

Preface

I am everything. I am every moment. I am every hug. I am every flight. I am every excuse. I am every measurement. I am every tooth. I am every stone. I am every laugh. I am memory. I am fragments of everything. It is crazy to think that at 17, or any age for that matter, we have any clue who we are. I think every person is composed of a series of fragments. These are broken pieces of memories, objects, people and sayings fused together...stuck in human form. There is no one answer of who I am.

“Christmas”

Christmas Eve. I was no more than seven-years-old. Christmas Eve was like a climax to a movie that had been building for a year. The thought of shiny new presents and the smell of pine kept me up, unable to sleep. Tucked into bed at my usual bedtime, eight o'clock, I listened to the dull murmur of voices down the hall and watched the light seeping through the crack under my door, thinking that last step or last whisper must be Santa Claus. I was more awake than if I had just chugged a gallon of coffee. I gripped my blanket so tightly that my fingers were sore.

I decided to make a bold move. I ran quickly from my room into my older brother's. I didn't dare turn on a light in case Mom knew I was up. I gathered my blanket and favorite teddy bear in the darkness and carefully climbed out of bed. I crept to the door and slowly turned the knob. Light gushed into my room, illuminating my face. I squinted down the hall and saw the closed door of my thirteen-year-old brother's room. I braced myself and made the dash. I burst into his room without knocking and carefully closed the door behind me with immense dexterity.

“Hey! Knock!” he exclaimed, whirling around.

“Reuben, I'm too excited to sleep. I don't want Mommy or Daddy to know in case they tell Santa...”

“Oh,” he said. “Well. I guess you can come here.”

“Do you want to watch A Bug's Life?” he asked. A Bug's Life had become the anthem to our childhood. We watched to it the point where we knew every line and could reenact every scene. I nodded and he put in the movie, tucked me into his bed, and crawled in next to me. The beginning of the movie flashed across the computer screen as my blanket and teddy bear began to slump, relaxed across my lap.

This is one of the few moments of consolation I can remember with my brother. He was rarely a person of comfort to me in my childhood. Being six years older, he was distant. He would often be out until late at night and too busy for family. I turn to others for love and affection, always assuming that he was not able to give either easily.

A year later, when my parents' divorce was final, I needed my brother more than ever. My father lived in an apartment. “Mom's house” was devoid of all things “Dad.” My life had become a series of biweekly packed suitcases, two beds, and two separate families. I turned to my brother to be one of the only constants in my life. And that is exactly what he became.

“Eject Button”

When my brother turned thirteen, my grandpa gave him his first computer. It was a black Dell flat screen with an external modem and it was shiny. After he received this present, I hardly saw him. He was glued in front of the screen, only to emerge at meals and tell us what cool, new function he had figured out. He loved everything about that computer and had even christened it with his mark—a lime green, three-dimensional sticker shaped like a keyboard key with the word “Eject” written across it.

“Walls”

I was born with an innate desire to climb. I owned a pair of stilts that launched me three feet above the ground. I was known as “Queen of the Monkey Bars.” I wanted to be off the ground as much as possible. It was then that I was able to let my imagination create magical realms and characters.

My adventure of choice was the yellow, adobe wall that bordered the outside of Mom’s house. It stretched all the way from our front gate to the side of my grandparents’ house. I was able to hoist myself on top of the wall at the lowest part, near the lavender patch. As soon as I climbed on the wall, my world was transformed. I was on a pirate ship. I was a spy gaining top-secret information on my neighbors. I was a cheetah on the African plains.

Nothing was bad about that wall. All my chores, homework, and bruised knees disappeared on the wall. Instead, I became effortlessly suspended above everything. All worries disappeared except for the final fatal dismount. For some reason, it never crossed my mind to return to the lavender patch to climb down. Instead, I repeatedly faced the feat of jumping six and a half feet off the wall to the lawn below. I stood so close to the edge that my toes would curl, searching for the wall beneath it. I waited minutes on end to get the guts to jump. I stood knowing the pain that was going to shoot through my knees as my feet made contact with the earth. Then, I would jump.

“Two Paintings”

The huge pink flowers with yellow centers and bright green stems are surrounded with the deepest blue I have ever seen. Mom planned the whole dining room around this painting. Our green table perfectly complements the green acrylic. The painting is the centerpiece of the room; it brings a warm, colorful splash to the room and creates a light that our inadequate windows fail to do.

