

Memory Palace

RACHEL MORITZ

In the first class, a man's hand shakes wildly with the poem I've given him. I fail to repeat my name, speak softly in the room ringed with watercolor paintings and ivy plants. It's December in Minnesota. I'm sleep deprived and a little unprepared, still nursing a toddler who wakes me several times each night. Though I've taught poetry in elementary schools and college classrooms, I've never worked with students who are cognitively challenged. There's much to learn.

Later, I will bring my face close to participants' ears, sway our arms together as we recite a poem. This work: tough and heart-opening. In one class, a woman slides off her slipper and rubs her bare foot, which is swollen pink with fluid. She shouts at other people's comments. When I write her lines for our collective poem—scribed onto my oversized Post-it pad—they make no sense. But in the same group, there's Sue, dressed in a cotton nightgown each week, a gold cross glistening on her chest. She comes to class clutching a beaded purse, and when we recite Langston Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of

Rivers,” she leans forward in her wheelchair, grinning. “He wrote that poem in 1935,” she declares. Only because I looked it up that morning, I do know Hughes wrote his famous poem in 1920 while crossing the Mississippi River by train. I don’t correct her. “*My soul has grown deep like the rivers,*” our voices chant, and it’s the thrill of language that counts. Facts may form the backbone of our lives, but poetry has a way of working across whatever memories we’ve lost, the way music does.

*

Memory, Mnemosyne, mother of the nine Muses of Greek mythology, including poetry, song, dance, and theater. Because of its orality, poetry is therapeutic for people with memory loss. Recitation is like singing, pulling breath into our lungs so the oxygen flows. And speaking a poem sparks electrical activity in the brain, even synchs heartbeat to breath as prayer does. “I’ll try a line and you repeat what you hear,” I say to elders, years now after that first class, after training and plenty of practice. Echoic memory, it’s called, lasting three to four seconds, and for people with dementia, a sensory field that remains. When we speak a poem out loud on a weekday morning—sitting in institutional chairs, name tags pinned to chests—language lights up our bodies before it fades.

*

My own memory loss wells up. New companion, arriving late in my thirties and altering how I hold onto names—books, movie titles, students—as well as my long-term recall. Entire episodes of a common life my partner remembers seem to have vanished overnight. This morning, it’s the Montessori pitcher we bought for our son a year ago. I try to find it in the kitchen, stand on a chair to reach the highest shelf. “Don’t you remember it broke?” she says.

I remember its clear glass ridges and handle sized for a child. This object, small token of independence, so he could pour a glass of water by himself.

I remember clicking on the Montessori website, the pitcher arriving in its cardboard box. Our presentation, one of many: how much we love your growing self.

My memory loss began with his birth, when time felt unmoored and locked in the present. My universe shrunk to a radius around his infant body. We walked up and down the stairs, rocked to the white noise of window fans. In this new reality, time was measured by hours, not days: How many until bedtime? Until he woke for his first feeding? I could track the details of his sleep with an obsessive tunnel vision, but so much else loosened. Still, I hadn't yet felt the slowed reaction time of middle age, as when an acquaintance waves across the grocery store aisle, and I can't remember for five long seconds how I know her. It's processing speed. It's recall. I mix words when I'm tired, struggle to find them on my tongue as if they hover just beyond reach, little language bodies floating away.

These gaps frighten me. Perhaps more so because I work with people who have Alzheimer's and understand something of its progress. First, in the hippocampus, how plaques and tangles mess with our ability to make new memories. How language is affected next, a grasping after nouns and verbs that have always felt effortless. Then problems of logic and sequence: which way to turn the stove's burners, what kind of pot to boil water in. Then emotional regulation, balance, coordination. Not to simplify a disease that devastates families; that isn't considered normal aging. And yet, I can't help but worry.

*

Our props passed from lap to lap: Audubon songbirds you can press on their back to hear recorded calls. Low whirr of red-winged blackbird, the cardinal's chirrup. "Isn't he pretty?" a woman sighs as she strokes the plush beak. Yes, birds are poetic cliché, but clichés, I learn from teaching elders, happen for a reason. My own grandmother confined to bed at the end of her life had her husband mount five different bird feeders by their window. She learned the shape of every songbird in North Carolina. Today, I can recite Tennyson's "The

Eagle” with great dramatic flair, swooping my arms to show a raptor’s dive: “*And like a thunderbolt he falls.*” The class grows quiet. Maybe words won’t come today. Then Deb, her clear blue eyes looking directly at mine, says: “I see fish, rocks, and waves.”

