1996

All The Things That I Am

Lawenda (Wendy) Jones
Carnegie Mellon University

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.cmu.edu/shr

Part of the Fiction Commons

Published In
The Sloping Halls Review, 3.
Silky fingers lightly brushed my shoulder, slipped down my arm, rubbed my elbow. *We should get together sometime.* I felt my insides tingle and quiver with the physical excitement of being asked out. And then my stomach dropped into my feet as I watched the prospective date walk into Morewood Gardens, my dormitory for my first year of college at Carnegie Mellon University. I was terrified. I'd been asked out by another woman. And I hadn't told her no.

*Stop it!* I commanded myself to get some control. Tried as hard as I could to make those happy, excited feelings go away; tried to mentally push them down while retrieving my stomach. I was not supposed to be having them. Not for a she. But they were there, and as I watched her walk all I could concentrate on were her legs, long and slim, muscles flexing as she climbed the steps that led to the security door. Amazing legs. Beautiful legs. Female legs.

My best friend in the fourth grade was a girl named Leean Souillard. She looked as French as her name sounded, with gentle almond eyes and a pixie-like quality about her face. She lived one block up from me at the intersection of Linda Drive, Hanson Drive, and Efaw Avenue. A rusty little street sign that perpetually pointed skyward proclaimed the intersection Sunset Heights. I always envied Leelers (the nickname my family gave her) because of that sign. Sunset Heights just seemed to be a much better place to live than 109 Linda Drive.

St. Clairsville, Ohio, the town we both lived in, was too small to officially call itself a city. I don’t know if that meant it was a village or a burg or a borough; everybody just called it St. Clairsville, “the paradise on the hilltop.” Sunset Heights seemed to fit right in with the town motto, and Linda Drive did not. Linda Drive sounded like it had been named after somebody’s aunt. I fervently believed that Leean’s house on Sunset Heights was the first touched by light when the sun came up, and the last brushed by shadow when the sun went down. Paradise, sunsets, romance—that was what I craved in St. Clairsville, Ohio.

Anyway, Leean and I were in the same class and we rode the same bus. We also had the same favorite author (Judy Blume) and the same favorite
pastime (Mike Myers, a fourth grade boy). Every weekday Leean and I would get off the bus at Linda Drive and walk down the hill together. I lived at the bottom of the hill right behind the Christ the King Lutheran Church. The church had put in an asphalt parking lot that was still fairly new, and without fail Leean and I would walk into the parking lot and circle it, talking about all those things crucial to fourth grade life: weekly reader book sales, makeup, football players, Cabbage Patch dolls, Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, homework, Boy George and the Culture Club, and which boy in our home room looked best in those black leather jackets with all the zippers. Some days we would lose track of time and walk-talk for hours until the sky started to get dark, and my mother would walk out onto our porch and call out to me to come home.

Every weekend we had sleep-overs. Usually Leean came down to my house. My parents were friend-friendly and let us alone. Not that her parents were intrusive, but she had a little sister who was unbearable. My little brother was too involved with his Spaceland Legos to bother with two "grils," as he so eloquently named us. Leean and I would abandon my room and hole up in the basement with the hide-a-bed and the TV, staying up most of the night whispering and telling secrets.

She was the first best friend I ever had. I loved her, envied her, wanted to be her, got jealous of her other friends, the whole nine yards. Sometimes I got confused around her. Best friends were supposed to care about each other, but for some reason I always felt I cared more than I was supposed to. Two specific occasions stick out in my mind. The first was at Christmas time. Leean was supposed to come over and help my family decorate our Christmas tree, a task which I was and still am in charge of. Anyway, the clock hands swept by ceaselessly and Leean didn't show. Finally the telephone rang and my mother answered it. She said a few things and listened and laughed and hung up. And then she told me that Leean and her family had just gotten back from visiting relatives and Leean's mother thought it was too late for Lee to come down. I was devastated. Not just disappointed, but devastated, crushed. I threw a tantrum. Ten years old and I threw a no-holds-barred tantrum. I wailed, I sobbed, I beat my fists, kicked, all of it. My mother was baffled and my father went to bed. Lance, my brother, thought the whole thing was terribly amusing, and stood in the doorway of my bedroom watching until my mother turned him around and sent him on his way. Mom finally wrote the whole thing off as me thinking Mrs. Souillard had kept Lee at her relatives too long on purpose because she didn't want Lee to help decorate our tree. But that wasn't it at all.

