



## TLC SHOWCASE

Siobhan Harvey

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## Introduction to *What We Remember, What We Forget*

*What We Remember, What We Forget* is a memoir about the power of reminiscence and the peril of forgetfulness. Themes of family secrets and social dilemmas, identity struggles and psychological reasoning, alienation and belonging, dysfunction and displacement, trauma and recovery prevail. Written in the form of the personal essay, its 11 chapters offer distinct subjects while interweaving autobiographical content into a cohesive memoir.

The work has a classic five-act structure. Its prologue and epilogue bookend the narrative as introduction and conclusion. In-between, three sections titulary and thematically replicate the memory-formation process of encoding, storage, and retrieval. In the first act, 'Encoding', pieces explore the juxtapositions between recollections of queer identity in the 1980s and contemporary anti-rainbow representations, the personal, social, and memorial impact of domestic abuse, and recall's positive role in overcoming familial dysfunction.

Meanwhile, the acts, 'Storage' and 'Retrieval' examine the parenting of a neurodiverse child, the memorial rift experienced by migrants, the cathartic response to the question, 'who do you think you are?' and the enduring difficulties of coming-out. Finally, the epilogue considers memory as a medium for healing and self-development.

Along the way, *What We Remember, What We Forget* subverts the social expectation upon queer peoples to "come out" in favour of a queer narration that chooses to voice its full existence without compromise to heteronormative determinism.

As part of the manuscript's success in the 2024 Bridport Memoir Award, I was fortunate to receive a TLC manuscript assessment. This was conducted by Anna South. Her overview of the work was insightful and encouraging. It listed the strengths of the work and also highlighted both the macro and micro elements of the manuscript which needed further consideration. Along with those of the array of judges for the prize, it was vital to have Anna's eyes over the work-in-genesis. She prompted me, for instance, to ensure that the fundamental issue of subverting the coming out process was addressed later in the work.

## Extract from *What We Remember, What We Forget*

### A Jigsaw of Broken Things

*one, part of a larger puzzle*

Let me piece this together, scattered as it is across the lifespan of my memory. As if little by little, I can make it into something complete. Even though, quite often, my memories seem like an array of singular parts. Irregular fragments belonging to a brainteaser: some with holes in them; some with loops; some one-sided; some double-edged.

A cruel exchange between those supposedly related to one another; the random discovery of something meaningful in a difficult place; an intolerant dogma linked to a loner's fractured sense of self; an image of broken learning; a severed relationship, a final failure to connect: this and that, replicated over and over again.

Apparently disconnected. Or apparently not.

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*two, irregular*

I was 17 years old when Mr. Y told me no one would ever love me.

"No one will ever love you," he said. Offered with that deep delivery of his, as if something belonging to darkness – or something coupled to it, like a night-terror – was trapped in his throat.

Trapped in my memory also, the day I came out.

That's all it took for the room in which we stood to narrow like his eyes.

This too I recall: the day he gave oxygen to his words, the heat of August scorched the air, the room tightening so much, I felt the breath empty my body and everything about me seemed myopic in that place I blindly thought of as home. While Mrs. Y sat in a chair next to her husband, watching me and my constriction with the same indifference she devoted to episodes of *Casualty*.

Pained, I knew Mr. Y laid bare his feelings about love and me, because he passionately believed that, in the tight Midlands town where we lived, he was rescuing me from a future in which I'd be unloved. By others. By him.

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*three, a hole*

A scatter of articles lies before me. 'Oslo shooting near gay bar investigated as terrorism, as Pride parade cancelled.'<sup>i</sup> 'Colorado gay shooting suspect charged with hate crime.'<sup>ii</sup> 'Italian government tells Milan to stop registering same-sex couples' children.'<sup>iii</sup> 'Ugandan MPs pass bill imposing death penalty for homosexuality.'<sup>iv</sup> 'To change your official gender in Poland you have to sue your parents.'<sup>v</sup> 'Spike in online hate towards trans community after Posie Parker visit.'<sup>vi</sup>

Reading them in the close, lonely space of my studio, I'm puzzled. I want to tell them, they don't belong here, they belong elsewhere: to an unforgiving past. A past four decades or more old when, cookie-cutter-like, prejudice against LGBTQi+ people was institutionalized. A time when governments and laws openly discriminated against us; a time when police, business, health, education, and housing secretly did the same. An era when the shame associated with being gay, lesbian, bi- and trans turned family member against family member. An era when non-heteronormative people carrying on with their everyday lives were subjected to intentional acts of spite.

Of course, those of us who experienced such discrimination remember it clearly, which is to say, we remember it deeply, painfully. Which is also to say, perhaps naively, we thought it just that: pained recollections lost, thankfully, to a bygone age.

