

I Remember

I have been working with an exercise suggested by Siri Hustvedt in her book *The Shaking Woman Or A History Of My Nerves* (Sceptre, 2010). Hustvedt uses this in creative writing classes with in-patients at a psychiatric hospital. The exercise entails free writing, one sentence to each thought, beginning each sentence with 'I remember'. Hustvedt writes: 'When the patients and I write our "I remembers", something remarkable happens. The very act of inscribing the words *I remember* generates memories [...] Usually I do not know how I will finish the sentence when I begin it [...] One memory often leads to another. An associative chain is engaged.'

Somehow, the act of writing 'I remembers' accesses memories in a way that speaking them does not. I worked on this with my husband, each for different reasons: I am a poet and fiction writer; he is a musician who co-writes songs.

For me, there are chunks of time, years even, where my memory is patchy. Some of these missing memories are from times where life was dull, flat – I wasn't actively miserable, but life lacked spark. Some of the missing memories are from events that I remember with joy, but the specifics evade me, peripheral things looming larger than they should.

For Bob, my husband, he joins the song-writing process when his partner has come up with the lyrics and the skeleton of a tune. He would like to generate lyrics himself, but each time he starts writing some song words down, he cannot get beyond the first few lines. He has also talked about writing a book; he has the idea and has done some research and thinking, but cannot get down to writing the first page.

Each of us filled a page of a notebook, writing single sentences beginning with 'I remember'. This is a familiar idea to me, used to free writing, barely lifting my pencil from the page (it has to be a pencil, as this moves fastest over the page), not correcting or censoring myself as I write. For Bob, this is something new and, as a professional editor, counter to what he is 'programmed' to do: look for mistakes and correct them.

When I saw Led Zeppelin at Knebworth in 1979, they were my favourite band (and remain in my top two live acts). I went with my best friend, Julie, my boyfriend, my brother, and another friend, Andy. Julie and I agreed that we could die happy once we had seen Led Zeppelin live (we were 18 at the time). For thirty years, I have been boasting about being at this landmark concert, when the band was at their performing best; I have been saying that it remains the best gig of my life. Yet I have been unable to access any memories of the music I heard that day, or visual memories of the performances. Using 'I remember', my list was as follows:

I remember the crowd
I remember the excitement
I remember the embarrassment
I remember the tension
I remember looking after
I remember looking after Jamie
I remember looking after Julie
I remember worrying about David
I remember Andy
I remember enjoying Jamie being there
I remember Julie going to sit in the shade
I remember Commander Cody
I remember Lynyrd Skynrd [this was actually from a different concert at the same venue]

I remember how difficult it was to get to the toilets
I remember it being hot
I remember David falling asleep with a tea towel over his head
I remember him wearing a black T shirt saying 'Quarry, we dig rock'
I remember the photo of him asleep with the tea towel over his head and that T shirt slogan

Reading this back and out loud to Bob, it became clear that the reason I could not remember the music from that day is because I was directing all my attention towards looking after other people and worrying about them. From when the concert was first announced, I started thinking about others: who would most like to go; what food I should bring; buying the tickets for everyone. I did this for my boyfriend (who drove us to the concert, got drunk, and drove us home afterwards), my fifteen-year-old brother, for Julie (who was on leave from a psychiatric hospital at the time) and for Andy (the only person I didn't worry about that day). No wonder I could remember nothing of the music with all that care and worry on my shoulders!

Bob then tried the exercise. He found it difficult to write without censoring himself, so I had to insist that he follow the rules of the exercise and write without thinking too hard, without correcting, and just write x or y if you don't remember a name. Here is his list:

I remember sitting on the grass at Greenbelt
I remember under the dressing-up cloak in bed
I remember Mum keeping me at table to eat what I didn't want
I remember concert @ the Drayn with John, bells from a box
I remember Mum sewing bright yellow lace into turquoise shirt
I remember going up the hill to Dover Grammar
I remember sitting at the back of the Physics lesson with Trevor
I remember ? who liked Foxtrot (Genesis) like I did
I remember my first drive in Mum's Mini when I passed my test
I remember ? in the car
I remember the D.J. who lived in our house, gave me some vinyl singles, set up his own pirate station up the road

I was astounded by the richness of these memories, some so visual, and the stories behind them as he read them aloud and went on to explain more. Rich material for songwriting, stories, poems.

The idea for this exercise comes from a book called *I Remember* by Joe Brainard, which is now out of print and difficult to get hold of. Thanks to Siri Hustvedt, I shall be using this again for my own writing, and look forward to the results when I next teach a creative writing class. I also look forward to hearing Bob's own lyrics in his future songwriting.

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