

# Come Back Around

by Valentine Carter

*A memory is what is left when something happens  
and does not completely unhappen*

Edward de Bono

*This is the happy house/ We're happy here/ In the happy  
house/ Oh, it's such fun/ Fun, fun/*

Siouxsie and the Banshees

*Memory...is nothing else than a certain  
concatenation of ideas.*

Baruch Spinoza

Memory is not fixed in time  
or space. It is activity and  
movement. It is not linear. There  
is no map. It does

not travel in neat paths from one point to another by the  
fastest route possible. It  
takes many simultaneous and

There are many places  
along the way that are  
unexpected. Memory  
staggers, leapfrogs and...

circuitous routes

...teleports.

There are many dangers,

dead ends, and  
abysses.

It is more than an adventure.  
It is an expedition, a quest  
and a trial all at once.

The present is only the furthest  
reach of the past, the bleeding-  
edge we balance on to face the  
future. Everything we know,  
understand, love, hate, suspect  
or fear is presently passing us by,  
disappearing into the vast space  
behind us called memory.

St Augustine says, in perhaps  
the world's first deliberate  
autobiography, that his  
memory is made of *vast fields  
and spacious palaces* [where  
he can find] *the treasures of  
innumerable images*<sup>1</sup> stored up  
for him.

I remember a house. It was a  
small house that belonged to the  
council. I remember I was told  
that this was bad, something to  
be ashamed of, to hide along  
with all the other secrets I had  
to keep. I remember I didn't  
understand why it was so  
terrible. The council owned  
all the books in the village  
library and all the swings in the  
playground too.

Memory is made of three components: encoding, storage and retrieval. *All three components are necessary for effective memory, but no one component is sufficient: this is the fundamental logic of memory.*<sup>2</sup>

Autobiographical memory is a combination of semantic memory and episodic memory. Semantic memory is concerned with general knowledge about the world, it gives us the answer to questions like what is the capital of Spain, how many days are there in January? Episodic memory enables us to remember events we have experienced, including when and where they happened and how we felt about them.

*Suppose I wholly lose the memory of some parts of my life beyond a possibility of retrieving them, so that perhaps I shall never be conscious of them again*<sup>3</sup>, am I still myself? Even if I can't remember having done things I must have done them. I can't remember learning how to walk yet here I am, walking around. I can't remember learning to read, yet here I am... *The existence of forgetting has never been proved: we only know that some things don't come to mind when we want them to.*<sup>4</sup> Yet if we never forgot, how could we live? Can a mind ever be full? Or empty, only full of holes?

The house was a neat cube. It was covered in little pebbles and sometimes the tiny edge of a seashell, all stuck into cream plaster. This house was the only house on the street that had a rockery in the front garden and paint on the window frames that wasn't coming off in jagged flakes. This house was the only house that had a gate blocking the back entrance, perhaps because it was the only house with a shed in the back garden.

The front door of this house was red. The name of the paint shade was called sentinel red. The half full tin is in the shed for a long time, until I knocked it over with my bicycle wheel and it spilt across the floor of the shed, under the door and onto the grass. It was at once festive and horrifying, like a brutal murder on Christmas Eve.

The roof of the house was made of grey tiles and there was no chimney. Just an aerial. The other houses had satellite dishes so they could watch television that came out of the sky in a particular way. This house was not like the other houses.

Who didn't put the lid on the paint tin? That's one question I want answered. Who is responsible? I don't know.

It was better to stay outside for as long as you can. Even grown men sat in their vans until they had to go in. But grown men are not brave.

Inferotemporal cortices are dedicated to implicit memories that we can reconstruct as sensory and mental images. They are the parts of the brain

designated areas 20, 21, 36, 38

and part of 37.

These cortices support many of the

autobiographical records

we use to

assemble our

and autobiographical self

realise

our

extended consciousness.

