



Steven Harvey

Lyric Memory:

A Guide to the Mnemonics of Nonfiction

When I started my memoir *The Book of Knowledge and Wonder* about my mother I could remember almost nothing about her—not even her face. I had a few vivid memories. In one I watch from behind as she, drink in hand, sways in front of the record console singing Peggy Lee’s “Fever,” holding out the notes and trying to sound good. In another, my dad sits on his haunches before my brother and me on a train ride into the night to deliver the impossible news that our mother has killed herself, his bare arms—large and muscular—reaching out of the sleeves of his suit and the cigarette smoke causing his left eye to squint.

All I had to do to put these memories on paper was follow the details. When I wrote about one of my parents’ shouting matches, I started with the sound of their voices, a cacophony that is always, I suspect, going on somewhere in the recesses of my unconscious mind. I described sitting hunched under the bed covers trying to escape the fury, unable to silence it, the blankets that made me feel safe also acting “like an echo chamber amplifying and distorting the low rumble until the roar, punctuated now and then with a slam or a crash, spilled over me.” When my parents suddenly stopped shouting, I tossed back the blankets, snuck out of my second floor bedroom, and peered between the balusters of the stairs blinking at the fluorescent glare of the kitchen below. The memory ends in a visual image that is both eerie and unforgettable. “I can picture the tableau even now,” I wrote.

My dad, his sleeves rolled up facing a wall, my mother sitting bent over in a kitchen chair with her back to him, crying in gasps.

“Oh no,” she says when she turns, mascara running down her cheek, and sees me running back upstairs.

I see in memory the mascara, but not the face. How can that be? (26)

These vignettes glowed like photographs pinned to the dark backdrop of my mind. Lingered over them turned details of my past into luminous, resonant, nearly palpable objects of solitary contemplation yielding insights in the present. So, as I wrote this particular memory, I realized that the mascara mask revealing my mother's agony, also hid her face and identity pointing to my real goal in the memoir: the woman behind the terror. Yes, there is the horror of my mother's life which I had to tell, but there is also the woman, the wife, and the mother there—and I was determined to discover her as well.

Unfortunately you cannot write a memoir with four or five memories, and in my case the trauma of my mother's suicide wiped clean all the rest. How could I write a memoir if I could not enter the past myself and experience the memories as my own? If we accept the definition of the lyric voice as the voice of discovery by the solitary mind, how can a writer summon detail sufficient for such discoveries from memories that are vague or worse, entirely forgotten?

I did have a shoebox full of letters from my mother to my grandmother that covered my childhood—a remarkable gift for any writer, but as I read them I wondered how I could make her details my own. Slowly, as I kept writing and experimenting, my memoir became a clinic in memory, and I discovered ways for the lyric voice to open more spaces for remembering as intense as the few memories that I could summon at will. If I could not remember details of an event well enough to write about it, I could uncover metonymies of the past—things, events, or ideas associated with it—that would allow me to triangulate on vague or forgotten memories. These techniques took me deep enough into the solitary state of the lyric mode to create writable memories more reliable in many ways than memory itself as I groped toward a fuller version of the woman behind the mascara mask.

They are techniques anyone can use, and I offer them here as a rough guide to the mnemonics of nonfiction for other writers to try.

Photographs: Still Replicas of the Past

I began by writing about photographs because they were the most obvious way to re-enter my past, though I found—like all of the techniques here—that their strength as a mnemonic was also their limitation. I certainly had an abundance of them, a wicker-basket full of stacked and banded and loose pictures along with mementoes from my mother's school days. One picture of my brother and me with our mother on a sofa in particular caught my eye. Taken five years before her suicide she is thirty and at the height of her beauty, so I started with it.

