**Sarah Vowell: “NRA vs. NEA”** This story aired on the NPR (National Public Radio) program *This American Life* on October 24, 1997.

If you were passing by the house where I grew up during my teenage years, and it happened to be before election day, you wouldn't have even needed to come inside to see that it was a house divided. You could just look at the Democratic campaign poster in the upstairs window and the Republican one in the downstairs window, and see our home for the civil war battleground it was. I'm not saying who was the Democrat and who was the Republican, my father or I, but I will tell you that I am not the one who plastered the family truck with National Rifle Association stickers, that I have never subscribed to *Guns* *&* *Ammo,* and that hunter's orange was never my color. About the only thing my father and I agree on is the Constitution, though I'm partial to the First Amendment while he's always favored the Second.

I am a gunsmith's daughter. In our house, or as I like to call it, the United States of Firearms, guns were everywhere-- the so-called pretty ones hanging on the wall, Dad's clients' fixer-uppers leaning in the corners, an entire rack right next to the TV. I had to move revolvers out of my way to make room for my bowl of Rice Krispies on the kitchen table.

Now I even giggle when Dad calls me on election day to cheerfully inform me that he has once again canceled out my vote, but I was not always so mature. There were times when I found the fact that he was a gunsmith horrifying and just weird. All he ever cared about was guns. All I ever cared about was art. And there were years and years when I holed up in my room reading Allen Ginsberg poems, and he hid out in the garage making rifle barrels, and we weren't capable of having a conversation that didn't end up in argument.

I have only shot a gun once, and once was plenty. My twin sister Amy and I were six years old-- six-- when Dad decided it was high time that we should know how to shoot. Amy remembers the day he handed us the gun for the first time differently. She liked it. She says that she thought it meant that Daddy trusted us, and that he thought of us as big girls.

But I remember holding the pistol only made me feel small. It was so heavy in my hand. I stretched out my arm and pointed it away and winced. It was a very long time before I had the nerve to pull the trigger, and I was so scared I had to close my eyes. It felt like it just went off by itself, as if I had no say in the matter, as if the gun just had this need. The sound it made was as big as God. It kicked little me back to the ground like a bully, like a foe. It hurt. I don't know if I dropped it or just handed it back over to my dad, but I do remember that I never wanted to touch another one again. And, since I believed in the devil, I did what my mother told me to do every time I felt an evil presence. I whispered under my breath, Satan, I rebuke thee.

Now it's not like I'm saying I was traumatized. It was more like I was decided-- guns, not for me. Lucky for me, both my parents grew up in exasperating households where children were considered puppets and/or slaves. So my mom and dad were hell-bent on letting my sister and me make our own choices. So if I decided that I didn't want my father's little death sticks to kick me to the ground again, that was fine with him. He'd go hunting with my sister, who started calling herself the loneliest twin in history because of my reluctance to engage in family activities.

Of course, the fact that I was allowed to voice my opinions did not mean that my father would silence his own. Some things were said during the Reagan administration that cannot be taken back. I won't bore you with the details. Let's just say that I blamed my father for nuclear proliferation and Contra aid, while he believed that if I had my way, all the guns would be confiscated, and it would take the commies about 15 minutes to parachute in and assume control.

We're older now, my dad and I, and the older I get, the more I'm interested in becoming a better daughter. First on my list, figure out that whole gun thing.

Not long ago, my dad finished his most elaborate tool of death yet, a cannon. He built a 19th century cannon from scratch. It took two years. After tooling a million guns, after inventing and building a rifle barrel boring machine, after setting up a complicated shop filled with lathes and bluing tanks and outmoded blacksmithing tools, the cannon is his most ambitious project ever. I thought that if I was ever going to understand the ballistic bee in his bonnet, this was my chance. It was the biggest gun he ever made, and I could experience it and spend time with it with the added bonus of not having to actually pull a trigger myself.