*

Memory Palace: a concept from the fifth century BCE, when Simonides of Ceos, a Greek poet, attended a banquet in Thessalia. When he stepped outside to speak with someone, the hall’s ceiling collapsed. Everyone inside died. How to identify the bodies? Simonides re-created the spatial contours of the room (the loci) in his mind, journeying around the banquet table seat by seat to rediscover each face. He went on to develop a system of mnemonics that’s still popular. You might recall a shopping list by visualizing the floor plan of your home, then stashing each item in a specific location: milk behind the front door, bread on the couch.

Maybe if I practiced Simonides’s system, I could remember my students’ names and stories, the lines they offer. Here, placed at our kitchen table, is the woman named Eve who emigrated from Germany late in the thirties, who declared loudly, “I hate birds. They are very stupid.” She told us her mother died when she was two. She had a mademoiselle who cared for her, the finest foods.

Here, by our living room window, is Christine, mother of eight. She described the color of dirt in her hometown: “deep red,” “tasting like iron.” She sewed her children clothes from cotton sacks, the poverty of Jim Crow Georgia weighing down her youth. The senior center where she went for morning coffee has closed, a decision from upper management like many moves to center care away from home and community. If she’s still alive, how does she spend her days?

Or here, on the front steps where I can see him clearly, is the former philosophy professor Joe, who uttered his lines full of Latinate words. “Getting rid of things that are usually ascertained, equivalent to the truth.” His answer to my question “What’s beautiful to you?” His sour breath and quiet voice, keys jangling in his pocket as he walked down the hall. Does his wife still visit from

her townhome blocks away? Do they drive to the Olive Garden for their Friday dinner date? Where is his language going, the litany of words he built a life on?

*

“What have your hands loved to do in your life?” I ask a group gathered in the living area of Annette House. Staff bustle in the kitchen, scraping dishes from lunch. I’ve placed my easel in front of the plasma-screen TV—blessedly quiet for an hour—and lean close to hear Ruth’s answer. Ruth has Parkinson’s, not Alzheimer’s. She bends deeply as she walks, and she’s always perfectly coiffed with lipstick and jewelry. Today she wears a black dress and red glass bracelet. Her notebook rests on the seat of her walker; she’s ready to write. But the disease has made her voice barely audible. She speaks her lines so faintly I ask her to repeat them: “My hands have loved to bury themselves in the dark curls of my mother’s hair.”

Ruth describes a day from her childhood, how she walked with her mother down St. Paul’s icy streets. By the time they reached home and opened the front door, Ruth’s hands burned raw with cold. Her mother told her to place them in her hair to warm up. I feel my throat catch with emotion and look to the other poets. They’ve registered Ruth’s words, but I can’t tell if her story has moved them. I write down her lines. Later, I will type them into our poem, unattached to Ruth’s name, without her mother’s name—a woman I’ll never know beyond this single image.

*

“The swallows of San Capistrano are gray and fly over the ocean.”

“Blue makes me think of my mother and no clouds anywhere in the sky.”

“When I was five in Mississippi, we’d make pies out of dirt.”

*

For people with early to mid-stage Alzheimer's, there are still a lot of memories. Childhood, place, all the lost things. They like to appear when we aren't directly calling them: The fort built with cousins in a backyard maple. The pecan trees of Arkansas climbed by a small girl who'd set her bicycle in the grass. Today this girl is seventy-four. She's taken the Metro Mobility bus to the day center where she'll stay until three o'clock. She's reciting a poem by Joyce Kilmer, who was killed by a sniper's bullet in World War I and criticized for writing a poem that dripped with sap, yet it's the most popular piece of language I've brought to class. *"A tree that may in Summer wear, / A nest of robins in her hair."* This girl filled her pockets with pecans, climbed high in the shade of branches. Beside her sits a boy who walked twenty treeless blocks from lower Manhattan to attend high school, his father with a good state job as electrician but, "he still couldn't feed us. He passed as white."

