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The Body of Memory

> Memory begins to qualify the imagination, to give it another formation, one that is peculiar to the self. . . . If I were to remember other things, I should be someone else.
>
> —N. Scott Momaday

In my earliest memory, I'm a four-year-old girl waking slowly from anesthesia. I lift my head off the damp pillow and gaze blearily out the bars of my hospital crib. I can see a dim hallway with a golden light burning; somehow I know in that hallway my mother will appear any minute now, bearing ice cream and 7-Up. She told me as much before the operation: "All good girls get ice cream and 7-Up when their tonsils come out," she said, stroking my hair. "It's your reward for being brave." I'm vaguely aware of another little girl screaming for her mother in the crib next to mine, but otherwise the room remains dark and hushed, buffered by the footfalls of nurses who stop a moment at the doorway and move on.

I do not turn to face my neighbor, afraid her terror will infect me; I can feel the tickling urge to cry burbling up in my wounded throat, and that might be the end of me, of all my purported bravery and the promised ice cream. I keep my gaze fixed on that hallway, but something glints in my peripheral vision and I turn to face the bedside table. There, in a mason jar, my tonsils float. They rotate in the liquid: misshapen ovals, pink and nubbly, grotesque.

And now my mother has simply appeared, with no warning or announcement. Her head leans close to the crib, and she gently plies the spoon between the bars, places it between my lips, and holds it there while

I swallow. I keep my gaze fixed on her face, and she keeps her gaze on mine, though I know we're both aware of those tonsils floating out of reach. The nurses pad about, and one of them enters the room bearing my "Badge of Courage." It's a certificate with a lion in the middle surrounded by laurels, my name scripted in black ink below. My mother holds it out to me, through the bars, and I run a finger across my name, across the lion's mane, across the dry yellowed parchment.

—BRENDA

The Earliest Memory

What is your earliest memory? What is the memory that always emerges from the dim reaches of your consciousness as the *first one*, the beginning to this life you call your own? Most of us can pinpoint them, these images that assume a privileged station in our life's story. Some of these early memories have the vague aspect of a dream, some the vivid clarity of a photograph. In whatever form they take, they tend to exert on us a mysterious fascination.

Memory itself could be called its own bit of creative nonfiction. We continually—often unconsciously—renovate our memories, shaping them into stories that bring coherence to chaos. Memory has been called the ultimate "mythmaker," continually seeking meaning in the random and often unfathomable events in our lives. "A myth," writes John Kotre, author of *White Gloves: How We Create Ourselves Through Memory*, "is not a falsehood but a comprehensive view of reality. It's a story that speaks to the heart as well as the mind, seeking to generate conviction about what it thinks is true."

The first memory then becomes the starting point in our own narratives of the self. "Our first memories are like the creation stories that humans have always told about the origins of the earth," Kotre writes. "In a similar way, the individual self—knowing how the story is coming out—selects its earliest memories to say, 'This is who I am because this is how I began.'" As writers, we naturally return again and again to these beginnings and scrutinize them. By paying attention to the illogical, unexpected details, we just might light upon the odd yet precise images that help our lives make sense, at least long enough for our purposes as writers.

The prominent fiction writer and essayist David James Duncan calls such autobiographical images "river teeth." Using the image of knots of dense wood that remain in a river years after a fallen tree disintegrates, Duncan creates a metaphor of how memory, too, retains vivid moments that stay in mind long after the events that spurred them have been forgotten. He writes:

> There are hard, cross-grained whorls of memory that remain inexplicably lodged in us long after the straight-grained narrative material that housed them has washed away. Most of these whorls are not stories, exactly: more often they're self-contained moments of shock or of inordinate empathy. . . . These are our "river teeth"—the time-defying knots of experience that remain in us after most of our autobiographies are gone.

Virginia Woolf had her own term for such "shocks" of memory. She calls them "moments of being," and they become essential to our very sense of self. They are the times when we get jolted out of our everyday complacency to really *see* the world and all that it contains. This shock-receiving capacity is essential for the writer's disposition. "I hazard the explanation," she writes, "that a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it. . . . I make it real by putting it into words." Woolf's early moments of being, the vivid first memories from childhood, are of the smallest, most ordinary things: the pattern of her mother's dress, for example, or the pull cord of the window blind skittering across the floor of their beach house.

