

Cultural Daily

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Creative Writing: The Missing Person Exercise

Charity Hume · Wednesday, January 1st, 2014

The process of writing allows us to see our own lives with increasing focus and understanding. This exercise will give you experience in navigating the river of emotion that surrounds someone you have “lost,” but have saved in your memory. Over time, you can layer in more information, include more detail, or try different subjects. Follow the “path of least resistance” into the places where the emotions are strongest and perhaps most hidden. Memory is tricky. Some days it will yield very little. Another day, just by showing up and writing for a while, you will be surprised by the wealth of material you have stored within. Find a comfortable place to write, and give yourself the luxury of a moment to reflect and think on the page.

The Missing Person Exercise



The Pink Dress by Frederic Bazille (1864), courtesy of Wikipaintings

All of us have people in our lives who populate the corridors of our memory. In this exercise, think of a person that you are no longer in contact with. The person could be “missing” in any sense of the word: a childhood friend who moved away, a teacher from long ago, someone you knew who died, a relative you never met, someone you wish you could forgive, a friendship you outgrew. First write down the list of possibilities. One name on that list will have the greatest emotional “charge” for you, or spark an internal response as you look at it. Circle the name and write it down on the top of a blank piece of paper.

Once you commit to one “missing person,” write down everything you can remember about him or her. Think of any detail, any fragment of conversation, any texture or place you associate with this person. Here are some questions to consider:

Where do you picture this person in your mind?

What is your first memory of him or her?

What did he or she look like?

What did he/she wear?

What smells, tastes, sounds are registered in your memory?

What dialogue snippets come to mind?

What are some of the more dramatic things that happened?

What feelings begin to surface?

Use concrete, physical details as you record your memories. Rather than using abstract descriptions, "It was a beautiful apartment," mention the brass doorknocker that was shaped like a pineapple. Write until you exhaust all the information in your brain about this person. Maybe you can tell us about the way the fridge was organized, or how the idea of stewed green beans with peanut butter sauce really grossed you out. The point is to put it all in. Every memory we have was recorded through the sensations of taste, touch, sight, smell and hearing. Use the five senses in a kind of check list. When you get to hearing, mine your mind for the things said, and even harder, what was never said. When you are done with the process of remembering, it is possible that you will already have the rough draft of a story. I have worked with writers who began this exercise and wrote a novella by patiently returning to write about the same person over time. Give yourself time to fully mine your memory for the treasures you have stored away.

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