Our American stories: variations on a theme. Where we fell in the steady tick of violence and hope, which privileges were denied, which given freely. Today this boy is eighty-two and likes strong coffee. We can't serve him grapes when we celebrate the end of class because he might choke on the slippery skins. His cane nudges ahead on the carpeted floor, and he requests music, would prefer it to poems, loud and fast as he strums his fingers on the table. He jokes with the white man sitting beside him who tells us little about his life except that his father directed a choir in their South Dakota town.

*

"We walked a mile and picked blackberries, and our mother told us we'd better be home by the time the sun hit the tops of the trees."

"I'm from Elaine, Arkansas, on a farm where they raised cotton and drank coffee up from the bottom."

"I remember the bootlegging years. I rolled up paper to put in my shoes, enough to withstand three or four rains."

*

Childhood, the first grand hall of our palace. Our parents, the gods whose voices echo through drafty rooms. My own father dead five years: in one room of my memory palace, he plays bluegrass on his clawhammer banjo. I conjure him through objects even as his face fades: the silver picks that slid on his fingers, the suede Clarks he wore when I was young, with their rubber heels that reminded me of congealed honey. When I discover a cassette of his songs, I'm flooded with longing for his voice, and for other memories forgotten to childhood: the malty taste of Ovaltine stirred in hot milk, cinnamon my mother sprinkled over rice. "The past is hidden somewhere," Proust wrote about the madeleine cake that proved his own mnemonic device, "beyond the reach of intellect." Nostalgia may be a fool's errand, but inevitable for those of us who can't get over time.

A poem I love by Kenneth Koch: "*How lucky that I ran into you / When everything was possible / For my legs and arms, and with hope in my heart.*" He was seventy-five when he published this ode to his twenties. To write to a decade, to imagine its room in the palace of your life, a generous landscape that allowed you to wander for a time. "*Whither, / midst falling decades, have you gone?*" Koch writes. "*Twenties, my soul / is yours for the asking. / You know that, if you ever come back.*"

I wonder sometimes why I haven't read this poem in class. Maybe because the topic feels sad, and Koch's life—his travels to Paris and jaunts down the streets of Manhattan—perhaps too privileged for the people I teach. A poem made from a life in poetry: what anomaly in rooms of cafeteria workers, teachers, electricians, secretaries. A life like mine, a teaching artist, this too is anomaly, one I supplement with other paid work to make ends meet. And is what I do teaching? Most days, I feel like a whimsical activities director with a bevy of props (birch bark, flowers, scarves, spice jars). But as with any class, the poems I choose matter. My taste and preferences matter, as does my whiteness, which sometimes allows me to hear things I wish I hadn't. The way a woman in one class recounts: "I said to myself, I'll never marry that Indian." She's speaking of her late husband, a man

well-tanned from construction work outdoors. No one sitting around the table blinks an eye. I don't scribe her lines, won't have us repeat them. I consider what her words reveal about the time of her youth, our country's enduring racism. So many cultural memories are not worth preserving. Why look back?

*

"I have a yellow bouquet, big tall boots, a winter coat."

"In May I will be seventy-nine."

"The falling leaves are called whirlybirds."

*

Our metaphors for memory change as the world does: Aeolian harp with its strings stretched taut, treasure chest latched at the bottom of the sea, file cabinet, computer hard drive. Now even this last one begins to feel antiquated.

My favorite is from Socrates: a wax tablet on which we etch impressions that count. "Let us then, say," he wrote in 369 BCE, "that whenever we wish to remember anything we see or hear or think of in our own minds, we hold this wax under the perceptions and thoughts and imprint them upon it, just as we make impressions from seal rings." There's agency to his metaphor, as if our minds work an assembly line, pressing each shape onto a wax slate. Though if the etching is rubbed out, Socrates writes, "we forget and don't know."

My own tablet: etched with my son's name, the moment it came to us. I was four months pregnant. We rented a cabin away from the city, and in the calm known only to those without children, read books by the wood stove, woke to ice glazing the windows. I stepped onto the deck overlooking the lake and heard his name in my head: "Finn," a single-syllable sound, clear and definite. We marvel at how it fits him: he's kinetic, a blur of speed and voice.