The memories that can have the most emotional impact for the writer are those we don't really understand, the images that rise up before us quite without our volition. For example, the flash of our mother's face as she sips from a cooled cup of coffee, her eyes betraying some private grief you've never seen before; or the smell of grapefruit ripening on a tree outside your bedroom window. Perhaps the touch of a stranger's hand reminds you of the way your grandmother casually grasped your hand in her own, the palm so soft but the knuckles so rough, as you sat together watching television, not speaking a word.

These are the "river teeth," or the moments of being, the ones that suck your breath away. What repository of memory do you hold in your heart rather than your head? What are the pictures that rise up to the surface without your bidding? Take these as your cue. Pick up your pen, your net, your magnet, whatever it takes. Be on alert. This is where you begin.

Metaphorical Memory

A metaphor is a way at getting at a truth that exists beyond the literal. By pinpointing certain images as *symbolic*, writers can go deeper than surface truths and create essays that work on many levels at once. This is what writers are up to all the time, not only with memory but with the material of experience and the world. We resurrect the details to describe not only the surface appearance, but also to make intuitive connections, to articulate some truth that cannot be spoken of directly.

Many writers allow early memories to "impress themselves" on the mind. They do not dismiss them as passing details but rather probe them for any insights they may contain. They ask not only "what?" but "why?" "Why do I remember the things I do? Why these memories and not others?"

Let's go back to that first memory of the tonsils, that early river tooth in the personal essay at the beginning of this chapter. For me, Brenda, as a writer it is not important *what* I remember—or even the factual accuracy of the scene—but *why* I recall it the way I do. And, I keep coming back to that incongruous jar of tonsils. I doubt the doctors did such a thing (my mother has no recollection of it), but it remains the most stubborn and intractable part of the scene. What I like about this part of my memory is its very illegibility. The best material cannot be deciphered in an instant, with a fixed meaning that, once pinned down, remains immutable. No. As essayists, we want the rich stuff, the inscrutable images whose meaning is never clear at first, second, or third glance.

I could interpret that jar of tonsils in any number of ways, but this is the one I light on most frequently. When I woke from having my tonsils removed, I knew for the first time that my body was not necessarily a whole unit, always intact. At that moment, I understood the courage that it will take to bear this body into a world that will most certainly cause it harm. Of course, as a child I realized no such thing. But, as an adult—*as a writer preserving this memory in language*—I begin to create a metaphor that will infiltrate both my writing and my sense of self from here on out.

Think back on that early memory of yours, the one that came to mind instantly. Illuminate the details, shine a spotlight on them until they begin to yield a sense of truth revealed. Where is your body in this memory? What kind of language does it speak? What metaphor does it offer for you to puzzle out in writing?

Muscle Memory

The body, memory, and mind exist in sublime interdependence, each part wholly twined with the others. There is a phrase used in dancing, athletics, parachuting, and other fields that require sharp training of the body: *muscle memory*. Once the body learns the repetitive gestures of a certain movement or skill, the memory of how to execute these movements will be encoded in the muscles. That is why, for instance, we never forget how to ride a bike. Or why, years after tap dance lessons, one can still execute a convincing shuffle-hop-step across a kitchen floor.

One cannot speak of memory—and of bodily memory in particular—without trotting out Marcel Proust and his famous madeleine. Proust dips his cookie in the lime-blossom tea, and *Remembrance of Things Past* springs forth, all six volumes of it. Because memory is so firmly fixed in the body, it takes an object that appeals to the senses to dislodge memory and allow it to float freely into the mind or onto the page. *These* memories will have resonance precisely because they have not been forced into being by a mind insistent on fixed meanings. It is the body's story and so one that resonates with a sense of an inadvertent truth revealed. As writer Terry Tempest Williams has said, the most potent images and stories are those that "bypass rhetoric and pierce the heart."

So, as far as memory devices go, you could do worse than turn to the body for guidance. The body can offer an inexhaustible store of triggers to begin any number of essays, each of which will have greater significance than what appears on the surface. Sometimes, what matters to us most is what has mattered to the body. Memory may pretend to live in the cerebral cortex, but it requires muscle—real muscle—to animate it again for the page.