My technique for writing about photographs was similar to the way I wrote about memories, but now I followed the details across a flat surface rather than in time. I let my eyes, guided by points of interest, go where they wanted to go: my brother Ron leaning into my mother—she has clearly just pulled his thumb from his puckered mouth—me under her arm leaning against her thigh, and ultimately her:

Her thick hair is pulled back from her face revealing high cheekbones, a long, thin nose, lips in a faint smile painted petal red, and dark, sultry eyes. The face is rounded and smooth, with no tension this time around the eyes. She wears a dark blouse with bright white buttons and sleeves rolled up to her elbows and looks healthy and athletic. (124)

Once again I am listing details just as I had done with the memory of my parents' fight, creating anticipation, and I am both in and out of the scene—in it as the bright-faced boy on the sofa and out of it as the bald old man at the writing desk with a furrowed brow tracing the image with his finger.

What the picture offers, though, that a memory cannot, are precisely rendered details that the mind has forgotten such as the rumpled pillow at my mother's feet, the fact that she is wearing scuffed shoes, and—above all—the ease of the bodies together which offers up a truth I had forgotten about my past: our family intimacy, and, ironically, the safety of home.

What moves me about the scene is how relaxed and comfortable we all are, our bodies tumbling together in a way that seems natural and easy. Even the pillow at her feet—a

large, brown, shapeless thing with piping running along its seams—adds to the rumpled informality of the image. These are the comforts of the familiar. (124-125)

The coziness doesn't last, though. As I looked harder at the photograph I noticed a toy balsa plane—a Guillow flyer—in the windowsill behind the sofa and recall that on the day of my mother's death I was holding a Guillow flyer just like that one and spinning in the basement as the upstairs filled with grieving guests, and the picture, which had come to represent safety and security, began spinning out of control in my mind as well, which is of course the other truth about my family, the one that the picture cannot hold back for long. I still don't remember my dad taking the picture but the process of writing about the photograph provoked a forgotten memory of the toy plane and offered insights into my family indicating the power of photographs as a writing tool for discovery.

Eventually, though, I realized that photographs have limitations and in many ways the pictures made me feel further removed from my mother and our past. I would lift one out of the basket, surprised by the details that the camera caught, details I could never remember: “my mother's long thin calves, the elegant tapering of her wrists, and her high forehead when she pulled back her hair with bobby pins. The fact that she wore bobby pins.” Her cheeks in her youthful photographs appeared so smooth that I sometimes gave in to the urge to touch them, only to be surprised by the lifeless, glossy surface. Photos promised spontaneity, catching a curl out of place for example or fingers bent just so, but what they delivered was frozen and lifeless. “The curl was eternally out of place, the smile remained tacked on forever, and the hand at the end of that elegant wrist hung midair like a stiffened claw.” The images, I came to understand, were “lifeless *mementos mori*, tattered and creased souvenirs of our loss, filled with little more than the emotions that we bring to them and drained of the life of their subjects” (17).

Fortunately I found more tools in my writer's toolbox.

Art: The Human Vision

One of the letters written in the first year of my mother's marriage had a line drawing on the envelope done in my father's distinctive style. He had a knack for drawing quick, sketched likenesses of faces. This one, which showed my mother's looking off to one side, troubled me. In it she looks elegant and pretty with wide eyes, an earring, and penciled eyebrows, but beneath the pleasant surface I sensed anxiety or concern. I held the envelope under a light to get a better look. "Both alert and detached in the drawing," I wrote, "the face wears an expression that I find in many later photographs, but this appears to be the first time, and it comes from Dad's hand like a relic in my care. It reveals a woman in conflict with herself." When I set the drawing on the ledge beside my computer, I wondered. "When did that look enter their marriage" (54-55)?

Following a hunch, I covered the right side of the drawing with a piece of paper and studied her expression on the left. She looked happy—ebullient even—on this side of her face with her upwardly arched eyebrow and a slight smile on her lips. It is the expectant look of a young woman eager to take on the day. But when I lifted the page and covered the other side I saw a very different picture: "her expression becomes severe," I wrote, "the eyebrow lowered, the smile crumbling at one edge, and the eye looking down and away with anxiety" (55). When I removed the piece of paper and gazed at the entire drawing I saw the two parts of my mother's nature blended together into an inscrutable whole. The truth that my father captured in the drawing was that my mother was a woman in conflict with herself, and what I realized, looking at a work of art older than I, was that the truth of her emerging woe, worn on a face divided between knowledge and wonder, had been there from the beginning of their marriage, veiled but available for all to see. Imperfect as the drawing was, it opened up new possibilities for me in my attempt to know my mother.