Extended consciousness is what separates us from animals, *it is a complex biological phenomenon; it has several levels of organisation; it evolves.*<sup>5</sup>

My autobiographical self, or who I am, is fashioned from the core self and my autobiographical memories so *neither in environment nor in heredity can I find the exact instrument which fashioned me, the anonymous roller that pressed upon my life a certain intricate watermark.*<sup>6</sup>

The exact instrument is lost but the instruction manual for the instrument is not.

Unfortunately, it is a palimpsest, the superimposition of the *palest ink*<sup>7</sup> written from memory. It begins with a home and a family, almost, but after that its legibility is problematic.

On the other side of the red front door was a dark hallway and some narrow stairs. The carpet was rough and the colour of mustard. There was a door on the left that led to the lounge. The door had patterned panes of glass in it that made a kaleidoscope of everything inside the room. Ahead was the door to the kitchen.

I remember a kitchen. It had broad, brown tiles on the floor, brown cupboards and white appliances. There was a table on one side of the room. The kitchen was full of foxhounds from the Pytchley Hunt who were also brown and white, some flashed with ginger. There must have been a hundred of them. The noise. They snarled and howled. They wanted to get out but they couldn't, there were too many of them and they couldn't move without getting in each other's way. They had short tempers and keen jaws. They were trained to rip things apart.

This only happened once. Yet the moment I think of that kitchen foxhounds pour through the back door.

As if I cannot bear the empty room.

The fluidity of memory allows us to change and develop as human beings. This is the opposite of social media which allows us only to be trapped for eternity at the birthday parties of people we don't really like.

I remember a lounge. At least I remember that there was one behind the kaleidoscope door.

Every wall was magnolia and all the woodwork is white.

I remember the stairs. The third step from the bottom groaned when stepped on. The seventh one did too, but it was a shorter sound, like it was surprised you'd made it that far. The penultimate step, and the one below it, creaked like coffin lids.

At the end of the landing was my bedroom. It was the furthest of three doors; the other two led the bathroom and my parents' room. I don't remember ever going in there.

Everything in the bathroom was the colour of rotting avocado and there was only ever enough hot water to make a small puddle in the bottom of the bath.

I grow up in this house. This is what I remember.

*We are not conscious of what memories we store and which memories we do not.*<sup>8</sup> We are not conscious of how we store them, or how we organise them, how we link them together and make connections between them. Perhaps we do not have as much explicit control over the logic of our memories as we may like to think.

I must have done because I remember searching through a bottom drawer looking for my birth certificate among my mother's old work uniforms. It could only have been in that room.

I don't know this then. I am in my twenties when I discover avocados and their unpredictable shelf life.

This is not what I remember. This is what I am sure is factual and even then...

Well, these were the permanent fixtures.

Nothing was a permanent fixture.

There are many places to look for who we are, and many times. *Memory...is the minds' triumph over time.*<sup>9</sup> I can slip back, any time I like to a different time, just by remembering it. I can pay a visit to places I have been, see people I have known as if I have stepped into a time machine. Memory also allows me to move forwards in time. Not only in remembering plans I have made or ambitions I want to fulfil, but in taking past experiences and using them to make decisions, determine actions.

The observer effect suggests that the act of observing will influence the phenomenon being observed. If we try to remember a specific event, the very act of our attempt to remember it will affect the detail of what we remember. This is partly because why, where and when we remember all influence how the memory appears to us. Even how we feel right now will colour how we remember back then. This participation is compulsory.

My mother unfixed things. She loosened time and shook minutes free of hours. She made Mondays of weekends. Events that happened, never happened, or they did happen even if they didn't. She wrote us tiny histories, then rewrote them. She could expand or contract space at will. She could replace all the air in a room with a mood. Her silences had pitch and tone, leaving all other sounds unheard. When she spoke she made words meaningless, made sentences nonsense. She was one person, then another, then another, then another until she became a faceless force of nature.

