

THE
COLLECTED
WRITINGS OF
JOE
BRAINARD

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY PAUL AUSTER

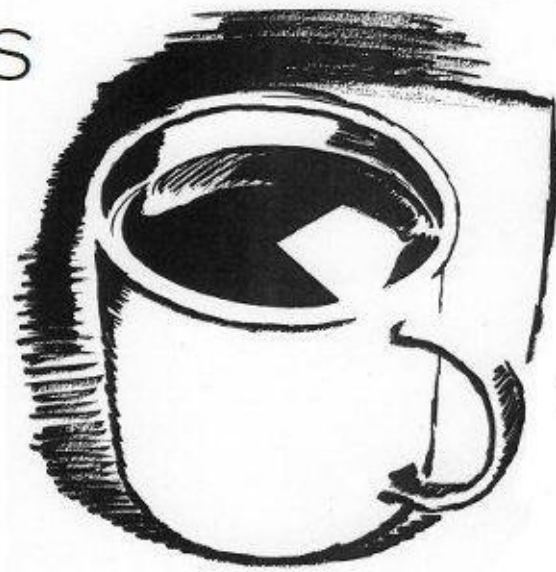
RON PADGETT,
EDITOR

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INTRODUCTION BY PAUL AUSTIN
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A Friend

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Editor's Preface

This book evolved from an idea that its author had as far back as 1965, when he created a handmade booklet entitled *Self-Portrait*. It consisted of ten drawings of individual hairs from ten different parts of his body, with captions identifying the parts. Actually that was just volume 1. Volume 2 had but a single page, at the top of which he glued a tiny square photograph of a nose, to the right of which he drew an arrow pointing to it, with the words "I have a big nose." Although as a painter Joe had done visual self-portraits, this was the first time he used self-portraiture in the creation of a book.

In late 1969 Joe began to assemble the manuscript for a much larger book to be called *Self-Portrait*, but which he published as *Selected Writings* (1971). A year later he and Anne Waldman brought out a collaborative book called *Self-Portrait*. Most of Joe's writings in it were republished in other volumes of his, including the current one.

Joe would eventually write many other pieces in which the primary subject was himself, but this work was created mainly for his friends. It was a way of giving himself to them.

Who was that self? Over the years, in an attempt to answer this question, Joe peeled away the layers of his personality and character. Gradually he realized how complex he was—just like everybody!—and the various forms of his writings reflect that complexity, which I have tried to mirror in the structuring of the *Self-Portrait* section of this book. In it are works that could be divided into two categories: comic, whimsical, even fantastical writings on the one hand, diaristic pieces on the other. My original thought had been to edit a separate volume for each of these categories, until I came to see that some pieces veer back and forth between them. That these hybrids could have fit in either category led me to the realization that Joe's non-diaristic writings are as self-revelatory as the diaristic ones, albeit in a more oblique manner. As Joe himself put it, in a journal entry for June 1969, "Almost everything I write is about me. Even funny fiction stories." Although separating the two types of writing would not be unreasonable—and one can easily make that separation for oneself by using the table of contents—the intertwining of these two strands gives us a richer, more complete, more realistic, and ultimately more satisfying view of the man who strongly preferred that people not think they had him all figured out, compartmentalized, "in their pocket," as he put it.

The plan for this book expanded when the editors at the Library of America suggested that we include Joe's enduring classic, *I Remember*, which deserved a section of its own. To round out the collection, Paul Auster urged us to add several of Joe's interviews.

In the *Self-Portrait* section, I have arranged the writings chronologically, according to their approximate date of composition. In some cases the date is the result of educated guesswork, but the sequencing doesn't stray far from the truth. An advantage of the chronological arrangement is that it gives the reader the opportunity to follow the evolution of Joe's spirit.

When I found different versions of a piece, I usually selected the latest, out of respect for (and in agreement with) Joe's revisions. For the same reason, I have not included several pieces that Joe eventually decided were not strong enough (after rushing one piece into print, he said ruefully, "What was I *thinking?*"); in these instances I agree, the lone exception being the final piece in the book. (At the top of its manuscript, he scribbled an afterthought: "Slow!" It is slow, but what he missed is that its measured, tranquil pace is at the heart of its beauty.) Also exceptional is its being out of chronological order in the current volume; putting it last felt right.

