

to pretend to remember

This is how to pretend you were alive, one or seven or five years before you were born:

Walk down the basement steps. Don't mind the peeling vinyl, it's especially bad on the fourth and the fifth and maybe the sixth steps, but it's okay, don't mind it. Walk down the hallway and once the stairs have done their job, walk towards the door that you only use in the summer. But don't go outside. Go towards the couches and the big television and walk to the closet with the peeling white paint. Open the door. There are stacks and stacks of tapes and now you can see all of them, but the first time you opened the closet there were only two or three shelves you could reach. But it's okay because now that you can reach them all, you can go back to when you couldn't reach any; you can go back even to when you didn't exist and there were other people who couldn't see above the shelves. While you watch the tapes you can pretend you were around then, you can convince yourself that it's just another day you don't remember very well. And you can pretend to remember. And you'll start to remember it, even if it happened before you existed.

made up memories (lives i never lived)

My father systematically recorded our lives on video. My life was filmed by my father and stacked in a peeling-white-painted closet. Behind the closet door, there are piles of VHS tapes, stacked into a tower of memories. The tapes have white stickers, plastered but peeling off of their what-would-be-the-spine-if-they-were-books with my father's scratchy handwriting: "the kids, January 1995" or "Ro, Bro, but mostly Jo", or "Brooklyn with Lego and Ramona with Josie". There are probably one hundred VHS tapes from the years 1988 to 2002—three hundred hours of Saturday mornings and dinnertime and Sunday afternoons and the moments in between. A lifetime hidden behind the paint-chipped-closet-door in the moldy basement of the house I grew up in. The piled-up footage represents everything that I forgot or never thought to remember or wasn't even alive for, all put together to tell that story.

When Ramona was seventeen and I was ten and Brooklyn was fifteen, I discovered a cabinet filled with black vinyl binders of photographs than I had ever seen, mostly of moments that I either wasn't alive for or I couldn't remember. But I knew the faces and the places and I knew what a birthday party thrown by my mother looked like: a sprinkler in the lawn, bathing-suited, sun-burned, cupcake-eating kids sitting on the porch. Or kids in the kitchen and the playroom with make-your-own-pizza and games. I made my own memories of things that I couldn't actually remember having happened. My memory cultivated the stories that were partially told in the 4x6 inch photographs. I constructed stories and memories that I hadn't actually experienced, despite the fact that they felt so real.

The earliest tape captured the spring of 1988, my mother with Ramona. My parents still lived in New York, in a small apartment on the Lower East Side when Ramona was a baby. The apartment had wood floors, a grey radiator, and big, foggy windows. There were Haitian paintings on the walls and a gray cat; I think his name was Leo. Ramona had a pink bib and was eating something orange. My mother had shoulder-length hair and she asked my father to put

down the camera. He had black hair then; he looked young. I can remember him being that young. I can remember the way he looked at my mother holding my sister. It felt like finding something I hadn't realized was lost. I was excited to find it but I didn't know it was missing.

This is how to miss something you never really had.

So my parents and two-year-old Ramona moved out of New York in 1990 when my mother was pregnant with Brooklyn. My mother had thin arms and thin legs and a big stomach and she was thirty-one years old. Ramona was two years old; she, too, had thin arms and thin legs and a big stomach. When they bathed together, Ramona saw nothing out-of-the-ordinary about our mother's body; it was just like hers. She wasn't told that our mother was pregnant until two months before he was born. That way, she wouldn't have to wait for a very long time. Brooklyn was born June 28, 1990. In the earliest video I've seen of him, he was still pink, lying on a blanket on our front yard. It was one of those sheepskin blankets that babies always seem to be lying on. There's a tree in our yard that had a folk-artsy-totem-pole stuck up in it and it's still there now. He was under that big tree though, which made him look even smaller, even younger. Brooklyn had a big forehead when he was a baby. He had wispy hair that looked like it didn't exist because he was so blonde and he had big eyes with heavy lids. My mother always describes him as "a serious baby." I didn't believe her when she used to say that because he was never serious with me.

what happened to me

The moments my father chose to preserve seem completely out of the ordinary for the most part, but there must have been something that stood out about one morning next to another. Some moments needed distinction above others so all the bowls of Cheerios didn't blend together and all the bare feet didn't leave the same marks on his mind.

