

## Week #1: Writing from Memory

Read the following set of poems to prepare for Quiz #1, Tuesday, Feb 3<sup>rd</sup>

Poem #1 Due, Thursday, Feb 5<sup>th</sup>

- ❖ 25 lines
- ❖ Do not use the automatic spacing settings on Microsoft Word. When writing your poems this semester, be sure to always set the spacing on single-space, and change the spacing to 0 before and after each paragraph.
- ❖ Try using couplets, triplets, quatrains, or a mixture of all three. See the reading for examples of the varying ways a poem can look on the page.
- ❖ Have fun! Be creative, innovative, brilliant, and most importantly, honest!

Joe Brainard, "I Remember"

Greg Orr, "Litany"

Willie Perdomo, "Funeral"

Laure-Ann Bosselar, "Stillbirth"

Charles Bukowski, "Throwing Away the Alarm Clock"

Theodore Roethke, "My Papa's Waltz"

Martin Espada, "Blessed Be the Truth Tellers"

Li-Young Lee, "Mnemonic"

Lucille Clifton, "fury"

*"Anybody who has survived his childhood has enough information about life to last him the rest of his days."*

— Flannery O'Connor

For this assignment, you will write a poem based on a memory or on several memories. Choose a complicated or complex memory, one that explores an inner tension. Begin this poem by free-writing whatever comes into your mind, and then spend some time editing and reshaping your work, thinking specifically about where you should or shouldn't break lines and how you should space the poem out on the page.

### Option #1 A Poem About Remembering

Write a poem about the act of remembering. Use Li-Young Lee's poem "Mnemonic"

### Option #2 Powerful Moment

Think back to a euphoric moment in your life and use it as a starting point for a poem. Like Theodore Roethke in "My Papa's Waltz," use powerful, descriptive language to recreate the intensity of the moment, captivating the reader with both the content and the language.

### Option #3 Dark Memory

Several of the poets in this unit address their darkest memories, the memories that we don't always want to remember but feel compelled to share. Both Gregory Orr in "Litany" and Laure Ann Bosselar " describe in vivid detail (using powerful imagery) painful or disturbing memories that haunt them. Orr's poem recreates the emotions he felt on the day he accidentally shot and killed his own brother while hunting while Bosselar grapples with the pain of losing a child. For

this option, think of a memory that haunts you and create a powerful poem based on that memory.

#### **Option #4 Elegy**

Death has always been a source of inspiration for poets and writers. Look at Willie Perdomo's poem "Funeral" as an examples of this poetic form. Using this poem as a model, write an honest elegy for someone you have lost. When writing this poem avoid sentimentality. Honesty is always more emotionally compelling and cathartic.

#### **Option #5 Poetic Portrait**

Write a poem about a person who has impacted your life positively or negatively. For instance, you could center the poem on a complicated, complex relationship with a family member or friend. Look at Charles Bukowski's poem "Throwing the Alarm Clock Away" or Lucille Clifton's poem "fury" for examples of this. Another possibility is to write a poem about someone who has touched your life in a significant and memorable way. See "Blessed Be the Truth Tellers." As noted in the elegy option, be sure to avoid sentimentality.

**From *I Remember*  
Brainard, 1975**

**Joe**

I remember the first time I saw the ocean. I jumped right in, and it swept me right under, down, and back to shore again.

I remember being disappointed in Europe that I didn't feel any different.

I remember when Ron Padgett and I first arrived in New York City we told a cab driver to take us to the Village. He said, "Where?" And we said, "To the Village." He said, "But where in the Village? And we said, "Anywhere." He took us to Sixth Avenue and 8<sup>th</sup> Street. I was pretty disappointed. I thought that the Village would be like a real village. Like my vision of Europe. I remember putting on sun tan oil and having the sun go away.

I remember Dorothy Kilgallen's face.

I remember when I was very young a photograph in Life magazine of a man running down the street naked on fire.

I remember daydreams of inheriting lots of money from some relative I didn't even know I had.

I remember the first time I heard water swishing around in my stomach (while running) and thinking that maybe I had a tumor.

