Photograph of a woman already gone

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Photograph of a woman already gone

by

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A house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability. We are constantly re-imagining its reality: to distinguish all these images would be to describe the soul of the house; it would be developing a veritable psychology of the house. 

-Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

In *Photograph of a Woman Already Gone*, I explore the notion of what it means to be absent from a place, and the ways in which place captures memory. Most of these poems are written within the landscape of a house; in the house, rooms and objects evoke memory and emotion. In a sense the house speaks for its inhabitants. When a woman dies, a lover leaves, or a child disappears what is left is his or her belongings, and the space he or she once inhabited. In this collection, these inanimate objects become the voices of departed characters. In order to understand the psychology of the characters, one needs to first understand the physical landscape which they inhabited.

As Bachelard mentions in *The Poetics of Space*, there are many emotions associated with the word “house.” According to Bachelard, a “house constitutes a body of images that give mankind the illusions of stability” (Bachelard 17). In the poem “Photograph of a Woman Already Gone,” I explore these “illusions of stability” (Bachelard 17). The setting of this poem contradicts the idea that a shelter
is a place of protection; the home in this narrative becomes a place that is threatening rather than secure. In this poem, a woman is murdered by someone, presumably her husband. The poem does not reveal why the woman was murdered although the reader is able to pick up on some clues along with the narrator of the poem. For instance, the suitcase in the hall implies that the wife was going to leave her husband; however, she is stopped through the actions of her murderer. The irony presented by the title is that in some sense, because of the murder, she is able to leave her husband behind. In leaving her husband, the woman in the poem is also abandoning the "illusions of stability" (Bachelard 17) that are associated with both her home and marriage.

When writing "Photograph of a Woman Already Gone," I was conflicted. I wanted to tell the entire story of the central character, the woman who was murdered by her husband. I had many ideas about what caused the tragedy; however, revealing them all at once would have made the poem a sloppy narrative. Since the poem opens the collection, it must in a sense open the door to the reader; however, it must not close the door by revealing too much information too soon. As a writer, I find that writing a poem is a delicate balance between what a poet should reveal, and what the poet should allow the reader to infer. A poem should allow enough specificity to allow the reader to imagine the place; in order to enter a poem
the reader must be able to see the door, a familiar object or image or place that allows the reader to enter.

In writing this poem, I decided to use a perspective that would explain limited knowledge on the part of the narrator. Instead of making the narrator all knowing, I avoided a confessional first-person narrator, and chose to tell the story through someone outside of it, a crime detective. The third person narrator made it easier to step inside of the poem, and walk through the house with the narrator; in a sense, the reader becomes the detective relying on inanimate objects, to reveal the mystery.

"Photograph of a Woman Already Gone" sets up the primary mystery in the collection. What happened to cause the central character to depart? A large part of the mysterious aspect to many of these poems is set up through the metaphor of photography. The metaphor of photograph has several purposes in this collection; it creates mystery; it reflects on memories, and it captures something that is difficult to capture in a non-abstract way: absence. Besides working well metaphorically and to aid the development of the poems, a photograph also resembles a poem in both its form and purpose. In a sense, a poem functions the same as a photograph. A poem is usually written entirely from one viewpoint; the poet decides what should be within the poem, and what should be left out. Due to the poem's form, its
economy of language, and its attention to image, it becomes essentially a
“snapshot.” In these poems, we are often left to speculate what happened; we are
left with the effect and not the cause. This leaves room for the readers to form their
own interpretations.

A poem becomes like a photograph of one moment in time, and in a
collection of poems these images are collected and compared. It becomes the job of
the viewer or reader to formulate connections between them. For instance, if you’re
looking through someone else’s photo album you might recognize a series of related
portraits of a vacation. How can you tell these photographs are related? Perhaps,
in the photographs a person is wearing the same dress or shirt; maybe it was taken
in a particular place that is recognizable. And you might assume certain
relationships by looking at the photographs; you might assume relationships
between the characters within the photographs based on their expressions.

