11

Family Secrets:
The Poem as Photograph

Mementos, I

Sorting out letters and piles of my old
  Canceled checks, old clippings, and yellow note cards
That meant something once, I happened to find
  Your picture. *That* picture. I stopped there cold,
Like a man raking piles of dead leaves in his yard
    Who has turned up a severed hand.

Still, that first second, I was glad: you stand
  Just as you stood—shy, delicate, slender,
In that long gown of green lace netting and daisies
  That you wore to our first dance. The sight of you stunned
Us all. Well, our needs were different, then,
    And our ideals came easy.

Then through the war and those two long years
  Overseas, the Japanese dead in their shacks
Among dishes, dolls, and lost shoes; I carried
  This glimpse of you, there, to choke down my fear,
Prove it had been, that it might come back.
    That was before we got married.

—Before we drained out one another's force
  With lies, self-denial, unspoken regret.
And the sick eyes that blame; before the divorce
  And the treachery. Say it: before we met. Still,
I put back your picture. Someday, in due course,
    I will find that it's still there.

—W.D. Snodgrass

The experience of coming upon an old photograph and being moved by it, being swept up in memories of a time long gone, is surely a common one to most of us. W.D. Snodgrass maintains a relaxed and "talky" tone of voice while imposing on that ordinary speech a good deal of end-rhyme and internal music. The end-rhymes, a mixture of full rhymes, assonant rhymes (*slender/then, daisies/easy*), and—in one case—full consonance (*stand/stunned*), help create the poem's lovely music. The internal music is no less rich. Notice all the alliterative *l*'s and *c*'s in the first three lines and the repeated *e* sound in letters, checks, yellow, and meant.

The statement of the poem is a touching one, the imagery is often strikingly effective—like that simile comparing the narrator's shock at finding the photo to that of a man coming upon a severed hand—and the affection and humanity behind the poem, the refusal to use the occasion for self-justification or complaint, make it a trustworthy document about human suffering.

Here is another poem about a photograph. Though its surface is simple, it reveals a family's secret life:

My Wicked Wicked Ways

This is my father.
See? He is young.
He looks like Errol Flynn.
He is wearing a hat
that tips over one eye,
a suit that fits him good,
and baggy pants.
He is also wearing
those awful shoes,
the two-toned ones
my mother hates.
Here is my mother.
She is not crying.
She cannot look into the lens
because the sun is bright.
The woman,
the one my father knows,
is not here.
She does not come till later.

My mother will get very mad.
Her face will turn red

and she will throw one shoe.
My father will say nothing.
After a while everyone
will forget it.
Years and years will pass.
My mother will stop mentioning it.

This is me she is carrying.
I am a baby.
She does not know
I will turn out bad.

—Sandra Cisneros

The poet steps outside the photograph to tell her story and then returns to the snapshot in the surprising concluding lines. In effect, the entire poem becomes a photograph. What an interesting shock the last line leaves us with, and yet it is somehow right—for, in fact, life does not turn out the way we imagine it will and the happy family portrait often hides the seething lives of its subjects. Cisneros' title, by the way, is also the title of Errol Flynn's autobiography.

Here's a poem about a photo that becomes an emblem of something touching, mysterious and unnameable:

The Hat in the Sky

After the war,
after I was born,
my father's hobby
(perhaps his obsession)
was photography.
New fathers often become
photographers, it seems.
But he took pictures of many things
besides me,
as if he suddenly felt it all
slipping away
and wanted to hold it forever.
In one of the many shoe boxes
full of photographs
in my father's house,
one photo sticks in my mind,
a snapshot
of a black hat
in midair,
the kind of hat fashionable in the forties,
a fedora—something
Bogie would wear.
Someone has thrown it

into the air—
perhaps my father himself,
perhaps someone in an exuberant moment
at a rally or gathering.
It's still there,
hanging in the sky
as ordinary and impossible
as a painting by Magritte,
and it's impossible
how it wrenches my heart, somehow.
At odd moments in my life,
that hat appears to me
for no discernible reason.

—Al Zolynas

This is not a poem that describes a photograph so much as one that uses a photograph to give us a sense of the mystery of photography—and of the past—and of life itself. Note how simple the language is and how mysterious the photo of the hat is acknowledged to be. The poem is perfectly clear and yet the feeling with which it leaves the narrator—and reader—is similarly mysterious, mysterious in its ability to capture life's unspeakable sadness in words that are more than the sum of their parts.

Here is another poem about a photograph that becomes engagingly mysterious, a poem in which the author finds a way of animating the picture, of entering it and, in some curious way, of unmasking its surface:

Ladies On The Beach

In the picture their high-button shoes
toe the surf that sudses and smoothes
the shallow shoreline; their scarves,
unfurled, shiver out to unveil
the wind's direction. The younger one
on the right inclines her head
towards the older, about to say
something just as a hairpin slips
loosening a few auburn curls.

