

# I REMEMBER

Joe Brainard

Granary Books  
New York City  
2001

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I remember "close dancing," with arms dangling straight down.

I remember red rubber coin purses that opened like a pair of lips, with a squeeze.

I remember a boy who could swig down a Coke in one big gulp, followed by a long loud belch.

I remember, just outside the city limits, firecracker booths.

I remember (basketball) total frustration over how to "dribble."

I remember finding it very mysterious that ballet dancers didn't break their toes off, doing what they do that way.

I remember record stores with glass windowed booths you could play records in before you bought them, or didn't.

I remember, in dime stores, "bronze" horses in varying sizes from small to quite large, with keychain-like reins.

I remember, at the circus, kewpie dolls on sticks smothered in feathers, and how quickly their faces got full of dents.

I remember "pick-up sticks," "tiddly-winks," "fifty-two pick-up," and "war."

I remember dangerous BB gun stories about kids losing eyeballs.

I remember being more than a bit disappointed over all the fluffy gray stuff with tiny red specks I discovered inside an old teddy bear's stomach once.

I remember turning around and around real fast until you can't stand up.

I remember going on fly swatting sprees, and keeping a very accurate count of how many dead.

I remember crocheted dress-up gloves with only half fingers.

I remember "Tupperware" parties.

I remember traveling salesman jokes way over my head, which didn't keep me from finding them funny anyway.

I remember "knock-knock" jokes. And Polish jokes. And a "What's for dinner?" cannibal joke with a "Catholic soup!" reply.

I remember "spin the bottle" and "post office."

I remember dashes for dirty words in adult novels.

I remember, when a fart invades a room, trying to look like I didn't do it, even if, indeed, I *didn't*.

I remember the way a baby's hand has of folding itself around your finger, as though forever.

I remember the different ways people have of not eating their toast crust.

I remember Dr. Brown fantasies of bright lights and silver instruments, and clinical "explorations" that develop into much hanky-panky on the examination table.

I remember Christine Keeler and the "Profumo Affair."

I remember stories about how L. B. J. got off on holding private conferences while on the john.

I remember the rumor that James Dean got off on bodily cigarette burns.

I remember fantasies of what I would say to a certain reviewer who gave me a really *mean* (to say nothing of stupid) review once, should we happen to meet at say a party or something.

I remember awkward elevator "moments."

I remember when both arms of your theater seat have elbows on them.

I remember making designs in the dark with a fast-moving lit cigarette.

I remember (spooky) when all of a sudden someone you know very well becomes momentarily a *total stranger*.

I remember (stoned) reaching out for a joint that isn't really being passed to you yet.

I remember (stoned) when the most profound thought in the world totally evaporates before you can find a pencil.

I remember (night) desperate (to say nothing of fruitless) flips through my address book.

I remember how silly it all seems in the morning (again).

I remember getting up at a certain hour every morning to walk down the street to pass a certain boy on his way to work. One morning I finally said hello to him and from then on we always said hello to each other. But that was as far as it went.

I remember taking communion and how hard it was not to smile.

I remember smiling at bad news. (I still do sometimes.) I can't help it. It just comes.

I remember that our church believed that when the Bible said wine it really meant grape juice. So at communion we had grape juice. And round paper-thin white wafers that tasted very good. Like paper. Once I found a whole jar full of them in a filing cabinet in the choir room and I ate a lot. Eating a lot was not as good as eating just one.

I remember the exact moment, during communion, that was the hardest to keep from smiling. It was when you had to stick out your tongue and the minister laid the white wafer on it.

I remember that one way to keep from smiling during communion was to think real hard about something very boring. Like how airplane engines work. Or tree trunks.

I remember movies in school about kids that drink and take drugs and then they have a car wreck and one girl gets killed.

I remember one day in psychology class the teacher asked everyone who had regular bowel movements to raise their hand. I don't remember if I had regular bowel movements or not but I do remember that I raised my hand.

I remember changing my name to Bo Jainard for about one week.

I remember not being able to pronounce "mirror."

I remember wanting to change my name to Jacques Bernard.

I remember when I used to sign my paintings "By Joe."

I remember a dream of meeting a man made out of a very soft yellow cheese and when I went to shake his hand I just pulled his whole arm off.

