May 8, 2010, 10:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.: Veterans’ Writing Group Agenda

--Opening and introductions
--Workshop of group members' writing (in response to the exercise "The Things they Carried" or any other writing that group members want to share).
--Break/food
--New writing exercise for next time (ivy)
--Short writing period (bring a notebook and pen or whatever you use to write)
--Discussion/closing

Next meeting possibilities: Saturday June 5, Saturday June 12, Saturday June 19
In my earliest memory, I'm a four-year-old girl waking slowly from anesthesia. I lift my head off the damp pillow and gaze blearily through the bars of my hospital crib. I can see a dim hallway with a golden light burning; somehow I know my mother will appear in that hallway any minute now, bearing ice cream and 7 Up. She told me as much before the operation: "All good girls get ice cream and 7 Up when their tonsils come out," she said, stroking my hair. "It's your reward for being brave." I'm vaguely aware of another little girl screaming for her mother in the crib next to mine, but otherwise the room remains dark and hushed, buffered by the footsteps of nurses who stop a moment at the doorway and move on.

I do not turn to face my neighbor; afraid her terror will infect me; I can feel the tickling urge to cry bubbling up in my wounded throat, and that might be the end of me, of all my purported bravery and the promised ice cream. I keep my gaze fixed on that hallway but something alights in my peripheral vision and I turn to face the bedside table. There, in a mason jar, my tonsils float. They rotate in the liquid: misshapen ovals, pink and nubbed, grotesque.

And now my mother has simply appeared, with no warning or announcement. Her head leans close to the crib, and she gently plies the spoon between the bars, places it between my lips, and holds it there while I swallow. I keep my gaze fixed on her face, and she keeps her gaze on mine, though I know we're both aware of those tonsils floating out of reach. The nurses pad about, and one of them enters the room bearing my "Badge of Courage." It's a certificate with a lion in the middle surrounded by laurels, my name scripted in black ink below. My mother holds it out to me, through the bars, and I run a finger across my name, across the lion's mane, across the dry yellowed parchment.—Brenda

The Earliest Memory

What's your earliest memory? What's the memory that always emerges from the dim reaches of your consciousness as the first one, the beginning to this life you call your own? Most of us can pinpoint them, these images that assume a privileged station in our life's story. Some of these early memories have the vague aspect of a dream, some the vivid clarity of a photograph; whatever form they take, they tend to exert on us a mysterious fascination.

Memory, itself, could be called its own bit of creative nonfiction: We continually, often unconsciously, renovate our memories, shaping them into stories that bring coherence to chaos. Memory's been called the ultimate "mythmaker," continually seeking meaning in the random and often unfathomable events in our lives. "A myth," writes John Kotre, author of White Gloves: How We Create Ourselves through Memory, "is not a falsehood but a comprehensive view of reality. It's a story that speaks to the heart as well as the mind, seeking to generate conviction about what it thinks is true."
The first memory, then, becomes the starting point in our own narratives of the self. "Our first memories are like the creation stories that humans have always told about the origins of the earth," Kotre writes. "In a similar way, the individual self—knowing how the story is coming out—selects its earliest memories to say, 'This is who I am because this is how I began.'" As writers, we naturally return again and again to these beginnings and scrutinize them. By paying attention to the illogical, unexpected details of these memories, we just might light upon the odd yet precise images that help our lives make sense—or make sense at least long enough for our purposes as writers.

David James Duncan calls such autobiographical images "river teeth." "There are hard, cross-grained whorls of memory," he writes, "that remain inexplicably lodged in us long after the straight-grained narrative material that housed them has washed away. Most of these whorls are not stories, exactly: more often they're self-contained moments of shock or of inordinate empathy. . . . These are our "river teeth"—the time-defying knots of experience that remain in us after most of our autobiographies are gone.

