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I Couldn't Stop Watching

Memory from Childhood

A chilly and overcast afternoon
of winter. The students
are studying. Steady boredom
of raindrops across the windowpanes.

It is the schoolroom. In a poster
Cain is shown running
away, and Abel dead,
not far from a red spot.

The teacher, with a voice husky and hollow,
is thundering. He is an old man badly dressed,
withered and dried up,
who is holding a book in his hand.

And the whole child's choir
is singing its lesson:
one thousand times one hundred is one hundred thousand,
one thousand times one thousand is one million.

A chilly and overcast afternoon
of winter. The students
are studying. Steady boredom
of raindrops across the windowpanes.

—Antonio Machado
(Translated by Robert Bly)

Poems are often generated by memories that haunt us—memories that suddenly return out of the blue, or memories that are

familiar companions and part of the fabric of our lives—memories that are too precious and sweet not to be recorded, or that are so painful they cry out to be exorcised.

Antonio Machado, one of the great Spanish poets of the twentieth century, evokes not just the dullness of his childhood classroom, but something too of the magic in which even unpleasant memories of the past are likely to be draped. The poster of Cain and Abel; the withered teacher with his book; the children chanting their numbers; the rain beating against the windowpanes: how oppressive it all is, and how vividly it has been evoked.

The poem is not filled with generalized phrases such as "school days long ago," "Bible pictures," and "inclement weather." But it is a particular day, the weather is chilly and overcast, there are raindrops across the windowpanes. There is not simply some poster or other on the wall but a particular poster, one that is briefly—and evocatively—described. The old teacher is sketched in quickly with specific details: he has a husky and hollow voice, he is withered and badly dressed, and he is holding a book in his hand. The students are not simply studying their lesson but are studying a particular lesson, one that the reader hears them reciting. Concrete, sensory details such as these allow readers to form vivid pictures in their minds of what is being described. That is how writers bring a scene to life.

Notice how simple the poem is. Neither the vocabulary nor the phrasing is at all complex or unusual. If you had imagined that poetry required exotic and dramatic subject matter, this poem should convince you that the most commonplace experiences can be transformed into powerful writing.

Keep in mind that this is an English translation of a Spanish poem. The translator, Robert Bly, has decided to sacrifice the original poem's *end-rhymes*—the rhymes that come at the ends of lines—so that he can duplicate its language and flavor more accurately. A good translator would far rather sacrifice the end-rhymes than any of the poem's specific details.

The following poem, also culled from a childhood memory, is similarly filled with details that bring the scene to life:

Power

No one we knew had ever stopped a train.
Hardly daring to breathe, I waited
Belly-down with my brother
In a dry ditch

Watching through the green thickness
Of grass and willows.
Stuffed with crumpled newspapers,
The shirt and pants looked real enough
Stretched out across the rails. I felt my heart
Beating against the cool ground
And the terrible long screech of the train's
Braking began. We had done it.

Then it was in front of us—
A hundred iron wheels tearing like time
Into red flannel and denim, shredding the child
We had made—until it finally stopped.

My brother jabbed at me,
Pointed down the tracks. A man
Had climbed out of the engine, was running
In our direction, waving his arms,
Screaming that he would kill us—
Whoever we were.
Then, very close to the spot
Where we hid, he stomped and cursed
At the rags and papers scattered
Over the gravel from our joke.

I tried to remember which of us
That red shirt had belonged to,
But morning seemed too long ago, and the man
Was falling, sobbing, to his knees.
I couldn't stop watching.
My brother lay next to me,
His hands covering his ears,
His face pressed tight to the ground.

—Corrine Hales

Both Machado and Hales have told their stories with simplicity and clarity. The belief that good poetry is necessarily dense and obscure is a misconception. To the contrary, lucidity is almost always a great virtue in writing.

Many inexperienced poets also imagine that the language of poetry must be ultra-romantic and theatrical, but a poetry which is too richly embellished with hyperventilated language, inflated sentiments, and abstruse verbiage is in grave danger of sounding artificial or just plain foolish. Hales' poem is written in our real language, one that approximates the way we speak: she finds no need to resort to an heroic, poetic or overblown style.

Narrative: Getting the Story Told The poet Dylan Thomas defined poetry as "the rhythmic, inevitably narrative, movement from an overclothed blindness to a naked vision." Certainly most poetry, no matter how concerned it is with music, voice, image, and language, depends to some extent upon storytelling. Like many successful storytellers, Corrine Hales manages to hook the reader's attention by opening her poem with an intriguing line—one that immediately makes us want to keep reading. Throughout the poem we see the details vividly. We experience the excitement the narrator was feeling not because she *tells* us she was excited but because she describes things in a way that makes her excitement real to the reader. It is generally more effective to imply an emotion through a physical description ("My fists tightened," "he gritted his teeth," "her face went pale") than by telling the reader the emotion ("I felt angry," "he was frightened," "she was shocked"). It is unlikely that writing will be successful if it does not convey to the reader strong emotion. If we do not know what the characters are feeling and are not ourselves moved to feel much of anything, then the writing is likely to fall flat.

