

Sea Change

I.

[. . .] And how the future
Takes shape
too quickly. The permanent is ebbing. Is leaving
nothing in the way of
trails. [. . .]

— Jorie Graham, *Sea Change*, 2008

Brutality lies in the obvious. The experience is quickly overcome. The most tantalizing images are those that never reveal—the expressions that can never be read, the gazes that are never met, the objects and moments lost forever. That’s why we needed images in the first place.

You can think of every picture as containing a story, but the best ones will allude and then disappoint you. You can think of a story for every picture, if you grow uncomfortable with not knowing. Your story may be wonderful—better, perhaps, than the picture itself. But then it will have nothing to do with the image anymore. But think of one, if you must.

It takes some getting used to: that we might look and yet not understand. That’s what we must do, however, when we encounter Hajra Waheed’s images—her collages, paintings, videos, an installation now—or however they present themselves. They refuse us. Often sweetly, and beautifully.

Her pages, these excerpts and fragments, they are timeworn cabinets containing histories and lives. Yet their keys are locked inside. To retrieve the keys would be to destroy them. You can ask questions, but there is no alternate mode of entry, no way of aligning the pins to pick the lock, nothing to translate from or into, no code to decrypt. Feel and then acknowledge your own need for answers.

The images themselves: the date and time of its making, with carefully collected materials gathered over long periods of time—some expired photo stock, or antique yellowing paper, a long-ago excised portion of a sepia-tinted photograph, a video snippet of the landscape—they came together and they came apart exactly when they became what you are you looking at.

Does it seem unfair?

When we look at an old photograph, we instinctively compare it to the way we see the world today. This is a medium-specific quality; we do not compare, say, Raphael’s 16th-century rendering of hillsides from the background of one of his paintings to what the hills around Urbino look like today. But we cannot help it, when scrutinizing an old photograph—even if it is from just 20 years, or 100 years, ago—to compare the reality of then to our mental image (which, we speciously believe, is itself photographic) of now.

We innately, unquestioningly believe in photography’s indexical characteristics. “This is Dhahran in 1957,” you might say, or “Here I am in Fez” when sharing a photograph. It is a singularity, a thing that-has-been.

When we scan the image’s surface, what we are seeking is that punctum—usually some small detail—that contravenes our initial expectation of the past by striking us deeply, personally, while simultaneously affirming that there’s something about this image that is very much outside of our-

selves at this moment. You remark on the child’s smile that still resembles your friend’s today. Remember the old cars? The shoreline was so beautiful before they built the hotels.

Why exactly then does it feel so unfamiliar, and challenging, to look at a series such as Hajra’s *Sea Change, A Short Film* (2012)? These cut fragments of sepia-tinted photographs, mounted on the backing of old Polaroid film, with little square tabs on the top right, mounted on twice-punched, perforated notebook paper. They are so utterly unyielding.

It begins poetically (with words slightly modified from lyrics by Twin Shadow). The first panel in the sequence reads: “Some people say you are the golden light, but if I chase after you, [it] doesn’t mean that it’s true.”

The photographic components—our locus of information—have largely been cut and cropped away, leaving us with blank, black fields, and just mere traces of what we are looking at. Perhaps some sand and rocks, a small body of water, some distant mountains, clouds, arid hills, a fencepost. The rest has been stripped away. There’s a code beneath these “film stills” reading “SC [. . .]/500” — more traces of information that lead nowhere, referring to a sequence whose entirety we cannot see—except for the penultimate “SC 500/500,” which is a gold sheet that reflects back only your image.

The culmination of this film is the aporia. It would be obviously beautiful if it weren’t also a refusal.

II.

[. . .] & farther and farther
away leaks the
past, much further than it used to go,

“The Missing and the Missed,” she says. It sounds like it should be a dialectic—although, aren’t the missing are precisely those who are missed?

Hajra’s series *The Missed* (2012) comprises ten poor souls whose portraits were taken long ago, whose busts she recently excised from photographs exhumed from who-knows-where, and whose tiny faces are now mounted on black card paper, which is taped to notebook paper. If they hadn’t disappeared from history already—they certainly have now. Their hairstyles and headwear hardly elucidate. Hajra has created an index of the unidentifiable; yet it’s also the index that makes them even more unidentifiable.

Conventionally, it is the photograph of a person’s visage that keeps the missing alive; that keeps our loved ones close after they have departed. *The Missed* represents this desire, while inverting the sentimental potential of a photographic keepsake. These ones called The Missed will never be missed by you, or by anyone ever again. Their faces are apparent, but they have vanished long ago from wherever they came, from whomever loved them.