The Five Senses of Memory

By paying attention to the sensory gateways of the body, you also begin to write in a way that naturally *embodies* experience, making it tactile for the reader. Readers tend to care deeply only about those things they *feel* in the body at a visceral level. And so as a writer consider your vocation as that of a translator: one who renders the abstract into the concrete. We experience the world through our senses. We must translate that experience into the language of the senses as well.

Smell

"Smell is a potent wizard that transports us across thousands of miles and all the years we have lived," wrote Helen Keller in her autobiography. "The odors of fruits waft me to my southern home, to my childhood frolics in the peach orchard. Other odors, instantaneous and fleeting, cause my heart to dilate joyously or contract with remembered grief."

Though Helen Keller's words are made more poignant by the fact that she was blind and deaf, we all have this innate connection to smell. Smell seems to travel to our brains directly, without logical or intellectual interference. Physiologically, we *do* apprehend smells more quickly than the other sensations, and the images aroused by smell act as beacons leading to our richest memories, our most private selves. Smell is so intimately tied up with *breath*, after all, a function of our bodies that works continually, day and night, keeping us alive. And so smell keys us into the memories that evoke the continual ebb and flow of experience. The richest smells can be the most innocent: the smell of a Barbie doll; Play-Doh; the house right after your mother has cleaned (the hot dust inside the vacuum, the tart scent of Lemon Pledge); or the shoes in your father's closet, redolent of old polish. Or, the smells can be more complex: the aftershave your father wore the day he lost his job or the scent of your baby's head when you first held her in your arms.

What are the smells you remember that even in memory make you stop a moment and breathe deeply, or that make your heart beat more vigorously, your palms ache for what's been lost? Write these down. Write as quickly as you can, seeing how one smell leads to another. What kinds of images, memories, or stories might arise from this sensory trigger?

Taste

Food is one of the most social gifts we have. The bond between mother and child forms over the feeding of that child, either at the breast or at the bottle, the infant body held close, the eyes intent on the parent's face. When you sit down to unburden yourself to a friend, you often do so over a meal prepared together in the kitchen, the two of you chopping vegetables or sipping wine as you articulate whatever troubles have come to haunt you. When these predicaments grow overwhelming, we turn to comfort food, meals that spark

in us a memory of an idealized, secure childhood. When we are falling in love, we offer food as our first timid gesture toward intimacy.

In his famous essay "Afternoon of an American Boy," E. B. White vividly remembers the taste of cinnamon toast in conjunction with the first stumbling overtures of a boyhood crush. In "A Thing Shared," food aficionado M. F. K. Fisher uses something as simple and commonplace as the taste of a peach pie—"the warm round peach pie and cool yellow cream"—to describe a memory of her father and sister the first time they found themselves alone without the mediating influence of their mother. The food acts as more than mere sustenance; it becomes a moment of communion. "That night I not only saw my father for the first time as a person. I saw the golden hills and the live oaks as clearly as I have ever seen them since; and I saw the dimples in my little sister's fat hands in a way that still moves me because of that first time; and I saw food as something beautiful to be shared with people instead of as a thrice-daily necessity." This scene becomes an illustration of how we awaken to one another. It's less about her own family than about the fleeting moments of connection that can transpire in *all* families, in one way or another.

What are the tastes that carry the most emotion for you? The tastes that, even in memory, make you stop a moment and run your tongue over your lips and swallow hard? Write these down, as quickly as you can. Which scenes, memories, associations come to the surface?

Hearing

Sounds often go unnoticed. Because we cannot consciously cut off our hearing unless we plug our ears, we've learned to filter sounds, picking and choosing the ones that are important, becoming inured to the rest. But these sounds often make up a subliminal backdrop to our lives, and even the faintest echo can tug back moments from the past in their entirety.