The morning of Ramona's eighth birthday, my father asked her questions about growing up while she sat on the kitchen table and set up her dolls. She kisses me over and over.

"Roey, the question that everyone's always wondering whenever it's anyone's birthday: Do you feel any different today than you did yesterday?"

"No. Not really. I don't know," She shakes her head. She's embarrassed.

"But now that you're EIGHT, do you feel like a whole sort of NEW PERSON?" He laughs and zooms in on her smile.

"When I turned five, I didn't feel very different," Brooklyn chimes in. He stutters and his words sound round. Everything takes longer to say, and his R's sound like W's.

"But is there a difference from now, when you're five and a half, to when you were say, two and a half?"

"Well I guess, yeah. I guess the main difference is that I can't remember what I was like then," he says quietly.

"Can you remember what happened then?" He asks, getting closer to Brooklyn.

"Well, I got James." James was Brooklyn's big teddy bear. James was slightly matted and had a leather necklace. Brooklyn needed physical evidence of his fourth year to really remember it; he needed something to touch and to feel so that he could actually say what he had done that year.

I'm not sure what happened to me. My experiences are somewhat intangible, at least in the linear sense. Different happenings have blended together in feelings and colors and seasons and years. I remember the sound that the washing machine made...the way it shook the kitchen ceiling. Like how if I was lying in bed at night, listening to everyone in the kitchen, they would get drowned out by the roar of the washing machine if it was ever on. In the morning, the sun rose right through that one window and I stared, even though I knew I shouldn't. The sun is supposed to blind people. But if I looked at it and tried not to blink, I could see how perfect a circle it was, and how it stayed in my eyes even after I looked away. It smells soft and warm, or maybe that's just how clothes feel after the ceiling is finished shaking.

glorious mornings

If recorded mornings are a landscape, mine are glorious in the same way that classic "this-country-is-beautiful-let's-all-remember-American-scenery" postcards appear to be—beautiful and recognizable. But mornings are less picturesque and more mundane. They're the faintest reminder of the people we all used to be and the love we used to pronounce so freely. We remember the love that once always reverberated through the house we still live in – seeing ourselves lying on the kitchen floor that we still lie on. We're there, rolling Lego wheels in the same places that we now roll cigarettes.

My parents vehemently attempted to save the reality of life for their children. It is impossible to exaggerate the flood of emotion I experience when my sister who isn't really my sister speaks to the me who isn't really me. Even if I don't think of myself as the baby on the tapes, I know it's me and I know it's the people I love surrounding me.

"I love you! I love you! You're the best baby girl in the entire universe! I love you sweetie!"

Or when my father who is my father, just with a softer face and a smaller stomach but the same voice and the same words, talks right to me and I can't do anything but listen.

"Josephine. You're so nice. You know that? I love you Josephine."

He says these things with big hands with thin skin and big veins and they hold my small white hands with no veins at all or touch my round face with a smile without teeth.

It must have been a Sunday, but really early in the morning...so early on a Sunday that it was almost late on a Saturday, but not quite. It must have been four or so, because I remember the birds and their chirping. I liked to pretend that they were talking to one another, like they had something really important to say, because they wouldn't have woken that early otherwise. But I woke up early and I heard the birds, so I assumed that it was morning like it had been every other time I woke up and heard the birds.

The birds sung enough and I woke up and walked down to the kitchen. And I sat on the floor, trying to be as flat as I could, pressing my cheek into the cool floor until I needed something else to do. So, after a little while, once my cheek was a piece of the floor and my arms felt unimportant, and I could see my breath fading and growing below my nose, I slowly stood. I turned on the television and I put in a tape that was on the floor. It was the first home movie I ever saw. It displayed a slightly younger version of myself with my mother and my brother,

doing nothing at all. Sitting in the kitchen or something.

this footage is now

I didn't see the films again for a long time. I forgot what the three-year-old version of my brother sounded like when he laughed, or what my father looked like with darker hair and fewer lines on his forehead. I forgot what I had constructed my sister to be like as an infant, how different my parents acted when they were that young. My father's smile had softened since I was born, since he started filming me. All the clean lines have disappeared and faded. I have an old father.