## AFTERWORD

I don't remember the genesis of *I Remember*, but as soon as Joe Brainard showed the initial version of it to friends and read it in public, everyone saw that he had made a marvelous discovery, and many of us wondered why we hadn't thought of such an obvious idea ourselves.

We included poet Anne Waldman, director of a small literary press called Angel Hair Books. In 1970, Angel Hair published the first version of *I Remember* in an edition of 700 copies that quickly sold out. Joe wrote two subsequent volumes for Angel Hair, *More I Remember* (1972) and *More I Remember More* (1973), both of which proved as popular as the original. In 1973, the Museum of Modern Art published *I Remember Christmas*, a new text for which he also contributed a cover design and four drawings. Excerpts from the Angel Hair editions appeared in *Interview*, *Gay Sunshine*, *The World*, and *The New York Herald*.

In 1975 a new venture, Full Court Press, directed by Waldman, Joan Simon, and me, jumped at the chance to issue a revised version that collected all three of the Angel Hair volumes and the MoMA booklet, along with new material, using the original title *I Remember*. My interest was personal as well as professional. Joe and I

had been in the same first grade class and then had reconnected in high school, where we became friends and published a little art and literary magazine. After graduating from high school, we left Tulsa together and headed east. Some of the memories in *I Remember* matched my own. Beyond that, however, I thought the work was brilliant.

The Full Court edition extended the book's audience considerably, going through one hard-cover and two paperback printings. Selections appeared in a Book-of-the-Month Club anthology and a textbook on writing. A *Washington Post* reviewer said, "Brainard takes one of the oldest and most familiar of poetic devices, the list (of the Bible, of Whitman, of the Surrealists' attempt to make it new), and couples it with a mania for trivia more personal than any craze could be, and it works." Michael Lally, in *The Voice Literary Supplement*, wrote that "[Brainard's] memories of growing up in the '40s and '50s have universal appeal. He catalogues his past in terms of fashion and fads, public events and private fantasies, with such honesty and accuracy and in such abundance, that sooner or later his history coincides with ours, and we are hooked."

Joe's originality came from the fresh way he looked at things. He saw straight through complexity and preconception to the clear and obvious. Instead of writing an autobiography or memoir, neither of which he was interested in doing, he simply wrote more than 1,000 brief entries that begin with the words "I remember."

His method had something childlike about it, and indeed Joe did have a taste for things that were free of adult overcomplication. He especially admired the clean draftsmanship of cartoonist Ernie Bushmiller, the creator of "Nancy." Joe's apartments and lofts, like the residence of Nancy and her Aunt Fritzzi, had a minimum of furniture and no frills. When he traveled he carried as little baggage as possible—on short trips he took only a very small suitcase in which he neatly arranged his clothing and the sample-size toiletries he took pleasure in buying. Even his penmanship—clean, bold capital letters—reflected his literary style.

But this is not to say that Joe was a naïf. The writing in *I Remember*—and he published a good many other works as well, including some personal journals—was partly inspired by the work of Gertrude Stein. Joe was reading Stein in the late summer of 1969 and drafting the first *I Remember*, as he mentioned in a letter to Waldman: "I am still reading [Stein] on the toilet and I still find her very difficult and I was thinking how great it would be to hear Gertrude Stein out loud. . . . I am way, way up these days over a piece I am still writing called *I Remember*. I feel very much like God writing the Bible. I mean, I feel like I am not really writing it but that it is because of me that it is being written. I also feel that it is about everybody else as much as it is about me. And that pleases me. I mean, I feel like I am everybody. And it's a nice feeling. It won't last. But I am enjoying it while I can."

Joe's writing was also influenced by the repeated-image paintings of Andy Warhol, which he first saw in the early 1960s. In fact, Joe wrote an appreciation of Warhol in 1964 that also makes heavy use of repetition. But whereas the repetition in Stein's works was often about language itself and in Warhol's paintings was a way for the artist to remain impassive and inscrutable behind the work, the repetition in *I Remember* proved to be a springboard that allowed Joe to leap backward and forward in time and to follow one chain of associations for a while, then jump to another, the way one's memory does. Coupled with Joe's impulse toward openness, the *I Remember* form provided a way for him to lay his soul bare in a confession that is personable, moving, perceptive, and often funny.

