

OBSESSIVE BECOMING ESSAY - DANIEL REEVES 1990-1991

So it is time to start in on these reflections and memories and I can not help thinking how un-spontaneous it all seems at the moment - to prop open a book of old photographs gathered together from the family and sit here at this awkward keyboard trying to breath life back into the past which although forever here is also hidden by dim memory and racing time. Some of these early photographs (the earliest in fact) are tiny little 2" by 2" crisp black and whites that could almost pass for big postage stamps with their neat little square frames, crinkle cut edges and sometimes tidy compositions - so I will use them to launch this letter of inquiry, moving along with their crisply outlined silver halides and chiaroscuro clouds to the land of nod that rolls away toward that part of my life which is largely hidden; memories obscured by sadness and my poor mothers inability to sketch it out in even the broadest strokes. Possibly the shame and pain of her own weakness and irresolution galvanised by our step-father Milton's abhorrence and defiance of the past which existed before him, keeps her commentary bound to the litany of how much she loved my father and how handsome and despicable he was alright. This man whom oddly enough I can not even name at this moment but keep thinking it must be John or Charles yet cannot speak with any certainty - This perhaps is a perfectly reduced crystallisation of the choking dilemma I find myself in along these paths - to not be able to name or even say the thing, which however dim, is here before you like a tree or a house -but so much like those desert devils of moving dust you will never see plainly no matter how fast you whip your skull around since they live only in the periphery of conscious vision... so here they are before me - these slightly browning blacks and blank whites with the stepped degrees of subtle grey in between-- hidden from view until my brother and I were well into our thirties .

Do I want to see any photographs of my REAL Father ? -- Who disappeared from view so long ago but could have been living just around the corner for all I know - So yes Tom I said at the time I suppose I would like to see them as well as read the clumsy letters of protestation he wrote to my mother when she (as the story goes) discovered he had another wife and family - whether he was actually married to my mother at the time I cannot be sure because it has only recently occurred to me what a gigantic iceberg of half-told stories and hidden plots there is that hides beneath all these events.

If you want to know what I am really talking about then think of all the lies and embellishments that you have told or sold to yourself and how quickly you begin to cling to them as if they were the living testament of the universe this is cheating at solitaire - it is truly frightening when you discover at some point in your life that there actually might be a vantage point beyond the absurd or meaningless and deeper than the fear of loss or the threat of gain from which a TRUTH might indeed be discerned-

So I try as I write this words to have compassion or at least to relinquish the impassioned stance - surrender the defensive perimeter of the injured, harmed, unloved victim - this custom and costume so much to our liking when the past is dragged up with all its rumbling chains and bemoaned events- ,So it is this discovery about deep mined truth that provides the jumping off point for a harder exploration of who I am, whence I came and what could I have possibly come here for.

This slightly higher ground free from moralising which raises you up above your death bed and firmly turns your eyes to all the hidden desires in the places you thought you were giving- all the demands to be more and further along than those you thought you were helping. So I will come back to this ground in our talk about death- this leveller and reducer to stark and simple terms who I know has always been beside me even as I cried myself to sleep in those lonely and far-flung night places of childhood sleep.

My real father it would seem is bereft of any redeeming or endearing qualities other than his so-called handsome visage and seductive charm whose vanity and deceit I can conjure up in my own deluded wandering -- yes it is true that we look a bit alike as if at least the moulds were from the same factory press- the one and only father-picture I have with me here in Japan is a tiny silver image has an appropriately tilted horizon as if everything on earth were already in full slide and I am being held up by this wayward rascal in baggy pants with the clumsy ineptitude that men who can't be bothered with parenting have when they pick up children- Despite all that I have heard about this boozing womaniser (which actually is not much aside from that) I really like him - in the way one likes a detective hero for his cockiness and nonchalance it shows in his crouch and even in the fat dent in the dull and dusty car (which is the substantial THING that pulls the eyes in past the merely domestic tone of this snapshot - into the real and super-real of this small icon - I mean to say that for all we know there might be a dozen narcotic agents- a half ton of stolen dynamite or a troop of deep bosomed dancing girls ready to spill from the suddenly swung door of all that this old Plymouth represents) but in this shadow car we find only a worn out condom, a half pack of luckies, a stained necktie, some pornographic playing cards mixed with old spark plugs, a broken pen, a dirty comb, a map of Maryland Pennsylvania and Virginia with Washington blown up as if in a square magnifying glass and book matches from joints and clubs up and down the eastern seaboard.