Art, of course, is everywhere. All of us make art, decorating our living and working spaces. In addition, we surround ourselves with drawings, paintings, ornaments, souvenirs, and knickknacks. When we throw in utilitarian objects adorned with art such as lamps, china, stationery, and birthday cards the list

is endless. The art that we make and the art that we choose reveals who we are. Like a photograph, a work of art such as my father's drawing, stays still for long and thoughtful contemplation, but in spirit it is mercurial. It may only be one person's interpretation, and is less reliable in its rendering of details than a photo, but it is rich in interpretive possibilities offering insights and a depth of understanding often unintended by the artist. Above all, it is an invitation to the interior of the subject, a lyrical moment waiting to happen and a treasure trove for the writer.

Popular Culture: Shared Cultural Experiences

Writing is a creative combination of play and work, and I go at it almost every morning with the detachment and focus of a diamond cutter. There have been exceptions, though, and one happened when I wrote about my mother and me watching Mary Martin in *Peter Pan* singing "Distant Melody" on television. We watched it at least twice over several years and it was a favorite of my mother's, a must-watch event with popcorn and sodas each time it came on.

To bring the song back I found a YouTube clip. Popular culture broadly defined has a long shelf life in the age of the Internet. Almost any event of cultural significance, such as the assassination of Kennedy or MLK's "I Have a Dream Speech" can be found, replayed, and vicariously relived triggering long-buried emotions. In *Peter Pan*, the character Wendy who has assumed the role of the mother of the lost boys of Neverland, asks Peter to sing a lullaby. Peter is reluctant at first but his mood softens when he repeats the word "lullaby" and smiles. Yes, he knows a lullaby, and as I sit watching my screen, pen in hand and pad nearby, I hear a lone oboe play and Mary Martin, as Peter, singing "Distant Melody." It is a simple song with lyrics that are little more than a string of clichés beginning with "once upon a time," but Martin's performance is riveting. Usually when she plays Peter, she sings in the annoying, high-pitched whine of the well-known song "I've Gotta Crow," but here she opens the lower registers of a woman's voice, and the song, I discovered, lowering my pen and leaning toward the screen, "becomes the lullaby of

a mother inside a lullaby sung by a boy.” As I looked and listened, some fifty years after the event, I realized “that the performance that my mother and I watched together was *our* story then *and* now” (123).

These discoveries came not from my memory of watching the show which remained vague in my mind, but in the details of the performance streaming into my study. When Martin milks words like “low” and “alone” to convey emotion I felt them, and when she says “all is well” and smiles, the assurance in her voice brought comfort to me, as if the impossible sentiment were true. “All the pretense that Mary Martin is a boy simply washes away as the actress’s face assumes a radiant expression of maternal love,” I wrote, because for a moment I felt a mother’s love. This was not the trickster Peter who protects the orphaned boys with guile. This is a mother who offers love as a balm for life’s losses, and there sitting in my office I felt that too—the loss *and* the balm—until the chimes at the end of the song struck a discordant chord. “The mother disappears, leaving a lost boy in her place,” I wrote later though at the time I had stopped taking notes, “as well as an old man watching alone with his fingers on the screen” (123-124).

Many Ways Inward

Writing *The Book of Knowledge and Wonder* in the end became a study of ways to go inward to remember. Each prompt was partial, limited, but taken as a whole the memories they provoked formed a pattern: love and despair came mixed in my family. I suppose every work of personal prose teaches the writer how to go back by going inward, and I tried many methods in order to tease out the story. Here are a few more.

I bought a set of *The Book of Knowledge* from AbeBooks and sought out articles that I know my mother, who used the encyclopedia as a way of educating herself, must have read, sharing those words with her in retrospect. After my brother was born with crossed eyes she became obsessed with the subject, so I read the section on eyes knowing that she would have read it too because this section with its scientific terminology and detailed diagrams was her torment and her solace and her companion on lonely nights. I

inevitably came to the sentences that would have haunted her: “*Our eyes and the eyes of other mammals move together. Both of them are always directed toward the thing they wish to see*” (91). I imagine the sadness these words would have provoked in her—imagine it, get a glimpse of it which is the gift of lyric memory, even though I can only begin to know the feelings of dread they produced in her.

