

Joe Brainard

I Remember (excerpts)

Excerpt #1

I remember the first time I got a letter that said “After Five Days Return To” on the envelope, and I thought that after I had kept the letter for five days I was supposed to return it to the sender.

I remember the kick I used to get going through my parents’ drawers looking for rubbers. (Peacock.)

I remember when polio was the worst thing in the world.

I remember pink dress shirts. And bola ties.

I remember when a kid told me that those sour clover-like leaves we used to eat (with little yellow flowers) tasted so sour because dogs peed on them. I remember that didn’t stop me from eating them.

I remember the first drawing I remember doing. It was of a bride with a very long train.

I remember my first cigarette. It was a Kent. Up on a hill. In Tulsa, Oklahoma. With Ron Padgett.

I remember my first erections. I thought I had some terrible disease or something.

I remember the only time I ever saw my mother cry. I was eating apricot pie.

I remember how much I cried seeing *South Pacific* (the movie) three times.

I remember how good a glass of water can taste after a dish of ice cream.

Excerpt #2

I remember the organ music from *As the World Turns*.

I remember white buck shoes with thick pink rubber soles.

I remember living rooms all one color.

I remember summer naps of no sleeping. And Kool-Aid.

I remember reading Van Gogh's letters to Theo.

I remember daydreams of dying and how unhappy everybody would be.

I remember daydreams of committing suicide and of the letter I would leave behind.

I remember daydreams of being a dancer and being able to leap higher than anyone thought was humanly possible.

I remember daydreams of being a singer all alone on a big stage with no scenery, just one spotlight on me, singing my heart out, and moving my audience to total tears of love and affection.

I remember driving in cars and doing landscape paintings in my head. (I still do this.)

I remember the tiger lilies alongside the house. I found a dime among them once.

I remember a very little doll I lost under the front porch and never found.

I remember a man who came around with a pony and a cowboy hat and a camera. For so much money he would take your picture on the pony wearing the hat.

I remember the sound of the ice cream man coming.

I remember once losing my nickel in the grass before he made it to my house.

I remember that life was just as serious then as it is now.

Excerpt #3

I remember queer bars.

I remember leaning up against walls in queer bars.

I remember standing up straight in queer bars.

I remember suddenly being aware of "how" I am holding my cigarette in queer bars.

I remember not liking myself for not picking up boys I probably could pick up because of the possibility of being rejected.

I remember deciding at a certain point that I would cut through all the bullshit and just go up to boys I liked and say, “Do you want to go home with me?” and so I tried it. But it didn’t work. Except once. And he was drunk. The next morning he left a card behind with a picture of Jesus on it signed, “with love, Jesus” on the back. He said he was a friend of Allen Ginsberg.

I remember tight white pants. Certain ways of standing. Blond heads of hair. And spotted bleached blue jeans.

I remember “baskets.”

I remember “jewels” neatly placed down the left pantleg or the right.

I remember pretty faces that don’t move.

I remember loud sexy music. Too much beer. Quick glances. And not liking myself for playing the game too.

I remember enjoying playing the game too, though.

David Trinidad
For Joe Brainard

I remember when I met Joe Brainard. My first trip to New York City. October, 1982. Tim Dlugos took me to an art opening and introduced me to Joe in the center of the room. I was so nervous I bumped into him, causing him to spill his drink.

I remember my first crush on another boy. Roy Ruth, who was a year and a half ahead of me at Superior Street Elementary School. Before he graduated, I approached him and asked him to sign my blue autograph book. He looked surprised, but signed his name.

I remember when all the girls in our classroom were invited to a “special” film in the auditorium. I couldn’t understand why I wasn’t invited too. None of the girls would tell me what it was about. They’d received pink invitations.

I remember when Tommy Merande, our next-door neighbor, told my brother and me that he’d walked into his parents’ bedroom without knocking and seen his mother’s breasts. She’d slapped him across the face—hard. Long after they’d moved away, we heard that Mrs. Merande had died of breast cancer. I instantly remembered the story Tommy had told us.

I remember during another trip to New York, at a party at Danceteria, snorting coke with Joe in a bathroom stall.

I remember the first time I came. While “fooling around” with Hal Weiland, a blond boy who lived two doors down the street. We were alone in my house, lying on the living room floor. I didn’t know what was happening, but he kept rubbing my cock until.... It left a faint stain on our brand-new beige carpet, which I prayed my mother wouldn’t notice.

I remember Hal and I “fooling around” whenever we could. Mostly just rubbing together, touching each other’s cocks. One day his mother came home and discovered us in his bedroom. After that, we never “fooled around” again.