So as it turns out the more I rearranged these photos to organise them the more I discovered the obvious connections - like all those taken on a certain outing or trip into Rock Creek Park or flown back after developing while on vacation in Minnesota - some with dates and proud little announcements about being a Kodachrome print processed and printed during the week of August twentythird 1953 or 54 - and with these mysteriously appearing after years of dusty exile in the gloom of attic cardboard I find at least three others from the same roll -the same light- the same little clothes and knitted caps in the cold spring air of temporary grace that precedes the deep well of disappointment and shame that only the truly abandoned will ever know-

And yet we are all abandoned, with our true senses taking leave as the way forward is stumbled into by training and default - this dumbness, this numbness shows up on my brothers usually so animated and intelligent face in these photos.

And it is difficult to say if it is the chill or tight clothing which has brought on this sloppy blank gaze that seems to indicate he might be seeing into an altogether different movie or shadow world where he sees the drift and slide in all its vain glorious tumult and banal horror -the years of oppression, humiliation and harsh unfeeling control which were to besiege the tiny forts we built around our hearts to barricade ourselves from darkness- and Yes I am clearly aware of the emotions and inflated sentimentality that marks the character of sifting through the trash heap that the little i surrounds itself with but how much better to weave a song of disenchantment and reclaim the spirit of the child in terms of the personal and dreamlike myth our lives reveal, than to sort and stack these little memory rooms labelling all the arrangements and rhythms with clinical descriptions whose depth has about as much reality as the names of cookies or oddly flavoured ice creams. Healing is what I propose to do in this work heal in order to clear a space in which to sit and breath and turn again to help and heal. My mother, Suzanne, which is really such a sexy name, comes on in these little squares with her handsome face and fine big bones adrift

in satin and white ribbon decked curls and shy cloth coat as desirable. And that she no doubt was. Without too much effort I can certainly imagine her opening again and again like a warm flower to the men who knew how to love her but not live with her because it does seem like most of that early life is about wreckage and confusion- and what can I say of mine except that perhaps I fool myself by valuing my rebellious and troublesome honesty as some higher quality -

I who looked for almost any reason to gather in defeat and embrace my isolation- ALONE - ALONE- who can say that they are not truly alone in these faltering steps to find what we have missed so many times that the missing itself appears to me to be the matrix of sorrow which swells the chest with disconsolate sighing at even the falling beauty of spring blossoms –

This sadness is the drone rhythm of life just behind your eyes, rolled up in the mist of the forest, in the sap of trees and veins of old farmers - this is the sorrow of remembering the vastness and quiet synchronicity of all those rooms with their angled sunlight and ancient dust in which we have moved through in our time around -the face of a young girl in a yellow dress beneath a bare light bulb seen from a speeding car on the Peloponnesus in Greece- the children huddled around your knees on the beach in Vietnam hoping for a bit of c-ration cake- those old Indians on the altiplano in Guatemala who drank and danced you into their celebration of wailing and lament until you came home staggering and weeping, crying inconsolably about the namelessness of sorrow itself- the ordinary water beneath how many wooden bridges, the coins lost and shouts of defiance or ecstasy, newspapers folded, unfolded and refolded some stuck fast to green blue window panes dated in the year of 1923 when in your imagination almost nothing could have happened, this temple light, this noon light filtered green through banana leaf and cedar those grounds which you have crossed singing of nothing but man and longing and some stony areas you have laid down upon where the heaving ground calls up

stories where language has no place at all; the buses seen from planes, towers and the curving pavement: moving with worried precision and expectation every moment in a thousand cities to make the time of arrival and departure click into place and finish yet one more business, one more shift, another thousand deals and exchanges, a Banyan tree in India where the eternally worn out sit waiting for nothing, wheels rolling and paper unrolling moment after moment - - who doesn't in their deepest heart know this longing that is really a kind of homesickness of the spirit for the spirit.