I also returned to the scene, my childhood house in Deerfield, Illinois, first from my study using Google maps and later taking a train to the suburbs during a trip to Chicago with my wife. Walking from the train station we soon got past the Starbucks and Barnes and Noble shops built after I lived there to places I recognized: the Methodist church where I sang in the choir as a boy, my school, and the yard that our neighbor flooded each winter to make a skating rink. Suddenly there it was: the small split-level with a picture window that faces the street. I led Barbara to the side yard to show her the small garden where my mother and I planted pansies and returning to the picture window tried to imagine the interior of the house. “I think the stairs came down here,” I said pointing to the left side of the window. “I remember my dad coming down those stairs, suitcases banging. I think it was on that side of the room.” What I discovered, though, as I wrote about the trip to the house was that our story was no longer there. It was in me (188).

As a nonfiction writer, I am suspicious of long passages of dialogue in essays and memoir. Memories are not that accurate. But I do trust the single phrase or word that lodges in the mind, and such suggestive, unforgettable language can be used to reconstruct an entire scene. When I asked my stepmother to look through some photos of the past, she started talking about my mother, offering invaluable details about the way she died, but when she got to the end of her story she lifted her hand in the shape of a gun to her temple and said “bam.” I was upset and looked away. My wife, who was there flipping through some pictures, looked up briefly—first at my step-mother and then at me, making a face that showed concern, but my stepmother continued talking blithely. I realized that she did not share my sense of loss. What she remembered of the time was her love for my dad and their mutual loneliness. With

the single word I could construct the entire scene of my wife, my stepmother, and me. Later I used the word ironically when I described the suicide itself.

All of these mnemonics served as a *via negativa* surrounding a subject they cannot capture. Evoking what they cannot say, they glowed with borrowed light, but in a sense that is true of all perception which is colored by the perceiver. They serve as a reminder that writing begins as longing for truth in a world of shades and appearances.

Even my dreams, odd and peculiar as they were when I wrote the memoir, became a way to recover the truth of my mother and relive her torment as vividly as any memory. Dreams and nightmares haunted the writing of the book. One night I had three particularly telling versions of the same dream each one more bizarre than the last. I was working on a section of the memoir about Dr. Jackman, an MD who offered marriage counseling to my parents during the first year of their marriage. His advice essentially added up to the need for them to have a baby: me. At the same time I was also struggling with a section of the memoir in which my mother—incorrectly as it turned out—believed she had contracted syphilis from my grandfather.

The result was a cascading nightmare. In the first version Dr. Jackman in a wool coat like the ones my grandfather—who was also a doctor—used to wear sits beside my mother. She wears a suit with a pencil skirt. I lift a bottle of bourbon like a phone receiver to ask a question. The doctor, saying the information is confidential, refuses to answer and my mother hands me a volume of *The Book of Knowledge* and says “Read your book, Stevie.” In the second version, my mother sits beside Dr. Jackman again, but she is wearing only her bra and panties and this time when I lift the bottle of bourbon to ask my question she drapes a bare arm over Jackman’s shoulder and says “play with your toys” and holds out a Guillow flyer (92-93, 96-97).

The last version is the most bizarre of all. As I lift the bottle of bourbon to ask my question I realize that Dr. Jackman *is* my grandfather. “My mother lies completely naked,” I write,

...with her head in his lap, facing up. Her white skin glows slightly and her breasts are girlish, standing up in small mounds. Her hair is in slight disarray as if a ribbon had been pulled from it and her black slip lies crumpled on the floor.

I notice a faint smell of buttered toast in the room.

When I ask my question, she says nothing.

Her eyes are closed.

I wake up feverish.

Incest? (100)

The facts, which I detail in the memoir, are complicated, but the truth is that there was no incest and in all likelihood no one in the family had syphilis. My mother's fear was irrational. She was haunted by paranoia, and so for a time as I wrote, was I. My dreams took me directly to her nightmare.

