**Strategies for Writing MEMOIR: Scene, Summary, and Musing**

from Writing the Memoir by Judith Barrington

However you structure your memoir, you will need to employ certain fiction-writing skills in order to make the most of the story element. Scene and summary are two important ways of moving through a story. Musing is an added element, sometimes present in fiction, but always essential to memoir.

On way of understanding scene and summary is to think of them in cinematic terms: the summary is the long shot - the one that pulls back to a great distance, taking in not only the whole house, but the street, then the neighborhood, and then perhaps the whole city. This view can include a huge number of details, but all seen from a distance, none apparently more important than another.

The scene is more like the close-up, the camera zooming in through the kitchen window, picking out the two figures talking at the table and going up really close to the face of first one speaker then the other while the audience hears each one speak. Many details of the kitchen are lost with this shot; maybe a blurry blue pitcher on a sideboard behind one of the speakers can just be discerned; perhaps there is a vague impression of yellow walls and an open door. But in this scene it is the speakers and what they say that matters. Only selected details are in sharp focus.

Translated into literary time, these two approaches represent different paces. We use the summary when we want to cover a lot of time in a few paragraphs; it gets us from the end of one scene to another scene a year later, and on the way there, it fills in information that is important to the continuity of the story. Often in summary, the action described refers to an ongoing set of actions that take place over time.

Scene, on the other hand, deals with a much shorter span of time; we slow down the narrative to something more like the actual time it takes for the scene to unravel in life. Because the writer is going in close and because there is no need to crunch a lot of time into a small space, she can give the exact dialogue, note the expressions, reactions, and movements of the speakers, as well as sounds, sights, smells, etc. in the immediate environment. She may go inside a character’s head and give us thoughts that aren’t expressed in the dialogue. She may describe in some detail the facial expression of one character. She selects which details to render in close-up.

A scene will often begin with a specific time location such as: one day in spring, Thursday afternoon, three weeks later, at five o’clock. Scene often includes dialogue which moves the story along. Even if you can’t remember the exact dialogue, in memoir you strive to replicate the truth of the dialogue as best as your memory can.

The musing element of memoir appears in two different forms. Sometimes it takes place right there on the page, visibly separated from the experience it is reflecting on; at other times the author lets us see that she has done her musing out of our sight but displays the resulting wisdom. What is always recognizable, though, is the presence of the retrospective voice.