

Substitute Memory by Tom Blake

U.S.A. Memory Championship: High School Division.
Poetry Event: Mental Athletes will have 15 minutes to memorize a previously unpublished poem.

Step One: Find the Trigger.

I don't want my prints all over the mechanism, it should be brought about as the volition of an agent of change and Olin Demetrius was an axe-grinding godsend. I drifted from the kitchenette toward the ratty old sofa.

"It is simply because you are an *African-American woman* that you hold the position you do!"

Proudly too old to mince words or mind his indoor voice, he made sure everyone in the faculty lounge knew that *he* should be head of the Math department here at Cary Middlecoff Regional High School. The powdered non-dairy creamer shaking in his hand sent up a little smoke signal. His narrow head shook as well, eyes wide and glassy. Sheila, unperturbed at the latest iteration of this complaint, adjusted her scarf and looked over at Elliot, the Vice-Principal, who closed his eyes while he chewed a drying sandwich just enough to get the mouthful down. He nodded at her and cleared his throat. "Olin..."

"I am within my rights to use those factual observations to express that opinion."

"Is it only when I eat in here? Because that's the only time I actually hear that opinion. I know you've talked to Karen about this; do you want to stop by my office when you have a chance?"

"And do what?" He waved his mug of weak coffee; Larry & Sons want to repair our transmissions, Olin waited defiantly. Elliot scanned the tabletop looking at everything but the finished crossword puzzle directly in front of him; an old briefcase, a marked up Pennysaver, a backpack, a pen. Half a beige sandwich stared at him through a plastic bag. Red cheeked and skinny in a mossy green button down that was too big and a wide brown tie, he looked younger than his forty-ish years, sitting before an older man who was displeased and demanded things he could not provide. He muscled up as much as he could in a short sleeved shirt.

"Then I'm going to eat my sandwich. You could take that time to think if that kind of statement, within your rights or not, is going to help things, you, here."

In the month I've been here I've seen Olin act up twice before and Sheila had not engaged, but today she was dressed more smartly than usual; the crisp navy suit for a

school district function perhaps. She paused at the door before heading out to her next class and fished something out from in between her foot and her shiny dress shoe. “I gave you pre-calc, which is what you asked for, isn’t that what you wanted?” She looked at Olin as she flicked the pebble or something into the wastebasket, it made a “tick” and she left.

And the flower, red and flushed with high blood pressure, bloomed before my eyes. I watched the temporo-mandibular muscles flexing; if those molars are still his they are being cracked, set to break the next time he’s enjoying some peppery jerky. Jen, a mousey biology teacher trapped near the half refrigerator, trying to lose herself in the green linoleum floor, exhaled and broke when the bell rang, slipping out the door. No one but Larry, his sons, and I heard him rasp, “No, it isn’t.”

It was on; Olin and I have the same free period, 1:05 to 1:45, on Tuesday. I watched him sag into the stuffed chair he frequented when he read *Popular Woodworker* or *Northwestern Coot*, and took out my cell phone. Positioning myself near enough but facing away from his buzz-cut head and aggressively plaid shirt, I looked out the window to the student parking lot and made a pretend phone call.

“...Yes, I agree with you. You’re the most experienced person I know...I read that study as well. We should. No it’s not my place, long-term, yes, but I’m still just a substitute. They *should* recite the poem, it *is* better for the Mental Athletes, but since they’ll have to write it down once they get to the regionals, that’s the way they do it. I know, you’re right. It’s not just the Scandinavians, the Germans do it too, I *know* it’ll give our kids an edge but I’m not respected enough, *my* suggestion won’t carry the weight. Of course I want to win regional qualifier. Of course it looks good for you... and your school, but it’s thought of as more of a math department thing... unprecedented...to reach the high school division of the U.S.A. Memory Championships because of a suggestion I made... that would be...”

In the quiet I watched Kimberly Frasso getting pinned against a red Focus by some skinny kid with long brown hair and a puffy down shirt, his build made him Tony Ritton or Emory Seideman. Heading for the door I glanced back at that anvil of a skull, canted slightly in my direction and said the word, “Powerful” and left, listening to the grinding of old heavy gears and the mumble of the word “Scandinavians.”

Step Two: Mechanism.