And lately I have thought that the aboriginal fear of photographs as soul-catchers must have some validity in the central wiring of businessman and pygmy - this seed of clear glowing wisdom we all share beneath the trappings and posturing of what we wear, own and profess to do. Just look at these few black and whites and you can feel it - I want to say poignancy -gestalt -vertical moment or vignette but these words are only words and it is the quality of signlessness that inhabits these complete worlds with their spring blossoms just so - for once and evermore and no more than that forever –

And the shadow of the photographer so dark and solid- a silhouette of a giant hog in a cowboy hat, a lobster hand with a three foot girth or just a lonely drunk with a brownie in one hand and a baby in the other... so in these squares we have my mothers charm only ruffled by her nose and the sharp angles of secretary glasses - the perfect shadow lace of the trees on the burnished hump of car- In the background far to the right - the mystery man seated in full lotus and seemingly hovering off the ground or seated on a tiny trolley like the legless blind beggars of my youth who were as regular as trolleys in post war Washington - all these held in time but also gone - long gone or going - the foliage gone forty times gone - the satin dress vanished into pillow scrap - the car gone back into earth and cheap teaspoons, the barn demolished into chipboard and daisies - the awkward hat flown away to the land of bad fashion like some ugly pigeon - but all wonderfully

present here in this tiny white square, itself as ephemeral and slender in time as impermanence can be.

We know the photographs of Hiroshima and Dresden were gone in a flash, even before bones or fine crystal succumbed to that relentless fire- my good Japanese landlord, when asked about all the old family photographs just says senko-damae desu- meaning that they went with the fire from the sky along with his home while he struggled to get back from his seven years in China - this ever rolling wave of disappearance is all at once chilling and burning, it opens up the heart not into wistfulness or fond recall, but into the vast plain of sorrow soaked by Ryokans burning tears:

*Walking along a narrow path at the foot of a mountain I come to an ancient cemetery filled with countless tombs And thousand-year-old oaks and pines, The day is ending with a lonely, plaintive wind. The names on the tombs are completely faded, And even the relatives have forgotten who they were.
Choked with tears, unable to speak,
I take my staff and return home.*

This feeling is the very one Rilke identifies when he points to the hand that holds up all this falling saying: "oh look it's in this one, it's in them all, and yet there is someone who holds up all this falling" It, whatever it may be, is in these photographs for me, not just because they are rooted in who I think I am-I find it in all old photographs, the older the better even though it is born fresh in the Polaroid as it slips into this very morning now with its decisive hum and click - only it is not ripe yet and for this we need time, and how much time is only the time bound within the viewer -- so for me that is a long time - and mostly black and white time since the colours seem to trick and glamorise the vision. Looking now at the two new-baby photos I have here it is clear to see that the one left un-coloured is full of light and presence while the other seems to look like a child who never existed - - gazing at

the first my eyes and heart fill up spontaneously with a feeling of love for this chubby smiling face and curling hands - I want to pick him up gently and walk slowly around the room with him cradled in my arms singing a song about the world outside...

Lately and for years I have thought about the boys who died in the water along side and around me on the only day I can really remember from Vietnam - My feelings are so mixed with anger, anguish and pure astonishment at my survival but at some point in my remembering I always think of them as lost children much like those in the limbo preached to me in childhood; or those babes in the Buddhist land of Sai-no-Kawara who in remembering their lost parents build tiny pagodas endlessly which are destroyed by a lurking demon just before completion while the babies run to hide in their terror in the stone sleeves of the Jizo protector who stands forever among them.

Like them all these children in blooded uniforms never had a chance to live - to me they remain frozen in time just like these photographs, even though in my deeper understanding I can see that they have moved on, I have tried very hard to move on as well, but even in this moment cannot help but think of them as if seeing glass shatter at my feet as it tumbles from my frozen hand - so quickly with no warning or chance to turn back or stem this sudden change- I see them still with all their time stolen, snatched from their eternally open arms and I see myself walking out of this arrested moment and going forward into promise, into light - only there is something I have left behind with them in that crystallised stillness- it comes around as weeping or guilt or the need to be present fully in every moment - what does it mean? nothing to do, nothing to be, nothing to have...

I read this today and in a way I can see that I have always known it but I also understand that knowing, in the mind or on the surface of the tongue, is far from enough and that truly, it is a lifetimes work in every moment to not be, not do, not

have. All these things, situations falling like walls form a palace of cards, all this name and form, this circling parade seems to push us forward and even appears to be the very substance and surround that we move through.

In the Mathnawi poems, Jelalludin Rumi pleads for us to "Think of how PHENOMENA come trooping out of the Desert of Non-existence into this materiality. Morning and night, they arrive in a long line and take over from each other, "It's my turn now. Get out!"

To me the procession is often as compelling as it is long.

In some weird way it is as if I was born into this world with a candle size knowledge of what an immense and thin illusion all our leaning toward and recoiling from materiality really amounts to. But a single flame seems meagre and feeble against all that is presented at home and in the prison that school becomes.