I have corrected Joe's occasionally phonetic spelling—at first embarrassed by it, later he said spelling as not all *that* important—and his uncertain grasp of standard punctuation. However, it would

be wrong to regularize all of his punctuation according to strict copyediting rules, since he sometimes used it as a kind of scoring to indicate tone and tempo, notably in his parentheses that indicate afterthought or his extra-long dashes that suggest a pregnant silence.

For a list of Joe's published pieces not included here, I refer the reader to the Note on the Text. The excluded unpublished manuscript pages amount to relatively few.

* * *

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My thanks also go to the extraordinary staff of the Library of America and to Paul Auster for his enthusiasm for this book and for his introduction.

Much credit is due Robert Butts, whose large donation of Joe's manuscripts and art formed the Joe Brainard Archive of the Mandeville Special Collections Library at the University of California, San Diego, and who painstakingly catalogued the donation. I also appreciate the help I have received over the years from Lynda Claassen, director of the Mandeville Special Collections Library.

A special thanks is reserved for John Brainard for his devotion to his brother's work.

Finally, I thank Joe's companion, Kenward Elmslie, and my wife, Patricia, for help beyond words.

—Ron Padgett

Introduction

I can't remember how many times I have read *I Remember*. I discovered the book soon after it was published in 1975, and in the intervening three and a half decades I have gone back to it once every few years, perhaps seven or eight times in all. The text is not long (just 138 pages in the original edition), but remarkably enough, in spite of these numerous rereadings, whenever I open Joe Brainard's little masterwork again, I have the curious sensation that I am encountering it for the first time. Except for a few indelible passages, nearly all of the memories recorded in the pages of *Remember* have vanished from my own memory. There are simply too many details to hold onto over an extended period of time, too much life is packed into Brainard's shifting, swirling collage of recollections for any one person to remember it in its entirety, and therefore, even if I recognize many of the entries the instant I start to reread them, there are many others that I don't. The book remains new and strange and surprising—for, small as it is, *I Remember* is inexhaustible, one of those rare books that can never be used up.

A prolific visual artist and occasional writer, Brainard stumbled upon the simple but ingenious composition method of *I Remember* in the summer of 1969. He was just twenty-seven, but a highly developed and accomplished twenty-seven, a precocious boy artist who had started exhibiting his work and winning prizes as a grade school student in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and had landed on Manhattan's Lower East Side before he turned twenty. By 1969, he was a veteran of the New York art scene, with several one-man shows to his credit, participation in numerous group shows, cover design for dozens of small literary magazines and books of poetry, stage decors for theater pieces by LeRoi Jones and Frank O'Hara, as well as comic strip collaborations (most of them hilarious) with a long list of poet friends. Collages, large and small assemblages, drawings, and oil paintings—his output was varied and incessant—and on top of that, he also found time to write. Before the miraculous breakthrough of 1969, Brainard had published poems, diaries, and short prose pieces in a number of downtown literary magazines associated with the New York School, and he had already developed a distinctive style of his own—charming, whimsical, unpretentious, frequently ungrammatical, and transparent. Those qualities are all present in *I Remember*, but now, almost by accident, he had hit upon an organizing principle, and the writing takes off and soars into an altogether different register.

With typical nonchalance and acumen, Brainard described the exhilaration he felt while working on his new project in a letter written that summer to poet Anne Waldman: "I am way, way up these days over a piece I am still writing called *I Remember*. I feel very much like God writing the Bible. I mean, I feel like I am not really writing it but that it is because of me that it is being written. I also feel that it is about everybody else as much as it is about me. And that pleases me. I mean, I feel like I am everybody. And it's a nice feeling. It won't last. But I am enjoying it while I can."