A collection of poems works the same way; poems work differently from
prose because they do not as fully explain the connections between them to the
reader. The poet provides clues that allow reader to make these connections for
themselves. For example, in this collection, a house is referred to in several of the
poems; the reader could assume it is the same house, or the dress that appears in
two poems may be the same dress. Of course these assumptions could be wrong.
In interpreting photographs the same sorts of mistakes can be made. In one photograph, you might see only the door of the house; in one photograph you might see the living room or the kitchen. Both photographs and poems encourage readers to focus in on what is inside the lens (the image); however, the subject of the photograph or poem often becomes representative of more than what is seen on the surface.

Within a "Photograph of a Woman Already Gone" the photograph has several purposes. The photograph of the fireplace takes on the presence of the absent “happy” couple. “Above the fireplace, a couple’s smiles are trapped/in a wooden frame, their eyes blinded/in the quick flash of one moment/frozen.” Within this line, the photograph serves three purposes; it brings the couple into the house; it shows the couple’s initial “blind” love and admiration for each other, and it shows how quickly this love can turn cold, or become “frozen.” The allusions to photography in the poem aid in the development of the primary characters. Through the photograph taken at the end of poem, I try to capture the essence of the poem the way the photograph captures the essence of its subject. When the detective (narrator) turns on the light the woman develops; like a photograph, “her body emerges from the darkness” and her wounds “speak for her now of pain she no longer feels.” By using the photograph as a metaphor, I am able to make the
deceased woman not a static character; she is able to change through the photograph, and develop beyond her own mortality.

While “Photograph of a Woman Already Gone” opens the door to a mystery, “Photographs of the House” moves us through the rooms of a personal relationship. In “Photographs of the House,” the home becomes a place of isolation, a place of expectations that are never fulfilled. In this poem, the objects and rooms within the house represent a deteriorated relationship. The rooms become symbolic of the stages of the couple’s lives. The closet holds the memories of initial romance: a wedding dress, dried flowers, and a passionate encounter. The section “The Door” represents a reflection on the beginning of their marriage. The section opens with the couple moving into their house with “boxes heavy with expectation.” In the section “The Kitchen,” the narrator reflects on the expectations placed upon her as a housewife, and how she feels unable to fit the role. In the last section, “The Patio,” the narrator reflects on how she could escape her house and her marriage: “there is a chance I could start a fire, burn down/this house...disappear without smoke.” By burning down the house, the narrator is not only escaping her house, but escaping the oppressiveness of her role and her relationship to her husband.

Although “Photographs of the House does not answer all the questions that are brought up in the collection, it addresses more directly why the narrator would
want to leave her marriage and her home. If a poem is successful, it needs to leave something to be imagined. It is the responsibility of the poet to keep the reader within a poem. As a reader, I feel disappointed when a poem ends on a telling statement. The last image of this poem, with the narrator outside of the main structure of her house on the patio, leaves the reader to consider whether the woman will escape her house, or escape her relationship.

Many of these poems begin with an absent character, but do not explain the reason for this absence which was the reason I wrote “Photographs of the House.” By the time the poem appears in the collection, the reader knows quite a bit about the recurring character: the departing lover. The reader is given subtle clues as to why the person is leaving. However, since the poems are often written through a detached, third person narrator, there are many questions that are never answered. Initially I intended “Photographs of the House” to work as a bridge into more personal poems about similar content. However, this poem provides an ideal crossroads for the end of the collection.

The persona of the housewife that is portrayed in the first poem in the collection comes up again only this time the voice of the woman is more apparent. Poems throughout this collection have been anticipating this return of the female narrator, including “Photographs of the Dress No Longer Hanging in the Closet”
and "Photograph of the Woman’s Voice." In the "Photograph of the Woman’s Voice," it can be seen that this silent woman wants "to speak, but...[is]...embarrassed, her voice held in so long like a crack beneath ice." With this final poem, the female character finally becomes fully developed in the mind of the reader; she is able to tell her story with certainty, and be able to distinguish reality from appearance.

