

REVISITING JOE BRAINARD'S *I REMEMBER*

A Kind of Magic

Three Writers on Reading, Teaching, and Being Inspired by Joe Brainard

*"Glories Strung Like Beads":
The Queer Brilliance of
I Remember*

MATTHEW BURGESS

This isn't the first time I've mentioned Eugene. I remember exactly where he sat, second row back, in the seventh-grade class as PS 187. I remember his laser-beam smirk as I read aloud from Joe Brainard's book, and before I could send the students into their own lists of "I remembers," Eugene raised his hand: "Why are we doing this? It seems pointless." I said something about the importance of specific, sensory detail in our writing, but my reply didn't erase the look on Eugene's face. I looked down at the book for examples: "I remember the chocolate Easter bunny problem of where to start... I remember rocks you pick up outside that, once inside, you wonder why." As much as I loved these lines, maybe Eugene had a point?

In that moment, I was unprepared to justify the lesson. I had led the same *I Remember* exercise count-

less times, and it always worked wonders. Students listened to excerpts from Brainard's book with dreamy attention. They often laughed openly in recognition and amusement. People with difficulty writing found a flow while composing their own lists, and they read their memories aloud in speech rhythms that felt authentic, spontaneous, and poetic. Students listened attentively and respectfully to each other's words, and the classroom grew perceptibly warmer for the experience. Many of you know what I'm talking about. We call them "I remembers," and they work.

Later, as I obsessed over Eugene's remarks, a few poets chimed in. William Blake, in *Jerusalem*, exhorts: "Labor well to the Minute Particulars: attend to the Little Ones." In "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," Walt Whitman sings at great length about "the glories strung like beads upon my smallest sights and hearings." And Frank O'Hara, who makes several sparkling cameos in *I Remember*, asserts: "Oh! kangaroos, sequins, chocolate sodas! You really are beautiful!" I felt encouraged by this choir of kindred spirits, but I didn't feel any closer to convincing a skeptical seventh-grader.

The more I thought about Brainard's book, the more I realized that its "pointlessness" is part of its greatness. Without explanation or apology, Brainard refuses to be linear. He displays personal detail for the sake of personal detail, liberated from the impera-

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tives to “reveal character” or “advance narrative.” No straightforward “plot development” or “climax” or “epiphany”: instead, he swerves at his leisure, allowing memories, big and small, to exist in a list with their color, wit, and music.

I remember that the red Crayola was always the first to go.

I remember the olive green lining of my mother's olive green “leather” jewelry box, with fold-out trays. When alone in the house, I loved going through it, examining each piece carefully, trying to pick out the favorites. And sometimes, trying on something, but mostly, I just liked to look.

I remember, after school, a period of three or four minutes of lots of locker doors being slammed. And long corridor echoes.

His seemingly simple sentences deliver various pleasures. They roll out, unrushed and unpretentious, as our attention flickers with curiosity, identification, and surprise. In sequence, they demonstrate the unexpected juxtapositions that occur when we allow ourselves to free associate:

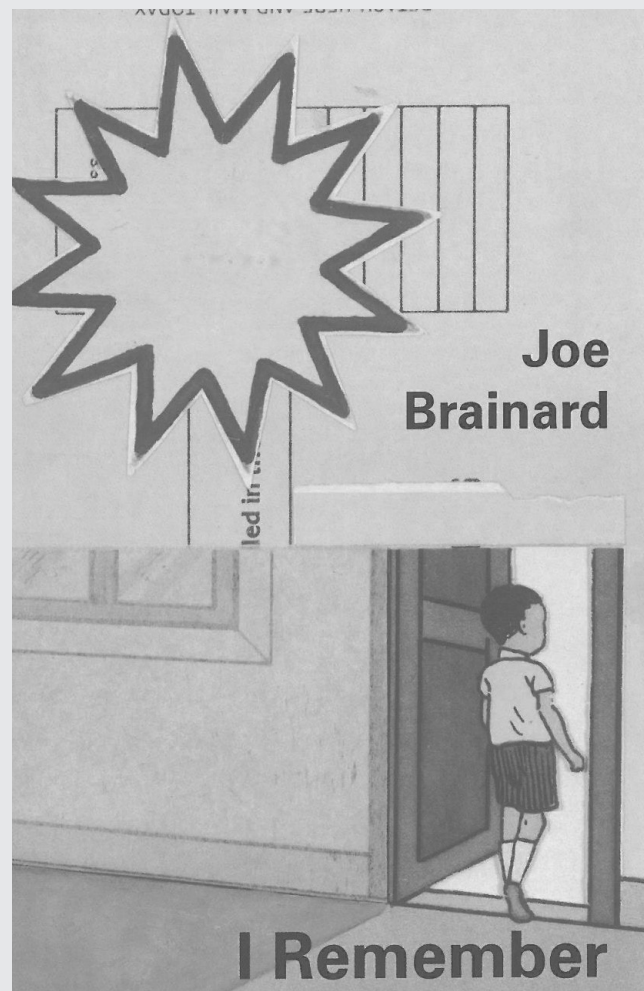
I remember how good wet dreams were.

