creative ambitions and the pressure that the culture at large has foisted on them: to be . . . the voice of their generation or at least a generation; to speak for everyone simply because they have a blog and so they can; to take their experiences, and make them ours. (Bennett)

The idea that this kind of self-inventory and personal reflection is mere naval-gazing (wearsome, whiny, narcissistic) has plagued the essay for centuries. But attaching it particularly to young people with us versus them language is problematic. There is nothing wrong with laying the sidewalk of one's experiences for others to traverse in order to find their way to some kind of shared emotion or new understanding. It is advice I tell my students: Give me something from your experience for myself, even if it's simply a means of understanding what I don't share with you. That these experiences are rooted in youth, tied to a younger person's experiences and concerns, makes no difference. Several years ago, one of my students wrote a powerful essay about being raped not once but three times in her college career. As a result of these traumas, she became addicted to the



show “Law and Order: SVU” and begins using what she learns from “SVU” to try to make sense of her own experiences. The essay didn’t succeed because she was young—though it captured some truth of what it means to be a young woman in college—and it wouldn’t have failed because she was young. It succeeded because it was a thoughtful, lyrical, unnerving, self-conscious essay. It would have failed if it were not those things.

In their seminal creative nonfiction textbook, *The Fourth Genre*, Robert Root and Michael Steinberg note that the essay genre encourages “self-discovery and self-exploration” (xxv), two concepts that seem especially suitable to youth, marked as it is by that process of discovery and exploration. Sondra Perl and Mimi Schwartz use those same terms in their textbook, *Writing True*, arguing that all nonfiction shares a “desire for self-exploration and discovery, whether writing about yourself or others” (9). It is hard to square Dillard’s advice to avoid writing about oneself with the craft advice to explore and discover oneself. Both sets of authors also settle on “personal presence” (Root and Steinberg) or an “engaging voice” (Perl and Schwartz) as another defining characteristic of the essay, again, a feature that seems well within reach of younger writers. After only a couple of weeks with a class of creative nonfiction writers, many of us are able to assign blind submissions to their rightful owners because we can already hear them, can recognize their voices on the page. But when it comes to the voices they are reading, it is fair to say that many of the examples we offer capture the voice of the middle-aged, the old—and while those voices and experiences can certainly resonate, it is also worth thinking about offering our students not only literary models in other voices but craft talk models as well, written from vantage points other than that of the “wise elder.”

I have had to re-examine my own craft advice in light of this awareness. For example, I used to advise creative nonfiction students not to write in media res, advice that, in retrospect, seems comical given that the entire genre is proffered as best suited for human beings in media res. I was simply passing along advice that had once been given to me, about how time (that is, years and experience) allows for the kind of deep reflection that underlies good essays. It made sense to me given how difficult reflection can be in the midst of chaos, no matter one’s age. And then my father died. Several weeks after his death, I began to write about those wrenching final days of his life, about the pain that consumed him, about his last words—“Why? Why?” before he choked on his last breaths. I knew if I didn’t write the details down, I would forget them—because the part of me that had to go on from those days needed them erased in order to do so. In some ways, it was too soon to write my father’s death, and I knew it. Still shell-shocked, still horrified by my father’s rapid wasting from pancreatic cancer, I could make no sense of it. The only discovery I could manage was the fact that I could indeed make no sense of it. Instead of acknowledging what Lopate sees as a default of youth, I turned it into an asset. I let what I didn’t know, the chaos and confusion, drive the essay. It was named a *Best American Essays 2003* Notable Essay. In many ways—and I

tell my students this—I will write my father’s death over and over for the rest of my life. That first essay was a beginning, written in my youth. I took another stab in 2016 with the publication of an essay I titled “The Stairs.” Was it better? I don’t know. Certainly different. Because I was different. The key to writing that original essay, though, was not age (I was in my 20s) but a forced detachment from the experience as I wrote: that is, I had to examine my words not as experience, as the thing itself, but as art. I had to dive deeply into my own mind, into my feelings, in order to emerge with art. I traveled the distance of Hesse’s “emplotted experience” rather than the distance of time in order to make that essay work.

