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### **Writing Assignment: Captioning and Capturing the Past\***

*"Memory is our domestic form of time travel. The invention of photography--in particular, the 'snapshot'--revolutionized human consciousness, for when we claim to 'remember' our pasts, we are surely remembering our favorite snapshots." --Joyce Carol Oates*

Taking the writings below as examples, browse through your own photographs or personal pictures and write an extended "caption" to the photo you select. What does your photo tell you or another viewer? What do you remember, think, and feel about what/whom the picture shows?

Your caption should be 1-2 typed, double-spaced pages. Bring it with you to class next time along with, if possible, the photo that inspired it. Plan to share your picture and your writing with the class and to hand your writing in.

Your caption counts as a "short writing assignment" (see syllabus), and completing it earns you a grade of Check, Check-plus, or Check-minus.

### ***Published Excerpts***

#### **On A Photograph in Her Mother's Album**

The scene speaks to me strongly of Winnipeg: the limestone foundation of the house, the board siding and the bright prairie sunlight breaking through the bare branches. It must be a relatively mild day in late October or November, since the awning has not yet been taken down for the winter. Any moment now this awning will be weighed down with snow or torn to shreds by the ferocious winds that sweep in from the north. Manitoba is a place of climate extremes, with one season usurping the other, and without warning.

The woman's face and body strike me as a brilliant mixture of vulnerability and strength. That sprightly hat, those thickly stockinged legs, that practical coat belted against the cold! The softness in her face is countered by a certain tension in the arms and the way in which her hands are clutched and drawn into her sleeves for warmth.

(Carol Shields, "Caption," *Civilization*, October/November 1996: 112.)

#### **On "Italian Soldier After End of Fighting, Sicily, 1943" by Robert Capa**

The hot Mediterranean landscape. Dust on the bicycle tires. Sun on her tanned arms. Their shadows mingling. The sizzle of cicadas, the slow whirl of the bicycle. The photograph would be diminished without that bicycle; it would be ruined without her long hair. Her hair tells us: this is how she was when he left; she has not changed; she has remained true to him.

She asks about the things that have happened to him; he is hesitant at first, but there is no hurry. Eventually, he tells her of the friends he has lost, the terrible things he has seen. He is impatient for

news of friends and relatives back in their village. She tells about her brother who was also in the army, about the funny thing that happened with the schoolteacher and the butcher's dog.

(Geoff Dyer, "Caption," *Civilization*, October/November 1997: 100.)

### **On a Photograph of Her Mother and Herself, 1941**

My 27-year-old father, Frederic Oates, "Freddy," taking snapshots of my mother and me on this sunny afternoon, is worried about being drafted into the army; in the meantime he's working at Harrison Radiator, a division of General Motors in Lockport, New York, involved in what is unofficially believed to be "defense work" (airplanes). It's a tense, unpredictable era in our history, yet such global turbulence is remote from the grassy backyard of our family home in Millersport, New York; here is a leafy, spacious world, in which my 24-year-old mother, Carolina, and I, an inquisitive child of three years 11 months, appear to be playing with new-born kittens. How happy we must have seemed to that long-lost "Joyce Carol," with little more vexing in her life than the ordeal of having curly hair combed free of snarls and prettily fixed with a ribbon, and being "dressed up" for some adult special occasion.

(Joyce Carol Oates, "Caption," *Civilization*, February/March 1997: 96.)

### **On a Photograph of Her Grandparents**

Abraham, your photograph hangs over my desk. Above the reflection on the glass from the window opposite, Mary stands stalwart behind you while your gaze is set eternally over my shoulder. In the reflection, superimposed over you and Mary in your good formal dark clothes, the Snake River spreads its current as it rolls toward its confluence. The early lights of winter glow on the far bank of the Snake and glow again in the reflected depths of your photograph. I am a long way from home.

(Mary Clearman Blew, *All But the Waltz*. New York, Penguin 1991: 38.)

