

The Place Where I Write

by Yelizaveta Renfro

In the past, I took Virginia Woolf's advice about having a room of my own to heart. Wherever I was living, I spent time and energy setting up an office, a space of my very own—with the right desk, papers neatly put away in filing cabinets, awards and diplomas displayed on walls—trying to create a room suitable to a writer, trying each time to make a permanent place for myself. But then I had children and moved too many times, and my writing place became right here, right now. I can spend time making a writing place, or I can spend time writing, because there isn't time for both. And since the places all turn out to be temporary, I choose to write.

Woolf's "room" I now understand to be more of a temporal space than a physical one. I need time more than I need a built-in bookcase. It took me far too long to realize this. I should have known, from the start. After all, my first published short story I wrote longhand in a notebook sitting in a house in Riverside, California, that I had been hired to clean. I once wrote for days in an apartment devoid of all furniture save a beanbag. I composed an award-winning story in the combined living room/dining room/kitchen area of a temporary furnished apartment in Sidney, Nebraska, racing the clock while my two-year-old napped in the next room and my unborn son kicked within me. I've worked in basements, typing one handed, while breastfeeding. I've scrawled ideas in notebooks during soccer games and ballet rehearsals. I've even written surreptitiously in the office of a cemetery when I was supposed to be organizing dead people in an Excel spreadsheet.

For the past three years, I have done most of my writing at a hundred-year-old oak desk in the corner of the master bedroom in our house in West Hartford, Connecticut—a space that my laptop shares with my husband's computer, along with an ever-shifting collection of stray Legos, multiplication flashcards, wooden cars that need the wheels glued back on, thread for sewing on missing buttons, my teaching evaluations, unpaid bills, crayons, puzzle pieces, and a hunk of petrified wood.

This was a temporary arrangement. When I sit down to write this, I have to push aside two smooth stones labeled "dad" in permanent marker, paperclip jewelry, and a Ziploc bag marked "my pumpkin" containing nine carefully harvested seeds. Sometimes, the kids are in the room with me, playing or reading on the bed—because this room is one of the few air conditioned rooms in the summer, the warmest room in the winter. Everything happens in this room. And still, it is all temporary.

The main center drawer contains a microcosm of my desk, my house, my writer's mind. That is, it contains almost nothing of immediate practical use. Sometimes I think I would like to pull the drawer open and find a tidy array of pens and pencils, Post-it notes in varying sizes and colors, multiple kinds of tape—anything my office-supply-loving heart could desire—but I'm not sure this is really true. Instead, the drawer contains a hodgepodge of talismans from past lives: a Pushkin matchbook from the 1999

bicentennial of his birth, pieces of knob-and-tube wiring from a house we had rewired in Lincoln, Nebraska, the beads of a broken necklace my daughter once wanted repaired, the tickets to a "Halloween Happening" preschool event at the library dated Oct. 31, 2011, that never happened due to Storm Alfred shutting off the lights for a week, keys to fire safes I probably don't own anymore, a magnifying glass that came with my compact Oxford English Dictionary in 1992, infant fingernail trimmers that came with my newborn in 2005, an unopened package of blank microcassettes and two rolls of unused 35mm film purchased in another century, a broken pedometer, extra links to a silver watchband, plastic blue jewels that were gifts from my son, and, if you dig deep, maybe even something more practical like a box of staples and a few pens.

Sometimes I can't find tape to save my life, but I have all of these other objects always at my fingertips, and it is in the midst of these juxtapositions, this disorder and uncertainty, that I write. Not only does being neat and organized take time, but a tidy environment makes me feel compelled to have tidy thoughts. And never do they come that way. The disorder is freeing; may it all come any which way. May I dip into the sea of disarray and pluck out the objects that gleam in the light of the present. May I keep that which is important and push aside the rest for another day.

So it helps in some way, I suppose, to know that at any moment I can open my drawer and stroke a piece of granite from the Box Springs Mountains 2,900 miles away. But this desk is not the only place I write, for I have learned to write anywhere, everywhere. I carry notebooks and pens with me always. I take my room with me. I dip into the drawer of my mind. Everything is temporary.