

by Jack Collum and Sheryl Noethe

## “I Remember” Poems

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Genre: Poetry

Grade: 2-12

Population: All

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Sheryl Noethe is artistic director and a writer-in-residence for the Missoula Writing Collaborative. Her poems have appeared in a number of journals, and she has published two collections of poetry, *The Descent of Heaven Over the Lake* (New Rivers Press, 1984) and *Ghost Openings* (Grace Court Press, 2000), which won a Northwest Publisher’s Best Book Award. Her latest collection, *As Is*, will be published by Lost Horse Press in 2009. She teaches at Hellgate Middle School for the Missoula Writing Collaborative.

### “I Remember” Poems

“I remember” poems—immortalized by artist and writer Joe Brainard in his book *I Remember* (Granary Books, 2001)—make an excellent introduction to a series of classroom poetry workshops. For one thing, they are fun to do and hear. They’re usually vivid, down to earth, and personal. For another, their practice lets the students know that poetry can be made of their own speech patterns and experience.

Especially if this is the first of a series of sessions, begin by reading aloud a poem (or a prose selection) notable for its rhythmic energy and sensuous details. Get in a “thing-y” mood. You might use the following excerpt from Brainard:

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

I remember how much I used to stutter.

I remember the first time I saw television. Lucille Ball was taking ballet lessons.

I remember Aunt Cleora who lived in Hollywood. Every year for Christmas she sent my brother and me a joint present of one book.

I remember a very poor boy who had to wear his sister's blouses to school.

I remember shower curtains with angel fish on them.

I remember very old people when I was very young. Their houses smelled funny.

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 waking up somewhere once and there was a horse staring me in the face.

I remember saying "thank you" in reply to "thank you" and then the other person doesn't know what to say.

I remember how embarrassed I was when other children cried.

I remember one very hot summer day I put ice cubes in my aquarium and all the fish died.

I remember not understanding why people on the other side of the world didn't fall off.

Try reading an "I Remember" poem of your own. This will help create an atmosphere in which students will explore the personal. Read aloud "I Remember" pieces by kids, pointing out good uses of sound, how poetic language often arises amid common speech, how comparison vivifies language, and any other virtues you find.

Then ask them to write, describing as many memories as they want, but concentrating on each one long enough to bring out its specialness. (You can have younger kids abbreviate "I remember" to "IR" each time.) They don't have to think "poetry," but can pretend they're talking, trading memories with a friend.

Collect and read aloud.

An interesting variation of this exercise is to concentrate on a single memory. In this case you should spend even more time talking up detail. This kind of "I Remember" is like a family photo, in which one sees not only Aunt Myrt picking pears but also the tree branches, the broken fence next door, half a black dog, the sky, an empty can of Van Camp's Pork & Beans, etc.

Another variant is to draw the students' attention to the possible play between early memories and more recent ones. These memories could be set off in blocks, or interspersed, to cast light on life changes.

I remember when I was in kindergarten my teacher said, "Cut on the lines." I was cutting wobbly, Henry said, "I'm telling 'cause you aren't cutting on the lines." I said, "Who cares?" Then he told the teacher. She said, "You don't have to cut exactly on the lines, Henry."

Patrick (2nd grade)

I remember being showered in the wilderness by hot embers {from a blazing fire sent into the air by an exploding can of cream-style corn.

Jim (high school)

I remember a wild stallion rearing like magic through the wild river.

I remember a plane taking me through clouds or visions.

I remember a star flashing red and blue in the dark breeze.

I remember a cloud that looked like a beautiful dragon in disguise.

I remember a wolf large enough to ride but it dashed away slicing snow.

Shauna (5th grade)

I remember the forest with trees so thick and tangled the ground was painted with one big, cold shadow.

I remember playing with the skin that hung from my great-grandma's arm and being told not to do it again.

Phelan (7th grade)