### ***Excerpts from Student Writers***

#### **On a Photo of Herself at Three Sleeping in a Drawer:**

I am wearing floral printed pajamas. These pajamas were most likely created by my grandmother, like many of my childhood clothes were. The dresser I am sleeping in was made from Grandfather's own crafty hands. . . . I am in a peaceful slumber. I am in my own childlike cocoon. Sometimes I wish I could go back to my childlike cocoon. My mother once told me that on that day she had thought she lost me. She searched the whole house up and down screaming my name aloud. I of course had blocked out the confusion around me. Now I realize it's time for me to wake up from my cocoon and face the confusion head on. . . . I am trying to slowly and carefully break away from the shelters my parents have put around me. . . . I am beginning to wake from peaceful slumber and realize it's time to grow up and face reality. It's time for me to give up the cozy comfort of 'Binky' and break away from the enclosing shelter of the drawer.

### **On a Photo of Her Daughter and Another Six-Year-Old at a Wedding:**

The pose touches me, their arms about each other, having forged a bond of friendship through participating in a ritual they did not fully understand or particularly enjoy. Their disheveled dresses and bare feet bespeak the whimsy of children to put off pomp and pretense in favor of dancing themselves into exhaustion for the sheer joy of it.

Seeing her dressed up was me for a portent of moments to come between my daughter and me. Hazy scenes of dates, dances, proms, and shadows of her own wedding flickered in my mind. I was aware as I took this picture that others like it were to come in our lives together. The events and rituals of a daughter growing, maturing, coming of age and beginning her own independent life is timeless and inescapable in some form or another.

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### **On a Photo of Myself as a Teenager:**

Why did my mother take this photo of me? I'm guessing she took it. It was just the two of us when I was growing up.

I must be sixteen or seventeen. I'm sitting like it's a Sears portrait, hands folded in my lap, smiling in a friendly, safe-for-parents way. But my white tights are spray-painted black, fuchsia, and yellow, and my dress is short and clingy. I can't see my feet, but I'm sure I'm wearing those 10-dollar Chinese slippers trendy at my school. Although I have a dark headband on, my hair still looks Jersey-big—hairspray must have been involved. I probably bought the tights on South Street, along with the slippers and the big, gaudy cross hanging from my neck on a fake leather cord. I remember the old song: "Where do all the hippies meet? South Street, South Street!" South Street wasn't for hippies when I knew it; it was for punks, and a punk was what I wanted to be. Tower Records was on South, and Shishkabibles. Zipperhead was there, the store where you could get vinyl pants and Manic Panic hair dye. (I tried to dye my hair blue once. I didn't want to bleach it first, and I ended up with muddy lowlights the color of dusk. No one noticed.) I got my New Age crystals and incense at the Garland of Letters bookstore, and my clove cigarettes came from the deli around the corner. "What are you doing to yourself?" my mother would ask me whenever I came home smelling of bergamot. She never seemed to expect an answer.

She took lots of pictures of me. It's a good thing she had them; moving-me wasn't as nice to her as still-me was. That very night, I was probably going out with the weird boy she didn't like, taking the train into the city with the tokens she gave me. Some time during the week, I had probably skipped school to be with him. She kicked a book out of my hands the afternoon she found out how much class I had missed—it was covered with a brown paper bag, and it made a muffled thump when it hit the floor. "Wow, she's mad," I thought, and then, "She's not going to do anything." She worked too hard to discipline me, and she couldn't stand my being mad at her. Eventually, she gave up frowning at my outfits and the boys I brought home, the bra straps slipping off my shoulders.

Despite my disappointing ways, my eyes in the picture tell her I'm willing to try to make her happy, to be the nice, normal daughter she wants. I'm giving her my sweet face, and, for once, I'm not flicking my earring back and forth with a thumb and forefinger, swinging it like a pendulum.

\* For this assignment and its examples (except mine), my thanks to Robert Root and his students at Ashland University in Ashland, Ohio.