Virginia Woolf had her own term for such "shocks" of memory: She calls them "moments of being," and they become essential to our sense of self. They're the times when we get jolted out of our everyday complacency to really see the world and all that it contains. This "shock-receiving capacity" is essential for the writer's disposition: "I hazard the explanation," she writes, "that a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it. . . . I make it real by putting it into words." Woolf's early "moments of being," the vivid first memories from childhood, are of the smallest, most ordinary things: the pattern of her mother's dress, for example, or the pull-cord of the window blind skittering across the floor of their beach house.

The memories that can have the most emotional impact for the writer are those we don't really understand, the images that rise up before us quite without our volition: the flash of our mother's face as she sips from a cooled cup of coffee, for example, her eyes betraying some private grief we've never seen before, or the smell of grapefruit ripening on a tree outside the bedroom window. Perhaps the touch of a stranger's hand reminds you of the way your grandmother casually grasped your hand in her own, the palm so soft but the knuckles so rough, as you sat together watching television, not speaking a word.

These are the "river teeth," the "moments of being," the ones that take your breath away. What repository of memory do you hold in your heart rather than in your head? What are the pictures that rise up on the surface without your bidding? Take these as your cue. Pick up your pen, your net, your magnet, whatever it takes. Be on alert. This is where you begin.

Metaphorical Memory

A metaphor is a way at getting at a truth that exists beyond the literal. By pinpointing certain images as symbolic, writers can go deeper than surface truths and create essays that work on many levels at once. This is what writers are up to all the time, not only with memory, but with the material of experience and the world: We resurrect the details not only to describe the surface appearance, but also to make intuitive connections, to articulate some truth that can't be spoken of directly.

If you look at "So Long Ago" in the anthology section, you'll see that Richard Bausch has taken two early images from memory—a short conversation with his father on his seventh birthday and the sight of his great-grandmother in her coffin years later—and expanded them so that these brief flashes now provide jumping-off points to longer meditations on the nature of memory and the passing of time. M. F. K. Fisher, in "A Thing Shared," takes the recollection of a bite of peach pie and transforms it into a vivid illustration of the rare connection between father, daughter, and sisters. These writers, and many others, allow these early memories to impress themselves on the mind. They don't dismiss them as passing details, but rather probe them for any insights they might contain. They ask not only "what," but "why." Why do I remember the things I do? Why these memories and not others?

Let's go back to that first memory of the tonsils, that early "river tooth" in the personal essay preceding this chapter. What's important for me, Brenda, as a writer, is not what I remember, or even the factual accuracy of the scene, but why I remember it the way I do. And I keep coming back to that incongruous jar of tonsils. I doubt the doctors did such a thing (my mother has no recollection of it), but it remains the most stubborn and intractable part of the scene. What I like about this part of my memory is its very illegibility. The best material can't be deciphered in an instant, with a fixed meaning that once pinned down remains immutable. No: What we want, as essayists, is the rich stuff of the inscrutable, those images whose meaning is never clear at first glance, or second, or third.

I could interpret that jar of tonsils in any number of ways, but this is the one I light on most frequently: When I woke from having my tonsils removed, I knew for the first time that my body was not
necessarily a whole unit, always intact. It was the moment I understood the courage it would take to bear this body into a world that would most certainly do it harm. Of course, as a child I realized no such thing, but as an adult, as a writer preserving this memory in language, I begin to create a metaphor that will infiltrate both my writing and my sense of self from here on out.

Think back on that early memory of yours, the one that came to mind instantly. Illuminate the details, shine a spotlight on them until they begin to yield a sense of truth revealed. Where is your body in this memory? What kind of language does it speak? What metaphor does it offer for you to puzzle out in writing?

**Muscle Memory**

The body, the memory, and the mind exist in sublime interdependence, each part wholly intertwined with the others. There's a term used in dancing, athletics, parachuting, and other fields that require sharp training of the body: muscle memory. Once the body learns the repetitive gestures of a certain movement or skill, the memory of how to execute these movements is encoded in the muscles. That's why, for instance, we never forget how to ride a bike. Or why, years after tap dance lessons, one can still execute a convincing "shuffle-hop-step" across the kitchen floor.