For example, in his short gem of an essay, "The Fine Art of Sighing," memoirist Bernard Cooper uses a sound as subtle as a sigh to elucidate his relationship to his family, himself, and the world. He describes how his father sighs, how his mother sighs, and how he, himself, sighs. And, paradoxically, by focusing in on this small, simple act, Cooper is able to reveal much larger things: his mother's dissatisfaction with domestic life, his father's gruff sensual nature, and Cooper's ambivalence about his own body and sexuality. "A friend

of mine once mentioned that I was given to long and ponderous sighs. Once I became aware of this habit, I heard my father's sighs in my own and knew for a moment his small satisfactions. At other times, I felt my mother's restlessness and wished I could leave my body with my breath, or be happy in the body my breath left behind."

Music is not so subtle but rather acts as a blaring soundtrack to our emotional lives. Think about the bonds you formed with friends over common musical passions, the days spent listening to the same song over and over as you learned the mundane yet painful lessons of love. Sometimes you turned up that song as loud as you could so that it might communicate to the world—and to your deepest, deafest self—*exactly* the measure of your emotion.

We often orchestrate our memories around the music that accompanied those pivotal eras of our lives. In his essay "A Voice for the Lonely," Stephen Corey writes movingly about how a certain Roy Orbison song can always call him back to his sophomore year of high school, to his friendship with a boy as outcast as himself. He characterizes those moments as "The right singer, the right sadness, the right silence." When you have the soundtrack down, the rest of life seems to fall into place.

Touch

Hospitals rely on volunteers to hold babies on the infant wards. Their only job is to hold and rock any baby that is crying or in distress. The nurses, of course, do not have time for such constant care, but they know this type of touch is essential as medicine for their patients' healing. As we grow, this need for touch does not diminish, and thus our raging desires for contact, our subtle and not-so-subtle maneuvers that lead us into skin-to-skin encounters with other living beings.

We are constantly aware of our bodies, of how they feel as they move through the world. Without this sense we become lost, disoriented in space and time. And the people who have affected us the most are the ones who have *touched* us in some way, who have reached beyond this barrier of skin and made contact with our small, isolated selves.

Sometimes an essayist can focus on the tactile feel of objects as a way to explore deeper emotions or memories. For instance, in his short essay "Buckeye," Scott Russell Sanders focuses on the feel of the buckeye seeds that his father carried with him to ward off arthritis. They are "hollow," he says, "hard as pebbles, yet they still gleam from the polish of his hands." Sanders then allows the sensation of touch to be the way we get to know his father:

> My father never paid much heed to pain. Near the end, when his worn knee often slipped out of joint, he would pound it back in place with a rubber mallet. If a splinter worked into his flesh beyond the reach of tweezers, he would heat the blade of his knife over a cigarette lighter and slice through the skin.

Such sensory details bring the reader almost into the father's body, feeling the pound of that mallet, the slice of the skin. He never needs to tell us his father was a tough man; the images do all the work for him. These details also allow us to see the narrator, Sanders, watching his father closely, and so this scene also conveys at least a part of their relationship and its emotional tenor.

Think about the people in your life who have touched you deeply. What was the quality of their physical touch on your body? How did they touch the objects around them? Why do you think this touch lingers in memory?

Sight

How do you see the world? How do you see yourself? Even linguistically, our sense of sight seems so tied up in our perceptions, stance, opinions, personalities, and knowledge of the world. To see something often means to finally understand, to be enlightened, to have our vision cleared. What we choose to see—and *not* to see—often says more about us than anything else.

When we "look back" in memory, we *see* those memories. Our minds have catalogued an inexhaustible storehouse of visual images. Now the trick is for you to render those images in writing. Pay attention to the smallest details: the way a tree limb cuts its jagged edge against a winter sky or the dull canary yellow of the bulldozer that leveled your favorite house on the street. Close your eyes to see these images more clearly. Trace the shape of your favorite toy or the outline of a beloved's face. Turn up the lights in the living room. Go out walking under a full moon. Keep looking.

For Annie Dillard, in her jubilant essay "Seeing" (from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*), being able to see truly is akin to spiritual awakening:

> One day I was walking along Tinker Creek thinking of nothing at all and I saw the tree with the lights in it. I saw the backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame. . . . It was less like seeing than like being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance. . . . I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted and struck.

What are the moments in your life that have "struck" you? How have they been engraved in memory?