I remember a rollercoaster that went out over a lake.

And reading *I Remember*, we experience Brainard's marvelous candor. Anyone who's read excerpts from *I Remember* in front of a class knows that you can't flip to just any page and read aloud. But if you censor too severely, you will miss out on one of Brainard's gifts: the implicit permission issued to the reader-writer to “remember” without inhibition.

As artists and writers, we know there is a point to all of this. But as teachers, we may be pressed to explain it. The *I Remember* exercise can serve clear and pointed pedagogical purposes: it can be a lead-in to a

unit on the personal essay, or students can select one of their lines and expand it into a descriptive poem or fictional story. It can be used as a “community-building” exercise at the beginning of a class or workshop, or it can be adapted into a culminating “free write” that reflects on a specific educational experience. Still, I think the particular magic of *I Remember* is the permission it issues to ditch the compass and wander, to revel in the remembered details of our lives as they emerge in their own mysterious order, to sidestep the tyranny of the timeline and open ourselves to other possibilities, to affirm the trivial along with the significant, and to perceive that this hierarchy may be flimsier than we imagined. As any snooping child knows, the plastic beads in a box of jewelry are no less glorious. 📖



Cover of the Granary Books edition of *I Remember* with art by Joe Brainard

Like a Key to the Writer's Mind

DAVID ANDREW STOLER

The first few times we saw each other the best we could do was cast wary glances at one another across the busy halls of the college, like people who met at a party long ago. We recognized each other—vaguely—but that was all.

And then one day the elevator door opened, everybody got out, she got on, the door closed. We stood for a moment, staring at our shoes.

“What high school did you go to?” I said. I thought I knew her, but having taught thousands of students over the last decade, I just couldn’t be sure.

“Lincoln,” she said. Somewhere I had never been. I shrugged, and we returned to the intimate, awkward silence of strangers on an elevator.

Then she spoke: “I remember the pretty German girl who stank. You’re the poetry guy. I still have the anthology we made.”

Her name was Jasmine. She had been in the fifth grade when I had taught her at PS 156 in Brownsville, Brooklyn. It had been nearly a decade since, she was now a sophomore in college, and she remembered the very first lesson we had done together: Joe Brainard.

This has happened over and over since I started teaching *I Remember* poems in 2001—former students calling out lines to me as I walked down the halls to other classrooms, or down the sidewalk on my block. They’ve never yelled out anything else: not Whitman or Williams, not the Slam poets they loved so much. And they shout out *specific lines*: from a poem I read them once—I don’t even hand out copies!—when they didn’t know who I was, on our first day, a long time ago.

There’s just something about Joe Brainard. I was introduced to *I Remember* poems by the poet Lisa Jarnot in my own first poetry class—a class I signed up for skeptically—and the poem I wrote using the form was the rocket that led me to change my college major from physics to creative writing. The simplicity of it masks its true gift: when faced with a blank page, one “I remember” spawns another, like a key to the writer’s mind that opens the floodgates of the subconscious, gets the pen moving, makes the paralyzing self-awareness of *the act* disappear.

As a writer, whenever stuck, *I Remember* is where I return. In fiction, it is an incredibly successful way to get into characters’ minds—what do *they* remember—or to attack a difficult scene. But for a teacher, Brainard is even more useful. As an opening lesson, it is rife with humor, with titillation (Joe B. *must* be edited for younger classes), and with experiences that students connect to immediately. A simple phrase—*I remember laundromats at night all lit up with nobody in them*—leads to lessons on image, details, and—writing’s reason to be—empathy. Students who are shy with their pencils are instantly connected to their own memories—*Well, I’ve also seen laundromats lit up at night...*—and those two simple words make starting easy.