When I was little, I was entranced by this piece. I would spend hours fascinated by every brush stroke and every dot of paint. The most captivating feature of the painting was what was hard to see. The way the flowers crisscrossed and weaved together to leave shapes in the blue background. These seemingly useless blobs were actually witches, dogs, and faces to an entertained five-year-old. I created stories, plots, and character sketches using the shapes seen in the deep blue.

One day I decided to tell Mom what I had seen. I stood on the ledge beneath the painting as she sat at the dining room table. On my tip-toes, I pointed to the various images that I had created, touching the rough acrylic with my tiny pointer finger. Mom smiled and approved, noting that she had never seen that before or that it truly does look like a witch.

The painting belonged to Dad, and when my parents got divorced, Mom's dining room was completely empty. We still had the green table, lamps shaped like candles, the triangle-shaped furniture that fit the corner, and the birdcage, but all was irrelevant without the painting. A huge piece of my life had been taken away from the one place I considered home. My dad's new absence was manifested in the missing painting.

Mom noticed my disappointment with the nonexistence of the art and asked a friend to create a complete replica of the work. Three weeks later, the painting hung at the end of the table. The flowers were the exact shade of pink, yellow, and green and the blue looked so rich that if I touched it, I sensed ocean water on my fingertips. Every splotch of paint that seemed a mistake in the original had been carefully recreated. Mom told me that she showed our friend every face, dog, and witch I had seen and told him to be extremely aware of their presence. The only difference between the new piece and the original one was the missing words "Bill Tate" on the bottom left edge of the painting.

Each painting currently resides in the two separate dining rooms of my parents' homes, reminding me of what I was able to see as a child.

"Pearl"

My full name is Gatha Pearl Hesselden, but I have never in my life been called Gatha except by college admission counselors and substitute teachers who don't know any better. I have always been called Pearl.

There are two different stories behind the name Pearl.

Mom's version: "I was forty-one-years-old when you were conceived. Your father and I had been trying very hard for many years to have another baby and each time, things kept going wrong. One day, however, after months and months of trying, the doctor said I was going to have a little baby girl. We named you Pearl because I had to close my eyes, hold my breath, and dive down deep to get you...just like a Pearl."

Dad's version: "You are named after Janis Joplin's album."

"Cards"

For as long as I can remember, I have been a card-playing fiend. Dad taught me card games my entire life. I was a "5 Card Draw," "Hearts, Sheep's Head," "Liar's Poker," "Jack the Ripper," "Miles Borne" winner by the age of seven. While other kids were learning how to play

basic “Go Fish,” I was mastering every game of poker. We spent hours at the table shuffling, cutting, dealing, drawing, discarding, playing, raising, seeing, folding, and shuffling.

My game of choice is “Jack the Ripper.” It is a card game based on the mystery of “Jack the Ripper.” It used a special deck that contained many color-coded five victim and scene cards and countless Ripper strikes, letters, wildcard, and evidence cards such as Montague Druet, Prince Eddy, and George Chapman. The main point is find who Jack the Ripper is. Dad and I sat at our table for hours engrossed in this game.

“Annabel”

Growing up, I was always warned of heartbreak. It was going to happen to me and I was eventually going to get over. It would just take time. I ran through the possible heartbreak scenarios in my head: my boyfriend cheating on me and I would have no choice but to dump him, even though I still madly loved him. Or that one day my boyfriend left me a note saying “I’m sorry. We’re done.” Each case would leave a resounding ache in my chest that only a tub of ice cream and a romantic comedy from the 80’s would cure. I never imagined that the greatest heartbreak would come from my best friend.

Friendship with Annabel sprouted in the fall of 2006, the start to our seventh grade. We were both new kids at the Santa Fe Girls’ School, and out of our class of fifteen, we were among four new girls. Nervous and awkward, we desperately sought friends. Annabel, however, was the exception. She was a radiant blond, towering above me at five feet ten inches, who seemed to have completely blown past the uncomfortable and humiliating early teen years. She glided down the halls as if walking on water and everyone wanted to be her friend. We all floated through already existing groups of girls, trying out who was the most compatible. Annabel and I clicked.

We became joined at the hip. We never missed chances to be with each other, whether it was taking my newly purchased dog over to her house or going with her family to California for her father’s new marriage. We told each other everything. I knew everything about her from her drunken mother stories to her newest crush and she knew just as much about me. We confided in each other. She became less like a friend and more like an actual part of myself whom I admired and idolized.

Then, the event took place. We all knew it was going to happen and awaited its arrival with combined excitement and sadness. Graduation. We were leaving middle school, being thrust into the dreaded high school. This was the moment for becoming adults, and yet, we were totally aware of how ill-prepared we were for that role. I was going to be attending a small, private school and Annabel was facing the large, public high. We clutched each other and promised we were going to remain friends...that nothing was going to change.