Watching the films, I become both scattered and sentimental. I'm trying to say what it is like to want after something. To want something that existed and that I saw existing, but I won't get back. I am trying to know what it is like to appreciate something. Like how I'm still living in the home that we used to live in and I'm trying to tell what it is like to see myself living and it isn't a me that I remember being. It's like a ghost story of figures I know, haunting the kitchen and the hallways and the bedrooms that I still live in. Invading my memory and my mind. Home videos are a unique glimpse into mundane home life. But they are not a random sample of how we used to live; they are selected moments of life, idealized and cast in a mold of perfection in my memory. They are a glimpse of what we would like to remember, what we want to save forever, how we want to remember the ones we love.

Bibliography

Didion, Joan. *The White Album*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979. Print.

Joan Didion's essays gave me a huge amount of inspiration in terms of what “good” creative non-fiction looks like. I was seriously taken with how she manages to say so much in a relatively small space. Her use of description and dialogue was really striking, mostly in the sense that she managed to create such a real sense of atmosphere, giving every aspect of the story a legitimate presence. The dialogue was artfully placed, and wasn't used excessively at all- that was perhaps what I strived to emulate most from Didion's writing.

Home Movie: An American Folk Art. Dir. Ernst Edward Star and Steven Zeiltin. *Home Movie: An American Folk Art*. Folk Streams. Web. <<http://www.folkstreams.net/film%2C112>>.

This documentary gave me a really great look into what the home movie is as an art form. It was really great to see an assessment of home movies from an intellectual and an artistic perspective; it really added to my reading of them/my perspective when it came to writing about my own videos and my relationship to them. The idea of constructed memories and selecting moments to film as an art-form was really intriguing to me and added to my process.

Smith, Patti. *Just Kids*. New York: Ecco, 2010. Print.

Just Kids has been one of my favorite books since I read it when it came out. I was really taken with the way Patti Smith dealt with writing about her memories. Something that often bothers me about memoirs is how reflective they are; I feel like all too often they read as pensive and slightly woeful. This text, though heavily nostalgic, is not overwhelmingly sad or sorrowful. I also love the descriptions of situations, feelings, and people, and the way dialogue is used throughout. I tried to incorporate my favorite aspects of Patti Smith's writing style into my piece. More than anything, I tried to read the book and reflect on it for a while, then go back to writing my own piece, so rather than simply translating her memories into mine, I absorbed how she dealt with hers and tried to apply a similar idea to my own.

Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977. Print.

Susan Sontag's essays are really interesting and beautifully written. I really like what she says about documenting, idealizing, and romanticizing things through photography (and video, in a way). I certainly reflected upon what she had to say in terms of documentation being a huge part of the conception of moments/how things are remembered.

Sullivan, John Jeremiah. *Pulphed*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011. Print.

Similarly to Joan Didion's *The White Album*, *Pulphead* is a great example of what really good creative-non-fiction looks like. I like how conversational Sullivan's writing is, without using too many colloquialisms or distracting/disconnecting from the writing. I also love how he lays out his stories, in terms of paragraph length, structure, word usage, and time-frame-changes (i.e. how much explanation is needed in a time lapse situation).

Wallace, David Foster. *Infinite Jest: A Novel*. Boston: Little, Brown and, 1996. Print.

I didn't intend for *Infinite Jest* to be one of my sources. I happened to be reading it while I began work on this project. However, this book is consuming, and it gave me no choice. I watched my writing change from before I started the novel to once I was reading it. DFW blatantly ignores grammar rules throughout the novel. He begins countless paragraphs with the words "If but so" or "But then so" or many other incorrect, non-literary phrases. A whole chapter is written in a way that each sentence begins with the word "that." I see the way that I form sentences and think about writing changes from the time I began the book. This book has influenced my piece in an unexpected way; more than anything, it has gotten me to think about what sentence structure and word choice and voice does for a piece.