Sometimes a head manifests itself, solid above a gauzy body so fine the head seemed to float untethered. She was small so the head is close to the ground, closer than it was when I was smaller. This head is eyeless. There is just a wide maw where its mouth should be that produces only a sucking wind, drawing everything ever closer to her pitch black brink.

Her tongue is not a soft thing. It is a weapon.

I remember the not-having of a mother and the not not-having of one.

Nothing was a permanent fixture.

I can't remember what she looked like anymore and I don't have a photograph of her.

This is not a person. People have bodies and mouths with tongues and gums. Wet, soft things.

Was.

Was a weapon.

Suprisingly, neuroscientists have proven that it is easier to remember pleasant things, which is sometimes hard to believe at three o'clock in the morning when the memory seems determined to drag up material ripe for rumination.

If I am not in the act of remembering I have no memory. The moment I think of riding my bicycle I remember how to ride it.

We expect, perhaps, to conjure up honest recollections from our memories, but *recall of memory is a creative process*.<sup>10</sup> We should be cautious, aware that *upon recall the core memory is then elaborated upon and reconstructed, with subtractions, additions, elaborations and distortions*.<sup>11</sup>

Sometimes the house was full of bags and boxes.

I remember that, in life, we are both helpless passenger and accidental engine.

I remember sitting on the stairs trying not to get in the way. The house was full of noise. The living room door was closed and in the patterned glass I could see shapes and colours whirl and jink as people moved around inside. I could hear my mother's voice over the bumping and shuffling of furniture and feet as she gave the men their orders. She had a neat list attached to a clipboard my Dad made out of a piece of plywood and a bulldog clip. One of the removal men opened the door and backed out,

To refer to something as a bipolar disorder is to discredit the significance of each precise point on the journey between the two poles. Each one of these single points is a destination in and of itself, as though they represent in some way a village or a town on an exhausting expedition from the very top of the world to its very depths. Every point is only a momentary shelter, a brief rest stop that you can never find again, as you turn back at the summit and make your way back down to where you started. Only to return and repeat in an endless journey on which you are both helpless passenger and accidental engine.

Sometimes, perhaps, the house was full of her social aspirations and attempts to buy herself out of a council house. It was full of her trying to escape the captivity of her gender. Although to suggest this is to largely, and purposefully, ignore the fact that she was violently unwell.

I remember sitting on the stairs trying not to get in the way. The house was full of noise. The living room door was closed and in the patterned glass I could see shapes and shadows shift and merge as large figures moved around inside. I could hear my mother's voice and strangers' laughter. She was wearing a new suit that it had taken her an hour to choose because people would be coming round. One of the repo men opened the door and back out, hunched over the weight of the new green settee.

Can you trust your memory?

What if it tells you two different versions of the same story?

What if it tries to do that at the same time?

What kind of truth does it speak to then?

hunched over the weight of the new green settee. The boy at the other end was sweating with effort. Inch by inch the settee emerged into the hallway. The removal man winked at me and grinned. He had no front teeth, his smile was made of pink gums and black space. He nodded at Bear who was sitting next to me on the stairs and told me to be careful that Bear didn't get lost in the move. I tucked Bear under my arm. Me and Bear were glad we were moving. Everything bad that happened was only because of the house. Maybe because it wasn't our house. In a new house we would be happy, like normal people. I knew the new house would be the same every day and things wouldn't keep disappearing or changing.

We could have the heating on whenever we liked and the fridge would be full. I watched the man and boy shuffling the settee out of the front door and down the step. They took it around the rockery and started to load it into the back of their lorry. I went outside. Some of the neighbours had come out to see us off and the other furniture from the lounge was on the pavement waiting for the new house. I opened the door of my Dad's work van and climbed inside. I sat Bear on the middle passenger seat and pulled the seatbelt across him so that he would be safe.