This training ground of assertion says YES, shouts BE DO HAVE--BE DO HAVE--BE DO HAVE!! - This blind deliverance into acquisition and force is why we were in Vietnam to begin with as teenagers when we might have been learning poetry or how to plant trees and make love-I think of Allen Ginsberg and the best minds of his generation eaten alive by these same demons and I have lived to see it happen- the suicides, the homeless, the over-dosed friends tied to trees, the over powered cars flung from curves, the helplessly mesmerised veterans and lost women sitting in front of all those shatteringly desolate televisions night after tired night - NO BODY HOME - NO BODY IN THERE - NO ONE TO HELP - NOTHING HAPPENING -and it has and does make me howl at the power who gently set our shoulders to the wheel.. and still I believe and trust and have - no other choice but to move gently forward with this quiet voice.

The Japanese word for mysterious is pronounced shimpi-teki which to my mind is a perfect sound for the qualities to be found in these old photographs... shimpi-teki could well be the wee thing adorned in greenish clothing which loves to turn over chairs and spill things in the blue shadowed kitchen of night with a sudden

bump and a swish of movement, or that feint face seen in the foliage which is never quite there when you look with purpose, a Golem stripped of evil and discontent or nothing at all - just the breeze on the back of our neck--- It is this mood I discover in turning to the early photographs of my brother, which in their stark and bleak crispness are just short of threatening and gloomy - certainly forlorn to a high degree. In a series of shots taken out doors he is plunked down in the wide grey landscape of a townhouse backyard - circa Washington 1947 - ,this could be death valley or Culloden Moor - the camera-eye some fifteen to twenty feet (or miles in this scale) away, is at squirrel level and really appears to be watching with intention rather than simply recording.

In the receding sweep that stops dead at wooden fence or brick wall this baby in white- shoes, shorts, socks and open sleeveless vest - all in white, like a sacrifice - an inmate - appears to be cast out and abandoned - hollering and clutching toward the closest edges of the frame; we might think he has been there for days if we could not sense the just beyond reach soul-taker who has gathered all this in. In one single snapshot, where his budding grimace is contracted, demanding and inconsolable, an old wooden ironing board leaning on the brick wall looks like a child's coffin lid or a doorway to some small purgatory.

Here love appears to have left altogether - checking out in a great rush and leaving no forward address.

Two other photographs - two by four inches with crinkly rounded borders - are as forbidding to me as any sinister image- I think because they call to mind and heart that insufferable, armless, helplessness the sprung trap above the silent cave that infancy devoid of warmth, contact and protection can become. . . They are both flawlessly exposed with the deepest of dense ebony running across the scale to the white of new business envelopes or chalk. In one, he is by all appearances, howling fiercely in complete and abject misery, slung in a kind of low canvas baby chair, legs bowed and curving, head rolled back into the corner of the chair against one wooden

arm. Here again the camera is barely off the squared perspective of tiled floor and its watching charges the room with the tensile feel of a huge mouth about to spring shut; this tenseness is heightened by the soft out-of-focus jitter caused by the nervous hand of the photographer during a sluggish sweep of the shutter. A tunnel of darkness formed by the door neatly surrounds the alabaster backed halo of the white fabric chair which surrounds in turn the grey and yawning head. And floating above all this darkness is the most excellently shimmering and distorted reflection of a window I think that I have ever seen. With the dark door handle placed neatly in the bottom corner of this wave like spectre-door we sense that with the right spell or twist of the wrist we might stroll right on into the other world behind this world of sorrow and loneliness, to check things out - maybe to ask a few questions such as,

WHO LEFT THAT BABY OUT THERE IN THE HALL WITH NO ONE TO WATCH OVER IT? WHY DO WE RUN FROM DEATH ? WHY IS LIFE NEVER FULL ? WHOSE IN CHARGE HERE ANYWAY? and so on...

To me there is little doubt that what we see in this photograph for the most part, however deftly or artfully described is suffering. This wee boy is in trouble and we can not break in to this lost space and push the dragon down and away from his stifling wails. Unlike the other baby, as much as I might want to pick him up and soothe him there is no way in to this room, no entry remains, for it is locked inside him alone. In the matching photograph the accidental framing and light exposure is very close to perfection; presenting the dense and abstract tiled foreground and delicately surreal and looming background balanced and divided evenly by a stunned, wizened baby lying chest down on the blanket covered floor like some old soft headed gnome who has collapsed after being forced to confess to almost everything... there is also the feel of an newspaper accident photo where we see the blank stare of the victim, sprawled before the mangled car, his glossy pupil trajectory leading straight as a guy wire to the center of the lens.