One cannot speak of memory, and of bodily memory in particular, without trotting out Marcel Proust and his famous madeleine. Proust dips his madeleine in lime-blossom tea, and *Remembrance of Things Past* springs forth, all six volumes of it. The moment is worth recalling here because the connection he makes goes to the very heart of memory and its residence inside the body:

> "When from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection."

Because memory is so firmly fixed in the body, it takes an object that appeals to the senses to dislodge memory and allow it to float freely into the mind or onto the page. These are the memories that resonate, precisely because they haven't been forced into being by a mind insistently on fixed meanings. It's the body's story, and it resonates with the sense of an inadvertent truth revealed. As writer Terry Tempest Williams has said, the most potent images and stories are those that "bypass rhetoric and pierce the heart."

So, as far as memory devices go, you could do worse than turn to the body for guidance. It can offer an inexhaustible store of triggers to begin any number of essays, each of which will have greater significance than what appears on the surface. What matters to us most, sometimes, is what has mattered to the body; memory may pretend to live in the cerebral cortex, but memory requires muscle, real muscle, to animate it again for the page.

As a writer, try yielding to the body and all the secrets it harbors. What kind of stories can your body tell? How does your body bear witness to the events of your life? How has it been wounded? Or healed? How does your body connect you to the past and to the future?

**The Five Senses of Memory**

By paying attention to the sensory gateways of the body, you also begin to write in a way that naturally embodies experience, makes it tactile for the reader. Readers tend to care deeply only about those things they feel, viscerally, in their body. And so, as a writer, consider your vocation that of a translator: one who renders the abstract into the concrete. We experience the world through our senses; we must translate that experience into the language of the senses as well.

**Smell**

"Smell is a potent wizard that transports us across thousands of miles and all the years we have lived," wrote Helen Keller in her autobiography. "The odors of fruits waft me to my southern home, to my childhood frolics in the peach orchard. Other odors, instantaneous and fleeting, cause my heart to dilate joyously or contract with remembered grief. Even as I think of smells, my nose is full of scents that start awake sweet memories of summers gone and ripening fields far away."

Though Helen Keller's words are made more poignant by the fact that she was blind and deaf, we all have this innate connection to smell. It seems to travel to our brains directly, without logical or intellectual interference. Physiologically, we do apprehend smells more quickly than the other sensations, and the images aroused by smell act as beacons leading to our richest memories, our most private selves. Because smell is so intimately tied up with breath, after all, a function of our bodies that works continually, day and night, keeping us alive,
Hearing

"The play is memory.

Being a memory play, it is dimly lighted, it is sentimental, it is not realistic.

In memory everything seems to happen to music. That explains the fadeout in the wings.

—Tennessee Williams, The Glass Menagerie"

Our senses are heightened by the music that accompanies the story. The fading out of the music in the play's ending suggests a sense of this emotional disconnection. The music serves as an emotional backdrop, setting the stage for the emotions to build without distraction. It allows the audience to feel the inner turmoil of the characters, enhancing the drama and intensity of the play.
sadness, the right silence." When you have the soundtrack down, the rest of life seems to fall into place.

**Touch**

Hospitals rely on volunteers to hold babies in the infant wards. Their only job is to hold and rock any baby who is crying or in distress. They pick these babies up and hold them close, rock with them, stroke their fingertips across faces and hands and bellies. The nurses, of course, don’t have time, but they know that this type of touch is as essential as medicine for their patients’ healing. As we grow, this need for touch doesn’t diminish, but instead gives rise to our raging desire for contact, the subtle and not-so-subtle maneuvers that lead us into skin-to-skin encounters with other living beings.

We’re constantly aware of our bodies, of how they feel as they move through the world; without this sense, we become lost, disoriented in space and time. And the people who have affected us the most are the ones who have touched us in some way, who have reached beyond this barrier of skin and made contact with our small, isolated selves.

