The Lexicon of Memory

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I don't remember being born. Nor do I remember opening my eyes for the first time, parting my lips to let my first word escape, or putting one foot out in front of the other and taking my first step. I do, however, know that I was born in Riverview Hospital in Red Bank, New Jersey, that my first word was "dad" but sounded more like *daaa*, and that when I finally found the courage to stand on my own two feet, I stumbled into the cushions of the living room couch. These are all reconstructed memories, of course. Even at one year of age, the hippocampus is not yet mature enough to store long-term memories, so I know these memories have been reconstructed for me by adult witnesses. I have no recollection of experience, only words fed to me like mashed baby carrots. But when I push my brain in an attempt to remember, I can hear my voice squealing *daa daa*, and I can feel the plush carpet beneath my toes, and then the weight of my large head sending me head-first into pillows. Sometimes, I consider that these false memories are all I have left of my childhood.

I reflect on one of my most prized memories, a story I brought to show-and-tell while other children brought hermit crabs with painted shells or pet turtles bought in Chinatown. Carefully eyeballing each other for fear of contracting cooties, we sat Indian-style in a small circle, and took this spotlight one by one. When it was my turn, the students looked puzzled at my empty hands, and then I gleefully pushed aside my bangs to reveal the scar on my forehead. I enthusiastically retold the dramatic tale of my fall, the trip to the hospital, and the process of getting 100 stitches to close the gash in my forehead.

Just recently, I found myself reciting the same story more theatrically than ever before, but I had not gotten very far when my sister interrupted me to announce that I had the facts all wrong. That night, I found out that I had cut my forehead while I was living in Holmdel Mews, not Falcon's Ridge, and that my forehead collided with the hostile corner of a brick step, not the cold concrete of the garage floor, and that the dress I was wearing at the time was blue, not pink. I also faced the harsh reality that I actually had no idea how I got to the hospital—I could only imagine that my parents sped down the highway at 120 miles per hour. As for the stitches, it's unlikely that the doctor used 100 stitches to close a cut the width of my thumbnail. But try as I might, I could hardly accept this newly edited version of the story because after each retelling, the concocted memory became ever more real to me.

When I think back on my childhood, I realize how few memories I still hold on to. Mostly, I recall sensory experiences: fingers made sticky by tree sap, the pain of scraped knees on asphalt, the crunch of a bed of leaves, the taste of ginger lemonade on a hot day, the smell of onion grass in the yard. But unlike the sap that clings to skin and gathers dirt, these memories perpetually slip through my fingers. In her essay "In the Memory Mines," Diane Ackerman describes fragmented recollections from her childhood, gathered through hypnosis sessions with her psychiatrist. Childhood is sensory overload because children perceive the world through physical interaction. As Ackerman says, she could not understand anything that was not a blanket against her skin. She remembers "kitchen utensils, and the maple jungle of recoiling legs below the dining room table" (683). With eye-level just a few feet from the ground, Ackerman saw the world from a perspective entirely different from her current adult one—"some things were close to me that were lost to my mother," like the "heavy ruffles along the sofa that tickled my knees when I climbed up to straddle the armrest and play horsey" and "the sheet of glass on top of the low coffee table, into whose edge I would peer each day for long, dizzying spells, transfixed by the bright, rippling green waves I saw there" (683). As toddlers in the sensory-motor stages of development, we gain an understanding of the world through our senses: touch, smell, taste, sound, sight. Whenever she explored "the sunlight catching dust in the air" or "a twirling color-flock above me," Ackerman recalls, "it was as if I had stepped onto another planet where nothing was but that sight, nothing mattered" (683). Ackerman remembers her childhood as a series of images and physical sensations rather than a progression of thoughts and revelations. At such a young age, we are not capable of thought or reflection; without language, there can be no interpretation of or relation to the past—there are only shapes, images, and sensations we don't fully understand. However, when we begin to make meaning of the chaos that surrounds us, we seek to define our world, emotions, and events, and through this act, we give substance to our sensory-based memories. As human beings, we are compelled to communicate and express ourselves through words, and by describing a personal experience, we reaffirm that it happened and give it meaning within the context of our lives.