But something in our bodies tells us clearly that it is not the camera which the victim sees but the dense body of fear that only certain cats and dogs can see. Except here there is no wreckage or whirling light, but two wooden painted armchairs surrounded in fine symmetry by the black arch of a mantle, one white and one dark, they appear to stand right over the baby's stunned baldness, a mother chair, a father chair, an Indian and cowboy chair, a Michael and Lucifer chair a yin yan chair pair – they seem to prance or pounce on the tender nape of white skin and pin the baby to the floor like two wanton Shivas stomping on the dwarf of deluded self.

And still there is only a baby. a floor and some cheap furniture all held together in time by the light which falls upon and through this paper. One chair, the good one, has a waving clown or monkey on the backrest which frolics even in the middle of the most terrible storms.

I have a teacher who says that sometimes we find it difficult to be solid. I think surely he is right, it is hard to stand upright in these times of fierce wind and hard weather when there seems to be nothing at all of substance or strength to cling to. I believe the real lesson is that there is truly nothing to hold onto. It is in this learning time, when the terrible balancing act comes on, that we must find a way of nurturing and kindly greeting that arising being which finds it hard to be solid. This is the hungry ghost in all of us. To learn how not to cling, without grasping the learning process itself in a stranglehold of spiritual yearning feels doubly hard. It creates a split, a burning ground of conflict and distorted views. I have often found myself in daydream or some other waking confusion half-wishing for or completely taken by the solid commitment of ignorance and apparent simplicity of the ordinary and uncomplicated life of the everyday working man or woman. I suppose the one that Whitman so much loved, that clear eyed man of muscle and well-met spirit who will swing his shoulder into the day with a reverence that is only breathing, sweating, laughing and getting on with the job at hand. I am thinking of someone beyond the notion of myth and romance, who sleeps and

eats when the time is right and gives because this is what nature does - it just gives - in both taking away and providing - it gives. The Tao says, if the Tao can be said to say at all, that to be generous and unaware of your generosity is to truly be alive, this is to leave no mark, no track no trace of clinging or difference.

What do I hope to accomplish in my examination of these early memories and images? If the seeds of our suffering lie much deeper in almost unfathomable depths it would be a folly and an idle whimsy to wrestle with all these sinewy cherubim over and over - bringing up all these troubled visions. But it must be the deeper seeds that form the child, that guide the birth, that attract the spirits momentum and quickening life perpetuating and transmuting karma into the family or a resemblance of one. To be fair to my mother, as I look at the frozen surfaces of these earliest photos it is not all shock and horror. Her face though always slightly confused seems to connect.

In the christening shot of my brother, born not quite two years after the world war in June of 1947, she is looking down with a rather bemused look at this tiny screwed-tight nut face which is dwarfed by the super nova comet tail of an unbelievably large white christening gown. It is actually so long that it hangs down to form a fringed border to mothers long dress. As I look closer at her face now I see that it is nearly inscrutable, yes there is a smile there but the joy and intelligence of a full blown smile are nowhere to be seen. This looks like the smile of someone who just did something awkward in public or a person who has been given a gift that they couldn't possibly want or even know how to use. Here the composition is handsomely and symmetrically balanced, like eggs on the shiny steel curved pan of a scale in some late 40's market.

My mothers torso, shoulders and Slavic head, complete with bad hat and ugly glasses is completely centred and encircled by a shiny round church glass window which is held aloft into the vertical rise of the photo frame by two arches of brick window framing. On either side of the trailing christening gown they sit like

two dwarf-pala temple guardians playing a dark and deepening riff against the holy whites of the soaring fabric.

To me, the real secret of the photograph is in the mirroring circle of glass that opens into a world left behind, another universe, another family cosmology that trails off behind my mother and back through the forties into the depression time and other beginnings. There are other photographs there, gone, lost buried or otherwise made to disappear, vanished by default or obscured by the jostled design of our shifting lives. In that window I see another family- a husband, John Derman, I believe, and two children of that union a Robert and a Jaqueline who walked. ran or were dragged out of the picture of my dear mothers life and never turned back. This is the true mystery and I suspect the proper key to all that remains so obscure and illogical in this fractured history; the detail and story line in all those times and places my mother fails to talk about. Does it matter?

Are these curious details and bizarre situational permutations of any value? I don't know at all, but I imagine that if my view was wider and more perfectly aware then all this would be noise or dim movement, but for someone still walking, still seeking, these rags tied to branches fluttering in the wind must mark the way back home.