Sometimes an essayist can focus on the tactile feel of objects as a way to explore deeper emotions or memories. For instance, in “Buckeye” (see the anthology section), Scott Russell Sanders focuses his piece on the feel of the buckeye seeds that his father carried with him to ward off arthritis. They are “hollow,” he says, “hard as pebbles, yet they still gleam from the polish of his hands.” Sanders then allows the sensation of touch to be the way we get to know his father:

My father never paid much heed to pain. Near the end, when his worn knee often slipped out of joint, he would pound it back in place with a rubber mallet. If a splinter worked into his flesh beyond the reach of tweezers, he would heat the blade of his knife over a cigarette lighter and slice through the skin.

Such sensory details bring the reader almost into the father’s body, feeling the pound of that mallet, the slice of the skin. He never needs to tell us his father was a “tough” man; the images do all the work for him. These details allow us to see the narrator, Sanders, watching his father closely, and so this scene also conveys at least a part of their relationship and its emotional tenor.

Think about the people in your life who have touched you deeply. What was the quality of their physical touch on your body? How did they touch the objects around them? Why do you think this touch lingers in memory?

**Sight**

How do you see the world? How do you see yourself? Even linguistically, our sense of sight seems so tied up in our perceptions, our stance, our opinions, our personalities, and our knowledge of the world. To “see” something often means to finally understand, to be enlightened, to have our vision cleared. Many times, what we choose to see—and not to see—says more about us than anything else.

When we look back in memory, we see those memories. Our minds have catalogued an inexhaustible storehouse of visual images. Now the trick, for you as a writer, is to render those images in writing. Pay attention to the smallest details, the way a tree limb cuts its jagged edge against a winter sky, say, or the dull yellow of the bulldozer that leveled your favorite house down the street. Close your eyes to see these images more clearly. Trace the shape of your favorite toy, the outline of a beloved’s face. Turn up the lights in the living room. Go out walking under a full moon. Keep looking.

For Annie Dillard, in her jubilant essay “Seeing” (from Pilgrim at Tinker Creek), being able to truly see is akin to spiritual awakening:

One day I was walking along Tinker Creek thinking of nothing at all and I saw the tree with the lights in it. I saw the backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost charged and transfused, each cell buzzing with flame. . . . It was less like seeing than like being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance. . . . I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted and struck.

What are the moments in your life that have “struck” you? How have they been engraved in memory?

Fortunately, we live in an age where visual memories are routinely preserved in photographs and on videotape. Sometimes these photos and films can act not only as triggers for your memory, reminding you of the visual details of the experience; but also as prompts to help you delve more deeply below the surface. Robin Hemley, for example, in “Reading History to My Mother” (see the anthology section), uses a photograph of his mother at an artists’ colony to prompt a deeper exploration of her past and how it connects to the present-day relationship she has with her son. He studies this photograph carefully, noting the facial expressions and the body language, but he doesn’t stop there; he uses these surface details not to answer all questions but to raise new ones that propel the essay forward.

In a different way, Lawrence Sutin, in A Postcard Memoir (see the anthology section), uses old postcard photographs as a jumping-off point for private meditations. These aren’t his own photographs—they
don’t document his personal history—but he studies them for all the unexpected details, the surprising juxtapositions, the fleeting expression of subtle emotion that will lead him to surprising memories of his own.

Try It

**The Earliest Memory**

1. Write a scene of a very early, vivid memory. What calls out for further examination? Are you realistic? What are the odd details, the ones that don’t seem to fit with other people’s versions of the story? What in this scene seems to matter to you? Should it? What are you leaving out? If you get stuck, keep repeating the phrase “I remember” to start off your sentences; allow this rhythm to take you further than you thought you could go.

   a. **Variation I:** Do you have an ideal “earliest memory”? Write this out, and see how your imagination and your memory intersect or diverge. Is there an essay in the process of memory itself?

   b. **Variation II:** Talk with family members about their memories of the time you pinpoint as your first memory. How do they corroborate or deny your own memory? How can you create a “collaborative” memory that includes their versions of the events? How does this divergent account a family “myth”? Is there an essay about the way these divergent accounts work together?