This is different than the voice of the female narrator in previous poems such as "Photograph of an Empty Frame." In "Photograph of an Empty Frame," the female narrator is still obsessed with the memory of her absent lover to the point that her "mind is inaccurate." However, in "Photographs of the House," the female narrator seems to have seen beyond the surface appearance of her relationship. Because of her experience, she understands that a relationship is not always as it looks; her wedding becomes not a day of romance "but one day of heaviness/of pins, and dried flowers." What once was symbolic of romance becomes the symbol of her repression.

In Photograph of a Woman Already Gone, the landscape of the house defines the characters within the poems. Although the characters often do not speak themselves, they are able to speak through inanimate objects that become metaphorical. Even though the characters are often absent, they are able to be
developed through the place where they lived, and the possessions to which they attach memory.
Photograph of a Woman Already Gone

The street’s silence is broken with the shrill sound of birds, dark wings and night sky, an unnoticed departure.

A siren screams its red light until silenced. Lights appear in dark windows; faces emerge pale behind glass.

Someone knocks at the door his uniform a dark shadow, an outline of something the dog does not trust.

It pulls on its chain, wanting to make him bleed as he enters through an open door no one has bothered to lock.

His shadow follows him through the house, the mirror catching him in its glare. Above the fireplace, a couple’s smiles are trapped in a wooden frame, their eyes blinded in the quick flash of one moment frozen. In the hall lies her suitcase, an empty coffin filled with her memory but she is not in this small box. She has not walked outside, the night cold and white, a night that could help her disappear. His footsteps echo down the hall as she waits in the bedroom, her body a long dark shadow on the wall, her eyes neither sleeping or awake.
He turns on the light and she changes.
Her body emerges from the darkness,
blurs in its soft white and red.

Her mouth opens as if to say something
she has never said, she will never say.

In the light, she is not a woman,
she is the inside of a woman,
blooming red.

He wants to cover her, bury her
in the ground but instead he takes
a picture to remember the wounds

that speak for her now of pain
she no longer feels. The wounds are filled
with light as she becomes a memory.
Photographs of Departure

Sometimes, there is nothing left at all,
just an empty room, the sharpness of four corners,
the bent heads of nails where the heavy things were hung.

Outside my window, I watch for a bird,
but there is no window, just an empty wall.
The photograph developed is blank,
except one corner displaying a long shadow,
two arms raised like wings.

The second picture is of a window, the thin bones
of trees, against an empty sky, dark clouds moving overhead.

During the last picture the shutter was closed.
It was of a box, but now the two flaps hang open
only to darkness.
Photographs of What Is Left of the House

What is left now is inside, though there is no inside. The walls, the windows, the doors no longer stand between us.

Instead there is the frame of this house, though the frame holds nothing but air and memory, a dark cloud of smoke.

This is what hatred has done. It has burned this house from the inside out, left us with a bare tree, a cross of burnt branches.

This is what hatred has done. It has broken through our living room window, let the cold in, but left us living through the memories of this place, a few black and white photographs to fill an empty frame.
Photograph of an Empty Frame

At night, I wait for the light under the door to widen
to see you standing in the wooden frame
your body a long shadow on the wall. You do not enter

the mirror that hangs this room backwards,
a crooked painting that would bother you
every time you looked at it.

Tonight the frame is filled with a dark room,
a bed with the sheets pulled back,
the backwards numbers of the alarm clock.

My mind is inaccurate. The black dress falling over
the empty chair is your coat, the glass
on the bedside table is half filled

with water. I imagine your lips
on the chipped glass drinking the last of it.
Later my own thirst wakes me; my hand reaches

out into the darkness, cupping air.
Photograph of the Dress No Longer Hanging in her Closet

She sleeps on silk sheets now, the cover of night closed over her, in her best dress,
the one she used to wear on Sundays,
its buttons like shining eyes, reflect
a colored haze of broken glass,
the thin lace that floated her down
the aisle towards communion.