From their eyes I can tell they sense
my presence, my awe. Suddenly they lift
their skirts, turn back the same way
I imagine they came, and gulls
scatter luminous over glittering water.
Victorian ladies, the older now raises
her parasol, the other holds onto her hat
along the same beach I walk with my mother

every summer in our different clothes...
If we were these women
around the next bend we would encounter
an inlet surprisingly private. I am
the one on the right who slowly undoes
her gloves, and, like a ceremony,
the buttons tracing the curve
of my spine. Then, the dress drops,
a wrinkled heap, abandoned on the sand.
After I unhook the eyelets of my corset
and step from my shoes, my mother,
always the speaker of good conscience,
will finish whatever it was
she had started to say.

—Clare Nagel

One has the sense that the poem was discovered as the poet examined the photograph of a familiar beach taken in an earlier era. The first imaginative leap the poet makes is to imagine that the women in the picture sense the narrator's presence. At that moment, the picture becomes animated and the women begin moving about. Then we are told that it is the same beach the narrator and her mother walk every summer, and a moment later she and her mother have become those two Victorian ladies taking off their clothes on that deserted inlet. The image of the two women stepping from their clothing, the fact that they are proper Victorian ladies, and the description of the narrator's mother as "the speaker of good conscience," set up a complex tension between propriety and intimacy that leaves the reader, once again, with a sense of mystery.

Of course not all photographs these days are still photographs. Here is a poem based on both actual film footage and an imaginary photograph:

The Catch

The film footage wavers
on the gray TV screen:
fistfuls of Marines flung
from a helicopter, a flower
suspended in air
dropping its bloom of pods.
A row of khakied backs, the square-
shouldered shapes of men, knee-deep
in mud and raising rifles
like fishing rods.
There is the bitter smell of powder,
of too much salt, as bodies,

scooped from a trench, are flopped
like fish on a deck.
Here's what is left
of a boy from Maryland, half a face
and his good right arm. The rest,
scattered on a hillside, his pink
testicles split against
the brain-gray rock. In his breast
pocket, a snapshot, his girl
in a bikini, her whole body sprawled
across the hood of a new Camaro.
She's wet from the blue pool, shining,
car keys dangling from her teeth like minnows.

—Dorianne Laux

The distant view of the marines on the flickering TV screen quickly becomes a close-up view, then the narrator—in a radical shift of perspective—unobtrusively enters the action so intimately that she can describe not only minute visual details but even the smells. Then, moving in even closer, now an omniscient observer, she describes the pitifully mutilated remains of a single marine. We have been taken not only from the distant to an ever-closer viewpoint, but also from a general sense of the events to the most specific of descriptions. At first we see only "fistfuls" of marines, but by the end we see the horror of one young man's death and the details of a single photograph in his breast pocket.

The simile that compares the marines raising their rifles to men raising fishing rods is not only an apt visual comparison but one that sets up the underlying theme of the poem—expressing through figurative language what the poem also expresses through its narrative line. This fishing image—an image of both the "good" life of American leisure and a "harmless" sport with unacknowledged deadly consequences for its victims—is extended when the narrator tells us that "bodies, scooped from a trench, are flopped like fish on a deck," and appears again at the poem's conclusion when the girl in the photograph is described mugging for the camera with "car keys dangling from her teeth like minnows." She has been transformed, through this carefully controlled image, into a fish who is "hooked," swallowing the bait. But so too has the marine been "hooked." Are imperialism, colonialism, and exploitation the "catch" in the American dream, the hidden cost of the good life? The basic fish/hooked metaphor of the poem is an example of the rich use of ambiguity—not to confuse readers but to enlarge the conceptual landscape of the poem.

Poem 19: A Family Snapshot

Describe a photograph of some member or members of your family. Look at the photograph long and hard until you are deeply moved. Perhaps the subject of the photo is no longer alive, or it was taken before you were born, or you are there in the picture as a young child. Perhaps behind you stands the house where you grew up and to which you have not returned in many years.

Here are some rules that might appear at first to limit your options, but will actually make the writing easier and the final product richer. Use at least four of the following dozen words in the poem, though not necessarily in their photography-related meaning: *lens*, *reflex*, *develop*, *blow-up*, *crop*, *negative*, *shoot*, *diaphragm*, *expose*, *focus*, *reel*, and *print*.

Begin the poem by describing the photograph, making three observations about it. Then tell us two or three things that we would not know from the picture. Let those draw you into your past until you discover something that you had never realized or had never articulated—or had never before dared reveal to yourself or others.

Look at how the author of "Mementos, I" creates the emotion that he wishes the reader to feel. How does the author of "The Hat in the Sky" "tell" the reader what to feel about that mysterious photograph taken by his father? What emotion does one feel from "My Wicked Wicked Ways"? How has the author controlled the reader's response?

Work on the poem until the emotions and characterizations develop like one of those Polaroid snapshots that you can watch growing clearer and clearer. Don't call the poem finished until there is the clarity of a striking, revelatory portrait.

Poem 20: A News Photo

Take a news or magazine photo that you find intriguing, haunting or in some way moving. Begin by describing the photograph, but then, somewhere between the fifth and ninth lines, and without the reader being quite aware of what you are doing, animate the characters, setting them in motion. Before the twelfth line, either become one of the characters or tell us an intimate detail or two about that person. Let the poem emerge, as the Clare Nagel poem emerges, somehow of its own volition, without any conscious agenda on your part. This is a poem in which you must trust the process itself, letting the poem take you where it wishes to go.

Experiment and the Tradition