I remember playing strip poker with the other boys in the neighborhood. On summer afternoons. Each time someone lost all of his clothes, he had to do whatever the others wanted. Like bending over and separating his cheeks (or something equally humiliating). I remember one time we played strip poker with an older boy from around the block. Halfway through the game he said, “You guys just want to see my dick, don’t you?” He unzipped his pants, pulled down his underwear, and gave us a good look. It was much bigger than any of ours, and had lots of dark hair around it.

I remember a crowded birthday party for Patrick Merla, during a snowstorm, at an apartment on Washington Mews. I remember sitting on the staircase, smoking, and Joe towering over me telling me how attractive I looked in my black sweater

I remember being afraid of getting a hard-on in the locker room.

I remember two boys wrestling on a gray mat, surrounded by the whole gym class. Suddenly one of the wrestlers “popped a boner.” I remember how stunned everyone was. Then the whispers and snickers. I remember how embarrassed I felt for that boy.

I remember sitting through my high school chemistry class with a hard-on. Trying to concentrate on the chart of the elements, rather than the jocks all around me. Hoping none of them would see the bulge in my pants. And that it would “go down” before the bell rang.

I remember receiving a letter from Joe that said, “I’d love to see you when you’re in town next month. Can I take you to dinner? And why don’t you bring a toothbrush with you and plan on spending the night.” I remember how excited and flattered I was, then how disappointed: when I got to New York, Joe had a cold and couldn’t keep our date.

I remember standing against a wall at the Club Baths in San Francisco. In 1976. Wearing nothing but a skimpy white towel. I remember a guy walking right up to me, reaching under the towel, and grabbing my cock. I remember how impressed I was by his directness, how I followed him to his cubicle. I remember having sex with him again—once at his place, once at mine. I remember that we sniffed Locker Room when we came.

I remember going on a secret date with my roommate’s boyfriend. We drank a bottle of red wine at the beach, then made out on a couch in his sister’s apartment. After we’d started having sex, I dramatically stood up, dressed, and left. The next day, he showed up and said, “What shall I call you now? ‘Darling’?”

I remember pausing in the middle of sex with a guy to smoke a cigarette. He was insulted. But I needed a rest because our lovemaking was so intense.

I remember giving a reading with Lyn Hejinian at St. Mark’s Church. It was a somber, humorless audience (mostly hers). But every time I looked up from my poems, I saw Joe’s face in the center of the room, beaming handsomely at me.

from in *The World In Us: Lesbian and Gay Poetry of the Next Wave* (St. Martin’s Press, 2000), edited by Michael Lassell and Elena Georgiou.

Savannah Sipple

A List of Times I Thought I Was Gay

1.

I gave a girl a handwritten copy of Peter Cetera lyrics and it hurt me when she left them in another girl's desk.

2.

I wrote a letter to my sports idol. I wanted to be like her: a girl the boys feared on the court.

3.

Whenever she made me wear a dress.

4.

I wore shorts & knee socks to the school dance instead of a skirt. My friends laughed. A cute older boy asked me to dance and his friends laughed.

5.

In the locker room, surrounded by sports bras & ball shoes I felt no different. I looked.

6.

I cut myself with a straight razor.

7.

In the kitchen at church camp. I cleaned dishes in three sinks: soap water, bleach, rinse. Week after week, for years. I never felt clean.

8.

I wanted to hug someone.
I did not trust myself to hug someone.

9.

Boxing class. My body sore, my muscles
Alive.

10.

When I saw you clothed.

11.

And imagined you naked.

12.

When I saw you naked.

13.

When I let myself hug you
in my mind and your arms
found my body, and we were
clothed & naked at once.

14.

I realized, if I wore makeup,
if I wore dresses,
she thought it meant I was straight.

15.

When the youth pastor decried our friend
might be dating a woman, my face flushed.

16.

When I wore my hair in a fauxhawk
then washed it out immediately.

17.

Every time I wanted to buy a new tie.

18.

When I notice your tight
shirt sculpted to your breasts,
your abs, your jutted-out hips.

19.

Every time a friend got married
and I went without a date.

20.

The first time I said
I'll never marry a man.

Then cried
when I realized I didn't have to.

Brett Josef Grubisic

Fifteen (Lies from My Adolescent Mouth, a Selection)

1. “Nothing.”

In answer to my father’s “What are you two doing upstairs?”