I remember... It seems so obvious now, so self-evident, so fundamental and even ancient—as if the magic formula had been known ever since the invention of written language. Write the words *remember*, pause for a moment or two, give your mind a chance to open up, and inevitably you will remember, and remember with a clarity and a specificity that will astonish you. This exercise is now used wherever writing courses are taught, whether for children, college students, or the very old, and the results never fail to summon up long-forgotten particulars of lived experience. As Siri Hustvedt wrote in her recent book, *The Shaking Woman or a History of My Nerves*: "Joe Brainard discovered the memory machine." *

But once you discover the machine, how do you use it? How do you harness the memories that come flooding through you into a work of art, into a book that can speak to someone other than

yourself? Many people have written their own versions of *I Remember* since 1975, but no one has come close to duplicating the spark of Brainard's original, of transcending the purely private and personal into a work that is about *everybody*—in the same way that all great novels are about everybody. It strikes me that Brainard's achievement is the product of several forces that operate simultaneously throughout the book: the hypnotic power of incantation; the economy of the prose; the author's courage in revealing things about himself (often sexual) that most of us would be too embarrassed to include; the painter's eye for detail; the gift for story-telling; the reluctance to judge other people; the sense of inner alertness; the lack of self-pity; the modulations of tone, ranging from blunt assertion to elaborate flights of fancy; and then, most of all (most pleasing of all), the complete musical structure of the book as a whole.

By music, I mean counterpoint, fugue, and repetition, the interweaving of several different voices throughout the nearly fifteen hundred entries of the book. A theme is picked up for a while, then dropped, then picked up again, in the same way that a horn might sound for a few moments in an orchestral piece, then give way to a violin, which in turn will give way to a cello, and then, all but forgotten now, the horn will suddenly return. *I Remember* is a concerto for multiple instruments, and among the various strings and woodwinds Brainard employs in his free-floating, ever-changing composition are the following:

—Family (more than seventy entries), such as “I remember my father in a tutu. As a ballerina dancer in a variety show at church;” “I remember when father seemed too formal, and daddy was out of the question, and dad too fake-casual. But, seeming the lesser of three evils, I chose fake-casual;” “I remember the only time I saw my mother cry. I was eating apricot pie.”

—Food (a hundred entries), including butter and sugar sandwiches, salt on watermelon, chewing candy in movie theaters, and repeated allusions to ice cream, as in “I remember how good a glass of water can taste after a dish of ice cream.”

—Clothes (roughly ninety entries), including pink dress shirts, pillbox hats, and fat ties with flowers on them. (Brainard's earliest ambition was to become a fashion designer.)

—Movies, Movie Stars, T.V., and Pop Music (more than a hundred entries), including references to Perry Como, Liberace, Hopalong Cassidy, Dinah Shore, Tab Hunter, Marilyn Monroe (several times), Montgomery Clift, Elvis Presley, Judy Garland, Jane Russell, Lana Turner, the Lone Ranger, and umpteen others. “I remember that Betty Grable's legs were insured for a million dollars;” “I remember rumors about what Marlon Brando had to do to get his first acting job;” “I remember Gilda Lollobrigida's very tiny waist in *Trapeze*.”

—School and Church (roughly a hundred entries), such as “I remember how much, in high school, I wanted to be handsome and popular;” “I remember an American history teacher who was always threatening to jump out of the window if we didn't quiet down. (Second floor.);” “I remember the clock from three to three-thirty;” “I remember two years of cheating in Spanish class by lightly penciling in the translations of words.”

—The Body (more than a hundred entries), ranging from intimate personal confessions—“I remember examining my cock and balls once and finding them absolutely disgusting”—to observations of others: “I remember a very big boy named Teddy and what hairy legs his mother had. (Long black ones squashed flat under nylons.)”

—Dreams, Daydreams, and Fantasies (more than seventy entries), often pertaining to sex (“I remember sexual fantasies of making it with a stranger in the woods”) but just as often not, such as “I remember day dreams of being a singer all alone on a big stage with no scenery, just one spotlight on me, singing my heart out, and moving my audience to total tears of love and affection.”

—Holidays (fifty entries), centering around Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter, Halloween, and the Fourth of July. “I remember after opening packages what an empty day Christmas is.”

—Objects and Products (more than 130 entries), including driftwood lamps, pop beads, beanbag chairs, ashtrays, pearlized plastic toilet seats, jeweled bottle openers, “Ace” combs, roller skate keys, Aspergum, dented ping pong balls, and miniature Bibles. “I remember the first ballpoint pens. They skipped, and deposited little balls of ink that would accumulate on the point.”