**What Have You Forgotten?**

2. In the preface to his anthology *The Business of Memory*, Charles Baxter writes: “What we talk about when we talk about memory is—often—what we have forgotten and what has been lost. The passion and torment and significance seem to lie in that direction.” What have you forgotten in your life? What are the moments that keep sliding out of reach? Write for 20 minutes, using the phrase “I can’t remember” to start off each sentence. Where does such an examination lead you?

   You may find that, by using this exercise, you can “back into” the scenes and images you do remember but never knew how to approach. Our students have written some very powerful essays based on this prompt, exploring material that seemed too dangerous to examine head-on.

   **Variation:** After you’ve settled on some events or times you can’t fully articulate, do a little research. Ask others about their memories of that time. Find documents or photographs that may shed some light on the issue. Be a detective, looking for clues. After you’ve gathered enough evidence, write an essay that focuses on the way your memory and the “reality” either differ or coincide. Why have you forgotten the things you did?

**The Beginnings of Things**

3. In her essay “Goodbye to All That,” (see the anthology section), Joan Didion writes: “It is easy to see the beginnings of things, and harder to see the ends.” For Didion, the beginning, in memory, can be probed, sorted out; endings can prove more slippery. Write about the “beginning” of some period in your life. Try to pinpoint the exact moment you knew you were crossing a threshold.

**The First Time**

4. How many different “firsts” can you remember in your life? The first meal you remember enjoying, the first smell you remember wanting to smell again, the first day of school, the first book you remember reading by yourself, the first album you ever bought, the first time you drove a car, the first time you were kissed, the first time you were touched in a sexual way? How does your memory of these “firsts” color your perception of yourself? What kinds of metaphors do they generate for your life story?

**The Five Senses of Memory**

**Smell**

5. Gather articles that you know carry some smell that is evocative for you. One by one, smell them deeply; then write the images that arise in your mind. Write quickly, allowing the smell to trigger other sensory associations.

6. What smells in your life are gone for you now? Which ones would you give anything to smell again?

7. Have you ever been “ambushed” by a smell you didn’t expect? Opening a box of clothing from a deceased relative, for example, and having the smell of that person’s house flood over you. Or walking into a friend’s house and smelling a meal exactly like one you remember from childhood. Write a scene about such an incident. If you can’t remember anything like that, imagine it. How do these sensory memories differ from memories of the past you’d normally conjure up? Write an essay exploring the idea that your body carries its own dormant memories.

   **Variation for a group:** Have each person bring in an object with some kind of strong smell and take a turn at being the leader. Keep the object hidden until it’s your turn. The rest of the group members close their
eyes, and the leader brings this object to each person and asks him or her to smell deeply. After everyone has had a chance, the leader hides the object again. Each person immediately writes down the images and associations that the smell evoked in them. Share these writings with each other and see how similarly or differently you reacted to the same object.

Taste

8. After reading M. F. K. Fisher’s “The Measure of My Powers” (see the anthology section), try to remember the first meal you consciously tasted and enjoyed. Describe this meal in detail; make yourself hungry. Who ate this meal with you? If you can’t remember any such meal, imagine one.

9. If you were to write a life history through food, what would be the “touchstone” moments, the meals that represented turning points for you? What meals have you loved? What meals have you hated? What meals marked important transitions in your life?

Variation for a group: Have “food exploration” days set aside for your group meetings. On these days, one person should be responsible for bringing in an item of food for everyone to taste. Try to choose foods that leave strong sensory impressions: a mango, perhaps, or a persimmon. After exploring the sight, texture, and smell of this food, taste it. Describe it in detail, then go on to whatever images and metaphorical associations arise. What in your own life is most like a mango? Begin an essay by cutting what people, feelings, events, and memories this food conjures up for you, and why.

Touch

10. Take an inventory of the scars or marks on your body. How were they received? How do these external scars relate to any internal “markings”?

11. After reading Carol Gue’s essay “Red” (see the website), write down several moments from your life where the feel of your body played a prominent role in your sense of identity. Choose one of these and write it out in a scene, amplifying the sensation of touch.