(Simultaneously, my sister and I had the experience-based intuition that accurate replies—“Reading *Vogue*,” “Pretending to be *Vogue* reporters covering catwalk shows,” or “Designing and sewing gowns to photograph for *Vogue*-like Polaroid photo spreads”—would have adverse consequences.)

2. “Chlorine. I swam a *lot* this summer.”

To everyone’s “What’s up with the carrot top?”

(The 100% truth: “A secret, home-brewed beauty regimen that features weeks of dedicated cotton-ball applications of lemon juice and peroxide can result in tabby-orange hair.”)

3. “No, I had to run at full speed just to get here on time.”

Asked on the morning the high school annual photographer arrived, a Very Important Event for which I thought I looked too pale and with great lack of expertise and judiciousness at home had rubbed my sister’s *rouge* (either she didn’t have foundation or that indispensable product didn’t occur to me) over the entire surface area of my face: “Your face is so pink, are you wearing makeup?”

(In retrospect: “Yeah, I am. Too much?”)

4. “Nothing.”

Instantaneously spat out following the classic boys’ change room query/accusation, “What are you gawking at?”

(Anachronistic but closer to the truth: “Your junk, what do you think?”)

5. “I’m good, thanks.”

To the driver in the white Econoline van. One summer night as I trudged home from my part-time job—my ten-speed having been stolen—this kind stranger pulled over and offered me a

homeward ride. At the halfway point he also offered me a blow job. “No strings,” he said, as though I’d know what that meant.

(“Please God, yes, I’d sell my soul for one” would have reflected my actual thinking.)

6. “I dunno.”

To my stepmother, who found an issue of *Playgirl* while riffling through my gym bag for evidence in her mounting case against me and asked, “What’s this?”

(Of course, I’d shoplifted it.)

7. “I left it there on purpose and told him to put that part in the letter to punish you for snooping through my stuff!”

To my father and his third wife upon their discovering—yet again—hidden contents in a gym bag, a secure location that, it turned out, could have been better. They’d read a letter mailed to me from a close friend in a distant town our family had recently vacated. Aside from news, gossip, and jokes, the letter featured a line that referenced the new stage our relationship had entered months before: “I guess you could say we made love.”

(The product of quick thinking. I felt proud of that one for years.)

8. “They’re great!”

Faked enthusiasm for my father, driving on Main Street and avidly pointing out a woman blessed with the bountiful sort of breasts he made jokes about being buried in instead of a coffin. Perhaps he dreamed of a family plot: father and son, resting for eternity on two comforting sets of breasts.

(See #9.)

9. “It’s great.”

To my father, when he whisper-queried what I thought of my second stepmother’s ample cleavage.

(Message from 2016: “Back then I couldn’t comprehend the constant attempts at heterosexual male bonding via objectification of women. Objectification of other men would have accomplished the same goal, though you’d have had to redefine your comfort zone.”)

10. “No.”

In reply to the guy parked at the side of the road with his track pants pulled down and the seat reclined. “Like whatcha see?” he growled as I walked by and took a peek.

(“Hell, yes.”)

11. “No.”

In reply to my jock step-uncle, who wanted to try on bathing suits and asked me if I thought it was weird to invite me into the change room area to give him advice.

(“A bit,” I might have said, “but I can deal with it. Anyhow, I’ve got all day.” Really, I would have cleared my entire schedule.)

12. “Nothing.”

To my father and stepmother’s daily refrain, “What’s wrong?”

(The alternative drew me to stock images: a volcano about to erupt, a dam about to burst, the universe before the epic moment of the big bang.)

13. “Yes.”

When I returned home after a date with a girl from work my father pulled me aside, wondering if I’d “dipped my wick.”

(“No” represents a short version of the truth. Longer but true too: “No, but we walked around downtown and chatted about cute guys, greasy-haired guys with cars we’d consider, and her best outfits.”)

14. “That’s great.”

To my father, who promised to get me drunk at a bar and then take me to a whorehouse for my eighteenth birthday.

(A plan for my birthday that wouldn’t have occurred to him: champagne in a hotel lounge, preferably Parisian, followed by an afternoon of shopping. I wasn’t difficult to understand then, just frivolous and non-heterosexual.)

15. “Yes.”

To my father, at the wheel of his red GM pickup. Aghast and sputtering and ashamed and shocked-but-not-really (re: #1), he’d just posed the Dreaded Question—if *he’d* turned me *that way*.

(What I’d wanted to say before changing my mind: “Get over yourself, this isn’t about you.” At seventeen, though, the lie-as-punishment struck me as the preferable option.)

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