I don’t care about the other events-Names and Faces, I don’t even know who’s running that-regurgitate a name to the face on the card and prepare for a career in life insurance. Speed Numbers and Speed Cards-mathletes and timers-clock that ultra marathon of

virginity because it's not about the destination as much as the painful lonely journey. But the Poetry Event- realm of the English department and right now I'm grateful to all the bored husbands of the entirely female department for giving their wives what they really want. Three teachers pregnant, including the department head and one on maternity leave, hence my prolonged presence and ripe opportunity.

"Testosteromeo." A nickname cleverly chosen by the department head for the fact that I am the only man present and that one class I've taken over is reading "Romeo and Juliet" aloud. In that class I sit at that desk ignoring the drone as I prepare my opus, also to be read aloud but to a different audience of one. I thought of reassigning the sonnets, to get the poetry in the air, but the uninflected tenth grade voices, frightened into a monotone by the repercussions for effort or emotion, soothe me like a white noise machine and allow me to concentrate on the task at hand. After I left the last department meeting walking out to my moped I thought of the rejoinder, "Estrogennifer." It didn't seem right to keep it in my back pocket for later use so I enjoyed it myself along with the fact that no one really wanted to deal with the extra-curricular responsibilities of the Memory competition. They fell upon me like clean, sweet snow, even though the region favors sleet.

"Will you be a dear, if you don't mind, and take care of that too?" Gennifer asked, feet propped up, watch-checkingly annoyed that we even had to have this meeting. Fanning herself though it was not warm.

Choosing the poem to be memorized-check.

Organizing the Mental Athletes-check.

"Oh and Olin Demetrius," (grunts and sighs) "hasn't got enough to keep him occupied so he has a suggestion about the poetry event. To orate the poem-his words-instead of writing it down. It's really a favor to Sheila, any objections?"

Barely a couple of shrugs while plump thumbs somehow manipulated tiny keys: my cue.

"So they'll be given 15 minutes to memorize, what, (I looked at the handout though I did not read it) 10 lines of poetry, right?"

Uh-huh's, nods.

"Unpublished, it can't be published," Shannon Ramirez grunted slightly setting a large sweet tea on her pristine copy of "The Catcher In The Rye", spine unbroken, pages unruffled. Sugar re-settled in the bottom of the sweaty plastic cup.

"Oh okay, thanks. You know what might make things smoother, why don't I get them each a different part of one poem, just so it'll all go faster, they can all be ready to go and we won't worry about them hearing each other recite the same piece. Faster, right?"

A long pause then more nods and shrugs of Sure and Why Not. Check.

Step Three-Prep.

Wardrobe. An olive green shirt; the choice between long or short sleeve-long, so if the jacket comes off the sleeves can roll up, showcasing a forearm that will pensively prop up a chin lost in thought-a thoughtful chin. Yes. And the brown corduroy suit-of course, the cloth of kings, but not brown, *rust!* Natural but imbued with light-rust will add that spark. Blucher mocs with a thick sock, no hose; the roots of the tree are strong. Puka choker (has it looked a bit grimy lately? Trim the beard and mustache. And I've purchased a Wonder Shirt, though I've nothing more to say on that matter aside from the fact I haven't been able to aerobicize since my last visit to the doctor. I'm curious about the circulatory effect of different leg crossing patterns: scissor versus ankle at the knee. Don't want heat generating in the undercarriage, stay cool and breezy, but no-there will not be enough room for crossing or uncrossing legs.

Location. Not enough room because I've decided the event should take place in the auditorium, better than Option Two: the low ceiling, glass walled cafeteria A.K.A. "The Fishbowl". When I pass through it as a shortcut to my preferred restroom, the space bathes me wanly in fluorescent lights and the acrid redolence of the scholasto-industrial fish patty. The molded plastic chairs leech sweat from any and all sized buttocks and the slick that covers the tabletops is impenetrable, though I wonder if any effort has been made since the custodial union vaccinated its members from elbow grease. Any space would lend more ambience than Option One: a classroom- faculty would have to sit in those desks, like cowboys in a teepee. My heralds need a stage from which to proclaim my ardor, even if it impinges on legroom.

It's off to hunt the elusive Principal, Karen "The Wizard" Connelly, I almost believe she's the Vice-Principal, pitch-shifted, amplified and lever pulling from behind a curtain. Karen's secretary doesn't even look up from her thick, dog-eared suspense novel anymore, knowing Elliot wants the ball and the door behind her is locked. He appears, walking jerkily from his hip flexors like the sleep deprived. Never stops eating, the calories burned away by the anticipation of conflict and his own discomfort at his lust for power. I follow him into his small office where polished, hard-to-discern trophies line the wall behind him; the golden figurines all have one arm raised and one down by their side. He grabs a bag of honey mustard whole wheat pretzels off the front of his metal desk, eating before reaching his seat and nods at me, sesame seeds sprinkle the blotter.

