

WHO WE WERE

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Ever since Wordsworth, childhood has been one of the great, necessary, and dangerous subjects for poets. Write a poem about childhood, about the deep—as opposed to the recent—past. Try* to dredge up something otherwise neglected or forgotten, something with special retrospective significance. One of your central strategic decisions will involve the question of tense. Your poem might begin in the past and stay there (as in Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz"); it might begin in the present and then turn to the past (as in Gerald Stern's "The Dancing"); it might begin in the present, turn to the past, and then come back to the present (as in Robert Hayden's "The Whipping"). Such poems are inevitably crisis lyrics. Think about what triggers the memory, about what's at stake in the experience, about what's lost (and found) in the writing of your poem, about what Samuel Beckett calls "that double-headed monster of damnation and salvation—Time."

Marcel Proust distinguished between voluntary and involuntary memory. By voluntary memory he meant that which is intentionally and consciously recalled; by involuntary memory he meant that which is given back to us, as if by magic, unconsciously. The distinction is animated by Randall Jarrell's "The Lost World" and its follow-up poem, "Thinking of the Lost World."

Freud introduced a psychological explanation for the uncanny. He was thinking of unusual, apparently inexplicable, supranormal experiences that turn out to have special buried meaning for the psyche. Something extraordinary outside of us is actually projected from inside of us. This idea is brilliantly demonstrated in Elizabeth Bishop's poem "In the Waiting Room."

Rainer Maria Rilke asserted that there are two inexhaustible sources for poetry: dreams and childhood. We drink from the well, but we never drink it dry.