Now every day is Sunday,
and the dress no longer hangs
in the closet, its skirt open
to a dark empty mouth, its body
weighted by the heaviness
of gravity. Now it is as still
as the snow she lies beneath,
covered by a clean landscape
no one dare break open. Her body has become a closed door,
a dark room, filled with her absence.
Photograph of Swinging Doors

The lens moves down my body, a focused lover, romanced by the place where light curves a halfmoon around hipbone.

Your finger snaps this moment still; the door opens and closes with blinking eyes. We stare at each other with such limited perception as if we are driving in the night rain, beads of watery light falling on the window, a small flash of lightning interrupts the dark.

What we know of love is so little.

It is the crack of light beneath a closed door, a picture that blurs in its constant movement, outside of the frame.
Photographs of the Bedroom

It has been too much, his body, her body, 
the way they grope in the darkness 
for something that never develops.

What is wrong? This question that they press 
against, their muscles tightened, 
their bodies concentrating on the answer.

The house is filled with the sound of their breath, 
no one else’s. They dream of a cry interrupting 
their hunger but there is no one.

Each day is a white curtain, a series of questions, 
a false hope; each day is a hospital gown 
with a naked body beneath, a test, answer: nothing inside.

Let’s not talk anymore about the night. The way 
the bed aches, and they collapse into sleep, 
the way hope follows them

a child in their dreams.
Photograph of a Body Found on a Dark Street

In the darkroom, I wait for the moment
to develop. Beneath red light

you rise to the surface, a round moon
cut in half by shadow.

I would like to understand you,
hang your body over the light

so the warmth would bleed through,
make the injuries more evident.

I would like to understand the intersections of your body,
the places that are the most dangerous,

where accidents have happened before.
Last night we are both driving in the same lane

too close without headlights.
I waited for a sign,

following the curves of a dark road.
I waited for your hand to stretch out

from the dark window, push back
the frame between us, tell me where

you’re headed or if you’re brave
*pull over, get out of the car,*

*stand in the middle of the street,*
I will not swerve to miss you.
Photograph of a Passing Car

In the night the lights of your car bleed into darkness. I disappear from your view. A broken body that moves only in reflection, I lie here in your rear view mirror, as you disappear around dark curves, mountain roads surrounded on one side by air

and the bare arms of trees that reach out beckoning you stop, fall to your death.

You imagine floating somewhere between earth and sky, somewhere unattached to branches.

You imagine your body falling through leaves the color of blood. Your body opening,

a wound that will not heal, will not be forgotten.
Missing Photographs

I. Michael

Tonight he will not walk out of the bar, 
his dark body outlined by burning streetlights, 
glowing halos around his head 
as he stumbles down cracked cement, drunk.

His shadow falls with rainwater into dark gutters. He will not walk home, 
lie down and close his eyes, 
swim into darkness, wake with the lights 
blurring, as if he is underwater, breaking through sunlit waves. It is ironic to disappear 
the day you were born, like a photograph returning to a dark negative. He walks 
down the street away from the light, takes a wrong turn into a dark house, disappears.
II. Josh

We have looked beneath the water. Is he part of the waves? The repetition, rise and fall, tucking him in to darkness.

It is almost winter. The bare trees reach across the vast sky. A helicopter moves, its blades cutting through cold air, its sound drowning out everything. The pilot watches from the clouds for him, sees nothing from the distance except the dark trees, the black lines of streets, the tall gray buildings. Around here he is everywhere, and nowhere. His face nailed to light posts, the color of newsprint, the color of ash, the color washed away slowly from memory.
Photographs Found Outside of the Album

These are the memories we bury
inside the darkness of drawers. We find them
years later, beneath letters, handwriting
we no longer recognize.