Narrator and Author It is useful to remember that when poets or fiction writers seem to be speaking of their own experiences, we cannot take for granted that they are really being autobiographical. For all we know, the story Hales has told is simply a fiction, a story that she made up. The "I" of a poem refers to the poem's narrator and *not* necessarily to the author.

Conflict and Suspense Good storytelling often contains the elements of conflict and suspense. We know what the narrator and her brother are doing and we know it is dangerous. Will they get caught? Will someone get hurt? Why have they done it? What is the man who is running toward them going to do? Suspense is that quality of storytelling which keeps the reader wanting to know what will happen next. Conflict implies that a character in a story has a problem. If there is no problem, there is probably no real story. If a man is thirsty in a restaurant and the waiter brings him a glass of water, there is no conflict, but if a man is thirsty in the middle of the Sahara desert there might well be a life-threatening conflict. Conflict leads to suspense, for the reader wants to know how the problem will be resolved. Will the man find water or will he perish of thirst? If nothing is at stake for a character, the reader may not be terribly interested in that character's fate. But if a life-or-death issue has been raised, we are likely to read on, wanting to know if the character will succeed or succumb. Machado's poem

"Memory of Childhood" is not a narrative in which much seems at stake. Its power is its ability to evoke the past with a few well-chosen details. It is true that the poster of Cain and Abel hints at the tension between the innocence of the schoolroom and the real world of violent conflict, but that conflict is represented too tangentially to add suspense to the poem. Although the portrait of the old teacher has great charm, no real story emerges. The pleasures of Machado's poem are not narrative ones. In contrast, "Power" is very much a narrative poem. The reader first wants to know how the children intend to stop the train and if anyone will be hurt when they do so; then, we want to know if the children will be caught and what the engineer will do. Those questions add suspense to the storytelling.

The Power is in the Details No matter how suspenseful her story, had Corrine Hales begun "Power" in the following manner, her poem would have fallen flat:

> One day my brother and I managed to stop a train
> by putting a fake person made out of different stuff
> on the railroad tracks. We watched the train come
> to a stop and then some guy got out who was very angry....

Can you see how ineffectual such writing is? No details are given, and consequently no vivid scene is created in the reader's mind. It is unlikely that such a poem will have much emotional punch. Here we are simply *telling* about the incident rather than doing what Corrine Hales has done—*showing* the scene with specific and concrete descriptions. Hales does not say: "The train hit the stuffed dummy that we had set on the tracks"; instead, the author *shows* us this situation by finding those details that allow the reader to see, feel and hear what is happening: "A hundred iron wheels tearing like time/ Into red flannel and denim, shredding the child/ We had made...." The phrase "a hundred iron wheels" creates more of a picture in the reader's mind than does the word "train," just as the word "train" would be more concrete and vivid than the word "vehicle."

Showing us through vivid detail—specific sights and sounds—does not mean that the poet is being roundabout or evasive. To the contrary, most of Hales' poem is perfectly clear. If, at the poem's end, we are not told explicitly what the young girl was feeling as she watched the man sobbing on his knees, that is probably because the narrator couldn't distinguish the complex mesh of emotions she herself was feeling at that moment. The reader senses, however, that she's watching the sobbing engineer in a kind of spellbound awe. At the same time, there is probably fear, guilt, an exhilaration born of her excitement and newfound power and, beyond those feelings, a strong dose of shock. Good writers often try to capture the complexity of human emotion, rather than settling for an easy and simple label.

Memories Too Painful To Share There are, of course, memories more traumatic than the ones that form the subject matter of "Memory from Childhood" and "Power." Such memories are often difficult to write about. Here is a poem that suggests an excruciatingly painful childhood experience—the sort that a poet may have a fierce need to write about and yet finds, because of the anguish involved, difficult to get down on paper. It takes courage to open old wounds, though it can be liberating to do so:

The Tooth Fairy

They brushed a quarter with glue
and glitter, slipped in on bare
feet, and without waking me
painted rows of delicate gold
footprints on my sheets with a love
so quiet, I still can't hear it.

My mother must have been
a beauty then, sitting
at the kitchen table with him,
a warm breeze lifting her
embroidered curtains, waiting
for me to fall asleep.