—Sex (more than fifty entries), detailing early heterosexual fumbleings in high school—“I remember the first time I got jerked off (never did discover it for myself). I didn’t know what she was trying to do and so I just laid there like a zombie not helping one bit” —later homosexual experiences and glimpses of gay life—“I remember not liking myself for not picking up boys I probably could have picked up because of the possibility of being rejected” —and more general (often touching) remarks: “I remember early sexual experiences and rubbery knees. I’m sure sex is much better now but I do miss my rubbery knees.”

—Jokes and Common Expressions (more than forty entries), including sick jokes, Mary Anne jokes—“I remember ‘Mommy, Mommy, I don’t like my little brother.’ ‘Shut up, Mary Anne, and eat what I tell you to!’” —traveling salesman jokes, and phrases such as “to coin a phrase,” “See you later, alligator,” “Because I say so, that’s why,” and “I remember, when babies fall down, ‘oopsy-daisy.’”

—Friends and Acquaintances (more than ninety entries), which tend to take the form of small narratives and are generally longer than the other sections of the book. One example: “I remember my parents’ bridge teacher. She was very fat and very butch (cropped hair) and she was a chain smoker. She prided herself on the fact that she didn’t have to carry matches around. She lit each new cigarette from the old one. She lived in a little house behind a restaurant and lived to be very old.” Another example: “I remember Anne Kepler. She played the flute. I remember her straight shoulders. I remember her large eyes. Her slightly roman nose. And her full lips. I remember an oil painting I did of her playing the flute. Several years ago she died in a fire giving a flute concert at a children’s home in Brooklyn. All the children were saved. There was something about her like white marble.”

—Autobiographical Fragments (twenty entries): a less insistent theme than the other subjects explored by Brainard, but fundamental to our understanding of his project, his life. We see him arriving in New York for the first time, learn of his stuttering and shyness, witness his initial encounter with the poet Frank O’Hara, are informed of his poverty and destitution during an early stint in Boston (“I remember collecting cigarette butts from the urns in front of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston”), are told about his short, unhappy stint as a scholarship student at the Dayton Art Institute (“I remember in Dayton, Ohio the art fair in the park where they made me take down all my naked self-portraits”), are given a full account of his draft board physical and his rejection by the army after he declared himself to be a homosexual (even though he was a virgin at the time), and are exposed to his self-doubts as an artist, which surely played a role in his decision to stop exhibiting his work during the last fifteen years of his life, as in this laconic but poignant entry: “I remember when I thought I was a great artist.”

—Insights and Confessions (forty entries), most of them about Brainard’s inner life and character, his overpowering self-consciousness (“I remember that I never cried in front of other people;” “I remember being embarrassed to blow my nose in public”), his awkwardness in social situations (“I remember, at parties, after you’ve said all you can think of to say to a person—but then you both stand”), and, here and there, instances of almost blinding emotional clarity: “I remember that life was just as serious then as it is now,” which could be the most important sentence in the book, the reason why the fifteen hundred fragments of *I Remember* ultimately cohere to form a solid and integrated work.

—Musings (more than thirty entries), which track the various stray thoughts that come flying in and out of consciousness, the bafflements and perplexities of someone trying to make sense of the world, the bizarre questions all people wind up asking themselves at one time or another. “I remember

not understanding why people on the other side of the world didn't fall off;" "I remember wondering if girls fart too;" "I remember wondering how turtles 'do it';" "I remember thinking once that flushing away pee might be a big waste. I remember thinking that pee is probably good for something and that if one could just discover what it was good for one could make a mint."

Such are the various themes and threads that comprise the totality of *I Remember*. Among its many virtues, it is a book that dwells with great focus on the sensuous details of somatic life (what it feels like to have your hair cut in a barber shop, what it feels like to "turn around and around real fast until you can't stand up," to hear water swishing around in your stomach for the first time and think you might have a tumor), that lovingly records the banal and trivial details of the American landscape of the forties, fifties, and sixties, and presents us with a portrait of a particular man—the modest, self-effacing young Joe Brainard—that is so precise and uninhibited in its telling that we as readers inevitably begin to see our own lives portrayed in his. The memories keep coming at us, relentlessly and without pause, one after the other with no strictures regarding chronology or place. One moment we are in New York, the next moment we are in Tulsa or Boston, a recollection from twenty years ago stands side by side with a memory from last week, and the farther we advance into the text, the more resonant each articulation becomes. As Brainard himself understood as he was writing *I Remember*, it is, truly, a book that belongs to everyone.