The boy at the other end was sweating with effort. It felt like hours before the settee was in the hallway. The repo man winked at me and grinned. He had letters tattooed on his knuckles. He said he didn't know that she had a kid because I was at school the last time he came. I very slowly, so that he wouldn't notice, I tucked Bear under my arm in case the man tried to take him too. The boy swore, which made my mother giggle like the kids at school, and said he was going to drop the settee so the man winked again and started off down the hallway. I wondered if we would get any money back for it like we did for the clothes, or if it would be like the piano which had just disappeared to stop money from leaking out.

I watched the man and the boy shuffling the settee out of the front door and down the step. They walked through the rockery and started to load it into the back of the lorry that blocked the street. Some of the neighbours had come out. The other furniture we couldn't afford to keep was on the pavement. The man from number six was sitting in the reclining armchair with his feet on the pouffe. I went upstairs and hid in the airing cupboard with Bear, next to the cold water tank. They didn't think I could fit in there anymore so we would be safe.

*Our memories of childhood are bound to testify to the impressions that preoccupied the child, rather than the adult*<sup>12</sup> so this is why we don't remember how we felt about the important historical and political events that happened when we were seven. We remember the time we had the wrong filling in our sandwich, or we forgot our PE kit, or the arm fell off our teddy. But still we cannot help but interpret these as an adult, giving poor teddy's arm even greater poignancy. Even though *one sees oneself as a child and knows that one is this child, yet one sees the child as an outside observer would*.<sup>13</sup>

My mother used to spend money we didn't have on things we didn't need when she was on top of the world. She would start with designer clothes for herself, then move on to expensive hobbies for me, then furniture or the latest technology. Once she bought a car and drove it home even though she didn't have a licence and my Dad had only taught her the basics in a car park when they were younger. My Dad used to take the clothes back at the end of the month. We knew to be quick and rescue the receipts before they went out with the rubbish. The larger items presented a bigger problem and we usually had to wait until we fell behind with the payments and they sent men around to repossess them.

At these times there was always too much month left at the end of the money.

Or to put it another way, *it is perhaps altogether questionable whether we have any memories from childhood: perhaps we have only memories of childhood*.<sup>14</sup> When we recall childhood memories we see them not as they were but as they are when we recall them, so the memories *did not emerge, as one is accustomed to saying, but were formed*.<sup>15</sup>

The neighbours used to enjoy the visits from the repo men, they used to bring people together. Although the street was never more than a wonky glance away from a brawl of some kind, the shared hatred of my mother was a unifying factor.

For a short time I had the best mountain bike in the village. I treated it with great care because I knew it would have to go back to the shop.

Cycling is better than walking.  
It's faster and you can go further.

There is nothing real or actual in the memory. It is a collection of images that represent the real or the actual. If it were not for language these images would be useless.

Sometimes the house was so still and quiet you could hear the paint laying on the walls. It became a house of shut doors and silent steps. Rarely-seen relatives would appear with anxious faces to mutter and sigh. These were the depths.

Is there any difference in the mind, between a memory and a made-up? Between fiction and non-fiction? Accepting that both are truth, one is just told *slant*<sup>16</sup>, and assuming that our intentions are honourable, there can't be. Can there?

In a longitudinal study in the 1980s and 90s psychologist Marcia Johnson attempted to examine reality monitoring, or how we tell real external memories from internally generated ones. Her findings indicated that there is no reliable way of telling what we remember and what we've made up.

In 1974, psychologist Alan Baddeley proposed that working memory requires an *episodic buffer* so that we can go beyond what exists in long-term memory and imagine giraffes ballet dancing, for example. The *episodic buffer* allows us to extend what we know about giraffes and ballet, combine existing information in different ways and use it to create pictures or stories. One practical function of this is that it allows us to decide on future actions. It would be impractical, however, given their shape, for giraffes to ballet dance.

The episodic buffer also performs another function. It marks the point where imagination begins, because

I don't remember any doctors.  
There was once an ambulance.  
The time they, at last, took her to  
hospital me and my Dad ate fish  
and chips out of the paper and  
listened to the classified results  
on the radio. I had mushy peas  
and he had a pickled egg.