The Written Word Remains: Letters

It turned out that the most important way for me to revive the memory of my mother was in her own words. Photographs, artwork, our shared popular culture, dreams, and a few unforgettable memories nudged the project along, but her words, written in her own cursive with the ink embedded like a stain on the page, was the mnemonic gift I needed most. When I wrote about them I could hear her voice not in the past, but in her present which made her come alive in the moment of my writing. At one point near the end of the book I paid tribute to them.

After my mother died I forgot the sensation of her touch and the sound of her voice. I could not hug a shadow. I could not fill her silence with my words [...] I needed a voice, speaking in her present, not one whispering to posterity, a voice animated by the desire to capture the present for someone alive. *That* is the voice I heard in the letters. When I read them, I got to know her—for the first time, really—know her and miss her. Miss *her*, not some made up idea of

her. The letters do not bring her back—I know the loss is permanent and irrevocable—but while I read them the pain, that had been nothing more than a dull throb, changed in character, becoming softer, more diffuse, and ardent, like heartache. (196)

Not everyone has a stack of letters to work with, of course, but jotted notes, grocery lists found curled in a drawer, names on the backs of photographs, even signed documents can bring the written word of the past into the present. Incorporating the written words of others turns a nonfiction project into a collaboration. As I constructed scenes from my mother’s letters, choosing her words with care and connecting them with my own thoughts, our words mingled in a conversation I needed and had waited nearly a lifetime to have. “I took my mother’s words into my mouth like milk,” I wrote, stunned and grateful at the end of the ordeal, “and fed our story” (199).

The Voice of Discovery: Memory and Imagination

The ancient Greeks identified Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, as the mother of the muses, and they were right to single out memory rather than imagination as the source for inspiration in the arts and sciences, but—and here we come to the crux of the matter—memory is, in fact, a form of imagining, a way of creating a usable past, of dreaming up a past, in order to move into an uncertain future. Try it now. Remember something, anything, you did yesterday. Doesn’t the memory have the filmy, evanescent quality of a daydream?

Yesterday, I was repairing Adirondack chairs by replacing rotting pieces with the remains of a broken chair I stored under the house last year, and in my mind I see—but don’t really see, do I?—I conjure up the bubbled red paint of a rotted chair slat as I unscrew it from the frame. A memory like this one has a plastic quality to it. I can freeze it, holding the wood in my still hands, or slow it down, manipulating time as I watch myself toss aside the rotted slat that clonks on the concrete floor. I find metaphors, one of many devices supplied by the imagination, in the bubbling of the paint. And I have an

attitude toward it—yuck, silverfish crawling out of the black rot! All of this imaginative work happens within the boundaries of a true account. Memory and imagination are not experienced as separate mental phenomena, but are on a continuum with thinking and dreaming.

I dream, therefore I was.

It is not surprising then that recent studies in the scene-construction theory of memory by British researchers Sinéad Mullaly and Eleanor Maguire, described in their monograph “Memory, Imagination, and Predicting the Future,” have found a connection between memory and imagination. “On the face of it, memory, imagination, and prediction seem to be distinct cognitive functions,” they write, but “evidence is emerging that they are not, suggesting intimate links in their underlying processes” (par 1). We do not *have* memories, their work suggests, we *construct* them, the imagination extrapolating on a kernel of the event by inevitably adding more detail and giving it all a larger, mind-shaped, context to create a coherent scene. Building memories this way, forging links between memory and imagination born apparently out of our need to anticipate the future in a dangerous world, explains the relief and subsequent delight heard in the voice of discovery in lyric prose despite the subject matter. Whether a writer like Virginia Woolf in *Moments of Being* is remembering a flower rooted in a circle of dirt or describing sexual abuse by her half-brother when she was a girl, the act of recreating a memory in words and “discovering what belongs to what,” she explains, “is the strongest pleasure known to me.” For her, making these connections uncovers “the hidden pattern” in everyday experience and reveals “that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art” (72). Perhaps “creative nonfiction” is the right term after all! Seeing these connections and watching them being made is why writers and readers turn to the genre in the first place.

