

**Life, Still: *Séateur***  
**Anne Brennan**

Little old lady from Hushabye St  
... Slowly she comes creeping ...  
The poppies they hang from her head to her feet  
She bringeth her poppies to you, my sweet  
But she findeth you sleeping

*I remember that it took place at dusk. It had rained heavily during the course of the day and the darkness set in early, even earlier than you would expect in late autumn. We had to make a sort of pilgrimage in the dark, walking round the little cube-shaped room, peering out from under our umbrellas into the four brightly lit windows.*

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Sometimes I think that memory is like the contents of the third drawer in someone's kitchen. I'm not talking here about the big things, the life-and-death things, but the things we're constantly forgetting until the next time, that accretion of random, inconsequential sensations, obstinately surfacing and re-surfacing within the space of our daily, lived experience.

The big things are what we use to divide up our lives - before the birth of a child, after the death of a friend - but the small things join it all together and give it a kind of shape. After great joy or great grief, we seem for a time beyond the mundane habits of daily life, but our bodies always win in the end. After a time, we find ourselves drawn back to the world of our physical needs until one day we realise that the memory of those constantly repeated corporeal acts has drawn us inexorably back into daily life.

When people die, I always wonder where it all goes, the memory of all those little experiences and sensations. Where *does* it go - the feeling of sun on the back of the neck, the ache in the left hip joint, the underfoot creak of the boards on a shaded verandah, the taste of toothpaste ... surely, it must go somewhere?

And when we go home afterwards and are confronted by that house full of ordinary things: the razors, the tin openers, the shoes, the combs, the toothbrushes - that legion of mute witnesses to a thousand interrupted everyday tasks - then ... then ... we realise the magnitude, the unassuageable nature of our loss.

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*The feeling was the kind you get at an open inspection, a sort of licensed voyeurism: look but don't touch. I cannot now dissociate this feeling from the slow drum of rain on our umbrellas. You had to look through a sort of shadow-frame or silhouette to see her. Her face was softened by a sort of gauzy membrane over the window, which made us think it might be a picture until we realised that she was moving. She was a very elderly woman,*

*and she was slowly arranging flowers in a vase - you knew they were from her own garden. Her lips moved, but you couldn't hear what she was saying. Because of the screen, you couldn't see into the room beyond, and as we moved from window to window, we could only see what we were permitted to see. At each window we saw the same thing unfolding over again.*

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It's about time, really, and how we are stuck in it. That's the most poignant thing: you can't go back; you can only go forward, but things in the past are not so confined by time: they can visit you any time they want, and they do, even (especially) when you don't want them to. And when they do, you're reminded of the inexorable, one-way nature of the traffic and how much farther we get, year by year, from the self that did that thing for the first time.

No wonder looking at photos is such an irresistible pastime. They are, as Barthes reminds us, a physical trace of the subject, of a time that has passed. They are irrefutable proof that, for a moment, that tree, that face was actually *there*, branding its shadow upon the receptive film. Maybe it is this that makes us lean forward and kiss that long-ago face as tenderly as if it were there before us.

And yet, at the same time, it's not simple either: we know they're not there, and I don't mean simply because we know the difference between the feel of photographic paper and the feel of a loved one's flesh. Look at any photograph, and see how, despite the irrefutable presence of someone in it, they are also strangely absent: I don't just mean because their head is turned away, or their nose never quite looked like that; or how they are not like that at all now, because they are older, or because you have quarrelled with them and don't see them any more, or because they are simply no longer in the world. I mean that they are absent from our present and no matter how hard or how longingly you look, you can't penetrate the surface of the image: they are there, locked in, stilled forever in that irretrievable moment, and you are here, looking, watching.

And yet, for all that, a photograph can still surprise you. A distant cousin showed me a collection of images taken with a Box Brownie in 1924. Their perspective slightly askew, they had the look of photographs taken by a child. In them I saw my ten-year-old mother and her parents as I had never seen them, standing in someone's sunny Carlton backyard, smiling awkwardly for the camera, caught between one forgotten moment and another, more alive for me than they ever were in the two or three studio portraits, the only other images I have of them. It was the ordinariness of the pictures that made me want to weep: how, in that randomly caught, far-off moment I was reminded of the thousands of others which slipped by unmarked, unrecorded, unremembered, even by them, into the stream of the past.