It's harder to believe
the years that followed, the palms
curled into fists, a floor
of broken dishes, her chainsmoking
through long silences, him
punching holes in his walls.

I can still remember her print
dresses, his checkered taxi, the day
I found her in the closet
with a paring knife, the night
he kicked my sister in the ribs.

He lives alone in Oregon now, dying
slowly of a rare bone disease.
His face stippled gray, his ankles
clotted beneath wool socks.

She's a nurse on the graveyard shift.
Comes home mornings and calls me.
Drinks her dark beer and goes to bed.

And I still wonder how they did it, slipped
that quarter under my pillow, made those
perfect footprints...

Whenever I visit her, I ask again.
"I don't know," she says, rocking, closing
her eyes. "We were as surprised as you."

—Dorianne Laux

In the course of describing one joyful experience, the author has also managed to suggest the story of her whole brutalized childhood. To do that she has chosen just a handful of details. For the violence and terror, she has given us "palms curled into fists, a floor of broken dishes," and "the day I found her in the closet with a paring knife, the night he kicked my sister in the ribs." A few dozen words and the entire environment of her childhood—or, more accurately, one aspect of her childhood—has been laid bare. Once the element of conflict has been established, the suspense is heightened. The reader wants to know what will happen next.

What a striking contrast the poet has created by framing the story of her abusive childhood in an affectionate memory about parental love and childhood innocence. Moreover, that story about the tooth fairy was probably of help in getting the story of those abusive years told, for it gives the poem a narrative structure—a beginning and an end—and establishes the narrator's point of view—not just her memory of those horrible years, but her pity and love for her mother. Notice too how beautifully the author has caught the poem's final moment, that touching and believable portrait of her mother: " 'I don't know,' she says, rocking, closing her eyes. 'We were as surprised as you.' " The quality of appearing to be true to life, of capturing a person or occasion with such accuracy that the reader recognizes it as true, is called *verisimilitude*. Here we can say that Laux has captured the mother, in that final scene, with fine verisimilitude.

Scene The first two of the poems we have read in this chapter describe a single scene; the action takes place at one location and during one brief period of time. But in "The Tooth Fairy" there are several different scenes: the parents tiptoeing into the child's room, her

mother and "him" sitting at the kitchen table, fragmentary images and events that took place over several years, the abusive figure dying in Oregon, the mother home from work drinking her dark beer, and the narrator's conversations with her mother during her visits.

It is generally more difficult to write a short poem that involves several scenes than a poem that focuses on only one, but "The Tooth Fairy" is just as coherent and well-structured as the other two. That is due, in part, to the fact that the incident with the "tooth fairy" begins and ends the poem, neatly framing what might otherwise have been a sprawling array of fragmentary memories.

The Gentle Art of Lying What Machado, Hales, and Laux wish to do is tell us the truth—not necessarily the literal truth, but the emotional truth. If "Power" is autobiographical, it is perfectly possible that the author has not told the story precisely as it happened. A poet often takes a memory and after beginning to shape it into a poem finds certain details need to be changed or invented. Perhaps there were other children involved in their plot, but the poet decided to leave them out so that she could simplify the story—and turn it into a better poem. If "The Tooth Fairy" is autobiographical, it's possible that it wasn't the author but her sister who found their mother in the closet with a knife. But the poet might have decided to alter the facts so that the narrator could speak of the knife more vividly, from firsthand knowledge.

Theme and Point of View To write about your childhood you needn't pretend to be a child. None of these poems is written from the child's point of view. Though both "Memory from Childhood" and "Power" give us clear and believable pictures of children, the point of view and the language employed are not those of children.

The poem's theme or main idea is also, ultimately, a matter of the author's viewpoint, for it is an interpretation imposed upon the story by the author. "The Tooth Fairy" might have been written as a poem about the strength to survive, or the author might have discussed her residual bitterness, or how the experience of that brutal childhood wounded her irrevocably, or she might have used that memory to speak of what one learns from pain. It is not inconceivable that the very same material that Dorianne Laux uses could have been turned into comedy or utilized as a political metaphor. The raw memory does not have a built-in meaning but, rather, is interpreted by the author to fit her purposes. We understand events in different ways at different times. Often enough a poet does not know when beginning a poem what it "means," what significance it has, what the theme will be, how it will be focused

so that the poem moves in one direction. In that sense a writer invents—or discovers—the meaning of her material. The "meaning" of a poem is often discovered or invented by the writer during the process of the writing itself. Once the writer understands what he or she wishes to say, the poem can then be successfully focused and shaped.

