

“I Remember . . .”

(contributed by Dora Malech)

This exercise is inspired by the Surrealist technique of “automatic writing” and the American author Joe Brainard’s memoir *I Remember*.

Surrealism and its precursor, Dadaism, originated as a philosophical and cultural movement in Europe, primarily in France, in the aftermath of World War I. The Dadaists and Surrealists rejected the authority of the supposedly “rational” thoughts and values that had led the world into war. Instead of relying on rational thought to make connections, Dadaist and Surrealist art and writing relied on the more “random” movements, images, and juxtapositions of the subconscious mind or the dreaming mind. Surrealist and Dadaist artists and thinkers believed that our subconscious and seemingly irrational thoughts are more authentic than our “conscious” thoughts, which are censored and influenced by the morals and conventions of society. The Surrealists and Dadaists had a number of techniques and games to free the conscious mind; “automatic writing” was one of those techniques. To practice automatic writing, a person must simply begin writing and continue writing *without censoring* any of the thoughts or images that come to mind. The writer must not stop writing what comes to mind, even though the content may seem strange or disconnected. For the Surrealists and Dadaists, this “stream of consciousness” was left unrevised, but for contemporary writers influenced by these movements, this uncensored flow of language may then be revised or mined for ideas or images.

Joe Brainard’s memoir *I Remember* is not an example of “pure” automatic writing, but the juxtapositions of images and the refusal to rely on chronological order of events does seem related to the technique. The entire book is a list of the author’s memories, each one beginning with the phrase “I remember”. Memories from childhood and adulthood stand side by side, and “important” memories share the page with seemingly “inconsequential” memories; the book is a testament to the potential power of juxtaposition and the uncensored mind. The repetition of the phrase “I remember” is all the author needs to connect his disparate memories. This repetition of the beginning word or phrase is an example of the literary device “anaphora,” a device found in the prayers and texts of many of the world’s religions.

To try this exercise, begin with a blank page and a clear mind. Try to avoid any preconceived notions of where your memory will take you. Start writing down your own memories, beginning each one with “I remember . . .”. Allow your mind to explore all of the years of your life in no particular order. If you start to get stuck, think of your senses, and follow your eyes, nose, ears, tongue, or fingers into *their* memories. If you start to get stuck again, follow the phrase “I remember” with a random letter or word, and then write from there. Try to inhabit your memories with specificity. It may help to give yourself a certain amount of time in which to write; don’t *stop* writing until your time is up.

This exercise is useful to free your mind and get yourself comfortable with the page. It is also useful to get in the habit of writing without censoring yourself. The memories you uncover may find their way into a story or a poem; the juxtapositions between memories may also have some unexpected resonance. If you are sharing this exercise with a group, it may be illuminating to discuss which memories or juxtapositions of memories were particularly moving or interesting to the other writers in the group, as the most “resonant” memories may not be the ones you would anticipate.

Related Internet Resources:

History of Surrealism: <http://www.gosurreal.com/history.htm>

Background Information on Surrealism: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Surrealism>

Surrealist Automatic Writing: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Surrealist\\_automatism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Surrealist_automatism)

More on Surrealism: <http://www.surrealism.org/>

Dadaism: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A156494>

Joe Brainard: <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5945>

Anaphora: <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5770>