I wished they wouldn't bring her  
back.

They didn't bring her back.

We had to go and get her.

Later I found a bike in a  
hedgerow up by the reservoir. It  
had a basket on the front and a  
hinge in the middle so you could  
fold it in half, although it was  
rusted closed. It was dark green.  
I was never the right size for me.  
It was too big for a long time and  
then it was too small.

Arsenal 14 Tottenham 0  
Nottingham Forest 2 Coventry 1  
Chelsea 0 Barnsley 0

Hating the person I thought  
I was born to love first was  
bewildering, but it was easier to  
live with than being terrified of  
her.

I used to ride my bike for miles  
and miles. I rode all the way  
around the reservoir, out past  
the next villages and all way  
down to the woods on the edge  
of the farmland where the real  
countryside began. There were  
old copses where the trees had  
stood for a thousand years.  
There was an old road that  
uses to carry carts and horses  
hundreds of years before, still  
visible where the corn wouldn't  
grow on it. There was a river's  
meander dwindling to form an  
oxbow lake. Glacial change.  
And across all of it the seasons,  
cyclical, returning with the same  
blossoms, the same conkers,  
the same hard earth and bare  
branches year after year after  
year. Everything where it had  
always been.

*memory belongs to the part of the soul to which imagination belongs*<sup>17</sup>.

grew up in, there was a rule: if you called on a neighbour for anything, sugar or a chat, you used the front door. Until they said 'come back around'. Then, you would be let in by the back door, you had been accepted.

In the street that I

Actually, my Dad was the kind of person who would not say anything for ten minutes, not even acknowledge that a conversation was happening around him, and then all of a sudden he would throw in a casual remark that was so well-timed and acutely-observed that everyone would fall about laughing or just stare at him like they were trying to work out whether a round of applause would be appropriate or just embarrass him. That's what kind of a person he was. He could say the exact right thing at the exact right time, all the while knowing that it made no difference, nothing changed. And that was his curse. Not her. That. disappeared altogether. Not even a floating head remains. Over the years he was worn down until he tried to siphon off small change for times of crisis. It was the tyranny of the exchange and return policy. He was because if anything was damaged he couldn't take it back. It was the only thing that made him really angry. Orange squash on the settee, dinner on a jumper, a scratch on a table. It was the only thing that made him really angry. Orange squash on the settee, dinner on a jumper, a scratch on a table. It was the only thing that made him really angry.

From memory we *recall flashes of daydream that illuminate the synthesis of immemorial and recollected. In this remote region, memory and imagination remain associated, each one working for their mutual deepening*<sup>18</sup> which is to say that recall is a creative high-wire act.

Living with someone with a severe mental illness was like waking up in a different house every day. I would get up in the morning and not know where my feet would land when I swung them out of bed to stand up. I could be anywhere. I could open my door and find that the landing was deep under water at the bottom of cold, dark flood or I was marooned in the middle of a burning desert. I could go down the stairs to find the house full like a bustling bazaar or I could be alone in the middle of the ocean. The kitchen might be full of foxhounds. There might be breakfast, there might not be. The day could get worse or it could stay as bad as it was, the dial stuck on I-have-no-idea-what-is-happening-to-me-anymore.

I remember a lounge. It was a kaleidoscope, always shifting and sliding. Never one room before it became another. It is on the right as you go in the front door, but sometimes it is on the left. And sometimes there is just a smooth magnolia wall where the door with the patterned glass panes once were.

How do you remember something that is different every time you look at it? It's like trying to memorise a poem when the words keep sliding around the page and the letters revolve like the barrels of a fruit machine. And it isn't a poem anyway. It's a giraffe ballet dancing.

Perhaps there is nothing to remember, there is only a series of blank spaces. But, surely, in the human mind there is no such thing as blank space, not for long, we have too much imagination to bear it.