A Process for Recovering Memories

Sit down with your notebook and jot down a few words or phrases for each memory that comes to you as you answer the following questions so that you will have an abbreviated record of the incidents you recalled. Something as brief as "crazy man in green hat" would do nicely. If some of these memories bring with them strong emotions, so much the better. The stronger the emotions the "hotter" the material! If a question fails to call forth an answer, that's okay too: just skip it and move to the next question. The incidents that you come up with do not have to be memories from your childhood.

1. Recall a pleasant time in the past.
2. Recall a building in which you once lived.
3. Recall a secret you once had.
4. Recall a magical person from your childhood.
5. Recall an incident that filled you with dread.
6. Recall something dangerous you did when you were young.
7. Recall something sinful or bad you did as a child.
8. Recall something that happened during a school vacation.
9. Recall something that happened in a classroom or schoolyard.
10. Recall something that happened many years ago near a body of water.
11. Recall your first romantic infatuation.
12. Recall something funny that made you laugh happily.

Taking Notes for the First Poem

Choose one of those incidents, one that calls up strong emotions and which might have had consequences for your emotional life, but also one that has a story that would be interesting to tell. Now close your eyes and go back to the beginning of that particular incident. Replay the "film" of it through to its end. Don't analyze or interpret but just watch it pass through your mind. Curiously, this will often take no more than two or three minutes no matter how charged or complex the experience is.

Then jot down as many specific details as you can recall: not simply a decorated classroom wall, but a poster of Cain and Abel; not simply a train coming to a halt but "the terrible long screech of the train's braking"; not just a man with a disease but "ankles clotted beneath wool socks." Write down what things looked like, smelled like, felt like; what someone said, how someone gestured or moved or wept. Was there a doorknob gleaming in the sun, a dog barking on the corner in the snow, did someone's dry cough punctuate the silence? If you wish, replay the incident again. You will probably find new details emerging, things that hadn't emerged in your first run-through. Write those down too. If you find yourself writing a paragraph or a couple of pages describing the incident, that is perfectly okay.

When you have done that, ask yourself what impact the incident had on your life. Why do you remember this? That is a question that is not always easy to answer. It is possible that your poem, like "Power," will be about an initiation, a rite of passage, a moment when you grew or changed or learned something important about yourself or the world. Perhaps, like "The Tooth Fairy," it will be about something that wounded you deeply, or something that has partially shaped who you presently are. Although a poem's theme, what one is to make of a particular incident, is often one of the discoveries that occurs in the process of writing rather than before the writing begins, it is a useful question to ask from the beginning, for the answer will help to focus the poem, determining the appropriate mood and how most effectively to organize and shape the material. In a sense it is a question of knowing—or deciding—what your own poem is about, what moral or truth it points at, what it says about your life or life in general.

Read the following three suggested poems and choose the one that seems to fit most comfortably the memory with which you are dealing. As you read the other two suggestions you might find that other memories brought to light by the exercise would fit those formats. Needless to say, it would be fruitful to write all three of the suggested poems.

Poem 1: A Childhood Memory

Out of all the details and facts you have written down, choose the ones that will permit you to write a poem of no more than thirty-five lines, telling your story as effectively as you can. Tell it in a manner that makes the reader continually want to know what happens next. Make sure the incident is held to one scene—one physical loca-

tion. Sometimes this means you will have to choose one particular incident out of many. If the memory that you recalled while doing the memory process jumped around from locale to locale, find the one that seems the most vivid and intense, the one filled with the most action, drama and conflict. Be sure it is one that will permit you to reveal, with a minimum of explanation and background, what you want to show us. As indicated earlier, that focus, what it is you want to show us, often emerges in the process of writing itself. Good writers can give us necessary background quickly and painlessly, without seeming to interrupt the flow of the story. A poem that begins "Again he took out his strap and hit me" lets the reader know, simply through the use of the word "again," that this has happened before. Starting with the action rather than with a lot of background information is an important storyteller's device. The reader must know what the poem's narrator (the "I" of the poem) is feeling. The more intensely you can get us to feel, the more successful you have been. It is important to remember that the power of poetry rests to a large degree on the emotional intensity it generates. Try to make the reader feel the humor of the situation or its pathos or the narrator's grief or something of the mystery of the world, or the small, significant triumph of a character's life—or whatever it is you wish to call forth from the reader's emotions.

Remember to show us rather than tell us: use vivid, expressive details to give the reader the picture you want us to see before our eyes. Concentrate on *describing* the action in such a way that the reader will understand the feelings of the characters without having to be told them.

If thirty-five lines doesn't seem like enough space in which to tell your story, so much the better: the more concise you are forced to be, the more likelihood that you will select your details carefully and maintain the narrative and emotional intensity that you want.