My archive: He jumps over the walls of his snow fort, his cheeks pink from running. I watch at the window, inside to grab a scarf for myself. The snow of

his childhood is never deep enough, not like the drifts that once buried me to my waist. The walls of his archive stutter with climate change.

My slate and chalk, my eraser: I try to remember what it was like when he was three, four-and-a-half, five. He hopped during meals, munching an apple as I worried over choking. Please sit, Finn, we asked constantly. I bought a rubber pad for his chair—the kind used for kids on the spectrum—hoping it would keep him at the table. He bounced, hard enough the pad flew out from under him. He’s the boy who kicks his soccer ball out of bounds and crashes to the ground laughing. His body a flurry of movement, any dance party made in leaps, fists flailing at our bodies in misplaced joy. His energy can shatter my mind. “It’s like being a dolphin confined to a small aquarium,” my partner says, “and workers are drilling your pen all day.” I admit her metaphor is apt.

My labyrinth and cave: We track his body through days that follow the same pattern. Thump of his feet as he slides from bed. We always hear him coming. In our bedroom’s milky light, he climbs between us. His arms reach behind our heads. We age as he grows. We struggle to keep up.

And since his birth, time has accelerated, as if the motion of his life makes everything veer faster. Each evening we prod his body in the same repetition of tasks: brush teeth, wash face, pee, listen to songs. Twelve hours later, we enter the grid of another day. The gold door on our red porch opens. 7:20 is the walk to his school clamoring with life. Cars and buses, a scramble of legs and backpacks and arms swallowed by flashing doors. The child left at his classroom, the teacher greeted. I walk home listening to highway traffic, a hum that never ceases, and cicadas in the trees lining our city street. I think how each day erases the one before it, how my son is erasing me even as he’s replicated my body in new form.

*

At Annette House, Ruth comes to class wearing a fleece pantsuit and clogs. Thin hairs on her chin glow in the window’s light, her lips painted with red

lipstick. This morning she tells us a story about her father, a man who hated zucchini and declared that it tasted like wet felt. Her mother cooked zucchini on Wednesdays, which was his bowling night—the single evening of the week when he stayed out late with friends. “We loved it,” she says, smiling at the memory, and I wonder if what she loved was the vegetable or his absence.

Our topic for this morning is food: what we love, what we dislike. Sue says the yam I pass around resembles a Russian nesting doll, the kind you open to find smaller versions inside. She’s dressed again in her cotton nightgown, and on her body as I lean over, there’s the faint scent of urine. Sue holds the yam in one hand and a sweet potato I’ve brought in the other, running her thumb over their rough skins. I meant to bring spices to smell but forgot them on the kitchen counter. I also forgot to clip parsley and sage from the garden. I was rushing, I tell myself. I’m forgetting more and more these days, I’m tired. I’ve outsourced my brain to my phone and computer, and life feels like a recurring list I write down to ward off nothingness, which is the passage of sheer time.

My body no longer sanctuary for my son, his days at school consumed with learning to read and write. His life takes on landmarks: school corridors, friend’s houses on weekend afternoons. His memory palace the world his body crosses. He’s happy. He catapults away. My body earns money and fixes meals and reads emails and sifts through the daily onslaught of news.

*

Here’s the drone of NPR on our Toyota’s radio, my mother’s thick hair piled against the driver’s seat, the windshield wipers scraping snow. She’s driving me home from some high school pursuit, and a thought settles: how much time is left to fill, how many afternoons of sunset sliding into night. The world my forty-something parents inhabit—its tick of Gulf War casualties, its stock market index. I’m certain it will never apply to me.