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*It was easy to forget the shadow-frames, the silhouettes, because we were so busy looking in. Which is remarkable, really, because when I thought about it afterwards, I remembered that they were big: they took up the bottom of each window frame. They blocked the windows, except for a cut-out part that provided a sort of peephole through which you had to peer. Each peephole was shaped like the silhouette of a flower arrangement of the old-fashioned, slightly formal kind you see in old books and magazines. The shapes were different, so that you saw things a little differently through each window frame. Thinking about it afterwards, those silhouettes teased at me, like something I couldn't quite conjure into memory, because they did that thing that shadows do: making ordinary things look strange.*

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We think that memory is like a photograph, or like a film or video clip: you see the analogy all the time in movies and books and you can understand why. After all, the photographic image promises some kind of true record, in spite of what we know about its capacity for duplicity. The film clip is an even more seductive metaphor, because with film, things move and for a few moments we see the subject animated and are able to imagine that we are there, too - watching, swallowed up inside the moment - before the film gutters out and maroons us once again in the present.

Perhaps a more compelling analogy for memory is the shadow. In the shift and change of shadows on a wall or screen, or on the road before our advancing feet, we recognise something impalpable, beyond our reach. As Gombrich points out, we use shadows as an analogy for that which is unreal, but at the same time, the presence of a shadow testifies to the solidity and therefore the reality of an object. What better way to describe the paradoxical play between memory's elusive tease and its anchoring consolations? Moreover, the analogy cannot offer us the false consolation of memory as truth. The fugitive and mutable form of the shadow allows it to swell and grow monstrous, like the things in nightmares, reflecting back at us the tyranny of memory run amok within our dreaming minds.

In the eighteenth century, people made silhouette portraits by placing the subject against a sheet of transparent paper and tracing the outline of their shadow from the other side. Perhaps, in this time before the camera, this was the closest anyone could get to the memory-trace of the photograph.

In the careful delineation of a shadow, the artist trapped a moment when someone or some thing was there, their solid form spilling its image upon the page. If the likeness of a face was the object of their exercise, perhaps they were also the unwitting portraitists of a fragment of time as well, a moment that might otherwise have passed forever out of memory.

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*It was some fifteen or twenty minutes before we got to the doorway on the fourth side of the little cube. It was dark, except for a shaded light like a strong lamp, and still, except*

*for the voice of an elderly woman who was reciting little ditties and doggerels about flowers. Her voice was distinctive, a little quavery, but still quite lucid. After a while, the voice trailed into other little nonsense rhymes, laughing with great enjoyment at the word plays, the little risqué moments that entered her mind unbidden.*

*After a little time, I became aware of the other woman, sitting quietly in the shadowy room. She was the old woman's granddaughter. But it wasn't till the spidery writing began to appear, seemingly in the air before us, that I saw that she was doing something. Her hand moved and as it did, the long columns of words materialised slowly - names of flowers wavering crookedly, like the voice of the elderly woman, echoing each other. At first I thought she was erasing something, but then I saw that she was uncovering the words, literally bringing them into the light.*

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I always like to read stories in the paper about people who have turned one hundred. Like most people, I'm compelled by the ones that narrate the experience of ordinary people who live through and beyond extraordinary events: wars, disasters, brushes with fame - these moments loom up in their lives like islands in an everyday sea of human experience. But the most moving stories for me always seem to be those people for whom nothing occurred beyond the modest events of daily life - those for whom one hundred years has been a rhythm of school, children, spouses, communities, houses, work, grandchildren, gardens, meals, birthdays, holidays, deaths. In these lives the accumulation of quotidian experience is suddenly ennobled, made remarkable by the person's longevity, by the simple fact that these people are connected directly to a time which for us is now only accessible as history, by a simple chain of experiences and events which are just like everybody else's lives.

And that's a mystery, too, because, however much each of those daily acts seem to bind us together, they also set us apart from each other. Even the most evanescent of rituals or experiences are visited and coloured by the incursion of our pasts into our present, so that the simplest of acts is shaped for each of us by all the other, forgotten times we did the same thing. And that's what makes love so interesting, because, no matter how much time we spend together, how familiar the face and gestures of the people we love, we know that, behind those beloved features, there's that still, dark place which is theirs alone, whether they know it or not.

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*Afterwards, when I thought about it again, I remembered how bright the windows with the screens were, and the shadowy space of the little room. I thought about how, for a moment, we hung between light and shadow, between being there and not being there; I thought about the space in time and place between those two women. Above all, I remembered the slow tender gestures of the granddaughter's hands as she unveiled that trembling list, as though each flower-name might stand in for another small, shared moment, just one more, before time closes in and memory trips over into history.*

She was lying on the beach with her bottom painted green  
What, the lady Mr Gallagher?  
No, the rowboat, Mr Sheen

... It's a good one that one ...

### References

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