It is also interesting to consider what is *not* in Brainard's book, all the things that most of us would probably feel inclined to put in if we were to sit down and write our own versions of *Remember*. No memories of sibling conflict, no memories of cruelty or physical violence, no eruptions of anger, no impulse to settle scores, no bitterness. Aside from fleeting references to the Kennedy assassination, "Korea" (in quotation marks), and the "I Like Ike" slogan of the Eisenhower presidential campaigns, there are no memories of political, public, or national events. Mondrian, Picasso, and Van Gogh are all mentioned, but there is nothing about Brainard's development as a visual artist, and except for telling us that he read all of Dostoyevsky's novels in Boston, no memories of discovering the work of other writers, even though Brainard was a passionate reader of fiction. No grief, no rage, and very few tears. Only one entry ("I remember throwing my eye-glasses into the ocean off the Staten Island ferry one black night in a fit of drama and depression") gives any hint of emotional suffering or deep inner turmoil. Brainard's book was written at the precise moment when so-called confessional poetry was dominating the American literary scene. Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and John Berryman (all suicides) were in vogue, and the private rant had become an acceptable, even lauded form of poetic discourse. Brainard confesses, but he does not rant, and he has no interest in mythologizing the story of his own life. He seduces us with his gentleness, his lack of pomposity, his imperturbable interest in everything the world offers up to him. He begins and ends small, but the cumulative force of so many small, exquisitely rendered observations turns his book into something great, something that will become, I believe, an enduring part of American literature.

* * *

Before *I Remember*, and after *I Remember*, and even during *I Remember* (which was composed of four separate stages between 1969 and 1973), there were, and are, the several hundred pages of Joe Brainard's other writings. Spanning three decades (from the early sixties to the early nineties), this work falls more or less equally into two general categories: short texts (fiction, non-fiction, poems) and diaries or journals (Brainard used the terms interchangeably). The short pieces tend to be funny—often uproariously funny. The diaries are flatter and more introspective, but not without their bursts of funniness as well. Brainard is an unclassifiable writer, but there are moments when his antics and inventions recall some of the zanier stunts performed by older American humorists, in particular Ring

Lardner and S. J. Perelman. Different as they are in so many ways, all three share a love of nonsense of parody and pastiche, of disjointed narrative, and alternately exploit both raucous and deadpan approaches to the comic. In Brainard's case, one could also cite the influence of Dada and Surrealism as filtered through the japeries and ironies of the New York School poets, as well as an occasional tip of the hat to Gertrude Stein, as in this delicious passage from an early "story" entitled "May Dye": "we found breaking bird feathers quite easy and extremely enjoyable and we enjoyed enjoyable things in the most enjoyable way you can imagine enjoyable things being enjoyed."

From the exuberant high jinks of "Back in Tulsa Again" to the irreverent and inspiriting "People of the World: Relax!" ("Take it easy and smoke a lot / Make all the noise you want to on the toilet. Other people will hear you but it does not matter / People of the world: RELAX!") to the inartistic brilliance of the one-sentence "No Story" ("I hope you have enjoyed not reading this story as much as I have enjoyed not writing it"), Brainard disarms us with the seemingly tossed-off, spontaneous nature of his writing and his stubborn refusal to accede to the pieties of self-importance. We must remember that he was very young when the wildest pieces in this collection were written—still in his twenties—and what these little works capture most fully, it seems to me, is precisely a sense of youth, the laughter of youth, the energy of youth, for in the end they are not really *about* anything so much as what it means to be young, that hopeful, anarchic time when all horizons are open to us and the future appears to be without limits.

Little by little, however, the pieces begin to take on a more somber tone, even as Brainard continues to maintain the lightness of his touch. By the mid-seventies, following his enormous exhibition of 1500 collages at the Fischbach Gallery, he seems to have entered a personal and artistic crisis, leading to such troubling statements as: "the person I always thought I was simply isn't anymore: *does not exist!*" (in "Nothing to Write Home About") and then, a few sentences later in the same piece: "the sky is no longer the limit . . . the temptation to wallow in one's own muck—simply surrender—to give up—is far too appealing. And far too realistic a possibility for comfort."