Ackerman speaks about the childhood lack of understanding, revealing that "not thoughts but images paraded through my days" for "things happened, but what a thing was I didn't know, nor could I fathom the idea of happen" (682). She claims that in her early childhood "there was no confusion, no thought, no sentiment, no want" because she was experiencing without reflecting, without writing essays or conducting analyses (683). As children, we often do not know how we feel or why we feel—we simply *feel*. But as adults, we interpret numbers, we struggle to remember that ever-important errand, we continually ask *why*? Reading "In the Memory Mines," I cannot help but think that Ackerman's stories are tainted by her present thought and analysis. She remembers her childhood through her adult eyes, interpreting events as she understands them now. Her memories are not recounted from the perspective of a child with limited understanding, but rather from the perspective of an adult with great insight into how past events connect and what effect they've had on her.

Ackerman's essay shows us that our memories are created by language, a capacity of our developed, adult brains. Each time we remember, we reconstruct our experiences, building and adorning our (sensory) notions of the past with nouns, verbs, and adjectives. We continually edit our memories; each time we retell and reflect, new words come to mind. Our dependence on language to shape and clarify our memories raises the question: without words, would we be able to feel and experience in the way we do? Benjamin Whorf, a linguist and anthropologist, struggles with the concept of linguistic relativity, which asks, "Are our own concepts of 'time,' 'space,' and 'matter' given in substantially the same form by experience to all men, or are they in part conditioned by the structure of particular languages?" The Sapir-Whorf theory suggests that language affects experiences of the world because different syntax and vocabulary sets affect our perception and cognition. If there are no words to describe a certain feeling, how can we feel it? The only way to know our emotion is to surround it with words—words that can only attempt to define and describe. We need language to understand experience; we put into words our experiences until we *feel* that we can understand, until we *know* how we feel. Because the words we choose define and make sense of our memories, and because our chosen words vary in each retelling, these constructed memories deviate from the truth of what really happened. Language affects memory in that it shapes our understanding of past experience; it interprets, albeit, inconsistently, what we only sensed during childhood.

Ackerman is only able to depict her earliest experiences and feelings in such detail because she now has the words to describe and interpret them. She has the terms to categorize her emotions, including confusion and the need for attention. Her recollections of the day of her birth and the perplexed look on her doctor's face seem false to me, an expression of "compound malaise" (680). Ackerman writes that although the doctor had delivered a deformed baby, premature twins, and many stillborns, his encounter with the unusual baby was the one that puzzled him most. Her source of information is unclear when she describes how "[the doctor] decided he would tell [her mother] that the condition was normal" and that at that moment, "New York State seemed to him suddenly shabby and outmoded, like the hospital on whose cracked linoleum he stood" (681). Ackerman's understanding of her mother—who, after failed attempts at daughterhood and wifehood, hopes to start a new life as a good mother—is also beyond that of a child. Such detail and wisdom regarding her mother and doctor's inner thoughts cause us to question how Ackerman's experiences have morphed and changed with her maturing perspective—each retelling might be exaggerated to increase interest or subdued to decrease distress. Just as storytelling helps us to remember, the process also distorts our memories because we vary our language in each telling and often lose sight of the elusive "original." For an author, the shift from sensory memory to story involves a process of writerly embellishments. Describing our experiences makes them real and comprehensible; we often tack on colorful new additions because they both bring meaning to something that was once only sensed and add to the overall effect of our fabrications.

During her hypnosis sessions, Ackerman "wandered through knotted jungles of memory to the lost kingdoms of [her] childhood, which for some reason [she] had forgotten, the way one casually misplaces a hat or glove" (680). She relates certain experiences—the day of her birth and first opening her eyes, the shifting shapes above her blond wood crib, and her relationship with her father—as if she remembers them perfectly, down to the very last detail. Her recollections are vivid and complete, as though she's rediscovered, intact, that "misplaced hat or glove" (680). But I wonder how reliable these memories, dug up during a deep trance, really are. In a study conducted by Nicholas Spanos of Carleton University, a group of subjects was hypnotized and age-regressed to the day after birth, and then the subjects were asked to describe what they remembered. Forty-six percent of the participants recalled "colored mobiles, bright lights, cribs, and masks," objects similar to those that inhabit Ackerman's hypnosis-induced memories (Loftus). Spanos found that these "impossible memories" of infancy are actually detailed fantasies influenced by an adult understanding of typical baby experiences. Because the participants had the vocabulary to describe a birth scenario—*mobiles*, *colors*, *doctors*, *lights*—they were able to fabricate a realistic memory. Similarly, Ackerman uses ornate language and abundant detail, creating the illusion that she remembers clearly and truthfully.