I remember a babyblue matching skirt and sweater that Suzy Barnes always wore. She was interested in science. All over her walls were advertising matchbook covers hanging on rolls of string. She had a great stamp collection too. Her mother and father were both over six feet tall. They belonged to a club for people over six feet tall only.

I remember doing other things with straws besides drinking through them.

I remember Davy Crockett hats. And Davy Crockett just about everything else.

I remember not understanding why people on the other side of the world didn't fall off.

I remember wondering why, if Jesus could cure sick people, why He didn't cure all sick people.

I remember wondering why God didn't use his powers more to end wars and stop polio. And stuff like that.

I remember "Love Me Tender."

I remember trying to realize how big the world really is.

I remember trying to figure out what it's all about (Life.)

I remember catching lightning bugs and putting them in a jar with holes in the lid and then letting them out the next day.

I remember making clover blossom chains.

I remember winning a Peter Pan Coloring Contest and getting a free pass to the movies for a year.

I remember Bunny Van Valkenburg. She had a little nose. A low hairline. And two big front teeth. She was my girlfriend for several years when we were very young. Later on, in high school, she turned into quite a sex-pot.

I remember Bunny Van Valkenburg's mother Betty. She was short and dumpy and bubbly and she wore giant earrings. Once she wallpapered her kitchen floor with wallpaper. Then shellacked it.

I remember Bunny Van Valkenburg's father Doc. He was our family doctor. I remember him telling of a patient he had who got poison ivy inside his body. The man was in total misery but it healed very fast because there was no way that he could scratch it.

I remember that the Van Valkenburg's had more money than we did.

I remember chain letters.

I remember pillow fights.

I remember Judy Garland's red shoes in *The Wizard of Oz*.

I remember Autumn.

I remember smiling at bad news (I still do sometimes.) I can't help it. It just comes.

## Litany

Greg Orr

I remember him falling beside me,  
the dark stain already seeping across his parka hood.  
I remember screaming and running the half mile to our house.  
I remember hiding in my room.  
I remember that it was hard to breathe  
and that I kept the door shut in terror that someone would enter.  
I remember pressing my knuckles into my eyes.  
I remember looking out the window once  
at where an ambulance had backed up  
over the lawn to the front door.  
I remember someone hung from a tree near the barn  
the deer we'd killed just before I shot my brother.  
I remember toward evening someone came with soup.  
I slurped it down, unable to look up.  
In the bowl, among the vegetable chunks,  
pale shapes of the alphabet bobbed at random  
or lay in the shallow spoon.

## **Funeral**

**Willie Perdomo**

It was the first time I saw Edwin wearing a suit. It was the first time I saw Chino cry. Set up by his right hand man, they found Ed in his Cherokee on a Washington, D.C. street, smoke coming out of every hole in his body. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry when I realized I went to more funerals than parties this summer. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry when I saw Edwin Jr. running around the lobby, asking us why we were looking at his father sleep. I think about El Barrio summers: Ed's a cop and I'm a robber. Money was something you asked an old time hustler for so you could go to the movies on Sunday. It wasn't suppose to kill you. We ran through the streets like there were no red lights. I asked God to look out for all of us—dead and alive. I walked home alone, refusing to get high, and I thought how if you looked close enough, you could see a hole on Ed's forehead. I walked home alone, refusing to get high, thinking how my death will just be another reason why my boys will pour beer on the street before they drink.

**Stillbirth  
Bosselar**

**Laure-Ann**

On a platform, I heard someone call out your name:

*No, Laetitia, no.*

It wasn't my train—the doors were closing,  
but I rushed in, searching for your face.

But no Laetitia. No.

No one in that car could have been you,  
but I rushed in, searching for your face:  
no longer an infant. A woman now, blond, thirty-two.

No one in that car could have been you.  
Laetitia-Marie was the name I had chosen.  
No longer an infant. A woman now, blond, thirty-two:  
I sometimes go months without remembering you.

Laetitia-Marie was the name I had chosen:  
I was told not to look. Not to get attached—  
I sometimes go months without remembering you.  
Some griefs bless us that way, not asking much space.

I was told not to look. Not to get attached.  
It wasn't my train—the doors were closing.  
Some griefs bless us that way, not asking much space.  
On a platform, I heard someone calling your name.