I was looking for something else
when I opened this drawer; I was searching
for something to throw away from the past
I saved for years

but instead I saw my face: gray with matte
finish, my old face creased with being
buried so young.
Self Portrait

I.

What is hidden beneath the straw hat, shade of your eyes, the orange brush of beard, warm blood curled inside an uncut ear

is only a small stroke of you, the eyes that stare back black or blue: the brightness of rainwater when your brush hits it.

We forget how much of the landscape is a deepening cloud, under the warmth of sun’s hat, yellow makes the blue more blue.

Looking at you is like opening an envelope, and finding nothing to read, just a bloody snail.

You are the poet that believes in living metaphors, the yellow burn of sun flowers, a field of red poppies to fall asleep inside.

You paint a basket of stillness, an empty bedroom, a field of white stars stretching into the darkness.

II.

In the mirror, you saw yourself rippling, the oval moon of your face floating dead on the water.

If you took a hammer and smashed the waves, perhaps you wouldn’t need to worry about drowning.

Your ocean would break into small knives; you could cut your way out of the canvas.
Photograph of a Woman's Voice

1.

She did not speak all winter.
Perhaps she was carried away on wings,
her suitcase packed with blank journals
that would never be opened.

She had the best intentions,
bought herself brand new pens to begin
the story. It must have been the weather
that year that stopped her.

Perhaps the plane never lifted off ground
because of low visibility, she sat for hours
in a waiting room, magazines spread over her knees.
Perhaps this is where she spent the rest of her life
reading how to make her lips look larger,
she learned how to outline them,
fill them in, but not how to open
her mouth to speak.

2.

Or more likely she did not leave the house
all winter. She spent winter with the dull
hum of the furnace, a child on each hip,
their lips open with need. Or she may have spent
all winter in his mouth, her voice lost in the hollow
between his lips.
The truth of the matter is she wanted to speak but was embarrassed, her voice held in so long like a crack beneath ice.
Two Photographs of a Blank Page

1.

Do you remember that moment? The sky became a blur of white you could not see beyond, driving your car into the fog lost.

The broken voice of the radio announcer interrupting the music, a note rising in your throat that sounded hollow

made you want to stop singing.

Was it the weather that made you feel like dying?

The wind that made you close your mouth and listen, pull over to the side of road, and watch the snow pile.

2.

Outside your window, the first snow erased everything. Your garden was buried, plants stopped in mid-growth.

From inside the house, you stared at the new landscape, a blank face that did not welcome you inside.

There was no way to move through it without sinking and you did not want to leave your dark footprints behind.
A Photograph of a Frozen Pond

This photograph is just white, a blinding star
that you cannot look at directly, something distant
that still promises the burn of being frozen.

“When was it taken?” she asks. Her eyes are cool rain:
the place where the ice has cracked open a door.

It is a memory of a time when there was no memory,
just the sound of the wind, the thin sharp blades
of spinning into numbness.

“I do not understand,” she says. Her hands are warm blood.
It is a different season now. The rain is less heavy,
and when we swim at night, there is no dull ache of death
in our bones.

She is silent for a moment, holding the light to her face,
looking for an outline of the shadows that must be there,
but it appears to be nothing: an overexposure.
Three Photographs of Night Swimming

1.

The couple’s bodies disappear in dark waves
as a flash of two headlights appear between branches
they hold their breath--let cold darkness roll over

2.

Minutes later, they rise from under the still water
their bodies, pale as the moon, float towards trees
where clothes hang ghosts across bare branches

3.

In the darkroom, a the white outline of a hand reaches out
from underwater. The still solution, slips through its fingers
turning them silver
A Photograph of a Car Crash (Underwater)

She dreams she is driving underwater,
trees and houses mirrored in a pool of night sky,

the street lights swimming in long reflection.
As she steers into the driveway,

she notices how dark the windows are, and wonders
if anyone lives there, or if anyone lives—who has survived?