Do not use end-rhyme (rhyming words at the ends of lines) in this poem. Far from making a poem more musical, in inexperienced hands end-rhyme often forces the author to write awkwardly, keeping a poem from becoming musical and graceful. Instead of rhyme, let the compression, precision, and clarity of your phrasing, the accuracy of your descriptions, the drama of your narrative, and the intensity of the emotion shape this into a powerful poem.

Poem 2: Working With Structure

Take one of the memories generated by the exercise and write a poem based on the structure of Machado's "Memory from Childhood." That poem evokes the mood of a place and time in the poet's past by choosing just a few details. This form might be appropriate for a memory of something that happened over and over, or a continuous action over a long period of time, or one that is significant to you without being particularly dramatic or fraught with conflict. Perhaps it will be about the two years you spent in Idaho or the three years when you lived with your grandmother, or the winter you spent in Alaska when your mother was dying. You might make each *stanza* a different scene at a different locale.

First, gather four distinct sets of details about the occasion and use one in each of four stanzas. A stanza is a verse paragraph, separated from the remainder of the poem by an additional space. Machado, for example, discusses the weather in the first stanza, the schoolroom in the second, the teacher in the third, and the students in the fourth. The final stanza repeats the first. You will observe that the poet tells the reader in the first stanza what the emotion of the poem is. If it works gracefully in your poem, try the same thing. But even if you don't tell us explicitly what the mood is, that mood must quickly and clearly be made known to the reader.

Each stanza of "Memory from Childhood" is four lines long. Keep yours the same length. Also, repeat the first stanza as the last as Machado does—or, as an alternative, make the last two lines a repetition of the poem's opening two lines.

Poem 3: Family Secrets

If there is a dramatic story that cannot be told as one incident but surveys an entire period of your life, you may wish to use the strategy that Dorianne Laux employs, framing the story with one small anecdote which appears at the poem's beginning and conclusion. Maybe your story is also about a family secret—about alcoholism or drug abuse or incest or violence or debilitating illness. Whatever the larger story you wish to tell, find a specific incident that you can use to frame it. Do not try to tell us all the things that happened but, like Laux, find the three or four details that will bring the situation to life for the reader. Since you may be encompassing the events of many

months or years, try to pick out just the right details, ignoring a wealth of others that you might have the impulse to tell us. Keep this poem to a maximum of thirty-five lines.

Revising the First Poem

After you have finished writing a first draft of one of these poems, look it over and see if you have actually told your story clearly and effectively. Often inexperienced writers find it hard to separate what they know about an incident from what they have told the reader, with the consequence that crucial information never gets conveyed. An additional problem is that the excitement of writing down one's memory and creating a poem is sometimes confused with a sense that the poem, since it delighted you, will surely delight the reader.

Sometimes in a second or third draft, dissatisfied with their previous attempts, writers will start the story at a different point in time or find better details for their purpose. Perhaps there is not yet enough suspense or emotion, or you got bogged down in background material that was inessential. Perhaps your word choice is not precise or trenchant enough to bring a scene to life. Perhaps the reader is given too few clues to the emotions the characters are feeling or cannot tell what emotion they themselves are supposed to be feeling.

Looking over your draft a few days later is often an effective way to see the poem with fresh eyes.

3

Little Poems in Prose

Something must have been bugging my father the day I asked him for fifty cents in the upstairs kitchen, because although he was always a sweet and gentle man and gave me most everything I asked for, this time he turns around from the sink where he is washing dishes and starts swinging at me fronthand and backhand, again and again, his face contorted with a rage I never saw before or again. I shrivelled into the chair by the kitchen window sobbing and begging this stranger to stop. Eventually he does, and the silence of the rest of our lives swallows the moment forever.

—Fred Moramarco

Three sentences about a moment that changed one's life! Is this a vignette, a tale, a short-short story, a sketch, an anecdote? We could call it any of those—or we could call it a little poem in *prose.*

That it is written in prose doesn't mean it isn't poetry; it only means that it isn't *verse.* Poetry and prose are not in every case distinguishable, and twentieth-century poets often write poems in prose. By prose we designate that writing which extends to the right-hand margin; verse, on the other hand, breaks each line at a place not determined by the margin of the page. The nineteenth-century French poet Charles Baudelaire was largely responsible for popularizing the *prose poem* through his collection *Paris Spleen,* which he subtitled *Petits poèmes en prose.* Since the formal requirements of the prose poem require nothing more than writing an effective paragraph, it is often a comfortable way to approach poetry for those who have little experience with verse.

The following could be called a short-short story, but it could just as easily be called a prose poem: