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ARTICLE

Tiny Jubilations: Using Photography in Fiction and an Extract from a Novel

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Zoë Strachan offers here an examination of the haunting power of photography as a creative stimulus. She discusses the use of photographs in Janice Galloway's two autobiographies *This is Not About Me* (2008) and *All Made Up* (2011), as well as her own use of photographic inspiration for her currently untitled new novel, an extract from which closes the special issue.

Keywords: memory; photography; creative writing; family narratives; Scottish literature

Street photographers were a feature of seaside towns in Britain from the 1850s until the 1950s and beyond. Their heyday was in the 1930s. On the August Bank Holiday of 1939, the fifty 'reflex men' working for Sunbeam Photos of Margate took



Figure 1: *Largs*, July 1943.

35,000 photographs of holidaymakers and day-trippers (Harding 2013). The typical image was the 'walkie', in which the subjects were snapped as they walked along the promenade, and then handed a receipt so that they could purchase the image from a shop or stall once developed. The photos might be retained as keepsakes or sent to a friend as a holiday postcard.

At present I am using two particular kinds of photographs to help me write a novel: family photos from an album that belonged to my grandmother, and archival photographs taken of Kilmarnock by the town planning department of what is now East Ayrshire Council. These latter – discovered by a librarian friend in a musty box, ignored for decades – depict buildings scheduled for demolition and new builds, amongst other, sometimes incongruous, sights. The novel is a kind of family saga set in small town Scotland between 1935 and 1970, or at least it focusses on the lives, marriage and ambitions of a couple, Rena and Bobby. While it would be accurate to say that the photographs are part of the historical research process, their role is more fundamental and more complex than that; the novel is set in my home town of Kilmarnock and the characters and their stories are based, loosely, on real people and events. I want to use this article to investigate photography and fiction in both general and personal terms, and I will end by presenting a short extract from my work in progress.

The photograph reproduced above comes from a family album. Although walking photographs were far less common during the war, I assume it was taken by a street photographer. Largs was a seaside resort, and an overflow seaplane base operated there, so there would have been plenty of visitors in 1943. Although taken in great numbers, and not conceived as art, walkies demanded skill, an almost instantaneous assessment of time and movement by the photographer: 'The trick was to focus slightly in front of people walking towards you to allow for the slight delay in taking the photograph after releasing the shutter,' explains Colin Harding, Curator of Photographic Technology at the National Media Museum (Harding 2013). Today we value such images as social history. They offer naturalistic glimpses of the past, often unposed; in *On Photography*, Susan Sontag notes that, 'The good manners of a camera culture dictate that one is supposed to pretend not to notice when one is being photographed by a stranger in a public place' (Sontag 1990 [1977], 171). When they

are discovered in the heavy pages of family albums, as Sontag says, 'Those ghostly traces, photographs, supply the token presence of the dispersed relatives' (Sontag 1990 [1977], 9). It might not have been at the forefront of the reflex men's minds when they paced the promenade at Largs, but when we take photographs we 'participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt'; that is why, indeed, 'All photographs are *memento mori*' (Sontag 1990 [1977], 15).

Given that photographs necessarily depict the past, we look to them often for evidence, thinking perhaps of the assumed veracity of reportage and scene of crime photographs. Sometimes that evidence is incontrovertible: Betty, the model for my character Rena, did wear a trouser suit, as I'd been told. There it is in black (or navy) and white. But the photograph as hard evidence has long been seen as problematic, even if we do not become entangled in its peculiar phenomenology. Walter Benjamin referred to Brecht's *The Threepenny Trial* to describe why:

'For the situation,' says Brecht, is 'made complicated by the fact that less than at any time does a simple "reproduction of reality" express something about reality. A photograph of the Krupps factory or AEG reveals next to nothing

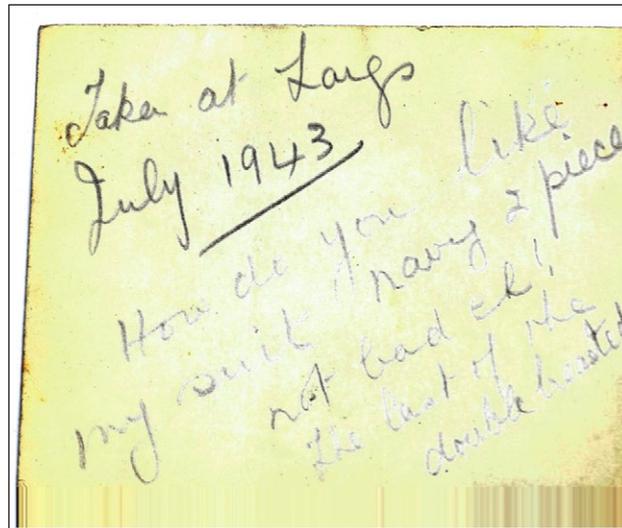


Figure 2: How do you like my suit navy 2 piece not bad eh! The last of the double breasted.

about these institutions. Actual reality has slipped into the functional. The reification of human relations, as in, for example, the factory, no longer makes these explicit. Effectively it is necessary “to build something up”, something “artificial”, “posed”.’ (Benjamin 2015, 91–2)

Susan Sontag offers an additional slant: ‘in the situations in which most people use photographs, their value is of the same order of fiction’ (Sontag 1990 [1977], 22), while in his response to *On Photography*, John Berger tells us that, ‘Photographs in themselves do not narrate’ (Berger 1980, 51).’ I believe that not only do photographs contain narrative, they invite us to invent it: Betty was a fan of Katherine Hepburn, that’s why she wore the suit. The something that it is necessary for us to build up is the fictional endeavour, and although mimesis is part of it, it is not the whole story.

With this in mind, we can understand why the examination of family photographs might provide a useful opening strategy for Janice Galloway’s two volumes of memoir, *This Is Not About Me* (2008) and *All Made Up* (2011). The titles suggest an ambivalence, to say the least, about the notion that memoir is more ‘truthful’ than fiction, and about the way in which we categorise literary works. In the first volume, the narrator surveys a photograph of herself, her sister and her mother sitting in the living room of their home in Saltcoats: ‘There are three chairs, a wicker rocker with embroidered cushions and a pair of short bare legs poke into the picture from the right, suspended by unknown means. It’s a doll all right, and if it’s a doll, it’s mine. I am implicated in these surroundings by this evidence alone’ (Galloway 2008, 2).

The description of the furniture, of the strangely positioned, dismembered doll, as well as the language used (‘implicated’) suggest that Galloway’s investigation is forensic. She is seeking evidence for something, but what? In the second volume, the photograph described at the beginning is of young Janice and her mother standing outside the house, ‘waiting for the shutter release to set us free, our self-consciousness rising through the gloss finish paper’ (Galloway 2011, 2). The shadow of the photographer is visible in the photograph: ‘without him, the evidence we were here together on this day would not exist, even if it’s partial’ (Galloway 2011, 4). The reproduction of reality is in full colour rather than black and white, but any proof it can

offer is incomplete. Contemporary cognitive theories of memory suggest that while we are likely to be able to come up with a reasonably accurate narrative of our lives, it is not simply a case of whipping out the relevant images from a mental card index. Instead, every instance of remembering is also an instance of retelling.¹

Family photographs are more than *aides memoire*. They do not simply record times gone by, and our responses to them are deeper than nostalgia. Taking photographs, collating them, looking through them, all of these actions can serve to reinforce the idea of the family unit. Marianne Hirsch makes a further argument:

the family is in itself traversed and constituted by a series of “familial” looks that place different individuals into familial relation within a field of vision. When I visually engage with others familiarly, when I look through my family’s albums, I enter a network of looks that dictate affiliative feelings, positive or negative feelings of recognition that can span miles and generations: I “recognize” my great-grandmother because I am told that she is an ancestor, not because she is otherwise in any way similar or identifiable to me. It is the context of the album that creates the relationship, not necessarily any preexistent sign. And when I look at her picture, I feel as though she also recognizes me (Hirsch 1997, 53).

Galloway’s description of looking at family photographs is a wonderfully vivid expression of this. In *All Made Up* the mother and daughter picture is interrupted by the glimpse of the older sister:

And we are not alone. Hidden, or so she thinks, is a sliver of another woman: a partial tumble of black, black hair, one cheek, the corner of an eye on the extreme right of the snap [. . .] Hoping Cora will calm down enough to take the train to somewhere else has been my guilty secret for ages and it’s not the only one, but today no one is admitting their dark side. The sun is up, the

¹ See Eakin, Paul John. 2008. *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

sky is blue and somebody, by being here and holding a camera, is helping to ensure we pull out the stops (Galloway 2011, 2–3).

Say 'cheese'. We all perform for the family photo, but some kind of reciprocity may be expected. Martha Langford makes a compelling argument:

The showing and telling of an album is a performance. Most of us are spoiled by the ideal circumstances in which we normally encounter an album – with an interpreter in the home. Viewing an album in company must be considered the normal spectatorial experience, so persistent is the framework in scholarly and literary description. This is not because a private album is so openly accessible, but precisely because it is not. Its personal nature and intended restriction to a circle of intimates, even to an audience of one, licenses singular arrangements of situational images that need explanation and are enhanced by a tale (Langford 2008, 5).

Any Christmas with a difficult relative will have convinced us that the effort of playing the game of happy families for the camera, can, in Hirsch's words, 'reduce the strains of family life by sustaining an imaginary cohesion, even as it exacerbates them by creating images that real families cannot uphold' (Hirsch 1997, 7).

Galloway's description of her family snaps exemplifies this, and in doing so sets up the real work of the memoirs; to trace the network of looks that delineate family relationships, to create a space in which the 'dark side' may be exposed to the bright sun. Hirsch describes the remembrance and act of definition intrinsic in tracing the familial look as forming 'part of the story through which I construct myself [. . .] It is fundamentally an interpretative and a narrative gesture, a fabrication out of available pieces that acknowledges the fragmentary nature of the autobiographical act [. . .] Photographs are fragments of stories, never stories in themselves' (Hirsch 1997, 83).

Photographs may not be able to narrate, but they do contain narrative. While they may provide a discourse, they cannot offer us the whole story; the fun parts that take us beyond 'A man and a woman walk along a street in Largs' to the 'what and why'



Figure 3: *Betty*, Sauchiehall Street.

of this action.² The interpretative and narrative gesture that Hirsch describes takes place later on, in the process of writing. It is no accident that the photos Galloway describes are not themselves reproduced, although the covers of both books do use images of her as a child and young woman. Besides, she has warned us already that the text we are reading is 'All Made Up'. For all we know, the photos themselves may be invented or amalgamated from similar images. Either way, they are the prompt for the story she goes on to tell.

Benjamin and others have taught us that the idea of photographic truth has its limits. When we look at family photographs, we might as well dismiss any aspirations towards objectivity altogether. We cannot escape what the American professor of human communication and auto-ethnographer H. L. Goodall refers to as our 'narrative inheritance':

the afterlives of the sentences used to spell out the life stories of those who came before us. What we inherit narratively from our forebears provides us with a framework for understanding our identity through theirs. It helps us

² See also Batty, Greg. 2014. *Photography, Narrative, Time: Imaging Our Forensic Imagination*. Bristol: Intellect, 40–43.

see our life grammar and working logic as an extension of, or a rebellion against, the way we story how they lived and thought about things, and it allows us to explain to others where we come from and how we were raised in the continuing context of what it all means. We are fundamentally *homo narrans*—humans as storytellers— and a well-told story brings with it a sense of fulfilment and of completion. But we don't always inherit that sense of completion. We too often inherit a family's unfinished business, and when we do, those incomplete narratives are given to us to fulfil (Goodall 2005, 492–3).

Each of the photographs that I have included here was taken before I was born. There is no date attached to the one above, although the pencilled annotation in the album – in the subject's own handwriting – tells me it is 'Betty, Sauchiehall Street'. If I had to hazard a guess, I might say it was taken in the early 1930s. Parts of Betty's story have been passed down to me, and their tantalising incompleteness has provoked a need to make a fictional response, or a retelling, but of course I am writing well after the fact, at a distance of decades, an entire generation. For this reason I find myself interested in Marianne Hirsch's idea of 'post-memory':

post-memory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Post-memory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation (Hirsch 1997, 22).

This concept is developed by Hirsch in a context entirely alien to my own, that of the children of Holocaust survivors, and I would like to leave trauma of any kind out of the present discussion. Nevertheless, there is a resonance for me in her statement that: 'Post-memory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated' (Hirsch 1997, 23).

The fictional work in which I am engaged is, in part, an interpretative and narrative gesture along the lines described above, and I see a clear parallel between Goodall's narrative inheritance and the narratives preceding birth of Hirsch's argument. The site at which these two distinct concepts intersect is for me a site of inspiration, and it is in order to exploit that possibility that my process of writing has revolved so intimately around photographs. For Hirsch, photographs 'are the medium connecting first- and second-generation remembrance, memory and post-memory. They are the leftovers, the fragmentary sources and building blocks, shot through with holes, of the work of post-memory' (Hirsch 1997, 23).

Let me return briefly to the description of the photograph of Janice Galloway and her mother outside their house, and the shadow of the photographer looming over the image: 'It fills most of the frame and makes us one: the ghosts and the present-but barely-correct, those doing our best not to be. Our stories mesh despite the gaps and the radio that is always by my sister's side plays tinny Frank Sinatra hits on Radio 2' (Galloway 2011, 4). Although we have spoken of photographs freezing time, something more interesting is happening here. Note the present tense: the radio is playing, now, in all the distinct moments of looking, remembering, writing and reading that this passage has and will engender. As another Scottish writer engaged in memory work, John Burnside, writes: 'No memory happens in the past. To say this in so many words is, no doubt, to state the obvious – our memories happen now, in the madeleine- and tisane-tinctured present' (Burnside 2014, 268).

Photographs may well be *memento mori* then, but they do not function in a way that is static, carved in stone. For John Berger 'the context of the instant recorded is preserved so that the photograph lives in an ongoing continuity (Berger 1980 [1978], 56). In the second part of *Camera Lucida* Barthes writes very movingly of his responses to a photograph of his mother, age five, in a Winter Garden. '*This will be and this has been*', is the 'catastrophe' that every photograph bears, he says (Barthes 2000 [1980], 96). I wonder if this underpins all that we see when we look at photographs, or if, indeed, it is all that we – if we are fundamentally *homo narrans* – can see. Why else, after all, do we tell stories, or feel moved to write them down?



Figure 4: Campbell Street.

In *Photography, Narrative, Time* Greg Batty suggests that, 'Photography's unusual relationship with time, and our uniquely human preoccupation with time and time's consequences, make for the presence of unexpected kinds of meaning in some photographs, including narrative and fictional meanings not hitherto conceived of as possible for a medium seemingly limited to the depiction of durationless instants' (Batty 2014, 54).³

This discussion risks neglecting the simplest ways in which we can read photographs, the ones which yield pleasingly easy answers. In the family album which I have on my desk, several small photographs appear laid out in a grid, inviting some gentle detective work. A magnifying glass reveals the names of films opening at the Plaza: *Black Narcissus*, *The Gallant Blade*. A second on the internet determines that it

³ Here, Batty is considering photography as art in general, rather than family photographs in particular, but I think the point holds.

was in 1947 that Deborah Kerr starred in *Black Narcissus*, and that *The Gallant Blade* was released a year later, featuring Larry Parks. The two photographs in which these titles appear are themselves almost identical, save for the changing cinema posters. A view taken from across a wide road, looking towards a small shop called the Bungalow Stores, where one could buy Craven A or Players Please. A view repeated to document, to reinforce, the idea of the family as the owners of a shop. In another photograph, three sisters ('Aunt Bess, Min & Mother')⁴ stand across the road from the shop. The shop itself is out of view. A cat is stalking behind the women, its head obscured by Mother's striped suit. It looks like a stray, but perhaps not. Someone has laid a shopping bag, or something, on the grass to her left, possibly believing it to be out of shot. The billboard posters range in a row behind them. I need to take off my glasses and squint to read the text. Left to right: 'Whiteways Cyder'; 'VD can be cured, if treated early'; unintelligible but it looks like a soldier; 'Aitken's Beer, just what I want' (a Scots Guard is pictured drinking it, so it must be the ticket); 'Good mornings begin with Gillette'; 'Unionists would let the builders build you a house now'; 'Golden Shred' (and yes, that is a golly striding in front of the marmalade jar); '5 years in the army'.

These small historical details are useful to accumulate. They enhance an imagined sense of time and place. Detail works harder than that in fiction though, and the details we see in photographs may strike us in different, more personal, ways. Sontag wrote that, 'Insofar as photography does peel away the dry wrappers of habitual seeing, it creates another habit of seeing: both intense and cool, solicitous and detached; charmed by the insignificant detail, addicted to incongruity' (Sontag 1990 [1977], 99).

One of the many things I admire in Janice Galloway's writing is her use of detail, the specificity of what is noticed, in the descriptions of the photographs and of other places, people and scenes. Even if we can't trust the ways in which familial looks are revealed or obscured, I am quite convinced that young Janice liked her eyelids 'slathered with purple sparkles' because 'Rimmel makes everything possible', and

⁴ My great-aunts and great-grandmother.

that her split ends had a tendency to 'fray out like burning rope', conditioner not having been invented (Galloway 2011, 2). Likewise, in that odd way by which we picture fictional characters from only a few brushstrokes⁵, her mother is entirely constructed for me by 'two dabs of powder and a modest blot of an old Estée Lauder number called Egyptian Coffee she's had for years' (Galloway 2011, 2). The title, *All Made Up*, refers also to the way in which women create or conceal their identities, the way in which they face the world. In *This Is Not About Me* another kind of detail is chosen to make a similar point: 'There was always a fag, always a fag burn, so these details make the composition evocative. There is a photographer present and we're not at ease, not really, but if every picture tells a story we want this story to suggest we amount to something, that we are at the least getting by. In our best duds, our bravest faces, we're trying our damndest to look right at home' (Galloway 2008, 2).

While most writers would surely agree that it is a useful endeavour to find strategies for peeling away 'the dry wrappers of habitual seeing', I am not convinced that this will always result in a coolness or detachment of gaze. After all, Mark Doty begins his 'Description's Alphabet' thus: 'Description is an ART to the degree that it gives us not just the world but the inner life of the witness' (Doty 2010, 65). The details we choose are loaded, usually specific to a point of view, and in most kinds of fiction we expect them to work as hard as Galloway's fag burn does in the quote above. There is a strange doubling of subjectivity; that of the narrator who notices such details, and that of the author sitting behind her. Many of those details are, I suspect, chosen as we form mental photographs of the scenes we are creating. As Moholy-Nagy wrote, since the advent of photography, 'we see the world with entirely different eyes' (Moholy Nagy 1969, 29).

If we are thinking of detail in photographs, and by extension in fiction, we must turn again to Barthes and *Camera Lucida*. He apprehends 'the co-presence of two

⁵ For more on this see Mendelsund, Peter. 2014. *What We See When We Read: A Phenomenology with Illustrations*. New York: Vintage.

discontinuous elements' in certain photographs that arouse his interest, and names them the *studium* and the *punctum* (Barthes 2010 [1980], 23–27). The *studium* is the surface subject and its context, that which accounts for our general historical, political or aesthetic interest in a photograph, and recognising it means we 'encounter the photographer's intentions [. . .] enter into harmony with them' (Barthes 2010 [1980], 27–8). Barthes is more interested in the *punctum*, an idea that appealed to me even before I began using the photographs I am working with now. The *punctum* in a photograph is: 'that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)', the element that disturbs the *studium* when it 'rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me' (Barthes 2010 [1980], 26–7). It is a detail that attracts us, and changes our reading of the photograph, and crucially it is not predictable or explicable, but depends on the lens of the viewer rather than that of the photographer. Initially Barthes uses the example of the Mary Jane shoes of a girl in a 1926 photo by James Van der Zee of an African American family but later, once the photograph has '*worked* within' him, he realises:

the real *punctum* was the necklace she was wearing; for (no doubt) it was this same necklace (a slender ribbon of braided gold) which I had seen worn by someone in my own family, and which, once she died, remained shut up in a family box of old jewellery (this sister of my father never married, lived with her mother as an old maid, and I had always been saddened whenever I thought of her dreary life).

(Barthes 2010 [1980], 53).⁶

In this, I think, we can detect echoes of Susan Suleiman's idea of autobiographical reading: 'the autobiographical imperative applies not only to writing about one's life

⁶ Oddly, in the photograph reproduced on p. 44 it looks as if the woman is wearing pearls. It might also be worth noting that the *punctum* has what Barthes calls a 'power of expansion', a possibility of transcendence that might circumvent the peculiar phenomenology of photography that I mentioned at the beginning of this essay by enabling the photograph to 'annihilate itself as a medium. . . be no longer a sign but the thing itself' (45).

but to reading about it; reading *for* it; reading, perhaps, *in order to* write about it' (Suleiman 1993, 563, italics in original).⁷

When I look at photographs of my family, or of the place where I was born and grew up, I wonder if, consciously or not, I am searching for the *punctum*. Perhaps I am reading for it in order to write about it, and in order to find the details that will prick and bruise in fiction. Barthes writes too of the effect of particular photographs that have 'passed through the filter of culture', that is, been chosen; published, exhibited, curated: 'I realized that some provoked tiny jubilations, as if they referred to a stilled center, an erotic or lacerating value buried in myself (however harmless the subject might have appeared)' (Barthes 2010 [1980], 16). The photographs I am using are largely unseen, chosen only to be wedged into cardboard corners on the pages of one green leather album, curated only in that they were jumbled together in folders in a decaying box in an archive. But these too can spark, 'an internal agitation, an excitement, a certain labour too, the pressure of the unspeakable which wants to be spoken' (Barthes 2010 [1980], 19). That which wants to be spoken takes many forms. It might be a bubbling up of inherited narratives, the flickering of inspiration, or the recognition that we have seen is common to all photographs of people but that we rarely articulate: this has been and this will be.⁸

In shifting my discussion towards inspiration, that most intangible of concepts, I hope to pull together my magpie approach in seizing and documenting some of the points of connection I have discovered in my reading around photography; reading which, combined with the reading of particular photographs themselves, I recognise as autobiographical. It is an ongoing process. Like many writers, I have a vexed relationship with autobiography. In the first meeting I had with my agent, when we were talking about my first novel, he employed a delicate subterfuge to determine whether the story I was telling – of a young woman grieving for her beloved brother – was true. Whether it was my story. I said that I was an only child; clearly it wasn't.

⁷ Barthes himself lived with his mother until her death, and although sexually active, did not speak openly of being gay. In *Camera Lucida* the author is far from dead, and it's almost impossible not to read the book other than through my own queer lens.

⁸ In the second half of *Camera Lucida*, the *punctum* becomes 'Time', with all its implications for memory and mortality (96).



Figure 5: Area 7, Dean Lane & Boyd Street.

And yet of course on a fundamental level it was. All writing is autobiographical, even when we pretend it isn't.

I have mentioned already that my novel in progress uses characters based on real people. It puts them in places that do or did exist. Occasionally, it has them play out events that actually, as I understand it, happened. I am relying on my memory of stories told to me from the memories of others for much of this. Some of the thoughts and feelings I ascribe to my characters must be mine, or recognisable to me, but the novel is set before I was born. I can share none of their experience, not even of place. The photographs I look at may offer details – of clothing, hairstyle, advertisements – but there are no revelations to be found there. In the last lines of *Family Frames*, Marianne Hirsch talks about her wish to construct the lost world of her parents' childhoods in Eastern Europe, and the difficulty in doing so given that they will not visit with her and share the memories such a trip would provoke. The process will instead be an imaginative one, powered by her own 'curiosity and desire' as well as by stronger emotions pertinent to her circumstances, and: 'it will certainly include the many old pictures of people and places, the albums and shoe boxes, the ghosts that [...] populate the domestic spaces of my imagination' (Hirsch 1997, 268).

When we talk about writing we talk necessarily about memory, and when people write about photography they seem usually to mention ghosts.⁹ Viewing an album alone, outwith the 'real-life domestic experience' with its 'inside stories' and 'compensatory pleasures – intimacy, conviviality [. . .] perhaps a slice of cake' (Langford 2008, 5) makes for a very different kind of reading, as Janice Galloway's writing around photographs exemplifies. Even when we find words written in a familiar hand on the back of a black and white photograph, there are huge gaps. Space enough to be filled with fiction, which is at the root of my longstanding fascination with photography, from Atget's early-morning Paris and Brassai's perfectly posed demi-monde, to Larry Clark's *Tulsa* and Nan Goldin's *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. Before presenting a short extract from my novel, I will conclude with what I consider a good enough description of the writing process: allowing oneself to be haunted, and seeking the tiny jubilations that will give one's ghosts flesh.

What follows is an extract from my novel in progress, currently titled *Lips That Touch Alcohol*. It opens in 1935 and ends in 1966, so this section falls about three quarters of the way through. There are two narrators, Rena and Bobby. This is Bobby's voice.

Bobby, 1964

Rena's in a fishtail frock that sways lightly from side to side, caught in the current as she moves from lounge to kitchen and back again. He zipped it up for her earlier, in the bedroom she's had done out in *café au lait*. Brown, it looks like, but who is he to argue? David Murphy must have been rubbing his hands together in glee when Rena walked through the doors of his furniture shop. Not that Bobby is complaining, about any of it. Standing here in a cashmere jumper, sipping whisky from a crystal tumbler, his lovely wife smiling and laughing with their guests? The bedroom suite

⁹ Brian Dillon describes the whole of *Camera Lucida* as 'a ghost story of sorts'; "Rereading: Camera Lucida by Roland Barthes", *The Guardian*, 26th March 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/mar/26/roland-barthes-camera-lucida-rereading> (accessed 8th April 2016).

is cream melamine. He watched Rena sitting at the dressing table, powdering her pale skin and painting in her lips. It takes a little longer these days, but the effect is still there.

Every inch the perfect hostess, she clicks open the silver cigarette box and offers it to Councillor Stoddart. Bobby sees the man glance towards Rena's milky white décolletage, marvels that she can be so unknowing. What would be blatant in another woman is, just, Rena. Or is he the only one that knows the secret? It isn't a come on, because she couldn't care less. Or maybe she prefers to play different games. Stoddart sits on the licensing committee, does he not?

Bobby saunters towards the hallway, wondering if he's imagining Rena's eyes sharp in his back. He pauses to smile at Bert Lauder, brushes past Evie, who doesn't quite realise how strong her drinks are. Her dress is tight brocade, a real headturner. She clasps his arm and whispers something; he sidesteps graciously. A compliment to Mrs Stoddart, and he's clear. A moment alone in the kitchen, looking out the window towards the dark mass of the park beyond. And oh, his hand has found the cool curve of the whisky bottle.

'Aye,' says Freddie MacConnechie behind him, by way of friendly greeting.

Bobby smiles, reaches for the black rum instead.

'Coke, was it?'

'Aye,' says Freddie again. 'Grand wee night, Bobby. Grand.'

Bobby splashes Coke into the rum. 'It's all Rena's doing. I wouldn't know a can-apé if it bit me on the arse.'

'Women, eh?'

'Aye.'

The small kitchen window is winking darkly at them. Freddie stares out.

'Handy to be so near the park.'

'Mmm,' Bobby says, following Freddie's gaze only to find it's turned towards him.

'Right there, eh?'

Bobby gets it at last. 'Janet takes the dog round every day,' he says, in gentle deflection. 'I tell her to be careful. You never know what you'll come across in a park,'

he adds, just to show he's a man of the world and that sort of thing doesn't bother him. When he was at sea, well.

When Freddie has gone Bobby's hand returns to the whisky bottle. There's a new ice bucket. He lifts it above his head to check it isn't bloody silver as well. They aren't made of money, not yet. Ignoring the tongs he dips his fingers in to retrieve a few slippery cubes before freshening his glass. On the rocks. Time to ring the changes. As if on cue, he hears Rena's laugh tinkling above all the others in the lounge. If she doesn't care, truly, he wishes sometimes she'd just . . . but no, Rena wouldn't, and he loves her for it. And she's not daft. She knows you'll string someone along for longer on a promise.

There's a delicate hiccup. He sees Evie's reflection in the dark window, teetering towards him. He slugs his whisky, checks his smile is intact. Rena would go mad, heels like those on the new linoleum.

'Evie,' he says, and for want of something better takes the empty glass from her hand. 'Another?' he offers, although he can hear Rena's voice in his head, telling him Evie's had enough.

'Yes please,' Evie says. She should have gone on the road with the ENSA boys and girls when she had the chance. That smile, those hips. A tiny wee thing, but she'd have brightened the troops no end. He remembers when they all went to Arran, not long after she married Thomas. A ruffled bikini at Lamlash. That, and the shades and headscarf; she looked like a movie star. Bobby supposes his brother-in-law must be behaving himself these days because Evie doesn't look cowed, far from it. Her eyes are outlined in turquoise, and her eyelashes are thick and black, like a forest in one of Janet's fairy stories. Don't go in.

'Lovely party,' she says, with a slur. Glug glug glug goes the liquor in her glass. He tops it up with lots of lemonade. 'Can I have a cherry?' she asks, pointing to the jar of maraschinos.

'Sure.' He spears one with a cocktail stick and drops it into her drink.

She fishes it out and catches a drip with her tongue. 'Oh Bobby, I think I'm a little tight,' she says.

'It's a party. We insist on it.'

She grins and pops the maraschino in her mouth, her lips pursing together as she chews.

'D'you remember, Bobby, that time in Arran,' she says, shyly.

He'd been thinking about the ruffled bikini, but now he recalls. Rena had to talk to Thomas and Jimmy about something, their mother maybe, and Frances was pregnant, napping every afternoon. So he and Evie were the spare wheels. Let's go for a spin, he said, with Rena's blessing. They went up the west coast of the island, stopped at a hotel for a drink it was such a scorcher. Evie took a soda and lime, Bobby thought her innocence charming. Guessed what Thomas saw in her; pure as his mother and just as eager to please. They drove on to the next beach and looked at the waves, and the next thing Bobby knew she was saying let's go in. I don't have a costume, he said, coy in spite of the double he'd knocked back.

She'd been like something wild and weightless, running barefoot across the sand. He followed, of course he did, splashing in after her, ungainly until the water caught and carried him. They laughed and swam until the salt stung his lips and he felt freer than he had since his first voyage out, except he couldn't swim back then. Bad luck at sea. Nothing happened, nothing like that, but still he stopped the car in a passing place on the way back, combed his hair and gave Evie time to reapply her lipstick. There had been something final in the way she scrutinised herself in the mirror and snapped the sunshield back up. No need for either of them to say it. He'd have sorted Thomas out, put a stop to the beating, if Rena had let him. What kind of man hits his wife? As if in answer, Anne drifts through Bobby's mind on a wave of Vol De Nuit and stale liquor. If both parties are drunk is it a level playing field?

'Oh, we had fun back then, didn't we?' Evie says.

'Yes,' he says. 'We had fun.'

Her make up is heavier than it was that summer, that's the style now, and Evie has always liked to keep up with the style, but there's a slight blur to her edges. He looks down at his glass, at the bottle beside it. How much has he drunk, since that first whisky he laid down on the glass surface of the dressing table so he could pull the fabric of Rena's dress taut and do up her zip?

'Sometimes I wish,' Evie says, then smiles again. Neat white teeth, the tiniest gap between the front two. The brocade of her dress is gold on blue. He can see where the hemline sits close against her legs, imagines his hand sandwiched between the rough of the brocade and the smooth of her nylons.

'I like what Rena's done with the kitchen,' she says, trailing her finger along the edge of the worktop. 'Funny to think we grew up with pantries and coal-fired ranges. On the farm, at least. I don't know how it was in the city.'

Miserable, he thinks, we'd have been glad of a bloody pantry. 'I forgot you grew up on a farm. Did you go to the dances?'

'Oh aye. The young farmers were looking for something a bit broader of beam though.'

'And what were you looking for?' No, he thinks, no: she's married to Thomas, and so that's what she was looking for, that and their twins and their house next door.

Just like he was looking for Rena, even when he was married to Anne.

'Who knows,' she says, giving her eyelashes an exaggerated flutter. 'A wee bit more glamour.' She laughs again and her eyes pick up the blue from her dress. For a second it looks as if the irises have gold in them too.

He's been following her round the room as she glances at the cooker and the fridge, the food mixer and the twin tub. She stops at the sink, leans over to see better out the window. What's out there tonight, he wonders? It's as if everyone's caught in the swell of something beyond the house, beyond the glass. He doesn't look though, because of the way that gold-on-blue brocade is stretching over her body, because of the way her eyes meet his in the darkened window. He moves closer, lets his hand drift towards her hip. Reflected in the glass, he could be half the age he is now. 'Oh for pity's sake,' says Rena. Dread washes over him, chilling his skin like that cold sea off Arran. Not like this, he thinks. Don't let it happen like this, when I haven't even done anything. But no, it's as if he and Rena are in cahoots, working undercover towards the same end. 'Get her home, will you?'

All of a sudden he realises what it looks like: that Evie is feeling poorly, and he's standing by concerned.

'Yes,' he says firmly. 'I think that's for the best, eh Evie?'

Evie has dipped her head closer to the sink. He can see the nape of her neck. Her curls are looser at the back, and they're trembling with what might be laughter.

Rena sighs and begins to remove glass after glass of syllabub from the fridge.

'Come on. That's a new sink you know.'

Evie straightens up. 'My handbag,' she says, looking around her then teetering back out into the hall. Is she acting it up, now? She could have gone on the stage, she said.

'She's plastered,' he whispers in Rena's ear. 'Look, I'll walk her round the park. Sober her up before Thomas gets home.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' Rena says, sifting through the cutlery drawer and fishing out the small spoons. 'What if one of the neighbours saw?'

Edzell Drive is a cul-de-sac, their house and Thomas's at the end, the gate to the park between them. The neighbours would have to be standing in the middle of the road with flashlights to see him slipping in to the darkness with Evie. Rena does it unconsciously, saving him from himself.

'Get her in the house and get a black coffee down her. I'll keep Thomas here. I'm not having him shouting the odds while we've got guests.'

'What about the twins?'

'Upstairs, listening to records with Janet. They'll be fine.'

Is Rena a double agent, he wonders, and as she bustles out, her fishtail swaying behind her. How long has it been since he could take her by the hand, spin her round and into his arms? He grabs the Johnnie Walker and takes a mouthful straight from the bottle. Rena's back in a moment, herding Evie in front of her, her hand on her sister in law's arm. Evie's nails are painted powder pink, Rena's gleam from the chamois buffer. Is Evie exaggerating, or not? He'll know soon enough. Rena thrusts Evie's beaded clutch bag towards him and picks up the first tray of syllabub. Evie's come without a coat, being just next door. Chivalrous, he lays an arm across her shoulders as they walk up her driveway and round the back. She doesn't fumble at all as she fits the key in the lock. He wonders if the view from her kitchen window is the same, all dark.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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