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Memory, Meaning, and Love: A Three Part Response to *After Peter*

Part I

Through his emotional description of his time spent with Peter, Chee overshadows the tragic image of Peter's sickness with one of safety and love. With this contrast, Chee shows how relationships define the way one remembers history. Halfway through the essay, Chee recounts his first date with Peter. He draws on his memory of that emotional night, describing a particularly powerful moment in his bedroom. He writes,

The weight of him pressed me out. I felt covered, safe; something dark in me retreated and, for what felt like the first time in the arms of a man, I felt safe. I was still me—the switch was not flicked, but the terrible feeling haunting me then didn't reach me. Which is one of the things that love can feel like. Peter stayed there for some time. He may have fallen asleep at some point. And so it is that when I hear stories of how thin he became, I can't reconcile them with the weight of the boy who pinned me to myself, made me feel the place in me where I attached to the world (84-85).

Up until this point in the story, Chee frames Peter with death and tragedy, but here for the first time he reveals a more intimate depiction of his former lover. In his warm description of this evening, Peter's effect on Chee becomes clear. Using phrases like "pinned me to myself" and "made me feel...where I attached to the world," Chee shows the central role that Peter plays in reaffirming his identity and sense of purpose. Before Peter, Chee is lost and afraid, but after

Peter—as alluded to by the essay’s title—he feels safe, sure of himself, and his tone gives the impression of hope. And because it is so central to his identity, Chee’s relationship with Peter takes up the most space in his memory, and therefore he “can’t reconcile” their intimacy with the more public image of his death. In this way, Chee’s memory of Peter is defined first and foremost by their relationship, indicating that for Chee, relationships have the power to turn objectively negative experiences into positive, formative, and remarkably beautiful memories.

Part II

The pain was lasting longer than I thought. What started as a stomach cramp turned into the worst three nights of my life, writhing around and calling out for someone to make it stop—both the pain in my gut and the increasingly unbearable feeling that none of this mattered, which had been weighing me down for months. In retrospect the two may have been one and the same.

I don’t know when it began—the feeling, not the pain. The latter would’ve been hard to forget. I had gotten into college a few months before, leaving me completely aimless. Who am I without my goals? That I still haven’t figured out. On top of this my girlfriend Cecilia had just left for a month in the desert, which doesn’t seem like much until she’s actually in the desert with a month to go. With Cecilia gone, I spent my afternoons climbing or playing baseball—anything to keep me busy. School didn’t feel the same anymore. Nothing did. And how could it? My world had been turned upside down, a once tunnel-visioned kid thrown out into the frightening vastness of the world. I had told myself I wanted this freedom, but a part of me hoped it would never come.

Music helped a bit. So did my friends. But nothing could cure the pain in my stomach, which started a week or two after she left. The doctor said it was a virus, but I didn't think viruses lasted this long. In the days leading up to her return, it was at its worst. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't do anything. I lay on the sofa, desperately trying to distract myself from the pain and everything else I was feeling. I wanted Cecilia home. I wanted everything back to normal, but I feared something would be different. Maybe I would be too sick to see her, or maybe she wouldn't want to see me.

Cecilia couldn't have come home soon enough. When I awoke that Thursday morning, the pain was still there, despite my prayers the night before. I told Cecilia's mother that I didn't think I could see Cecilia, but that I would call her in a few hours when I had planned to leave. I paced around the house. I sat in front of the TV and waited. Hours passed and I still couldn't stand up straight without a grimace. And then, with only minutes to spare, the pain was gone, all at once. I'm not religious, nor do I believe in miracles. But this was one of those times in my life that made me question that belief. Someone must have been watching over me, over us.

That night, we ordered pizza and sat in the kitchen as Cecilia told stories from her travels. I listened closely, hanging on to her every word. Her voice felt like Christmas morning, like a long awaited gift. After dinner we retreated downstairs to Cecilia's room, which I hadn't seen since she left. Something inside me felt full, brought back to life by the familiar hum of the washing machine at the foot of her bed and the cold cement of what was once a basement floor. Not long after, Cecilia fell asleep in my arms. I matched her deep breaths with mine, running my fingers through her hair.

Distance is a curious thing when it comes to love. Sometimes Cecilia is miles away and I feel her by my side, and others the inches between us feel like galaxies. I knew that a part of her

was still in the desert, but right then it didn't matter. There, in her cluttered room, she felt closer than ever before. For the first time in a long time, I didn't feel lost at all.

Part III

As shown by *After Peter*, memory is history through a personal lens. When we remember an event, we remember how it shaped who we are and place it in the context of our identities. When Chee looks back on the AIDS crisis, he remembers not only the death and tragedy but also the moments of love and joy in between. History has a tendency to reduce people's lives to a single narrative, whereas memory encompasses all the complexities that make up our experiences. Studying history is incredibly valuable when looking at the larger picture, but memory is exceptional at conveying the emotion behind an event, whether or not that emotion fits with the historical narrative.

This difference is especially apparent in the medium's through which history and memory are often expressed. Author Siegfried J. Schmidt perfectly articulated this difference with his assertion, "Remembering needs performance, that is to say, narrations of remembrances" (Schmidt 194). History, unlike memory, is expected to be entirely factual and impartial, which is why it is generally distributed in academic textbooks or journals. Memory, on the other hand, has always been shared through what Schmidt calls performance, using more artistic mediums such as music, poetry, or theater, all of which preserve an emotional quality that history lacks. When we want the facts, history gets the job done. But when we want to truly grasp the gravity and emotion of an event, we turn to the memories of those who lived through it.

Works Cited

Chee, Alexander. "Title of Essay." *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel*. Mariner, 2008.

Schmidt, Siegfried J.. "Memory and Remembrance: A Constructivist Approach". *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, edited by Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2010, pp. 191-202.

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