

Artist Statement
Gina Stevensen

My mother is a visual artist who, over the last ten years, has slowly been losing her ability to see. A hole has formed in the center of her line of sight, expanding so that now only her peripheral vision gives her a glimpse of the world as she remembers it. She stopped making art. Her identity as an artist has always been tied to her literal ability to see, and with that disappearing, she has to discover who she is all over again. I have watched her crisis of self from the sidelines, offering encouragement but inevitably helpless. This has instilled within me two things: a voracious need to create my own art, and a deep curiosity of the tools we use to define ourselves and give the world meaning.

Often influenced by folklore and historical events, my plays are investigations of identity: as a woman, as a member of a particular community, or as an American. I write plays because in the theatre strangers are offered the opportunity to live inside a different reality for a few hours together, breathing the same air, sharing in a search for truth. I believe that this experience creates empathy, and I believe that empathy is the only thing that can effect change in the world.

At the most recent production of my play *Book of Esther*, about a teenage girl growing up within a sheltered ultra-orthodox Jewish community in Brooklyn, a young woman from Palestine was sitting in the audience in front of a middle-aged man from Israel. Afterwards they both expressed how the play moved them; the Palestinian woman told me that she found many parallels within the play that reflected her own identity as a Muslim woman. I felt my goals as a writer crystallize in that moment.

When I was younger, my mother's hands were always covered in the bright chalky pastels she loved. I would find little traces of her presence in vibrant smudges left on a glass of orange juice or the edge of a napkin; a colorful scavenger hunt for a delighted daughter. It's been a long time since I've seen her like that. I think part of the reason I write, part of the reason I champion the cause of empathy, is the hope that I will convince my mother to embrace her own altered world. Because I am determined to prove that we all can learn to see with new eyes.