The second instance happened after we had left the elementary school and moved up the hill to the middle school. We were in sixth grade, I think, and though I never had problems with my classes, Leean seemed unable to get good grades. Having finished our lunches in the gymnasium, we went out on the blacktop area where the buses came to pick us up after school. I turned away to talk to someone, and when I turned back, Leean was talking to Jonette. Now, I didn't care for Jonette and Leean knew it. Jonette wore tight
clothes, too much makeup, and was already dating. Rumor had it she’d already done the deed, the big S-E-X thing, and I thought it could probably be true; she hung all over the junior high boys. At any rate, this particular day Lee was walking with Jonette and talking about the upcoming science test, and as I approached I distinctly heard Jonette mention a “key,” and Leean asked to see it.

Well. I let the anger stew and simmer for the rest of the afternoon and didn’t speak to Lee until we were getting off the bus. By then I was so angry and upset that when I did acquiesce to Lee’s pleas to please tell her what was wrong, I started crying. I accused her of doing the absolute lowest thing on earth; I accused her of cheating. She denied it, saying that she’d changed her mind after talking to Jonette, and the total relief that flooded through my body was unparalleled. I hugged her, kisses her, thanked her for not disappointing me, and went home, cheeks still stinging from the tears.

In retrospect, I now understand why I had these terrifically strong emotions and I also can identify them for what they were. At that point in time I could do neither. I didn’t know and my parents would never have thought it was possible for their daughter, their good, smart, well-behaved, Christian daughter to manifest any such signs.

When Lee and I were together, I was happy. When we were apart, I missed her. When she was with other people, I got jealous. I needed her to tell me I was pretty, needed to be able to brush her hair. We would put on a record with the music from Fame and dance, taking turns leading each other through tangos and discos, turns and dips. She slept with her head on my stomach, made me listen to the Monkees and watch “The Brady Bunch.” I was in love with her, totally and completely. Her being female just complicated matters slightly.

I could write off this experience as normal and dismiss it as a healthy growing-up experience if it were an isolated event, and if I hadn’t specifically sought it out in my memory to prove a point to myself. The fact of the matter, though, is that it’s the earliest recollection I have of loving another female. It was the first piece of evidence in my search for a sexual identity, a search brought on by my inability to say no to the girl who asked me out in front of my dorm. My obsession with Lee was the first instance of proof that I wasn’t crazy, just bisexual. A woman who loves men and women, a woman in constant conflict.

I thought at first that this revelation, the idea that I could be with men or women, was merely me wanting to be part of a popular, growing trend on college campuses all over America. I’d researched what I suspected might be my “condition,” and I’d found an article in Time Magazine that called bisexuality the “new” preference, the “third sex,” the sexual phenomenon of the nineties. So I sat in my tiny shoebox of a dorm room my freshman year of college and chastised myself for a whole list of damnable acts: not screaming at the girl and saying no to her, not being true to my feelings, betraying my upbringing, going against God and the natural order of evolution, and
manufacturing myself as part of a Time magazine-defined in-crowd when it wasn’t what I really was inside. Except that it was.

I had to rationalize the entire situation in my own mind to even consider accepting it. I had no one to talk to, no one to get advice from; I was alone. I mean really alone. I went to my mother with every problem in my life, but I could not even fathom talking to my mother about this. She was still praying nightly that the parents of the man I was meant to marry were doing their best to raise him up well. My whole family thought that homosexuality was wicked, evil, unnatural, and against God. Homosexuals were going to hell. Do not pass go, do not collect two hundred dollars, see the devil at the door as you go in, thank you for playing.

I struggled with the question of whether or not sexual preference was something a person was born with, or whether it was a conscious choice. The idea of being able to choose was attractive, until I realized that one cannot choose which feelings to have. If they’re there, well then, they’re just there. And they were there. I got the same sizzle when I looked at an attractive woman as I did when I looked at an attractive man.