For a couple months, we tricked each other into thinking this. I saw Annabel on occasional weekends and she caught me up with the latest news of her new group of friends. I smiled as we forced our friendship to stay secure and safe—knowing that we wouldn’t last for

long. I was being integrated into a new school, making new friends of my own and finding hobbies and subjects that I was interested in that Annabel wasn't.

Last week, I saw Annabel at a cafe. She was well over six feet tall and still just as blond. She had a handsome boy draped over her arm and was gracefully carrying a cup of hot tea. She waved at me as we said our hellos and she politely suggested we get lunch to "catch up." I smiled and nodded, saying that it had been far too long. I know neither of us meant it and that lunch will never happen. But I really do miss my best friend, Annabel.

"Mandy"

My family went to Oaxaca, Mexico when I was five-years-old. The entire trip has been reduced to a blur due to age and I can't remember much. The only keepsake I have from that trip is a large, wooden guardian angel, named Mandy. Her wooden figure hangs above my bed from a fishing wire. Mandy is in mid-flight wearing a traditional maroon Mexican dress and a huge necklace. Her prominent eyebrows perfectly match the color of her dark mullet. The wings that carry her are bulky and whittled from thick wood. The whole awe-inspiring scene is only enhanced by her enormous, manly hands, carved like planks along her sides. I have never felt more love or protection from any one object.

"Numbers and Letters"

I learned to read in first grade. We sat around our teacher with a copy of "A Pig in a Wig Does a Jig," prepared to struggle through the seemingly irrelevant words in front of everyone. My teacher later informed my parents that I had trouble reading and should be placed in a lower level reading group. I reread the "Pig Book" ten times in first grade, never moving a book forward.

It wasn't until seventh grade when I realized I might have dyslexia. I commonly mixed up numbers and letters, thinking that 57 was actually 75 or that "gaots" were kept on farms. I could never recite phone numbers out loud knowing that the ten digits would soon get hopelessly jumbled up in my mind and never realigned.

I started telling my mom about what I thought and it generated many discussions. She thought that I wasn't really dyslexic and that I just had a hard time with reading and writing. I insisted that something was wrong but never understood.

One night, I lay in my bed and dreamed about all the different letters of the alphabet. The more I considered them, I realized that each letter appeared a different color in my mind. "A" is red. "B" is blue. "C" is purple. "D" navy. "E" green... Every single color. I zoomed through the whole alphabet making sure that each letter had a corresponding color.

I then moved on to numbers. I remarked that once again, each number had its own distinct color. "1" white. "2" purple...

A couple days later, I had to read aloud a series of math problems so my teacher could write them on the board. They were not difficult problems. The real issue lay in my inability to keep the number straight. After stuttering and struggling my way through the first set, I remembered my new found technique. I reviewed the problem: “ $3.56x + 4.88y - 21z + 12$.” The numbers began to disappear and I was left with only this image in my mind: “lime green. blue forest green x + red. purple purple y - dark blue white z + white dark blue.”

“Rings”

I wear rings every single day. What ring and one which figure depends, but always at least two or three. When I take off rings, my fingers are left warped by the silver bands, never returning to their original shapes.

My favorite rings sits on my ring finger of my right hand. It is silver with triangles and lightening bolts carved out and little diamonds. It was given to me by my mother when I was around fourteen. When we were looking at it in the store she made me promise to wear it all the time and I swore I would. I didn't. I didn't really see it again until I was fifteen. It was then that I put it on and haven't taken it off since.

My pointer finger on my left hand holds a very special ring. It was, once again, a gift from my mother about three years ago at Christmas. She got it for me at a recycled art show. It is a sterling silver band encasing an old typewriter key, “P.” It was the most beautiful and precious thing I had ever seen. I took it to the Dominican Republic with me and ever since, it has gotten a watermark that covers the bottom half of the key. It now looks like the “P” was burned in a fire, like someone threw a letter into a fireplace.

The newest addition to my hands is placed on my left hand's ring finger. I purchased this ring myself in downtown Napa. I wanted something to commemorate my experience at Oxbow. The ring is of a silver fox looping around to catch its tail. It is treasured and delicate, lying simply against my pale skin.

“Conclusion”

I do not know who I am.

In the simplest terms, I think that's what life is about: trying to answer the question, “Who am I?” We live moments with people and objects that all seem arbitrary and unconnected, but in the end, we realize that everything was a new dot on the map of ourselves. Every little thing is who I am.