In his essay "Labyrinthine," Bernard Cooper warns us of the unreliability of memory. As a child, Cooper was obsessed with mazes because he found them complex and challenging. He could get lost in mazes for hours, finding immense satisfaction in navigating the narrow corridors. But he notices his parents' aversion to mazes: "They took one look at those tangled paths and seemed to wilt" (346). Cooper comes to associate the maze with the path of life, and for his parents, who were old and tired, living and remembering were complicated enough without those intricate, man-made twists and turns. As a result of the wear of time, "remembered events merge together or fade away" and "places and dates grow dubious, a jumble of guesswork and speculation" (346). We forget names, chronology, dates, and facts that years before had been fresh in our minds. In the "forest of middle age," forgetfulness is unavoidable—"eggs were boiled until they turned brown, sprinklers left on till the lawn grew soggy, keys and glasses and watches misplaced" (346). The details blur into one another and sometimes, even whole recollections are lost. "Recollecting the past," Cooper writes, "becomes as unreliable as forecasting the future; you consult yourself with a certain trepidation and take your answer with a grain of salt" (346). Memories are inherently unreliable; like shape-shifters, they disguise themselves in varied, verbal cloaks. Ackerman's tale of the day she was born shows that language can disguise fiction as truth; because she speaks with authority, her story is believable although her memories are reconstructed from unreachable sources. We cannot trust what we say. The mind, like the words that describe our thoughts, is twisted and convoluted, hiding memories deep within its folds, never to be found again, at least in their original form. There is no way of telling what is real from what is not, because we learn and create memories just as we learn language and create stories by stringing together words and events. Just as our brains allow for the creation of false memories, they allow other memories to combine and evaporate. Yet despite the mental trickery involved, it seems that these processes of storytelling and falsification create meaning in our lives.

I hold my eyes shut and try to remember. But no matter how hard I try, I cannot remember the first time I opened my eyes. I cannot remember years of my childhood, and I cannot recall the traumas hidden in the corners of my mind. Cooper describes memories as "labyrinths" because they are "as slippery as thought, as perplexing as truth, [and] as long and convoluted as life" (347). Wandering through the maze, I find myself stuck at a dead end, unable to recover missing memories and therefore unable to continue. Perhaps like Ackerman's memories, mine are tucked away in my brain, waiting to be tapped, but I am making a fatal error in trying to retrieve them. As darker memories creep back into the depths of the forgotten, knotted jungle, I am left with gaps and voids, longing to know and understand more. Although our memories are fallible and inaccurate, our interpretations of past events remain true to our thoughts and ultimately, to ourselves. As Ackerman reflects upon her childhood through the lens of her adult eyes she gains a better, more complete, sense of self. Her memories may not be true, but her fabrication and understanding of them allow insight into her mind. By using specific words to convey the various sights and feelings that define her experiences, Ackerman reveals what the events mean to her and how they have affected her. By creating stories from sensations, we create our memories, our pasts, and essentially, our identities. Ackerman forges her sense of self through the description of experience; she tells herself that she was a strange baby, and she believes it. Perhaps she does not delve into painful moments, but by looking back and trying to remember, she forces herself into the center of Cooper's maze, snaking her way through complicated, penciled walls. As an experience is understood, a wall is erased and she is set free with a better understanding of herself and her story. "Lost in the folds and bones of [our] bodies," we ourselves have become living labyrinths, and although we are worn from the constant search for an exit, we must continue to try to straighten and make sense of ourselves (Cooper 347). Revisiting our pasts allows us to understand them more completely because, as adults, we have the knowledge and capability to reflect upon them. Like Spanos's subjects, Ackerman elaborates on the idea of her infancy using imagination and words. We find truth in fiction as Ackerman makes sense of her world in an idiosyncratic way, interpreting events to enrich the identity she has created (and continues to create) for herself.

I open my eyes, and in the brilliant light I see the triangles shuffling in the aquarium of shapes and color. Still, I do not remember the impossible memory. I don't remember being born or opening my eyes for the first time. Yet I feel like a whole person as I cut and paste photos of an infant entertained by a game of peek-a-boo, video clips of a little girl smiling and laughing, and embarrassing stories told at the dinner table to create a scrapbook of vivid memories. As I thumb through the yellowing pages, I find myself reconstructing—scribbling notes, labeling events, and recording names and places. Now I realize that it is not the impossible memory I am searching for, but the identity that I must create for myself. I am still sitting, Indian-style, in a circle of pre-schoolers, anxious for my turn to show and tell. I am and always will be a storyteller, gradually constructing myself and my world through words.

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