I came to the conclusion that if I was truly bisexual then I had always been bisexual and just hadn’t discovered it until now. So the easy way to prove or disprove this theory would be to examine my childhood for moments of, well, unexplained feelings for the same sex. If there were no such moments, then I was not truly bisexual, I was just caught up in Time Magazine’s “third sex trend,” and was badly in need of therapy. The perverse logic of this scheme still amazes me, but it served its purpose.

Melissa Williams lived on Hanson Drive, one street away from me and Leean. Even though she was a year older, Leean and I integrated her into our group of friends upon reaching junior high. Melissa was a bleached blond, a cheap orangy, brassy blond whose chestnut roots cried out, “Fake! Fake!” She, like Leean, was a less-than-average student, and like Leean, she was beautiful, bad bleach job or not. Every occurrence in Mel’s life was a crisis, and she had at least one crisis a day, usually more. She had a great imagination, and changed her mind about what she wanted to do after high school every week or so. She usually always came back to the beauty school option, but some of the more creative occupations she touted were child psychologist, professional nanny, rollerskating bartender, and (my favorite) table-top dancer. We developed a routine of renting movies and eating pizza in my basement on the weekends, with Melissa practicing her beautician skills on Lee and I, just in case her other dreams fell through.

The evening that stands out in my mind, though, was not one of those comfy evenings with Aqua Net and R-rated movies we weren’t supposed to be able to rent. It was a Sunday afternoon with my whole family. Melissa had walked over to show me a new shirt she’d just bought, an off-the-shoulder deal that I could never hope to wear. My family had rented The Outsiders, and Melissa stayed to watch it. Now, The Outsiders is the quintessential teenage
girl, cry-your-eyes-out, filled-with-every-sexy-male-actor-of-the-eighties film. At the very end, Matt Dillon’s character Dally, the boldest, baddest, and most beautiful of the Greasers, gets shot and has a terrible, agonizing, crawling death scene on the street. Melissa and I wailed. We didn’t cry, wekeened for that boy. I was sitting on our black couch, one leg up on the couch, the other hanging over the edge to the floor. Melissa sat in the V of my thighs, curled up against my body. We held on to each other, cheeks pressed against each other sticky with too much Maybelline coverstick, and howled in gut-wrenching dissonance.

We both realized, as the credits ran, how ridiculous we must have looked and sounded. But it was good to cry like that together, we agreed. We’d had a moment. I grinned as I wiped Mel’s black mascara tears off my chin, feeling slightly foolish but happy nonetheless. She fluffed her brassy tresses and flashed a retainer-covered smile at me. When the movie ended, I followed my mother upstairs to get some pop for us and found myself cornered in the kitchen.

She had the strangest look on her face, I remember. My foolish-but-happy feeling faded into strange apprehension, that “oh shit, what did I do that I can’t remember” déjà vous. I mentally ran through the last two hours for something I might have said or done but found nothing. Nothing at all. She looked at me like that for a long time, and then said, “You shouldn’t sit that way with Melissa.”

I was baffled. Sit what way? And then it hit me. Shame, as strong as if God himself was towering over me, the kind of shame that floods little children caught playing doctor. That dirty feeling. I know I turned the darkest shade of scarlet. I must have, because then my mother blushed, too. She walked away from me and said, “That’s the way boys sit with their girlfriends, Wendy.” Well, it was how I sat with my girlfriends, too. And it hadn’t felt dirty, or bad, or wrong until she had said something to me. Then it felt so bad I sat across the room from Mel for the rest of the afternoon.

Like all bad moments, that one passed, and my mother never said another word to me about it. That’s the only memory I have of her ever actually questioning any of my actions around my female friends. But the question itself never went away. It was always there, in the set of her mouth, her eyes, the way she would look back after leaving a room. I think now that she always knew, always sensed at least, the truth, but was too afraid, perhaps too disappointed, or maybe too disgusted to acknowledge it.