But these articles say otherwise. Here is proof, they remind me, that the harm of the past has resurfaced, as if an old game, believed to be gathering dust in the closet, has been rediscovered, is being replayed.

In these snippets of reportage, I also find people who've forgotten how to love. Forgotten how to remember too, those instances of hate first encoded four decades or more ago in the minds of those who endured them. Like me.

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*four, a loop*

This memory is a cul-de-sac attached to the network of streets where I live. A busy

market town that changes once the main employer, the coal mine is forced to close. Suddenly, a third of the working population, including Mr. Y, are made redundant.

What remains of this memory after that?

As redundancy payments dwindle, as an increasing number of shops and small businesses fail, it becomes harder for residents to keep up appearances. Yet in the emptiness of the days, weeks and months afterwards, those once devoted to blasting new seams and the back-breaking excavation of coal, residents' pride in themselves and their industrial heartland community means appearance is all that's left. A nugget of fool's gold to fret over.

That's why I remember Mrs. Y cleaning her house every day, disinfecting its floors, sanitizing its surfaces and buffing its windows to a blinding sheen. Whether by example, desperation or misplaced belief, she wages war against contamination, convinced it will absolve her and her household from stain. All so the neighbours can see how spotless she is. All so they can't defile her name or dwelling with their cold-shouldering shame.

Or can they?

In that world of tight pride and redundancy, in that world of myopia, my memory evokes how it isn't only the fear of being outcast by those we live closest to which plagues Mr. and Mrs Y. It's more encompassing and introspective than this. The creed of appearance is absolute and rigid. It creates a fear of association in all residents, placing them at risk of tainting others and, by association, being tainted themselves. All it takes is for one person to exhibit behaviour the neighbours deem inappropriate, and not just the miscreant, but their family are in danger of being ostracized.

For Mr. and Mrs Y, this means that the fear of rejection by their neighbours is also the fear of contamination by me.

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*piece five, an edge*

In reviewing the collection of articles upon contemporary acts of hate against queer people, I find myself wondering if my attention has been elsewhere. I've been so focused upon the progress LGBTQi+ people have made in recent decades through same-sex marriage legislation, parenting and adoption rights, anti-discrimination laws, legal recognition of affirmed gender, gender-affirming healthcare and the like, I've

overlooked how others have been working secretly against this. So that now a point of history has been reached where measures giving legislative and social equality to the rainbow community are being eroded and erased.

That's what headlines like 'Ugandan MPs pass bill imposing death penalty for homosexuality' and 'Italian government tells Milan to stop registering same-sex couples' children' seem to reveal. For in the hostility that links them and others together, I find not just a compliment to the bigotry that appears in many of my memories, but also a testament to how fragile the legacy of our misfortune is, how easily it can be unremembered.

Suddenly, I realize that this isn't only a fight between political forces, the progressive versus the conservative, gender identity their battleground. No, it's also a conflict over memory: its evidence and erasure; how, often, it supports us and how, sometimes, it lets us down.

## REFERENCES

- i Oslo shooting near gay bar investigated as terrorism, as Pride parade cancelled' (CNN 24/6/22)
- ii Colorado gay shooting suspect charged with hate crime' (Stuff 7/12/22).
- iii 'Italian government tells Milan to stop registering same-sex couples' children' (Reuters 15/3/23).
- iv 'Ugandan MPs pass bill imposing death penalty for homosexuality' (The Guardian 21/3/23).
- v 'To change your official gender in Poland you have to sue your parents' (NFP 31/3/23).
- vi 'Spike in online hate towards trans community after Posie Parker visit' (RNZ 4/4/23).

## About the Writer

Siobhan Harvey is an author of eight books, including 2022 New Zealand Book Awards longlisted *Ghosts* (OUP 2021) and 2013 Kathleen Grattan Award winner, *Cloudboy* (Otago University Press, 2014). Unpublished, her latest manuscript, a memoir *What We Remember, What We Forget* was selected as a Category Winner in 2025 Memoir Prize for Books (US) and Highly Commended in 2024 Bridport Memoir Award (UK). Harvey has been awarded the 2023 Landfall Essay Prize, 2021 Janet Frame Literary Trust Award for Poetry, 2020 NZSA Peter & Dianne Beatson Fellowship, 2019 Kathleen Grattan Award for a Sequence of Poems, and 2016 US Write Well Award. Additionally, she has been runner up 3 times in the New Zealand Poetry Society International Poetry Competition and 3 times selected for inclusion in Best New Zealand Poems. The Poetry Archive (UK) holds a Poet's Page devoted to her work. She is a resident of the UK and Aotearoa/ New Zealand.