She looks up and sees fish swimming through
the basketball hoop, their silvery bodies moving through

the net, threads of moonlight catching them.
They move in and out of captivity easily—

she does not want to leave the car.
Perhaps it is the reason she is alive,

the reason she is not floating.
She shifts the car from park, drives

into the house. The wood opens like a wound;
shards of glass rise like stars.
Photographs of the House

I. The Closet

There is nothing here to share, these photographs undeveloped, dark negatives--I would rather forget what is in the boxes, their mouths taped shut.

You will never see me in that dress hanging there. It hangs from wire one day of heaviness of pins, and dried flowers. It is not as it looks.

Not beautiful, not floating down red carpet. No, it is years of darkness, dreaming of the small light beneath the door, wishing

the way out of a small room. Do you remember the summer, you were chosen? How you willingly stepped inside this room, your body, his body

forced together by chance. It is not that kiss, that game you learned quickly, that new language of heat. No, it is coldness.

It is what happens when you close the door, turn the light off. It is what happens when everything you waited for has happened, and unhappened.
II. The Door

We came here in 1967, with boxes heavy with expectation. China that gleamed separated by newspaper later broke into jagged teeth, split into cracked smiles.

We threw out unraveled ribbons, torn paper to find our new life: a coffee maker dripping darkness into each morning's cup, the blender cutting things down to size, making what was hard smooth. How new everything seemed, the vase with cut flowers blooming till they fell apart one red petal at a time.

Do you remember this place? The door that swallowed us inside, this white box we shut ourselves inside. The way we were so happy with our mirrors, our wedding pictures beneath a thin shield of glass.
III. Laundry Room

Each Saturday, I wash away the last week of my life: this pile of dirty shadows, nylons unraveled on a dark bed, their old skin curled like the dead skin of a snake. In the end, they whisper down the dark sweep of a chute, land on a bed of dirty linen. White sheets that smell of bodies, will soon hold the imagined scent of cleanliness. But let us not forget what has happened here. Before the buttons unbuttoned, pulled apart to reveal what was beneath.

Let us not forget this past week. This shirt with the missing button, the empty mouth that will later be sewn shut. Let us forget how we forget each week our lives, bleach the darkness that bleeds into material. Is it blood? A cut finger, the small sliver of an opening? I forget the years between now and then. A wound is cleaned, sewn shut; a resilient skin grows over.
This is an old recipe with one ingredient missing
I have no substitute for. The eggs have been cracked open,
but nothing is born. I do not cook like my mother.

I only have her heart, her legs, her voice. I am missing
one ingredient; I cannot remove the center from a fruit,
remove the core, like a doctor finding a lump and removing it.

She knows what I do not need, says nothing more will grow
of these seeds; she slips the knife down into the heart,
and pulls out darkness, something eating at me like cancer.

She is braver than I, not afraid to slip the knife in, peel
back the skin, the surface of things. I do not cook this way.
I leave the skin on; I swallow the seeds like hope

into the pit of my stomach.
V. The Bath

The bathtub has a curtain, not a window.
I can pull back the curtain, and you will only hear

the sound of water; you will not see anything.
I should ask you why you are even here.

Standing in the mirror, you are made of glass.
I believe I locked the door. But somehow you enter

the frame of the window into yourself.
Warm water has made you disappear, become softness,

a photograph, an image without edges.
What has gone wrong? Why have we started to melt?

Our bodies no longer surface beneath water;
instead we dissolve into air.
VI. The Patio

At night, I breathe through the screen, press against it. I am half exposed beneath the flickering porch light. It is one of those lights that turns on with movement, but the bulb is about to go dead

and then you will not see me, just darkness. But now I flicker in and out like a flame. There is a chance I could start a fire, burn down this house. There is a chance I might flicker out--I could disappear without smoke.