Kara was one of the most popular girls in my class. She was pretty and plump, with bouncy breasts and a darling swing in her walk. She had a dazzling smile, all full lips and white teeth. I drifted away from Leean and Melissa and began to spend more and more time with Kara, going to football games and dances, meeting older boys, sneaking little forbidden things like cigarettes and beer.

Kara was fascinated by my writing, and wanted to read my notebooks
all the time. It was flattering and encouraging. We would go to her pink, flouncy room and sit on her canopy bed as she poured through page after page of teenage angst, romance, and conflict, all painstakingly scribbled in longhand between classes and sometimes during them. I would lay on my stomach and watch her face for signs of approval or intrigue, and when she closed the cover I would turn over on my back and stare at the ceiling, listening to her praise.

Soon there were no more stories or poems for Kara to read, and so I came up with the idea of telling them, aloud, to each other. We would set up scenarios based on who we were in love with at the time—it mattered little if the boys were rock stars or classmates. Deep into the night we would whisper details of intimacy, what we’d do, how far we’d go if only we had the boys we wanted. In time, we weren’t just whispering but demonstrating as well. Every weekend for a school year in either her bedroom or mine we would hold each other, kissing, touching, and making love, all in absentia for some man or another, or at least that’s what we told each other. How else could we possibly rationalize what we were doing? We called each other by the boy’s name when we were playing ourselves. I’d look into Kara’s green eyes and call her Tom or David before her lips hit mine; she would run her fingers through my hair and whisper Chris or Phil as she kissed my ear.

I look back on the whole experience, my first true same-sex relationship, and I want to cry. It makes me sad. It gives me pain to know that in order to fulfill real feelings for each other, Kara and I had to pretend to be men. I read angry lesbian literature and see angry lesbian films and listen to angry lesbian speakers and I understand. What I felt for her wasn’t wrong. The ways and means I was forced to utilize to express those feelings, that was what was wrong. I should’ve been able to tell her how I felt about her. I should’ve been able to make love to her and call her Kara.

Eventually a real boy took my place, and Kara no longer needed me for her fantasies. In retaliation, I also found myself a boyfriend. His name was Bobby Nicholson, and he was a year older than me. He was also a cross country runner and had gorgeous legs. We went out for a month and then he dumped me for his best friend who just happened to be female. It seems so funny to me now, since I had dumped my best friend who just happened to be female to be with him. It wasn’t funny then, though, and I went to work to trap a new boyfriend immediately. That was Scott and Shawn was next, followed by Jeff. Kara and I drifted apart for good. I went through a group of male friends, systematically dating every single one of them and finally settling on the one who had the least ambition and treated me the worst. She ran away from home, went back, dated a criminal, got thrown out of the house, and finally moved in with a man who broke her jaw. We both took risks and broke rules, lashing out against the only St. Clairsville values St. Clairsville would permit us to question. That’s what Kara and I both chose over each other, because that was what was expected of us. We really didn’t have another choice. Anything else would’ve been unexplainable.
All The Things That I Am

I can find example after example if I close my eyes and turn back the pages of my memory. High school, summers, one after another, and it never occurred to me that I might not be heterosexual. It just wasn’t an option. I liked men. Those other feelings were like radio interference, and when they started getting to me I just switched to a new channel: hello Jason, Greg, Marty, Mark. I never considered examining the radio; I never considered examining myself.

I am a woman that bases love on beauty and strength and personality. I love people, not genders. I couldn’t know any of this until I’d come far enough away from St. Clairsville, Ohio to accept different ideas about people and life and love. By then I’d met other people who knew what it was like to question, to deny, and to learn to accept. I’m amazed that I survived life in small-town Ohio for as long as I did. Even now that I’m gone I find myself caught between what I think I believe and the things I was taught to believe all my life.

Every day I wonder what I’ll question next, what I’ll explore, where I’ll go. It’s thrilling and scary and wonderful. I know that as long as I know myself, accept myself, I can do anything. I think about all the things that I am, all the things that I want to be, and I have to put my arms around myself and squeeze, pinch, and blink my eyes fiercely, just to make sure I’ve really made it this far. And as I hold on I remember John 8:32, the truth shall make me free.