Fortunately, we live in an age where visual memories are routinely preserved in photographs and on video. Sometimes these photos and films can act not only as triggers for your memory—reminding you of the visual details of the experience—but they can also prompt you to delve more deeply below the surface.

TRY IT

1. Write a scene of a very early, vivid memory. What calls out for further examination? Are you realistic? What are the odd details, the ones that don't seem to fit with other people's versions of the story? What in this scene seems to matter to you? Should it? What are you leaving out? If you get stuck, keep repeating the phrase "I remember" to start off your sentences; allow this rhythm to take you further than you thought you could go.

> **VARIATION 1:** Do you have an ideal "earliest memory"? Write this out, and see how your imagination and your memory intersect or diverge. Is there an essay in the process of memory itself?

> **VARIATION 2:** Talk with family members about *their* memories of the time you pinpoint as your first memory. How do they corroborate or deny your own memory? How can you create a "collaborative" memory that includes their versions of the events? How does this memory enact a family "myth"? Is there an essay about the way these divergent accounts work together?

2. In the preface to his anthology *The Business of Memory*, Charles Baxter writes, "What we talk about when we talk about memory is—often—what we have forgotten and what has been lost. The passion and torment and significance seem to lie in that direction." What have you forgotten in your life? What are the moments that keep sliding out of reach? Write for twenty minutes, using the phrase "I can't remember" to start off each sentence. Where does such an examination lead you?

You may find that by using this exercise you can back into the scenes and images you *do* remember but never knew how to approach. You can write some very powerful essays based on this prompt, exploring material that seemed too dangerous to examine head-on.

> **VARIATION:** After you've lighted on some events or times you can't fully articulate, do a little research. Ask others about their memories of that time. Find documents or photographs that may shed some light on the issue. Be a detective, looking for clues. After you've gathered enough evidence, write an essay that focuses on the way your memory and the "reality" either differ or coincide. Why have you forgotten the things you did?

3. How many different "firsts" can you remember in your life? The first meal you remember enjoying, the first smell you remember wanting to smell again, the first day of school, the first book you remember reading by yourself, the first album you ever bought, the first time you drove a car, the first kiss? How does your memory of these "first" events color your perception of yourself? What kinds of metaphors do they generate for your life story?

Smell

1. Gather articles that you know carry some smell that is evocative for you. One by one, smell them deeply, and then write the images that arise in your mind. Write quickly, allowing the smell to trigger other sensory associations.

2. Which smells in your life are gone for you now? Which ones would you give anything to smell again? Have you ever been "ambushed" by a smell you didn't expect? For example, have you opened a box of clothing from a deceased relative and had the smell of that person's house flood over you? Or, have you

walked into a friend's house and smelled a meal exactly like one you remember from childhood? Write a scene about such an incident. If you can't remember anything like that, imagine one. How do these sensory memories differ from memories of the past you'd normally conjure up? Write an essay exploring the idea that your body carries its own dormant memories.

> VARIATION FOR A GROUP: Each person brings in an object that carries some kind of strong smell and takes a turn being the leader. Keep the object hidden until it is your turn. The rest of the group members close their eyes while the leader brings this object to each person and asks him or her to smell deeply. After everyone has had a chance, the leader hides the object again. Each person immediately writes the images and associations that smell evoked. Share these writings with each other and see how similarly or differently you reacted to the same odor.

Taste

1. Try to remember the first meal you consciously tasted and enjoyed. Describe this meal in detail; make yourself hungry with these details. Who ate this meal with you? If you can't remember any such meal, imagine one.

2. If you were to write a life history through food, what would be the "touchstone" moments, the meals that represented turning points for you? Which meals have you loved? Which meals have you hated? Which meals marked important transitions in your life?

> VARIATION FOR A GROUP: Have "food exploration" days set aside for your group meetings. On these days, one person is responsible for bringing in an item of food for everyone to taste. Try to choose foods that leave strong sensory impressions: a mango, perhaps, or a persimmon. After exploring the sight, textures, and smells, taste it. Describe this food in detail, then go on to whichever images and metaphorical associations arise. In your own life, what is most like a mango? Begin an essay by outlining which people, feelings, events, or memories this food conjures up for you and why.

Touch

1. Take an inventory of the scars or marks on your body. How were they received? How do these external scars relate to any internal "markings" as well?