Dangers and Rewards

There be demons, I know, in the *terra incognita* at the far end of this kind of lonely remembrance, and I do not want to dismiss the dangers of following the lyrical voice of discovery into the past. Unlike my

mother, I am not given to mental depression and did not descend into that dark hole while writing my memoir of her deteriorating mental state and ultimate suicide, but I did become frantic and obsessed, unable to concentrate on anything else, and for I time, as I admit here, I shared in my mother's terrifying paranoia. I think all writers need to ask hard questions about their limits before plunging into a difficult topic from the past.

But, if the dangers are high, the rewards of self-discovery in writing intimately about the past are beyond measure, and, as I look back on the experience of writing the book I suspect that I did not in the end have a choice. I delayed—yes, for five decades—but once I sat down with the shoebox full of her letters setting them in order and reading through them one at a time, I pushed all else aside and went to work.

Works Cited

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Writing Prompts

With these prompts you can put some of the ideas in “Lyric Memory” into practice. They assume that you are writing about another person—your subject—in a memoir.

Unprompted Memories: The Past Unbidden

Quickly make a list of memories with your subject. Look for events that took about 20 minutes to happen that come easily to mind. Be specific, not “first year of marriage” but “winning the stuffed bear at Coney Island.” Circle three. Choose one. Make a new list of what happened in that memory and order it by assigning numbers. Write taking on each item on the list one at a time.

Photographs: Still Replicas of Reality

Choose one photograph of your subject. Study it, making a list of details, especially ones you have not seen before. Assign numbers to the list and arrange it so that they lead to the most important discovery and write referring regularly to the photo. Be sure to include your thoughts about what the most important details suggest. Bring the section to an end by asking what you want to know that the photo cannot tell you.

Art: The Human Vision

Ask a friend to read a passage you have written about your subject. She or he should choose an interesting phrase and draw a picture using the phrase as a caption. Your friend does not need to draw well, but should avoid using stick figures, being expressive and trying to capture the feeling as well as the image.

Retrieve the drawing and caption from your friend and feel free to talk about it together. Write the caption down as the title of a new section and write for fifteen minutes amplifying on the caption based on the drawing. Begin by describing the drawing, noting lineation, points of interest, and the expressive qualities of the lines. Where do your eyes go first, second, third? Try isolating certain sections. Consider these issues as you write: Does the choice of that caption surprise you? What feeling does the drawing suggest to you? What did the friend see that you did not? Does the drawing say more than the artist intended? Above all, what does the drawing teach you that you had not thought about before?

Popular Culture: The Public Conversation

Make a list of shared cultural moments with your subject. These can be movies, plays, television shows, sporting events, political activities, concerts, art shows, religious holidays or ceremonies, and family events, but also moments from nature such as an eclipse, a blizzard, or watching the tsunami on TV. There are also intense, shared cultural moments: the death of John F. Kennedy or Martin Luther King, Jr., the Columbine shooting, or the KKK rally in Charlottesville. Choose one you remember well. Make another list about the event. Order it. Write for fifteen minutes. After you finish find coverage of the event (or a similar event) on YouTube or scour the internet for photos and amplify or revise your passage.

Dreams: Subconscious Memory

Keep a dream diary, jotting down the content of the dream as soon as possible after you wake. If you have a dream about your subject, or events that inform your writing about your subject, use that as the prompt for a passage. Ask the same questions of the dream that you ask of the drawing, in particular this: what does the dream teach you that you had not thought about before?

Other Voices: Dialogue

Make a list of five words or phrases that you know your subject said. Choose one and make a list of events around the word or phrase. Order it. Write creating a scene around those words using references to senses beyond sight, especially gestures.

Letters (etc.): The Written Word

Written artifacts by your subject—diaries, letters, notes, recipes, lists, or emails, including poems, songs, and other written creative works by your subject can be invaluable as ways into the subject's mind. What matters to you, though, is what the words open up in your mind. What do the word choices suggest to you? What is the tone? What is being left unsaid? What does the handwriting, ink, or choice of stationery say? Avoid repeating big chunks of the letter. Instead, weave your words with the subject's in a written conversation.