QUESTIONS: Why if our fathers name was Merkle were we brought up and always

registered in schools as Derman? Was my mother in fact ever married to this man

Merkle? Why did my mothers marriage break up with John Derman and more importantly - Why did the children go off with him to England and the Air Force rather than stay with mother which was far and away the more normal and socially

acceptable thing to do in Catholic 1940's America? Why have they, except for one very brief interlude, never in all this time made any contact with my mother?

Why did she make no effort to contact them and cloak the whole episode in very vague language?

Why did Milton go through all the trouble of using his influence at city hall or somewhere to get faked birth certificates (which I have used successfully all my adult life) made up which state that he was our real father of record in 1947 and 48? Why would Milton, whenever he really lost control, call us little bastards and the like? Why do Tommy and I look so different and yet in the areas of similarity look like our mother? Why was the divorce and dispensation ordeal so long and seemingly complicated?

Lately it has occurred to me that some of these questions might be answerable by the strong possibility that Mother was having an affair with this Mr. Merkle and her first husband left with the children when it was discovered, she subsequently never legally married my father (thus keeping the name Derman, which she and the two of us had as a last name while we were growing up). All this will remain unclear until my mother cares to share the truth with us. Somehow I feel that knowing would put some ground under my feet.

Returning to the album I find a series of shots taken on a bright early summer day in the park. They are obviously a set, as my Mother wears the same dreadful nautical-design shortsleeved blouse throughout, while I and my brother are in matching bib overalls, striped tee shirts and dark blue Keds in every frame. For some reason, perhaps because she thought it was cute and enjoyed the public attention when we were out and about, my mother always dressed us in two absolutely identical outfits, mirrored to the last tiny detail of button, cap or cowboy belt. This fashion symmetry is in all the photographs up to the time we were sent away to school; then it became the parochial schools job to see that everybody dressed alike. Which they accomplished with an all out vengeance - tolerating not even the faintest variation of the true blue-on-blue theme of fashion transubstantiation. No wonder my generation exploded into a wild and unrestrained exotic clothes fever when we finally hit the streets, piling layer upon

layer of mixed regalia and freak wear.... the fifties was all about moderation and repetition. So dressed each day like frik and frak Tom and I would cringe and wince our way through a dozen or more inquiries by shopkeepers, trolley conductors and old ladies:

MY ! MY! what cute little boys ! Are they twins? At which point, by the time we could just barely speak, my brother and I (jumping like trained mice out of the third-person into the first-person present) would blurt out the secret password which we clung to like our own little identity tag, NO we're fourteen months apart... Fourteen months and a light year apart even though until my brother was trundled onto the big yellow bus and hauled away to the first day of twenty years of formal education we were always toe to toe and hand in hand in our little world of confusion. I think that our mantra of fourteen months apart somehow reinforced and widened the radical differences in our temperament and character so that each time we chanted it we were somehow separated by the repetition like beads on an ageing rosary. I don't know if mom wanted to show what a good catholic wife she was by publicly announcing the spacing of her sons, like boxcars or fenceposts, all the while dressing us so smartly as twins. Perhaps it was just easier to buy two blazers and caps and two pairs of thick black galoshes, than to pick out two different items for boys who after all were only fourteen months apart. So in these six photographs gathered in like sonnets or daisies there is a curious almost strange discrepancy. The looker, the recorder, the photo taker never appears. Who is this mystery photographer? Or is there no mystery at all, since my four year old brother shows up but once in the six photographs, in one where only he and I appear together drinking from a water fountain. The rest show my mother and I together or myself alone. If this is the case, then he abandoned an immeasurably promising career as a photographer because all of these shots are creative and often very imaginative in their composition for a four year old.

Among them is my favourite lifetime image of myself, and a symbol of all that I would like to be remembered by. In it I am seated beneath a large wide brimmed

straw hat, enthroned upon a picnic table with my denim clad legs splayed out in front- each ending in a pair of fat sneaker bottoms looking like two mute pages at the court of happy fools. Facing directly into the lens I am holding a can of National Bohemian Beer, a local brand often referred to as National Bo or in times of urgency just Bo- the white stem of an unfiltered cigarette perches on my pursed lips- unlit and awkward it sits biding its time waiting to fly. You have seen this photo before. It's the one where the children wield the power symbols; the ruddy plains Indian boy buried in a mountain of buffalo hide with the feathered pipe and Winchester cradled in his thin brown arms, his eyes are like glass or a frozen lake and reel in the future with the pull a magnet feels for a herd of pins; the top hat and pipe pose, the chubby hands that grip the steering wheel, stroke the flank of the hanging stag or pitch coal into the steam and brass of forward motion, all these children acting out the parts-filling up the costumed space of those in power, aching for and acting out the future. When I was young and began to reason I yearned incessantly for the power of those grownup, those towering trousers and looming skirts which filled the lonely horizon of my helplessness with their demands and one-way suggestions.