"I know you've got a lot on your plate, but the English department was thinking of holding the Memory Contest thing, or whatever it's called, in the auditorium if..."
I stopped because he was checking something on his phone, nodding, chewing, holding up his hand.

"If... you... don't need anything else, extra faculty to ride herd, kids to be pulled for an audience, anything else, it ends right here with a yes and if it gets more complicated, then it's probably a no-we good?"

I stood, gave a short bow from the neck with a little salute, turned and exited to the sound of crunching. Yes, we good.

Step Four: Endgame plan.

Take single English tea rose out of attaché and brush the outside of her left hand, which will most likely land on the armrest, since I will purposefully not occupy it, as the poem ends. Simple enough. She will be thunderstruck by the realization that it is she and I am he. I will look steadily into her eyes, except during the possible kiss, which I've always found a bit off-putting. It's not the time or the place for tongue, hopefully in her car, in which we would definitely be leaving. I decided against asking Garret to borrow his Altima since the ride here was awash in Arby's wrappers and empty pint bottles of Mr. Pibb. And doesn't that choice of vehicle say, "I vaguely need a car?" My moped may be borrowed but it has a certain nobility, just not for two, on the first date.

Sitting there, filled with longing just about to be realized after a short car ride, ideally to her place since I could not convince my roommate to stay with his latest "girlfriend." Lord knows how many times I've wandered the misting night streets of town; the coffee shop closes early, nothing for me but the wary stares of assorted dog walkers. Garret has alluded to the complexity of their relationship but I know it's not above board. He is a cad and my request was half test to see if he *could* go to her place, anticipating his response, "Nope, spring for a motel and I'm out of your hair." I answered the way I usually do with a shake of the head and an "Aaah, Gary."

Step Five: Execution.

The dark cavernous feel of the sparsely lit auditorium has the air of thrill and promise. I adjust the stage wash, making the center slightly brighter while taking focus away from artisanal posters that advise one to catch a fever related to the impending homecoming. The teachers involved in evaluating the event prep their scorecards unknowing; I've placed a sheet of notebook paper (the blank page upon which our chapter will be written) on the seat next to (or near, since I didn't name the seats for the teachers evaluating the contest) mon objet. I'll get things going backstage and as the last piece is being delivered, steal into the dark of the space and quietly take my place for the finale.

Russell Toomey was always the front runner to open, though the purity of tone that comes so effortlessly from Isabel Nieves was tempting; the natural dampness of her soft brown eyes, her dress always plain, the lank yet shiny hair, but no: a man, well, a male. A "he" must start and finish. His speaking voice is naturally flat, not that he would think to emote or editorialize in this situation; the words will resonate with eerie detachment. He shuffles on stage, standing at the edge of the lighting so his rimless glasses glint but most of his reluctant body slouches in faint relief. He looks stage right, his bowl-cut backlit for a moment as he seeks permission. I smile and nod.

Four days a week at 2:35 the world is enveloped in a glow
 that comes from sixth period European History.
 No matter the blood let loose in the French Revolution
 No matter the entangling alliances of Otto von Bismarck,
 You are the Age of Enlightenment, the Age of Reason, The Renaissance.
 You walk down the hall at the only time of day
 The sunlight pours through that window and bounces off the shining green floor bathing
 you in hourless seasonless timelessness.
 Lugged books grow light, break free from dull hands
 and flap their pages to fly about your chestnut hair.

Stalwart and perfunctory, the sleepy drum major leads the way, though I should have
 made it “lug-ged”.

Jennifer and Jason Rhee were fraternal twins, *are* twins, but Jason walked in on his
 parents swinging with family friends, previously referred to as “Aunt and Uncle”, freaked
 out and is in military school back east. The twins did everything together; doubles
 badminton, cello (he, first chair), co-class representatives, all before my arrival and now
 Jennifer does none of those things. The only change I’ve been present to witness, apart
 from a suspicious consistency in weight, is the replacement of round, thick-rimmed
 glasses with contacts. And though she always looks like she’s trying to see something a
 foot beyond her nose, I knew she would be ardent, have longing, and not know what to
 do about either.