Perhaps that sort of mental travel—rather than physical travel through time—is embedded in the concept of the “old soul.” In Taoism, the old soul is the last stage or lifetime in the journey of reincarnation, encompassing now the memories, experiences and knowledge acquired in all past lives. This final lifetime, though, is not necessarily linked to age, and perhaps for that reason, people latch onto the idea of old souls “trapped” in young bodies—as if the young body is some kind of impediment to the old soul’s full life. Nevertheless, at least at the level of pop psychology, old souls are often defined by their maturity, their propensity for introspection and reflection, and their sensitivity. In that sense, the characteristics of an old soul are not so different from that of the essayist. Significantly, though, while the soul may be old, the body does not have to be. Again, I know from my experience as a creative nonfiction professor that young people are capable of writing essays that demonstrate with equal finesse the kind of old-soul writing that the actual old souls themselves produce. Put another way: young people are capable of writing, and being, essayists. For really, it is something of the old soul that drives the essay. And yet, I have since wondered, maybe the concept of the old soul doesn’t do enough to celebrate the possibilities of the other stages of life’s journey that are also rich with experiences, even if they do not yet contain all experiences, or enough experiences, for full enlightenment. The essay’s call to deep thinking and reflection is not tied to middle age and middle-aged experiences but to the desire to be on a journey, to think at all, to relentlessly mull things over. And young people have something of great value to offer to the essay genre.

In a now out-of-print collection titled *Twentysomething Essays by Twentysomething Writers*, then 20-something editors Matt Kellogg and Jillian Quint celebrate in the volume’s introduction the way that the included writers tackle the issues that their generation faces: “With hope, intelligence, irreverence, and urgency, they show that we are not to be taken lightly (but not too seriously, either), that we’re finally ready to sit at the proverbial Grownups’ Table” (vii–viii). Point taken, and humor aside, the idea of (the goal of) a Grownups’ Table undermines that value of what 20-something essayists can and are contributing to the essay genre. Anne Fadiman, in the introduction to her student Marina Keegan’s collection of prose and poetry, *The Opposite of Loneliness*, published posthumously after Keegan’s death in a car accident five days after her graduation from Yale, notes that Keegan’s writing differed from that of her classmates:

Many of my students sound forty years old. They are articulate but derivative, their own voices muffled by their desire to skip over their current age and experience, which they fear trivial, and land on some version of polished adulthood without passing Go. Marina was twenty-one and sounded twenty-one: a brainy twenty-one, a twenty-one who knew her way around the English language, a twenty-one who understood that there were few better subjects than being young and uncertain and starry-eyed and frustrated and hopeful.

In other words, Keegan, like my own student who wrote of sexual violence in college, rejected the voice of the middle-aged essayist that her classmates thought they had to assume in order to write essays and chose instead to write in her own. The literary obituaries for Keegan understandably mourned the possibilities of what Keegan's writing might have become had she lived. Shortly after the publication of Keegan's posthumous collection, Emma Cueto wrote,

it is somewhat tragic to read her work, which is already very good, and know that she would have gotten better. The writer in these pages still hasn't quite honed her voice or her craft just yet. Almost, but not quite. And it's enough to break your heart.

However tragic the untimely death of a promising writer, let us reject, however, the notion that to hone the voice of an essayist, one must grow old. After all, who better to capture with raw sincerity—isn't that a hallmark of an essay, too?—the experiences of being young than the people who are living it. They may write those experiences again when they, too, reach middle age, but they won't be the same essays. Our task as teachers of creative nonfiction is to help young essayists write the essays they are meant to write now—to embrace their meaningful contributions to the essay genre, and even to reimagine what the genre is capable of holding and telling in voices well shy of middle age.

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