So much from birth until five lies buried or blocked- What do I remember? Certain objects like the three foot white goose that was my hugging companion and shows up in several photos taken on a bench outside of our Savannah Street apartment. Pretending to be lame as I walked slightly behind my mother in the busy downtown

shopping street. Being rolled into the operating room at two, flat on a man size gurney, I am flattened beneath the sheets as the wide smile of the black male nurse

descends to ask me" NOW WHAT DO YOU WANT FOR CHRISTMAS MY LITTLE

MAN" as if my wish was somehow held in one hand behind his back.

Being chased down an alley by a group of very angry black children and trying to escape on to a tin roof -- hoisting myself up with the abundant strength of fear and slicing open my shin a scar that is still there after forty years, hitting a little black girl on the head with a can opener thrown from the third floor back porch of our apartment in retaliation - being terrified that the police would come and take me away. Going to a night club act with Milton and mom and being given all the baby chicks that the magician used like paper streamers or balloons in his act, taking them home in a cardboard box where they died one by one during a week long wake to the tune of Tammy's In Love -

Two scenes of public anger and violence: In one my mother and I are walking downtown in bright summer sunlight and a crew cut white man in a station wagon is rear ended by a black taxi driver, his car is not really hurt but he is consumed by an intolerably powerful rage and repeatedly smashes the car behind him with his own car by alternately roaring forward and slamming his car into reverse with the throttle pressed to the floor. His wife who is clutching a young baby and crying hysterically flops about in the front seat like a suburban raggedy ann, pieces of both cars break, tear away and fall with a great heartbreaking commotion all around- the whole scene goes by in a minute but seems to last and linger like the slow motion inferno of Zabrieskie Point - finally the raging man screeches away tires howling and burning into the soft black summer tar to vanish in the traffic, someone from the dumbstruck crowd yells to the taxi man, Hey! Don't worry pal, I've got his number"...

Another time around age three or four driving in a friends car to Beverley Beach, then a segregated swimming beach on the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland, we are in a long line of cars moving slowly and hesitantly through the hazy fields following a weaving drunk whose erratic driving is keeping everyone behind from passing and forcing oncoming traffic onto the shoulder, suddenly as the drunk lurches to the side of the road a few other cars stop, men emerge from several cars then

surround the drunk and yank him from the car - as we pass they can be seen pummelling and kicking him to the ground, this behaviour seems bizarre and incomprehensible to me. My mother says he is getting what he deserves...

One early pre step father apartment was just on the Washington side of the Patuxent River; but the one I do remember clearly was over on Savannah Street South East, and as many of the old photos will testify, these apartments, built because of the need for housing during the war, can only be described as ugly, not squalid or destitute like buildings from the lower east side of early 20th century New York, but so severely plain, brick dim and box shaped as to be the architectural cousin to the banality of evil. They had been thoroughly scoured by an invisible vacuum force which inhaled even the slightest residue of charm or dignity. If their blank facades could speak they would most likely murmur "like it or lump it" then spit into the street or into your astonished face. Now if they still exist they must be a perfect place for drugs and guns - a place where the city begins to gnaw on its own flesh. Three stories of undistinguished red-brown brick broken by steel frame windows, the kind that only one pane swings out of - you see them in barracks and basements everywhere and they will pinch your fingers with a blind vengeance if you are slow or careless. They are normally a colour which falls somewhere in that short dingy spectrum from navy grey to pea green. These windows are regular-standard-plain-utilitarian-colder to the touch than glass in a wooden frame - evenly spaced like bad false teeth and face out into the street in gridded sets of twelve or fifteen to a brick side - they have nothing to say to the world except at Christmas time, when they are adorned with a sprinkling of coloured lights or an arched row of yellow electric candles that blink out the stuttered promise of happiness and peace.

In my attempt to re-inhabit these dim spaces my thoughts are drawn to the

value and fragility of memory - which seems to be faulted and fleeting as everything else on the chartless planet of our minds - What then is the true and lasting value of memory? It can lead to despair or a wish to live each moment in impeccable balance reality and honesty. Reading Raymond Carver's last poems, written as he approached an early and certain death, he refers to a picture taken two years before he was informed of his fatal cancer - looking deeply into the difference this ignorance of his swiftly approaching end had made.