*

The truth is: I hate the smell of antiseptic soap, the TVs blasting all hours of the day, the carceral systems into which we shunt our elderly, denying them basics of human life: touch, sunlight, movement. “Why don’t you let us outside?” a woman growls in one memory care class. She repeats her question for the hour I’m there, and each time her voice grows fiercer. Here I am, hired as enrichment for the residents; how silly to talk about trees or birds when everyone’s trapped in the same room for hours. After class, I want to blast my car radio and speed away. This ablest part of me wants to look away. And yet, Irv sits in the back of the activity room, by a stack of blue washcloths he likes to fold. He comes to life when I play anything by Frank Sinatra. I kneel beside him and tap the table in rhythm, and he pulls me close to his chest, his lips circled with a thin strand of saliva. His electric joy—how surprised I am at the strength of his arms calling me close to enjoy the song. To be human, Irv teaches me, is never one thing. When the music ends, he can share a line about the CCC camp where he spent a year during the Depression. “There’s a lumber house over here, they’ve been to and fro.” “A moose!” he shouts, pointing at the window. “What’s the best thing about turning ninety?” I ask him. “That’s it! Not yet!” he yells back. The lines enter our poem.

*

Not yet, my nightly wish, when I put Finn to sleep and linger for a moment by his bed. Pathos of the child sleeping, sheet tangled around his belly. To be with him a little longer, let this be what I get. To exist in the rooms that will become his life memories: this is now my daily ask, replacing so many ambitions of my youth. How less matters these days, another cliché: less and more.

*

Months pass. It’s January, a foot of snow fallen overnight. At the day center

across town, Pauline asks me to set her walker against the wall. She eases into her armchair and straightens the gray wig curling below her ears. Pauline is ninety-three, the oldest one here and a participant in my very first class, when I practiced reading poems in short blasts and raising my voice so everyone would hear me. This morning, I've brought a cooler of snow and Wallace Stevens's poem "The Snowman": "*One must have a mind of winter / To regard the frost and the boughs / Of the pine-trees crusted with snow.*"

When I began teaching here, Pauline shared the story of her name. It turned out to be the story of her birth. She was born at home, she said, early in the morning. Her mother chose a name for her baby, then changed her mind as the doctor left. She called after him, but he didn't hear her. And until Pauline filled out legal paperwork for a teaching job in her early twenties, she didn't realize the name on her birth certificate was different.

For days, I'm haunted by her story. Images shape in my mind: a kerosene lamp flickering on a bedside table, a doctor's black bag snapping shut. There's meaning to these fragments, though the story blurs and isn't mine. Because her family was poor, I imagine Pauline's mother as ignored and victorious, the name of her daughter ringing through the room. Though maybe the doctor's mistake meant nothing. Maybe an older sister poured warm water into a basin, cleaned the baby curled on her mother's chest. Maybe the door clicked shut before anyone knew it.

Today, Pauline tells a story about a blizzard that shut down her childhood city. Snow fell all day and night, she says, until the Model Ts were buried to their boxy roofs. The next morning, men brought out shovels to pave a path to church. "It was so quiet," she remembers. I pass around the cooler, and Pauline molds a snowman from two chunks of snow. Everyone laughs at his size. I place our tiny snowman on the floor, and during the hour we're together, a puddle begins to spill from his side.

Later, I google "snowstorm, Chicago," and discover nineteen inches fell on March 25, 1930. I look up "South Side Chicago, winter" and see fire escapes and porch railings heavy with snow, a short film of a woman veering across an

icy street as if she's skating. It helps me imagine Pauline's snowstorm, though I don't know for certain if this storm is hers. I don't know what the preacher said in church that morning, what she ate for Sunday dinner in the apartment shared with her parents and siblings, coal fire blazing in the stove. I don't know her first name, the one on her birth certificate. At the end of a life, whatever memories we've etched are erasing, whatever palace aids our recall has long since crumbled. To be given a life as fragment: I realize this is what I love about poetry, about sitting with the class and our snowman and cooler of snow.

Pauline's no longer with us. She died this spring. I still bring poetry to the senior center she visited three days a week, where she listened to riddles and exercised with the staff—arms up and down, feet tapping the floor. I remember Pauline in the present tense, the way I knew her. Eyes a little rheumy as I kneel to see her face. Her wry chuckle, the way she reaches inside the cooler, recoils at the touch of cold and breathes, "Oh, my." As I leave the center, sun glints off icicles melting in the doorway. I empty the cooler on fresh piles a plow pushed when it was dark outside. Snow pitched on the car roofs shines in the January light.

