



WRITING THROUGH TRAUMA

Holding On, Letting Go, Making Use: Writing as Remembering

PETER MARKUS

The act of remembering, I often tell my students, is most often an act of love. When someone we love leaves us, is taken from us—by the hand of God, or by a hand holding a gun—we can keep their spirit and story alive through the power of words. We can write them back into a world—the poem that the page can sometimes become—that we can hold forever in the palms of our own hands. Be empowered by that, I say. Reach back, with the pen in your hand, and hold on, as did Miguel Rodriguez, the young Detroit poet behind these words, when he wrote down what he could not otherwise get himself to say:

Crushed

Your hands
make a stone man
turn soft.

I am heavy
with the memory
of your touch.

When I invite students to write about loss, I let them know that no one in the room is exempt from the experience and the absence that remains in its

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wake. The older we get, the more we live and love, the more these losses accumulate. But as the poet Jack Gilbert wrote, he himself no stranger to love and the losses that come with it: “There will be music despite everything.”¹

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Our purpose, as teaching artists in the schools, is to show students that there is a song to be sung. It may be out of sorrow, yes, but poetry allows us to celebrate what is lost even as we mourn.

As someone who believes that language has the power to restore and even redeem us, I encourage my students to reclaim that which has been taken away, to make use of experiences that can sometimes beat us and hold us down.

No one is fenced off from the violence that is our world. A mother is taken by a drunk driver. A brother meets with a bullet over a leather jacket. A classmate walks out of school on a Friday afternoon and doesn't

¹ From “A Brief for the Defense” in *Refusing Heaven* (Knopf, 2005).



This, too, is a function of language: translating experience into words so that we might move ourselves from grief into reconciliation, and sometimes even forgiveness.

come back. We use poems to tell these stories. We use stories to help us make sense.

“And then he was gone, like so many of us to follow, leaving behind the stories we’d tell—until even those disappeared into the dark emptiness between our throat & our tongues.” So writes poet Sean Thomas Dougherty in “Clay,” a poem of metaphor and remembrance that I hand out to students when it comes time to show them that memory can be a form of prayer.

He was the sun streaming on a late April afternoon, a dead pigeon’s claws upturned above the park’s broken glass.

He was the park’s broken glass.

He was street.

He was the fire hydrant’s cooling waters streaming onto a mid-July sidewalk & the splash made by the callused soles of little children’s feet.²

I’ve read from and used this poem (the above is just an excerpt) to help students categorize and define the images of their own grief when presence gives way to absence, when a person moves from a state of “is” to “was.” One of my students wrote the following poem in response.

Gold Dragon

STEFANIE WILSON

Jay was rollerblades & loaded guns.

He was the gold dragon dangling from around my neck.

² Sean Thomas Dougherty is the author of the forthcoming *All I Ask for Is Longing: Poems 1994–2014* (2014 BOA Editions) *Scything Grace* (2013 Etruscan Press) and *Sasha Sings the Laundry on the Line* (2010 BOA Editions).

Remember when we were five and we were at the park down in Tennessee and we jumped off the monkey bars and both broke our arms?

Remember how we used to jump off that bluff, over the one-lane road of cars, down into the Tennessee River?

Remember how we used to go hunting in the mountains and the woods, that time you threw your jackknife and killed a jackrabbit?

I remember.

I remember Jay’s hands, strong, gentle hands. And Jay’s hair: it was like night.

I remember how he never liked to be inside his house unless it was to sleep.

I had seen guns before. I’d seen guns in Jay’s hands. I watched as he walked back over by the door and then I watched him lift the gun up to his head.

I got down on my knees, beside Jay, and I held onto his hand. His hand felt like there was nothing there.

Stefanie used the power of words, of story, to transform a moment of “nothing there,” a sort of paralysis, into a moment of action, of making something that she could own instead of being owned by. This, too, is a function of language: translating experience into words so that we might move ourselves from grief into reconciliation, and sometimes even forgiveness. 🐉