12. In his short essay “Buckeye” (see the anthology section), Scott Russell Sanders uses a buckeye seed to represent his feelings about his father. Find an object that you consider a “talisman,” something you either carry with you or keep in a special place in your home. Hold this object in your hand, with your eyes closed, and feel all its textures. Begin to write, using this tactile description to trigger memories, scenes, and metaphors.

Variation for a group: Have each person bring in such an object and do a “show and tell,” explaining the story behind the item. Pass these things around the room for everyone to examine, then write based on someone else’s talisman. What did it feel like in your hand? How does it trigger your own memories?

Sound

13. Try re-creating a scene from your childhood using only the sense of hearing. What music is playing in the background? Whose voice is on the radio? How loud is the sound of traffic? What do the trees sound like in the wind? Are there insects, birds, or animals? A hum from a factory? Rain, rivers, the lapping of a lake? What’s the quality of the silence? Try to pick out as many ambient sounds as you can, then begin to amplify the ones you think have the most metaphorical significance. What kind of emotional tone do these sounds give to the piece?

14. Put on a piece of music that you strongly associate with a certain era of your life. Using this music as a soundtrack, zero in on a particular scene that arises in your mind. Try writing the scene without mentioning the music at all, but convey through your word choices, imagery, and sentence structure the essence of this music’s rhythm, its beat.

Variation: Do the same thing, but this time use fragments of the lyrics as “scaffolding” for the essay. Give us a few lines, then write part of the memory those lines evoke in you. Give us a few more, and continue with the memory, so that the song plays throughout the entire piece.

Variation for a group: Have each person bring in a tape or CD of instrumental music that evokes some kind of strong emotion. Put these pieces on in turn, and have everybody write for at least five minutes about each track, trying not to describe the music directly but focusing instead on the images and memories it evokes. Choose a few to read aloud when you’re done, but don’t mention which piece of music acted as the trigger; have the rest of the group try to guess which music corresponds to which piece of writing.

Sight

15. What do you see when you look in the mirror? Where does your gaze land first? How does this gaze determine your attitude toward yourself and your life? Do you see your younger self beneath your present-day face? Can you determine your future self through this gaze?

16. Using a photograph of yourself, a relative, or a friend, describe every detail of the scene. Then focus on one object or detail that seems unexpected to you in some way. How does this detail trigger specific memories?
Also, imagine what occurred just before and just after this photograph was taken; what’s left outside the frame? For instance, write an essay with a title like "After (Before) My Father Is Photographed on the U.S.S. Constitution" (insert whatever subject is appropriate for the photographs you’ve chosen).

Variation for a group: Repeat the above exercise, but then trade photographs with your neighbor. What are the details that strike you? How does any part of the scene remind you of scenes from your own life? Perform a number of these trades around the room to see what kinds of details leap up from other people’s photographs.

Suggestions for Further Reading

In Our Anthology

Bausch, Richard, “So Long Ago”
Cooper, Bernard, “The Fine Art of Sighing”
Didion, Joan, “Goodbye to All That”
Hemley, Robin, “Reading History to My Mother”
Sanders, Scott Russell, “Buckeye”
White, E. B., “Afternoon of an American Boy”

On Our Website

Guess, Carol, “Red”
Hampi, Patricia, “The Need to Say It”
Kitchen, Judith, “Things of This Life”

Elsewhere

Ackerman, Diane, A Natural History of the Senses
Baxter, Charles, ed., The Business of Memory (includes Corey, Stephen, “A Voice for the Lonely” in In Short)
Dillard, Annie, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek
Duncan, David James, River Teeth

Fiffer, Sharon Sloan, ed., Body: Writers Reflect on Parts of the Body
Foster, Patricia, ed., Minding the Body: Women Writers on Body and Soul
Kitchen, Judith, and Mary Paumier Jones, eds., In Brief: Short Takes on the Personal
Kitchen, Judith, and Mary Paumier Jones, eds., In Short: A Collection of Brief Creative Nonfiction
Nabokov, Vladimir, Speak, Memory
Proust, Marcel, Remembrance of Things Past
Woolf, Virginia, Moments of Being