Living with someone with a severe mental illness was like living in the time of small pox or the black death, waiting for your own symptoms to appear while the neighbours point at the X marked on your door. It began to feel contagious.

Do we all know that *Art is not truth* [?] *That* *Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand*<sup>19</sup>? I suppose it largely depends on your definition of the truth. Do you dare define it? And would it then be a definition to live by?

When I thought about the truth and memory, *this retrospection led to nothing but a fresh acknowledgement of my own ignorance. Thereupon I said to myself, 'Since I know nothing at all, I shall simply do whatever occurs to me'* Thus I consciously submitted myself to the impulses of my unconscious.<sup>20</sup> This seemed like a much better credo to live by than a nebulous definition of truth.

There is no need to know everything. It is not important to know anything with any certainty. If we are truthful we should acknowledge that we live in *Negative Capability, that is when a [person] is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason*,<sup>21</sup> because facts and reason are also subject to the vagaries of memory and the self.

Perhaps memory is just an elaborate trick and imagination provides the smoke and mirrors that maintains the mystery.

I used to ride my bike up to the top of Pitsford Hill and look down on the village. I could see the back of my house from there. I could tell which one was my house because of the shed in the garden. From far away it was possible to see that the whole world was fixed and solid and only the house was always in a state of excitable collapse, like it was built of sherbet and drinking straws.

And from a distance it looks like it could be somewhere more substantial than a tangle of fizzy hollows.

Home.

Sometimes when I was lying in bed at night I would fly up Pitsford Hill and look back at the house in the dark and see a light on in my bedroom window. Sometimes I would switch the light on and off and signal to myself. Everything is good, I would say, you can go. And then the me on the hill would signal back with a torch and carry on down the other side of the hill where the house couldn't be seen anymore and fly away, and away.

Home.

Ho

The memory is not a bowl that holds thoughts. It is net that lets thoughts slip through if they are the wrong size and shape. It is an unfixer. It makes mysteries and intrigues. What about all the things you can't remember? Where have they gone? Why won't they come back? Who are you then if all these parts of you are missing? In time even more things will have vanished. *You will be going to pieces, falling forever. Maybe there will be no relationship to the body [anymore]... no orientation. The good-enough mother prevents these unthinkable anxieties<sup>22</sup>* becoming realised. Is this, then, one of the many horrors of childhood? A memory like a net, full of holes? Imagine a small house with a light in an upstairs window seen from afar. There is more to this house than first appears. It is the house that allowed the idea of escape, the possibility of freedom. It is the house with shifting walls and doors, a house full of space. *This house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer; the house allows one to dream in peace and the values that belong to daydreaming mark humanity in its depths.*<sup>23</sup> It is not, here, the remembering that matters. It is the imagining we have woven in.

Imagine that this house has a chimney and that there is a welcome fire burning in a homely grate. Imagine that *the house we were born in is more than an embodiment of home, [that] it is also an embodiment of dream [and that] our habits of a particular daydream were acquired there*<sup>24</sup>. Imagine

the smoke in shades of  
the palest ink,  
as it

ris-  
es  
out of the chimney into the quiet night sky, drifting up and up.

This is more than an adventure. This is escape and freedom. Watch it now, the smoke, see how it  
ghosts through the holes and fissures, drifting  
away into all of space.

## Guests

1. St Augustine
2. Foster
3. Locke
4. Nietzsche
5. Damasio
6. Nabokov
7. Chinese proverb: *The palest ink is better than the best memory*
8. Damasio
9. Collingwood
10. Kandel
11. Kandel
12. Freud
13. Freud
14. Freud
15. Freud
16. Dickinson
17. Aristotle
18. Bachelard
19. Picasso
20. Jung
21. Keats
22. Winnicott
23. Bachelard
24. Bachelard

**Word count: 4,629**

## Inventory

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