May 2012 Writing Prompts/Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group

Writing Prompt: Remembrance Writing

Memorial Day fast approaches, and this time of year, many of us think of loved ones who have passed away. Write a remembrance of someone you served with in the military or someone who has been important to you in another part of your life. This can be about someone who has passed away; alternately, you may choose to write a living remembrance about someone that you have simply lost touch with or that was in your life for a period of time and then passed out of your life. The goal here is capture the "essence" of that person: his or her attitudes, quirks, quality and manner of speaking and interaction with you or with others. If it helps, place this person into a "scene," an event or happening, in which his or her character and quality of interaction is apparent.

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Writing Prompt: Inventory of Scars

The March 19, 2012 issue of The New Yorker published an essay by David Owen called "Scars: A life in injuries." In this essay, which is, ironically, somewhat light-hearted, Owen unfolds a series of memories of his younger years through a reading of his own bodily scars. As he weaves together these anecdotes, we get a sense of his boyhood personality: daring, curious, adventurous, even perhaps a benign trouble-maker, willing to put all personal pain aside for the experience of a “world [that] seemed much bigger then than it does now.” Owen also extends some of these meditations about his childhood scars into his adult life, recounting what became of his childhood friends as they grew into adults, and recalling an incident in which his ten-year-old daughter has to be taken to the doctor for stitches after an ice-skating injury. On the way to the hospital, he tries to comfort her by sharing stories about his own childhood injuries, and suggests that her injury might be seen “not as tragedy but as a potentially interesting adventure, which we would both remember with more than ordinary clarity.”

Thinking back on your life—both your life as a civilian and your experiences in the military—it’s entirely possible that some of your scars may signify “interesting adventures,” while others may evoke darker memories. Try writing an essay in which you examine your scars and use your memories of how you got them to stitch together a self-portrait. How did you get these scars? What do the experiences they recall mean to you now? And, to borrow a question asked by Brenda Miller & Suzanne Paola in their book Tell It Slant, “How do these external scars relate to any internal ‘markings’?”