

# “In Memory”

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## Abstract

‘In Memory’ is a poem inspired by Joe Brainard’s 1970 publication ‘I Remember’ and Oulipian, George Perec’s ‘Je Me Souviens’ (1978). Like these works, the piece explores the use of literary constraints such as repetition and memory. In doing so it presents the memories of a female Alzheimer’s sufferer, once a nurse in the Second World War, as she battles with the daily distortions of memories she both can and cannot remember. In constructing the work, the involvement of women during World War II was thoroughly researched, as well as the segregation that continued to exist between the fighting troops and- most significantly, for the purpose of this piece- the women that nursed them. Further investigation was carried out on the progressive symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease so as to be as accurate as possible in depicting the memories of the protagonist. Finally, ‘In Memory’ attempts to explore the question of writing from the perspective of one who cannot remember, or whose memory is constrained by means beyond their control.

**Keywords:** Poem, Joe Brainard, Alzheimer, writing perspective.

## Poem

She remembers childhood.

She remembers a farmhouse in Georgia, white cladding, green shutters.

She remembers a tin bath in the yard, sharing the water with her brother, the dog who circled playfully as they bathed.

She remembers her mother, “You children behave now”, her skirts carried by the breeze from the porch. “You mind yo’ manners”

She remembers a schoolyard, lined by trees, Sycamore trees.

“In Memory”

She remembers how she would stand and watch the other children climb during recess.

She remembers when her brother, seven years old, fell from a tree at dusk one summer and sprained his leg; he hobbled around the neighbourhood for days on a crutch her father built.

She remembers village boys, who would kiss at her across the street and then chase her with spiders.

She remembers riding the horse beside her father, a fleshy toddler, bare-legged and wearing no underwear.

She remembers the smell of the saddle: sweat and horsehair.

She remembers a hall of dark faces, dancing The Hop in time to a band.

She remembers the taste of liquor.

She remembers a hand up her skirt in the darkness of trees, how she was late home and had broken curfew.

She remembers the condemnation of grass stains. Her mother: “Girl, you been actin’ a damned *fool*”.

She remembers white cladding, green shutters.

She remembers a radio broadcast.

She remembers a neighbourhood, their ears pressed close to the wireless.

She remembers, all on porches, in kitchens, in hallways, in yards, in attics and in the street, the community gathered, waiting.

She remembers white children climbing Sycamore trees.

She remembers: a date that would “live in infamy”.

She remembers young men in uniform, marching through streets, military arms and legs swinging in perfect unison.

She remembers a public service announcement: “Your country needs *you!!!*”

“In Memory”

She remembers a radio broadcast.

She remembers an enrolment.

She remembers the very first division of coloured nurses in the war effort.

She remembers her mother: “Girl if I’ma say it once, then I’ma say it again, you actin’ like a damned *fool*”.

She remembers sisters dressed in nursing attire: Ada, Adelaide, Cora, Etta, Helen, Ivy, Jemimah, Lorraine, Millicent, May, Pearl, Ruth, Rene, Sydney and Yvonne.

She remembers 1943 and eighteen years old.

She remembers the Army Nurse Corps, 1943 and segregated; the senior sister told her: “Don’t you be treatin’ no white man”.

She remembers the 25<sup>th</sup> Station Hospital Unit.

She remembers black troops in Liberia, men writhing in hospital beds, drenched in Malaria.

She remembers the heat.

She remembers jaundice, convulsions, blood in bed pans.

She remembers 1944.

She remembers the disembodiment of the Army’s quota system: coloured women tending white soldiers.

She remembers a unit of sixty-three coloured women serving the American Convalescent Hospital in Warrington, England.

She remembers 1944.

She remembers her first white soldier.

She remembers his body on the stretcher, his face contorted and his head matted with haemoglobin, screaming, screaming, screaming to no one.

“In Memory”

She remembers cleaning, bandaging, hot cloth and needlework.

She remembers alarm bells, casualties; artillery, landmines, snake bites, accidents, and fatigue.

She remembers white sheets covering the bodies of the dead.

She remembers the soldier’s first conscious breath, the rise and fall of a ghostly chest in a hospital bed.

She remembers “a date that would live in infamy”.

She remembers letters, written to and from the United States.

She remembers a surrender.

She remembers May 8<sup>th</sup> 1945.

She remembers the feel of old, American soil beneath her boots.

She remembers a land, changed but nonetheless beautiful.

She remembers her mother: “Damn, girl, you’ *shrunk!* What they bin’ feedin’ you?”

She remembers the absence of a brother: Missing in Action.

She remembers a wedding, a military man with pale skin.

She remembers a church, choir, confetti and roses.

She remembers a lake-house, a honeymoon.

She remembers the rise and fall of a white chest in the darkness.

She remembers babies, three of them, one after another.

She remembers contractions.

She remembers diapers, bottles, piles of laundry.

She remembers school shoes, backpacks, tailored shorts and skirts.

She remembers infant tantrums, teenage bickering and adolescent brawls.

“In Memory”

She remembers her hands flailing in the air, always the peacemaker.

She remembers the dull ache that remained in her breast, for months, when they left her.

She remembers the years, burying a white soldier, an American flag.

She remembers men, women and children gathered by a graveside.  
She remembers hands upon her back, comforting; “We’re so *sorry* for your loss”.

She remembers the flux of time, slowing down, speeding up.

She remembers cups of coffee, “Corinne, where’d I put that sugar?”

She remembers losing her door keys.

She remembers her youngest, her daughter: “Mama, you sure yo’ alright, out here, on yo’ own?”

She remembers milk in the cupboard, eggs in the dresser.

She remembers prizing toast with a knife, from the toaster.

She remembers her sons: “Mama, you goin’ crazy! What the hell you doin’?”

She remembers cleaning the windows with white wine vinegar – “See those marks? Look at all them marks! I’ll bet it was the bugs. Bugs love leavin’ marks”.

She remembers photographs of a white soldier.

She remembers smoke, cigarettes in the waste-paper basket.

She remembers boxes piled high in the kitchen.

She remembers a hospital car in the driveway.

She remembers arms leading her through alien space.

She remembers: “Welcome to Fairhill Mrs -”.

She remembers a room with a window-seat.

“In Memory”

She remembers the daughter who visits often, with Jonathan – “Mama, this is Marcus, your grandson. Johnny didn’t come back from war, remember?”

She remembers lunch on plastic trays, spoon-feeding, napkins wet with saliva.

She remembers...

She remembers.

She does not remember retirement.

She does not remember four-hundred and seventy-three days of misplaced time; two people in deckchairs on the back porch.

She does not remember baths assisted by nursing staff – “Hold still, hold still now Cela, it’s alright”.

She does not remember the trees that line the fence outside. Sycamore trees.

She does not remember the man on crutches who limps from corridor to corridor, muttering softly to himself about the price of postage stamps, a mysterious garbage truck...

She does not remember that her husband is gone.

She does not remember kissing the doctor who served her medication this morning.

She does not remember violently seizing his white face and calling him Jerry.

She does not remember pleading with him; “But you’re Jerry! You look just like him”.

She does not remember asking, after a pause, “Who’s Jerry?”

She does not remember the smell of daily bleach and air freshener.

She does not remember the faces that stare in the day-room, the taste of Semolina.

She does not remember falling in the gardens, grass stains on her skirt.

“In Memory”

She does not remember the names of songs on the radio: ‘Vogue’, ‘Escapade’, and ‘Opposites Attract’.

She does not remember what happened to Doris Day.

She does not remember her grandchildren.

She does not remember the date.

She does not remember who is in the White House.

She does not remember what anybody is talking about.

She does not remember the names and faces of nurses in uniform, doctors in white coats; Victoria, Valerie, Susanna, Robert, Nigel, Mercy, Michael, Jeannie, Joanne, Harriet, Gwen, Esther, Clarence, Betty, Andrew.

She does not remember the weather yesterday.

She does not remember rising at 5AM and dressing in her best clothes; “My daughter is arriving. She just graduated from University”.

She does not remember being led back to bed, a fresh face of make-up, “Listen! I told you, my daughter is arriving!”

She does not remember asthma, incontinence, mess in bedpans.

She does not remember the onset of disease.

She does not remember the world outside of her window.

She does not remember countries, continents, states or counties.

She does not remember 1984.

She does not remember wandering the hallways at night, repeating to herself, “My name... Cela. That’s right, my name...my name...”

She does not remember the screaming elderly in their beds.

She does not remember the faeces, the fever, the arthritic fingers.

“In Memory”

She does not remember the weather, yesterday.

She does not remember the sound of the fire alarm when someone burns the toast.

She does not remember how it sends her crazy.

She does not remember telling staff over and over, for the thousandth time: “I was a nurse... in the war. I was a nurse”.

She does not remember the nicotine stains above the armchair in her bedroom.

She does not remember the white sheets, covering the bodies of the dead.

She does not remember the rise and fall of her own depleted chest.

She does not remember the letters her daughter anxiously pens to nursing staff – “Tell me, really, is Mama doing okay?”

She does not remember surrendering herself to life.

She does not remember her body, changed, perhaps less beautiful.

She does not remember the face of the lady in the mirror who stares ruefully back at her, sometimes angry, screeching blaspheme, at other times, crying, “Hush, hush chile, hush”.

She does not remember if Johnny will visit again.

She does not remember 1984.

She does not remember diapers, medicine bottles, piles of soiled laundry.

She does not remember fighting off the nurse at dinner, her arms flailing; “I don’t know who I am. I don’t know who I am!”

She does not remember years gone by.

She does not remember time.

She does not remember decades, years, months, weeks, days, hours, and minutes.



“In Memory”

She does not remember hands on her back; “Shhh, Cela. There now”.

She does not remember Coffee and Sugar.

She does not remember Milk and Eggs.

She does not remember how she came to this place.

She does not remember 1984.

She does not remember white cladding, green shutters.

She does not remember.

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