"You open a drawer and find inside the man's photograph, knowing he has only two years to live. He doesn't know this, of course, that's why he can mug for the camera."

No matter how tightly I shut my eyes or how forcibly I peer into the labyrinth of faint memory of these earliest years I can only retrieve fragments - half of a room, the shadowed parts of a hall, the element of fear from an incomplete scene, the shadow of the fat settee, the eclipsed pattern of a quilt - many faces devoid of names. Spotting a wooden bumble bee with rotation Plasticine wings, hiding for forty years at the edge of a photo, I am presented, from some deeper recess of memory - the entire toy. Its weight and tactile sense in little fingers when handled or pulled by a brightly coloured plastic cord - the clackity bumpalong sound it made when it followed obediently behind me down the long hall - the colour and feel of the bee painted cardboard that was glued to the bee silhouette of wood - the wonky plastic bobbed springs swinging around in every direction when the bee danced - from where does this bumble bee gestalt emerge and recede? Where does the rasa, the sweetness hide? Where is the juice of the thing? There is a whole bee here somewhere - not in the photo I'm sure or I would eat the entire album like blotter acid for a vibrant and astonishing walk through childhood. This mystery is in some way both brilliant and shadowy, all in the same moment like the chill within a fever.

I am certain that there are rooms bulging with books in all the major cities and universities of our world which would divulge the state of the art psychological profile and definitive answer to this mystery of memory - thesis upon thesis and theory within theory from epistemology to deconstruction and back around the bend in time again; but to me they are like shadow studies – bound to language, experiment debate rhetoric and the fetters of expectation of result. To me what is real must necessarily be signless - without reference or symbol - and the truly signless can not be measured or rationally described –

When Rumi says in the Mathnawi that, "*truth is not a matter for discussion*" and "*burn up your thinking and your forms of expression*" he is not pleading for the hood of ignorance to descend and obscure our everyday truth.

It is only his delightful finger pointing directly to this bright and unspeakable invisibility from which the bee so long hidden emerges These holes of glass beneath the flattened roofs where my dear bee once lived were for letting in light and air and looking out to see someone's car pull away or the mail arrive - they aren't about beauty or even design so we should not expect too much or curse them in our dreaming.

Across the street from these brick blocks was planted the still uglier seed of what grew into the now monstrous phenomena called the SHOPPING MALL or MALL; which might easily and more appropriately be called MAUL or the French MAL as in what they do to the spirit that is left within us. After the war when this clumping of stores began to spring up in earnest, like the spread of some unstoppable social weed they were called centres or plazas and had harmless and sanguine first names like Oakdale or Twin Rivers. They were all about convenience and the wanton worship of homogeneity that started in the fifties and rages completely beyond control in our cities and suburbs. This is what one world's fair promotional film called throw-away living. Our pipsqueak enterprise was only an early skirmisher, a puny four or five concrete block storefronts with flat aluminium awning roofs stretched across a wide cement walkway - a drug store, a movie

theatre, a laundry-dry cleaners and a grocery store with the matter of fact and no frills name of FOOD-TOWN which can still be read in the soft background of some of our photographs. The movie theatre had Saturday afternoon events complete with prize drawings and stage skits, I won something there once but I have long forgotten what it was. There was no father at Savannah Street South East; he had long since disappeared into his other mythical family or a drunken stupor, vanished beyond the range of the longest lens. This absence, with one parent in limbo and the other waiting on fancy tables to put bread on our own, might account for the skinny memory - no body home *donc*- no body home - I think my brother and I spent a lot of our early time waiting - - our misfortune is that we did not gain patience from this vigil but only a mighty anger and a raging impatience which is a scourge to us both.

But in the empty slots left for the mother and father cut-outs at least there was Jimmy, who like the marvellous white stuffed goose of these beginning days was a source of love and friendship in our not so lucky lives (and like the toy goose survives as a simple photograph). I don't remember much about Jimmy except her bigness and her dark skin which to us seemed as fine as any other. Her lap was my home and I do know that she was there day after day while my mother was away working or elsewhere; she took care of all the things that needed doing in a house with two young boys and was kind to us in a happy and maternal way. No doubt she had her own troubles which made her turn more and more to drink. At some point she was in a helpless and uncontrollable state when mom returned from work and she passed from our little world into some other.

1990 – 1991 Daniel Reeves