The figures seen in the 20 panels of *The Missing* (2012), by contrast, have characteristics but no identities. A police officer, a soldier, a traveler, a functionary, a street vendor, a holy man, a laborer, a scholar—these decapitated figures yield details—you can begin to write stories for them, even if you’ll never know who they are. By the end of the series, the cataloguer has strayed from the figure. There is an image of a field, the top story of a building, plants against a wall, a distant colonnade. The world of things and places. An investigator could tell you something about this city, its architecture, its colonial history, its population’s demographics. That wouldn’t tell you who had lived there.

It’s a peculiar thing about photographs, we realize. When you take them apart, when you see a

city without people, people without a city, faces without a body, bodies without faces. You realize how much you expect from the photograph, from each of its contingent parts. How dependent and familiar we are on this depiction of the past, of what we call history.

III.

[. . .] Consider
the body of the ocean which rises every instant into
me, & its
ancient e-
vaporation, & how it delivers itself
to me, how the world is our law, this indrift of us
into us [. . .]

What / to Say, / Every / Ocean / Reminds / Me / of Ours—each the seven parts of the title are written on one of the seven green pages that frames a faded purple Polaroid square. Investigating these images of wispy magenta-inflected clouds spread out over a deep blue expanse, lightly speckled with microscopic luminous dots whose origins—and appearance on the surface of the image—feel as mysterious as the origins of stars in the roof of the night sky . . . What to Say? Yes, exactly, what to say about things so plainly photographic and yet . . .

Can the camera record the invisible? The photograph here seems to summon itself as the record of a secret mood, of a thought deeply internalized and projected onto the dark, unyielding depth of the sky—that ocean above and around us? What you cast out there into its depths never comes back. As records—or records of impossibilities, as Hajra's collages prefer to be—you are looking at the sky with the photographer, or, even, at the photographer who is looking through the camera at the sky, who is trying to capture a shared but interior sentiment. They are not so much romantic or mystical images as images of the objects that we find in our most romantic or mystical moments. The photograph merely stands in for what cannot be photographed. The photograph now feels more like our experience, and much less like the picture of the world that it is.

IV.

If I Had My Way, Your File On Me Would Open With the Sea. The title itself is a condensed poem.

if i had my way
your file on
me
would open with
the sea

As is each of the little collages—a landscape pasted onto a sky. The meeting of “you” and “me”—of “my way” and “your file”—two experiences grafted together, on the front of a green folder that would, or could, contain the rest of what comes. All it is suggestive of is what is not there, yet. Of all the things that are un-photographic.

IV.

[. . .] the distant treetops in the evening sky, not there, though flashing,
pierced full of tinny pinprick holes the sky not
there, the present
being elsewhere, you can almost rub elbows with it, you, not there,
this was the day it happened you say [. . .]

Little pinpricks of light are visible through the cracks in the old wooden boards. The surface of *You Are Everywhere* (2013) is nearly impenetrable, the sleeper wood flush with the floor, above a black tin sheet that keeps illumination from us. Like Hajra's collages, whose ordinary secrets are kept from us. Light, simple understanding—it is everywhere. When seen plainly, it is unremarkable. The secret joy lies in obfuscation, in large moments of not knowing, and little glimmers of revelation, when mystery and potential is restored to the world.

V.

I am inclining my heart toward the end,
I cannot fail, this Saturday, early pm, hurling myself [. . .]

What if you went on a journey and never came back? Would you be the missing, or the missed? Do either of these concepts hold any meaning for the departed, for the wandering?

The Witness comes along on the pilgrimage, her images appearing to map the journey: by whom, from where, to where—all untold. The 17 frames of *Witness* (2012) are three-inch-square frames of glass negatives that Hajra arranged in a row on a shelf made from a plank of knotty sleeper wood (themselves relics of travel). These small square windows contain fragments of images: sky, sea, waves on the beach, the coastline, the open ocean, a small boat anchored in shallow water, a gravel path, a coastal mansion ringed in palms, a thicket, distant hills, far off mountains, a hillside, rocky crags, a mountaintop vista, the valleys far below. The story breaks off with two full frames of the hills ahead or behind—like two vantages of the directions that could be taken, each through undistinguished landscapes towards an invisible destination beyond the horizon. Should we go east, or north? What did the voyager decide? The record ends here. The journey must have continued. But that is a story you will have to tell yourself.

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