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I Remember Being Black

JAKE Small

This poem is modeled after Jo Brainard's "I Remember" (2001) which is a poetic prose/ novel that recounts experiences the narrator encountered throughout their life. My poem, "I Remember Being Black," is poetic prose that serves to organize many of my racialized experiences inside of and expansive of formalized education.

Keywords: Black people, Black stories, Black narratives, Black memories, Black Lives Matter

"I Remember Being Black" is dedicated to my three nephews: James, Aaron, and Justin.

I remember being Black in New York City. Nobody cared. It wasn't special. I wasn't the only one.

I remember being Black on September 11th, 2001. Mommy sat with me on the front porch while Dad drove 100mph directly into the heart of the city. He was going to save my aunt. That's how I remember it. I was only 3 years old. I was scared and confused. I remember it was cold.

I remember being Black at a private high school. My brothers made fun of me.

I remember being Black at galas and fundraisers and symposiums with famous people who were quiet about the money they gave. "*Anonymous donor.*"

I remember being Black around the holidays. My family didn't celebrate like everyone else. I don't know if it was a Christian thing or something else – my mom won't tell me.

I am who my ancestors fought for. I am who they dreamed we could become. I am a young, Black, queer boy with so much life to live and so many things left to do. I am JAKE Small (be/ him), a proud scholar-practitioner with something amazing to say!

I remember being Black and people thinking I was older than I really was.

I remember being Black at the grocery store with my mom. She was really good at shopping while asking me questions about school, or football, or anything else. She always got everything on her list. She also never had a list.

I remember being Black with green eyes and people asking if I knew my *real* dad. I remember being confused and also hurt.

I remember being Black while driving. “*DWB* - driving while Black.” I even got pulled over on my bicycle once.

I remember being Black in South Side Jamaica, Queens. We lived in a big house with just enough space. My brothers and I shared a bedroom in the attic and my sister had her own room. My parents deserved more space than they had. They deserved a private bathroom off a master bedroom. My mom deserved a walk-in closet with tall ceilings and a place for her to sit. My uncle had a room on the second floor.

I remember being Black at Poly Prep, SUNY Oswego, and the University of Vermont. I don’t remember being Black at Campus Magnet High School, formerly known as Andrew Jackson or simply “Jack.”

I remember being Black in preschool. Miss Diamond was tall and she had soft hands. Her skin was the same color as mine: light brown with yellow undertones. She said I made the best peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

I remember being Black in Talented & Gifted classes.

I remember being Black in middle school. I remember my eighth-grade teacher. I was always good at mathematics. However, this same teacher taught my older brother four years earlier. He was not very good at mathematics. She was also not very good at teaching but I won’t get into that. Anyway, she only called me by his name, Joseph, for the entire year. When I asked her why she wouldn’t call me Jacob, she told me it was because my name didn’t matter. She told me I didn’t matter. She told me she had taught 100 boys like me and none of us mattered. I stormed out of the room and at the next parent-teacher conference, she told everyone that I threw a chair at her. I didn’t throw a chair at her but that doesn’t matter. White people get to say whatever they want.

I remember being Black and deciding to go by JAKE rather than Jake or Jacob.

I remember being Black during organ lessons. The practice pianos had keys the

same color as the inside of my palms. I got pretty good at playing commercial jingles by ear.

I remember being Black when we learned about slavery in our history class. I spent the entire week wandering the halls with a bathroom pass. The teacher didn't ask me where I went each day; but, if he did, I would have told him the elaborate story I made up in my head about tripping down the stairs and needing to visit the nurse's office.

I remember being Black and learning Spanish. No puedo hablar con fluidez pero sigo practicando todos los días.

I remember being Black with a father in the NYPD. He taught me what to do when I get pulled over before he taught me how to drive. Hands on the wheel in a clear line of sight. Ask before reaching for your wallet. Move slow. Be polite. Always put the SBA card on top of your license. I will teach my sons the same.

I remember being Black and submitting college applications. The first line of my personal statement started, "As a Black man growing up in New York City..." I think I took that line from my older brother.

I remember being Black on my first date with a guy. We went to a movie theater and held hands underneath his jacket.

I remember being Black and applying to graduate school. I had a white friend named Cindy who was equally as involved and had better grades. We didn't get into the same schools and I remember feeling like affirmative action gave me an upper hand. I don't know that it didn't. I don't know that it did.

I remember being Black and hating graphic tees.

I remember being Black and traveling to Europe alone. I felt safe even when I wasn't.

I remember being Black and hearing a Dominican girl call herself Black too. I remember learning that Black people exist all over the world. I remember feeling proud.

I remember being Black at the beach and in the ocean. My family has always loved the water... even my mom.

I remember being Black in so many classes and not seeing a single other Black

person in the room.

I remember being Black in Burlington, Vermont. I was riding my bike from class to my part-time job when a police officer pulled me over. He was suspicious of my backpack and the way I was peddling.

I remember being Black at my grandmother's funeral. I remember watching my sister die too. Black funerals are harder to cry at. We also call them Homecomings.

I remember being Black when Whitney Houston died. I was the first to tell Mom.

I remember being Black in the backyard with my brothers and dad. We lifted weights and told stories that made us sound tougher than I knew we really were.

I remember being Black when my nephews were born. Their names are James, Aaron, and Justin. They have their entire lives ahead of them and I will do anything to protect them. Mine are some of the many shoulders they will stand on to be taller than our ancestors. They will go on to do amazing things and live amazing lives. Brilliant beyond compare. Bright as the sun and stars. Those boys are destined for greatness.

I remember being Black when George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery were all killed in the same year.

I remember being Black when Barack Obama was our President. I remember when Kamala Harris was elected Vice President. I like seeing brown skin in those offices.

I remember being Black. Black Lives Matter.