I called Dad and said that I wanted to come watch him shoot off the cannon. He was immediately suspicious. He seemed nervous when I told him I wanted to record it, but I had never taken an interest in his work before, and he would take what he could get.

I flew home to Montana. He loaded it into the back of his truck, and we drove up into the Bridger Mountains.

**Sarah Vowell:** And the National Forest Service doesn't mind you setting off fiery balls of metal onto their property?

**Pat Vowell:** You cannot shoot fireworks, but this is considered a firearm.

**Sarah Vowell:** So that's OK?I should mention that it is a small cannon. It's as long as a baseball bat and as wide as a coffee can, so it's heavy. 110 pounds. We get to the mountain. My dad takes his gunpowder and other toys out of this adorable wooden box on which he has stenciled Pat G. Vowell Cannonworks. He plunges his homemade bullets into the barrel, points it at an embankment just to be safe, and lights the fuse.

The fuse is lit. This is like a cartoon. Oh my god. Oh, there's smoke everywhere. It's like the Fourth of July. Oh beautiful, for spacious skies--

I've given this a lot of thought, how to convey the giddiness I felt as the cannon shot off, and I wish there were a more articulate way to say this, but I'm telling you, there isn't. It's just really, really cool. My dad thought so too. It's also loud, louder than I can possibly convey over the radio. No, let me amend that. If you want to understand how loud it was, in a moment, not yet, but when I say, turn the volume on your radio all the way up. Ready? Now.

God.It was so loud and so painful, I had to touch my head to make sure my skull hadn't cracked open. Here's something my dad and I share. We're both a little hard of hearing. Me from Aerosmith, him from gunsmith. Hey, turn it up again.

Man, good shot Dad. Just as I was wondering what was coming over me, two hikers walked by. We forced them to politely laugh at our jokes for a while, and Dad set the cannon off again so they could see how it works.

**Hiker:** So you work for the radio, and that's your dad?

**Sarah Vowell:** Yeah.

**Hiker:** That's neat.

**Sarah Vowell:** Then this odd thing happens. When one of the hikers says, that's quite the machine you got there, he isn't talking about the cannon. He's talking about my tape recorder and my long radio microphone. I stare back at him, then I look over at my father's cannon, and down at my microphone, and I think, oh my god, my dad and I are the same person. We're both smart-alecky loners with goofy projects and weird equipment. And since this whole target practice outing was my idea, I was no longer his adversary. I was his accomplice. And what's worse, I was liking it.

I haven't changed my mind about guns. I can get behind the cannon because it is a completely ceremonial object. It's unwieldy and impractical just like everything else I care about in the world. Try to rob a convenience store with this 110-pound Saturday night special, you'll still be dragging it in the door Sunday afternoon.

I love noise. I make my living writing about it, and I'm always waiting for that moment in a song when something just flies out of it and explodes in the air. My dad is a one-man garage band, the kind of rock-and-roller who slaves away at his art for no other reason than to make his own sound. My dad's an artist, a pretty driven idiosyncratic one too, and he's got his last Gesamtkunstwerk all planned out. It's a performance piece. We're all in it, my mom, the loneliest twin in history, and me.

Here's how it goes. When my father dies, take a wild guess what he wants done with his ashes. Here's a hint. It requires a cannon: “You guys are going to love this. You get to drag this thing up on top of the Gravellies on opening day of hunting season, and looking off at Sphinx Mountain, you get to put me in little paper bags, and I can take my last hunting trip on opening morning.”

I'll do it too. I don't know about my mom and my sister, but I'll do it. I'll have my father's body burned into ashes. I'll pack this ash into paper bags. The morbid joker has already made the molds. I'll go to the mountains with my mother and my sister, bringing the cannon as he asks. I will plunge his remains into the barrel and point it into a hill so he doesn't take anyone with him. I will light the fuse, but I will not cover my ears, because when I blow what used to be my dad into the earth, I want it to hurt.