

SOURCE: Known and
Street Things
Teju Cole, 2016

Object Lesson

IN NOVEMBER 2013, thousands of people gathered in Maidan Nezalezhnosti, the central square in Kiev, to protest their government's refusal to ratify an agreement with the European Union. The demonstrations went on for months; when brutal attempts were made to stop them, they only became more popular. The crowds were enormous, containing, at times, more than 100,000 people. Many of the photographs from the protests had the organized disorder of medieval battle scenes: spiky barricades, rows of tents, patches of soil and ash, flashes of color where flags were held aloft, sudden brightness from reflections and fires, a great swirl of angry humanity and dark-helmeted riot police massed behind shields, all of it set against backdrops of smoke, fog, or falling snow. So epic and cinematic were the photographs from the Maidan that it took some effort to remember that they were first and foremost news images, unstaged depictions of real, ongoing human suffering.

In her 1977 collection of essays, *On Photography*, Susan Sontag identified a feeling of helpless voyeurism that comes over us as we look at photographs of people in the midst of conflict. She also wrote about how repeatedly seeing such images could anesthetize the vision and deaden the conscience. Sontag understood photographs of conflict to be making a utilitarian

argument—that they could bring us into a state of productive shock—and she showed that they seldom did what they claimed, or hoped, to do. The more photographs shock, the more difficult it is for them to be pinned to their local context, and the more easily they are indexed to our mental library of generic images. What, then, are we to do with a thrilling photograph that is at the same time an image of pain?

In becoming part of a family of familiar cinematic images that includes *Throne of Blood* and *Alexander Nevsky*, but also *The Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars*, the spectacular photos from Ukraine stopped doing what they were ostensibly made for. They supplied some aesthetic satisfaction, as well as a jolt of outrage, but they told us very little about the particular politics of the protests, much less what to think about it or do in response. Conflict photography comes with built-in risks for the photographers, who put themselves in harm's way to bring us news, but also, in a less visceral way, for us, the viewers. If it is done well, it can move us to think of art and pop culture ("it's just like a movie"), instead of the suffering it depicts. If it is not done well, if the images are not formally compelling, it might lose its claim on even our momentary attention.

There are other kinds of photographs, though, that can present particular crises without also giving us the feeling that it has all been seen before. There are photographic projects that document survivors long after war. Others use archival or found images to consider violence. Yet another approach is to take photographs that exclude humans: destroyed buildings, detritus-strewn battlefields, aerial photographs of damaged landscapes. An intriguing subset of that last category depicts domestic objects whose meaning has been altered in the aftermath of a calamity. The shock of the Ukrainian conflict is con-

veyed in one way by a photo of riot police dragging a protester through the snow, and in quite another way by an image of a ruined kitchen, like the one by the Ukrainian photographer Sergei Ilnitsky.

In Ilnitsky's photograph, taken in August 2013 in Donetsk, a major city in the eastern part of Ukraine, a length of white lace is swept to the left side. Like a theatrical curtain, it reveals a table with a teapot, a bowl full of tomatoes, a can, two mugs, and two paring knives on a little cutting board. It is a still life, but it is in utter disarray. Broken glass and dust are everywhere, and one of the mugs is shattered; to the right, across the lace curtain, the shards of glass, and the table, is a splatter of red color that could only be one thing. Domestic objects imply use, and Ilnitsky's photograph pulls our minds toward the now lost tranquility of the people who owned these items. How many cups of coffee were made in that kitchen? Who bought those tomatoes? Were there children in this household who did their homework on this table? Whose blood is that? The absence of people in the photograph makes room for these questions.

No image stands alone; each is related in straightforward or convoluted ways to other pictures. Ilnitsky's photograph reads to me as a sad update of a famous one by Sam Abell taken in Moscow in 1983. Abell's picture also shows a diaphanous white lace curtain, but, in this case, it is not drawn aside. We see through the curtain a windowsill lined with seven pears, luminous in late-afternoon light, beyond which are visible the spires of Red Square. Abell had gone to Russia to shoot a story about the life of Tolstoy. For days he was shadowed by security forces who must have assumed he was a spy. Then, one Sunday, in his hotel room, he realized that the pears sitting on the windowsill

might make an interesting picture. And so he worked on the composition for twelve hours, until a breeze lifted the curtain in just the right way. The resulting photograph evokes a private reverie in an atmosphere of Cold War paranoia. Andropov was the leader of the Soviet Union, Reagan was the president of the United States, and relations between the two countries were deteriorating. "People ask me why I worked on one composition so long," Abell wrote in response to my questions about this image. "My answer: for solace."

Another surprisingly quiet depiction of aftermath is Glenna Gordon's series on the things left behind by the Nigerian girls abducted by Boko Haram. Unlike Abell and Ilnitsky, Gordon did not take her photos in situ. She had the objects—schoolbooks, pens, dresses, shoes—sent from Chibok, where the girls lived, to Abuja, and she photographed them in a studio there. In Gordon's project, the human victims are themselves missing, not simply excluded. Their abduction could not be photographed, nor could their captivity; Gordon's photographs nevertheless bring us into close contact with the girls' lives. When we look at a blue blouse with the name written on its collar—"Hauwa Mutah"—we might reflect on the awful fate of this one particular girl among hundreds. It is like Gilles Peress's photograph of a stained infant bodysuit on the ground, taken just after the genocide in Rwanda, an image that persists in the memory longer than yet another horrific photograph of a corpse.

Gordon's notes tell us that Hauwa Mutah, the girl who owned the blue blouse, was the sixth-born of nine children. Her favorite subjects were English and geography, and she hoped to become a biochemist. Now, almost a year after the abduction, with the exception of a small number of the girls

who escaped, there is no certainty as to whether they are alive or whether they will ever be found. The faint biographical traces left by this one girl activated my own memories and emotional responses. In my teens, my favorite subjects were English and geography. During the year I spent in a Nigerian boarding school, I wrote my name on my school uniform so that nothing would go missing in the communal wash. The blue blouse restores these fragments to me in a way a portrait of the girl might not have. Photographs of people's things reach us in this way even in the absence of such biographical coincidences because we recognize their things as being like ours. Our infants wear bodysuits, too. We have favorite coffee mugs, too. There's that lace curtain we have always liked, or have always meant to change.

Proust once wrote in a letter, "We think we no longer love the dead because we don't remember them, but if by chance we come across an old glove we burst into tears." Objects, sometimes more powerfully than faces, remind us of what was and no longer is; stillness, in photography, can be more affecting than action. This is in part because of the respectful distance that a photograph of objects can create between the one who looks, far from the place of trouble, and the one whose trouble those objects signify. But it is also because objects are reservoirs of specific personal experience, filled with the hours of some person's life. They have been touched, or worn through use. They have frayed, or been placed just so. Perhaps the kind of "object photography" made by Abell, Ilnitsky, Gordon, Peress, and many others in conflict zones cannot ever effect the political change we hope for from highly dramatic images. Perhaps their photographs don't make us think of the photographers' bravery, the way other conflict pictures do, or urge us to im-

mediate action. We look at them anyway, for the change that they bring about elsewhere: in the core of the sympathetic self. We look at them for the way they cooperate with the imagination, the way they contain what cannot otherwise be accommodated, and the way they grant us, to however modest a degree, some kind of solace.