Breeze, a promise of freedom from stricture and form,
 from timelines and rote nature, that all too often seem a gavotte.
 You impart the music, your staccato stride the rhythm
 pounded out from a modest heel, bouncing off ears unattuned but forgiven.
 Their time will come, but will they ever discern true Vanilla bean from imitation?
 Locker doors wave steely fronds, wafting the scent of that exotic flower
 down the hallways, the natives oblivious.
 The clamor of an age is hushed and falls neath tiny feet,
 to an unknowing obeisance, to a harmony of the Higher Realm
 that borrows from all the disciplines while studying none.

Stakes raised a bit with a tone of determined, confused optimism. Now Isabel’s plaintive,
 explanatory tone. She’s smart and uncomfortable with it; a poor, unhappy family that
 doesn’t understand or spend the time attending their precocious daughter so it’s off to the
 books. And she’s sorry about it;

For the beauty of nature needs no book, no pen, no scroll
 only multiplied by the essence of kindness that knows there is a cause,

oft unseen, an internal ritual undamped by the quotidian.
 The obligation but not the obligatory.
 A pixie sprite that guides passion, ushers water through the brook
 Glistening in sunlight, that Writhes in dance through the sweet green grass, that Pushes
 the essence of need through leaves fallen upon a sacred ground,
 and resting yet Never resting till they feed the loam
 to Rise again in mute anticipation
 and benign triumph of a remote island goddess.

How did she make that sound a little condescending? Like she knew she should read first. Son of a bitch.

And Jeremiah Seene, my closer; how many years have young men like he suffered the distance of others for a stony disposition and a volume control issue? I don't know what is being done for his Aspergers, but right now I relish it. He stands like a sixty year-old mailman, his voice a siren of diligent clueless certainty, any message is propelled like a crude rocket. I'm so glad he's not in my class;

Till your hand rests in mine and we walk through the ever surprisingly
 heavy double doors of the faculty entrance
 and into my Subaru Outback. And off. Spheres aligning, the friction transmuted to pre-
 major label Depeche Mode
 We wind through the mountains towards the sea towards a horizon
 That laughs in pleasure and welcome upon guests that have been awaited,
 Warm muffins and turned down comforters, inside jokes
 Unspaked with a knowing smile.
 Lines that draw a map to a treasure already found
 It's natural interest ever accruing. Lid waiting to be opened.

High pitched, strained, adamantly creaky; Cupid that has to pee!
 The last of the pencils check for mistakes-NONE-they tally the points-MAXIMUM
 VALUE. Each word on each line correct, message delivered!

On the walk out to the parking lot I'll matter-of-factly mention that my car is "in the shop" which will be neither here nor there with hearts pounding and minds a-reel. I was tempted to try and borrow the money to pay off the latest repairs on the Outback (how can a cylinder block actually crack?), to keep it from being just a poetic trope. Ah well. Love! Now all I have to do is get that boorish chem teacher out of my seat; she holds a flower or an asteroid he fashioned out of my symbolic placeholder, out of politeness no doubt-the Goodness! Dennis is a widower and volunteers for everything in this school, science based or not, perhaps I can distract him with a theoretical cheese platter in the faculty lounge. He is a loomer and took my seat when I had to stay behind the scenes attending to Jeremiah's outburst, the boy got freaked as he and Jennifer passed through a

backstage doorway at the same time. His vocal hyperventilation froze her and he couldn't back up (I don't think I've ever seen him move in reverse or sideways) or go forward. I gave her a gentle shove but I was trapped on the wing of the stage, just behind the curtain until Jeremiah's dutiful finish.

Back in the audience I saw an open seat on her right side, but there were several lazing members of the Romance Languages drinking coffee and chatting in the preceding seats. What were Esteban and Rosario even doing here? I maneuvered to the row behind, the recitation done, the timing, THE TIMING! I stretched a leg to the point of moderate strain and pivoted over the seat, having to catch myself and find balance (proudly so for a man of my size) with the swing of my briefcase, planting me atop the seatback of the row in front. Dashing but not alarming; Chemistry eyed me, rightfully wary of my hormonal power, but kept his face towards hers as I heard her say, leaning a bit too much in his direction, "Those poems were...last year they had a much easier poem. Did Gennifer choose them? A Subaru Outback?" A giggle of delight and wonder cued the finish.

I'd gotten used to the force with which the locks of my attaché pop open; she jumped a bit, startled by the sound, her almond eyes wide and pink mouth sprung. I have her full excited attention as I reach for the rose.

"Actually..." I smiled, "it's in the shop, for now."