2. Find an object that you consider a talisman, something you either carry with you or keep in a special place in your home. Hold it in your hand, and, with your eyes closed, feel all its textures. Begin to write, using this tactile description to trigger memories, scenes, and metaphors.

> VARIATION FOR A GROUP: Each person brings in such an object for a "show-and-tell," explaining the story behind the item. Pass these things around the room for everyone to examine, and then write based on *someone else's* talisman. What did it feel like in your hand? How does it trigger memories of your own?

Sound

1. Try re-creating a scene from your childhood using *only* the sense of hearing. What music is playing in the background? Whose voice is on the radio? How loud is the sound of traffic? What do the trees sound like in the wind? Are there insects, birds, animals? A hum from a factory? Rain, rivers, the lapping of a lake? What is the quality of the silence? Try to pick out as many ambient sounds as you can, then begin to amplify the ones you think have the most metaphorical significance. What kind of emotional tone do these sounds give to the piece?

2. Put on a piece of music that you strongly associate with a certain era of your life. Using this music as a soundtrack, zero in on a particular scene that arises in your mind. Try writing the scene *without mentioning the music at all*, but through your word choices and imagery and sentence structure convey the essence of this music's rhythm and beat.

> VARIATION: Do the same thing, but this time use fragments of the lyrics as "scaffolding" for the essay. Give us a few lines, then write part of the memory those lines evoke in you. Give us a few more, and continue with the memory, so that the song plays throughout the entire piece.

VARIATION FOR A GROUP: Each person brings in a tape or CD of instrumental music that evokes some kind of strong emotion. Put on these pieces in turn, and have everybody write for at least five minutes to each track, trying not to describe the music directly but focusing instead on the images and memories the music brings up. Choose a few to read aloud when you're done, but don't mention which piece of music acted as the trigger; have the rest of the group try to guess which music corresponds to which writing.

Sight

1. What do you see when you look in the mirror? Where does your gaze land first? How does this gaze determine your attitude toward yourself and your life? Do you see your younger self beneath the present-day face? Can you determine your future self through this gaze?

2. Using a photograph of yourself, a relative, or a friend, describe every detail of the scene. Then focus in on one object or detail that seems unexpected to you in some way. How does this detail trigger specific memories? Also, imagine what occurred just before and just after this photograph was taken; what is left outside the frame? For instance, write an essay with a title such as "After [Before] My Father Is Photographed on the *U.S.S. Constitution*." (Insert whichever subject is appropriate for the photographs you've chosen.)

VARIATION FOR A GROUP: Repeat the above exercise, but then trade photographs with your neighbor. Which details strike you? How does any part of the scene remind you of scenes from your own life? Perform a number of these trades around the room to see which details leap up from other people's photographs.

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Writing the Family

> One thing that we always assume, wrongly, is that if we write about people honestly they will resent it and become angry. If you come at it for the right reasons and you treat people as you would your fictional characters . . . if you treat them with complexity and compassion, sometimes they will feel as though they've been honored, not because they're presented in some ideal way but because they're presented with understanding.
>
> —KIM BARNES, AUTHOR OF *IN THE WILDERNESS* AND *HUNGRY FOR THE WORLD*

My brother is swinging the bat and I'm bored in the stands, seven years old. My mother has given me a piece of paper and a pen that doesn't have much ink in it. I've written, "I HAVE TWO BROTHERS. ONE IS A LITTLE ONE. ONE IS A BIG ONE. WE ONLY HAVE TWO GIRLS IN OUR FAMILY. ONE IS ME. ONE IS MY MOTHER." The mothers sit all around me, their straight skirts pulled tight across their knees. My brother is swinging the bat and wiggling his hips on the other side of the mesh. "THE BIG BROTHER IS MEAN. THE LITTLE BROTHER IS SOMETIMES MEAN." Where is my father? I squint to see him near the dugout, his hands cupped around his mouth. My brother swings the bat, and the ball sails, sails, sails out of sight. Everyone stands up, cheering, but I stay seated long enough to write: "THE BIG BROTHER JUST MADE A HOME RUN AND I THINK THATS ALL I'LL WRITE. GOODBYE." My