I’ve used Brainard a thousand times over, in a thousand different situations—to help young cancer survivors start approaching the trauma they’ve recently confronted; to help my sister write her speech for her daughter’s *bat mitzvah*; to help business students understand how they, too, are poets. And Joe Brainard has given a gift of the most rewarding kind for a veteran teacher who sometimes wonders if he’s ever really had any effect on any student at all: to know that he, too, long after leaving an elementary school in Brownsville’s halls, will also be remembered. 📧

David Andrew Stoller, a T&W teaching artist, just completed his first film, Daadi. Details at: <https://www.facebook.com/DaadiTheMovie>.

Strange, Guileless, Incredibly Moving

RICK MOODY

I came to Joe Brainard relatively late, which is a humbling thing to admit. If you were schooled in the experimental writing of the sixties and seventies, like I was, you believed that experimental writing did certain things, had certain consistent preoccupations. Experimental writing was anti-establishment, it was sexually explicit, it was cynical, it was malevolent, it was concerned with philosophy, it was often comic, and so on. Mostly the writers of this work were white, male, and straight. I read all the canonical writers in the experimental pantheon, and that was a lot (reading all of William Gaddis and Thomas Pynchon, for example, can fill a few years). I was a keen student.

And I therefore felt that I had learned all that I had to know about the furthest-out fringes of literary experiment. I already even accounted for language poetry, and Oulipo, and Stein, all of that stuff. I knew what I knew. Until I went out to dinner one night, ten or twelve years ago, with Paul Auster. We talked about a lot of things we both liked—Beckett, of course, and Hawthorne, and then at some point Paul said “You’ve never read *I Remember*? Well, you have to come back to the house, and I’ll show it to you.” So I went back to his house and down into Paul’s library (which is substantial), and he pulled out a copy of *I Remember*.

Now, in fact, one of those curmudgeonly, white, straight, experimental guys had said to me, back in college: catalogues are too easy. That has not stopped me from making some extremely long lists in my own work, now and again, but I have always fashioned them in a state of some embarrassment. However, what I immediately recognized in the eruption that is the catalogue entitled *I Remember*, even as I gazed on

Rick Moody is a writer known for his novels such as *Garden State*, *The Ice Storm*, and *The Four Fingers of Death*.

it in Paul Auster’s library, is that the author was not in any way being facetious or literary, nor did he have any interest in whether a list was a good or bad idea from a literary-historical perspective. His list was automatic. And true. This I admired greatly.

I further admired that there was no beginning, middle, and end to *I Remember*. And no particular reason why you should start at the beginning and not skip around. *I Remember* is composed in little seizures of memory, not in the prison house of chronology. And this too was liberating for me. I came to see not long after that I was very moved by this work, and that I was not alone in being incredibly moved by this work. There’s a whole cult of Brainard enthusiasts, and with good reason. This work is free (in the jazz sense of the word), it’s strange, it’s guileless, it’s incredibly moving, it has nothing to do with literature, except that in its exile from the guilds and schools of literature, it turns out to be better in many ways than more traditional literary work. Which makes it plenty literary indeed.

Meanwhile, for some twenty years, I’d been wrestling with how to tell the story of the death from Alzheimer’s Disease of someone I had known and loved. I had tried many conventional dramatic ways to deal with this material, and had always been short-circuited by the inherent sentimentality of the story. The unlocking finally came after I had read Brainard’s *I Remember*, after I had come rightly to appreciate its myriad excellences. My story was called “She Forgot” and it wasn’t autobiographical, and it was (because I was operating under this Brainard star), just a list of things that a certain character had forgotten. It was less free, it was more narrative, it was unconfessional, it was elegiac. And so: not as good as Brainard. But it was meant as an homage to Brainard’s incredibly canny form, and, simultaneously, as an effort to make use of this very organic and reflexive structure. Brainard did not exhaust the catalogue; that is, he made it useful all over again. I owe the story in question to Joe Brainard’s memory. And to Paul Auster. I always remember my debts. 📖