## Throwing Away the Alarm Clock

Charles Bukowski

my father always said, "early to bed and  
early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy  
and wise."

it was lights out at 8 p.m. in our house  
and we were up at dawn to the smell of  
coffee, frying bacon and scrambled  
eggs.

my father followed this general routine  
for a lifetime and died young, broke,  
and, I think, not too  
wise.

taking note, I rejected his advice and it  
became, for me, late to bed and late  
to rise.

now, I'm not saying that I've conquered  
the world but I've avoided  
numberless early traffic jams, bypassed some  
common pitfalls  
and have met some strange, wonderful  
people

one of whom  
was  
myself—someone my father  
never  
knew.



## **My Papa's Waltz**

**Theodore Roethke**

The whiskey on your breath  
Could make a small boy dizzy;  
But I hung on like death:  
Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans  
Slid from the kitchen shelf;  
My mother's countenance  
Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist  
Was battered on one knuckle;  
At every step you missed  
My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head  
With a palm caked hard by dirt,  
Then waltzed me off to bed  
Still clinging to your shirt.

*For Jack Agüeros*

In the projects of Brooklyn, everyone lied.  
My mother used to say:  
*If somebody starts a fight,*  
*just walk away.*  
Then somebody would smack  
the back of my head  
and dance around me in a circle, laughing.

When I was twelve, pus bubbled  
on my tonsils, and everyone said:  
*After the operation, you can have*  
*all the ice cream you want.*  
I bragged about the deal;  
no longer would I chase the ice cream truck  
down the street, panting at the bells  
to catch Johnny the ice cream man,  
who allegedly sold heroin the color of vanilla  
from the same window.

Then Jack the Truth-Teller visited the projects,  
Jack who herded real camels and sheep  
through the snow of East Harlem every Three Kings' Day,  
Jack who wrote sonnets of the jail cell  
and the racetrack and the boxing ring,  
Jack who crossed his arms in a hunger strike  
until the mayor hired more Puerto Ricans.

And Jack said:  
*You gonna get your tonsils out?*  
*Ay bendito cuchifrito Puerto Rico.*  
*That's gonna hurt.*

I was etherized,  
then woke up on the ward  
heaving black water onto white sheets.  
A man poking through his hospital gown  
leaned over me and sneered:  
*You think you got it tough? Look at this!*  
and showed me the cauliflower tumor  
behind his ear. I heaved up black water again.

The ice cream burned.  
Vanilla was a snowball spiked with bits of glass.

My throat was red as a tunnel on fire  
after the head-on collision of two gasoline trucks.

This is how I learned to trust  
the poets and shepherds of East Harlem.  
Blessed be the Truth-Tellers,  
for they shall have all the ice cream they want.

## Mnemonic

Li-Young Lee

I was tired. So I lay down.  
My lids grew heavy. So I slept.  
Slender memory, stay with me.

I was cold once. So my father took off his blue sweater.  
He wrapped me in it, and I never gave it back.  
It is the sweater he wore to America,  
this one, which I've grown into, whose sleeves are too long,  
whose elbows have thinned, who outlives its rightful owner.  
Flamboyant blue in daylight, poor blue by daylight,  
it is black in the folds.

A serious man who devised complex systems of numbers and rhymes  
to aid him in remembering, a man who forgot nothing, my father  
would be ashamed of me.  
Not because I'm forgetful,  
but because there is no order  
to my memory, a heap  
of details, uncatalogued, illogical.  
For instance:  
God was lonely. So he made me.  
My father loved me. So he spanked me.  
It hurt him to do so. He did it daily.

The earth is flat. Those who fall off don't return.  
The earth is round. All things reveal themselves to men only gradually.

It won't last. Memory is sweet.  
Even when it's painful, memory is sweet.

Once I was cold. So my father took off his blue sweater.

## **fury**

**Lucille Clifton**

for mama

remember this.  
she is standing by  
the furnace.  
the coals  
glisten like rubies.  
her hand is crying.  
her hand is clutching  
a sheaf of papers.  
poems.  
she gives them up.  
they burn  
jewels into jewels.  
her eyes are animals.  
each hank of her hair  
is a serpent's obedient  
wife.  
she will never recover.  
remember. there is nothing  
you will not bear  
for this woman's sake.