



Mary Cassatt, *Young Girl Reading*, 1908

When did I become alive to myself?

I can easily conjure up the bedroom where I slept with my sister until I was eleven: its gray woven wallpaper with hints of pink; our pale curlicued dressers and desk; the cushioned window seats hiding storage for toys and blankets; our twin beds flanking a two-tier night table and lamp; the wooden floor smooth enough to play jacks and pick-up-sticks with a girlfriend. I can likewise picture the square brick school on a side street that I attended, its worn wooden hinge-top desks and the thwack of a spongy red dodgeball hitting me in the schoolyard during recess.

But reminiscences aren't quite what I'm probing. I wonder when,

while growing up, I felt my “Marcia-ness”—a sense of having likes, dislikes, yearnings, talents, and thoughts all my own. For that, identity and self-awareness intertwine with memory. When I cast back through the tunnel of time, several scenes wave at me.



At age seven, I'm home from school with chickenpox. My parents are both at work, and Esther, our housekeeper, is tidying the bedrooms upstairs. Wrapped in a sheet and blanket on our living room couch, I concentrate on a spiral-bound lined notebook propped against my knees. Pen in hand, I ponder rhymes for a whimsical ditty, testing sounds for quirky elegance. Words have texture, personality, and charm for me. I love the way they feel in my head and in my mouth.

Around the same age, I'm scrunched under the covers with a flashlight and a book. I pull the bedspread over my head so my beam of light wouldn't be seen if anyone cracked the door to peek in. Whether it's a Nancy Drew mystery or some classic like Peter Pan, reading feels much more compelling than drifting off into sleepyland. My parents and older siblings never catch me flouting the rules of bedtime. My disobedience remains a secret between me and myself, flawlessly kept.

Afternoons, I don't race around the corner to the empty lot where my



William Adolphe Bouguereau, *A Calling*, 1896

brother, younger sister, and other neighborhood kids bat at a softball, run bases, and jabber at each other in the outfield. No one pressures me to play there, and I exercise my prerogative not to join in. After all, in my family I'm "the poetry girl," cute in bangs and pigtails.

At my uncle's swimming pool that summer, my father demonstrates how to dive. "Put one hand on top of the other to form a point, bow your head, and hands first, just fall into the water," Dad says. He holds my feet at the edge of the pool while I imitate his posture. But as I fall, my head comes up and I bellyflop instead of dive. Time after time, some



Before I turn eight, I swing my legs one afternoon on a folding chair in a basement studio where a jovial host named Admiral Jack booms kid-friendly chatter to a local TV audience in between Popeye cartoons. He calls me to a broadcast mic, adjusted to my skinny height, where I read two of my verse creations as if at the front of a class. At the end I curtsy, then return to my chair. Across the room, from the off-camera parents' section of seats, a mother I don't know sends over a big smile.



John Sloan, *Young Girl Reading, Gloucester*, 1917

little gremlin won't let my head stay tucked. Who did that? Why?

Two years later, our homework assignment is "Write the story of your life." While describing my first day of kindergarten, I express surprise at the kids who cried at being separated from their parents. "You see, I'm not the maudlin type," my ten-year-old writing self comments in rounded blue cursive. Clearly, by that age I have a concept of myself as not just distinct but also different from others. My teacher returns the composition with a red capital "A" slanted up top.



Decades on, I try to reach back for my early Marcia essence, the me within an easily freckled little body that can swim but not dive, read twelve hours a day if allowed, and perform on TV but not congregate in a gang. If I can clasp her hand, I'll have a wholeness beyond compare, I imagine. She presaged perfectly who I am today: not an athlete, not a crybaby; yes, a word aficionado, a rebel, a contemplative who loves to ponder and understand. ♦