In 1978, in an interview with Anne Waldman, it is clear that Brainard is already preparing to jump ship:

AW: Do you think one has a choice about being an artist?

JB: Oh yes, I think one always has a choice.

AW: When did you make that choice?

JB: I don't think I ever made it, but I think I have a choice. I think I could stop it now.

AW: Isn't it too late to stop?

JB: No, I don't really think so. I think I could stop tomorrow, I really do.

Not long after that, he did stop. No more exhibitions of his work, no more writing for publication. For the next fifteen years—until his death from AIDS in 1994 at age fifty-two—he spent his time reading books and nurturing his friendships with the many people he loved, the many people who adored him. Why he withdrew from the art world remains a mystery. Some say that he was burned out, exhausted by the frenzied pace that had fueled such an abundant outpouring of work. Others say that he was disappointed in his progress as an artist, by his failure (self-perceived failure) to master oil painting to the degree he aspired to. Others, such as poet Ann Lauterbach (a good friend of Brainard's during his last years), have reported that he felt he didn't have enough ambition, or at least not "the right kind of ambition." And then, too, there was the growing competitiveness and commercialization of the art world, which made Brainard feel increasingly uncomfortable and out of place, for, as Lauterbach puts it, "Joe had no taste for this new aggressive combat. Life and art were, for Joe Brainard, acts of devoted camaraderie and generative collaboration." *

All of these factors might have played a part in Brainard's decision, but it is important to no

that he was not anguished by this decision, and he walked away from his career without regrets. Roy Padgett (the editor of this volume), whose friendship with Brainard began in a first grade classroom in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and continued until the last day of Brainard's life in New York City, believes that Brainard's evolution from artist to former artist was almost inevitable. As he writes in his book about Brainard: "In a 1973 letter . . . Joe referred to what he felt was his 'basic lack of dedication to "art." For him, art was "simply 'a way of life'" that enabled him to fulfill his need to give people 'a present and perhaps be loved in return. Gradually . . . Joe's need to make art diminished as his own life became his art." †

With that in mind, it strikes me as altogether fitting that Padgett should have been chosen to begin and end the second part of this book with two previously unpublished pieces, "Self-Portrait on Christmas Night," written in 1961, when Brainard was just nineteen years old, and a short, untitled paragraph from January 1978, almost half a lifetime later—a glimpse, as it were, of Joe Brainard before he became Joe Brainard, followed by a glimpse of Joe Brainard when he was beginning to distance himself from the Joe Brainard of old.

"Self-Portrait on Christmas Night" is an extremely moving document, a passionate cry from the heart delivered by a very young man (still a boy, really) about his hopes and fears as an artist and as a human being. With uncanny prescience, it maps out the journey this young man is about to take, as Brainard instinctively understood the doubts and potential stumbling blocks that lay ahead of him. Romantic and excessive, different in tone from all of his other writings, it is both a declaration of independence and the anatomy of a soul in conflict. "I'll always know, yet will never really know. Will do great paintings, but will never do what I want. Will learn to understand and accept life, but will never know why. Will love and make love, but will know it could be greater. Will be smart, but will always know there's so much more to learn. I'm damned, but can't change."

A gush of adolescent angst, to be sure, a single paragraph that sprints along breathlessly for fourteen typewritten pages, but painfully honest and insightful, an essential key to our understanding of Brainard's work, and then, sixteen years and one month later, when the adolescent fires were nearly extinguished, the painter who was also a writer sat down to compose a small scene in words. Working calmly and patiently, with no ambition other than to depict the visual and sensual this-ness of what he feels like to sit in a room and look out the window, he offers up his impressions as a gift, since all art for Brainard is a gift to an Other, to a real or imagined someone, and that sublime little paragraph ends with these words:

Outside my window snow is falling down, against a translucent sky of deep lavender, with a touch of orange, zig-zagged along the bottom into a silhouette of black buildings. (The icebergs click off, and shudders.) And it's as simple as this, what I want to tell you about; if perhaps not much, everything. Painting the moment for you tonight.

—Paul Austen
December 2004

*Henry Holt, New York. 2010.

*Preface to *The Nancy Book*, by Joe Brainard, published posthumously in 2008 by Siglio Press, Los Angeles.

† *Joe: A Memoir of Joe Brainard*. Coffee House Press, Minneapolis. 2004.





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