Other, subtler influences on *I Remember* include Joe's own artwork. Walking down a busy New York City street, he would spy a small piece of paper or some other discarded object he would take home and use in a collage, where it would shine. One of his exhibitions—at New York's Fischbach Gallery in 1975 (the same year the Full Court edition of *I Remember* came out)—consisted of 1,500 small collages, each one a little world of its own that related to the others in the show, much the way the entries in *I Remember* relate to each other. His friendship with many poets and painters of the New York School also may have encouraged him to write a work of this scope.

Joe turned out to be anything but a naïf. He

was one of the most sophisticated people I have ever known.

He was also a hard worker. The Joe Brainard Archive at the University of California–San Diego alone contains more than 600 draft pages of the three slim Angel Hair editions. Because Joe never learned to type, he did all of his writing by hand, using his distinctive printing style (the only time he used script was to sign a check or a contract). Revising the manuscripts until he felt they were ready for the publisher, he had to copy everything again and again by hand, having his close friend and companion Kenward Elmslie correct his phonetic spelling. Even after he had the manuscripts typed, he remained open to further revisions all the way through typesetting.

The work never seemed to discourage him. In a letter to poet Lewis Warsh in August of 1971, when *I Remember More* was in press, he said he was “working on a new *I Remember*, much to my own surprise. I thought with no. two I had had it. Guess 29 years is a long time. (The ‘stuff’ continues to gush up.)” In a letter to poet Tom Clark, he reported that *I Remember* is “very honest. And accurate. Honesty (for me) is very hard because I suppose I don't really believe there is such a thing, but somehow I think I have managed to do it. So—I'm happy about that.” He also claimed that he had “practically no memory and so remembering is like pulling teeth. Every now and then, though, when I really get into it, floods of stuff just pour out and shock the you-know-what out of me. But it pours out very



crystal clear and orderly.” In the summer of 1973, while *More I Remember More* was at the printer, Joe wrote to Waldman that he was at work on what he called *The Last I Remember*, “but on this one I’m in no hurry; it’s got to be the best, I feel, or nothing at all. And ‘the best,’ at this stage in my head, is going to take lots of digging.” When it came to putting together the Full Court Press edition, Joe went back over everything, rearranging passages, cutting, and fine-tuning. He was such a severe critic of his own work that I had to talk him into restoring some perfectly good entries he had deleted.

The beauty of it all is that Joe made it look so easy. And in some ways it is. Few people can read this book and not feel like grabbing a pencil to start writing their own parallel versions. The first *I Remember* was published when Kenneth Koch was doing his pioneering work in teaching children to write poetry. Koch found that the *I Remember* format was a natural for children. Since then, thousands of poets and teachers have used this format in classrooms across the country, sidestepping the sexual content, when necessary. The “I Remember” device has been promulgated in many books about writing and yet most people are unaware of its origin. Of course, children have a lot less to remember than adults, and the content and tone of their work is usually different from that of grown-ups, but the most successful versions of *I Remember*—by both children and adults—show the same qualities as Joe’s original: clarity,

specificity, generosity, frankness, humor, variety, a rhythm that ebbs and flows from entry to entry, and the sense that no memory is insignificant. Even the smallest one can exert a mysterious tug, and when it is clearly recalled it can release a flood of other memories, the way Proust’s madeleine did. In any case, the *I Remember* form has shown itself to have universal appeal. It is one of the few literary forms that even non-literary people can use. Since the early 1970s, many writers and artists have been inspired to create their own variations on *I Remember*, among them Ted Berrigan, Kenward Elmslie, and Harry Mathews. Dancer Juan Antonio choreographed a piece in which the dancers recited passages from Joe’s book, mixed with their own memories, as they danced. French writer Georges Perec’s volume *Je me souviens*, a French parallel to *I Remember*, is dedicated to Joe. Subsequent to that, Marie Chaix translated *I Remember* into French.

In 1995, through the good offices of Paul Auster, Penguin brought out a reprint of the Full Court Press edition. Auster wrote, “*I Remember* is a masterpiece. One by one, the so-called important books of our time will be forgotten, but Joe Brainard’s modest little gem will endure. In simple forthright, declarative sentences, he charts the map of the human soul and permanently alters the way we look at the world. *I Remember* is both uproariously funny and deeply moving. It is also one of the few totally original books I have ever read.”

The current Granary edition (for which I

have regularized the punctuation) suggests that Auster's prediction of longevity may well prove true. In any event, this edition gives new readers the opportunity to discover Joe Brainard's engaging and extraordinary work.

—*Ron Padgett*