

## Reviews

Terry Kurgan, *Everyone Is Present: Essays on Photography, Memory and Family*, ed. Bronwyn Law-Viljoen. Johannesburg: Fourthwall Books, 2018. 277 pp. ISBN 978 0 9947009 6 4

In a book propelled by a dedicated pursuit of clues and traces, perhaps the first of these lies in its elegantly paradoxical title: *Everyone Is Present*. In one sense, these words offer a hint as to the kind of book it is – a narrative of intimate familial restitution or intergenerational recovery. In another, it is an impossible claim for, in the broader sweep of time ruptured by the trauma of history, it is not possible for everyone to be physically present in the present. So the book's title subtly gestures towards the maddening impossibility that underlies the writer's project – the all too real spectre of loss and the impossibility of fully restoring the past to the present.

But there is another layer yet: the fevered idea at the heart of any serious narrative of restitution that the processes and mechanisms of building the narrative might play some magical role in restoring everyone to the present in a more abstract register. In this mystic tenor, Terry Kurgan's *Everyone Is Present* could be understood as an ancestral dialogue, a conversation across time and geography with chosen members of her family – both living and dead. In the tradition of Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* (Barthes, 1981) – which is at once a eulogy to the author's late mother and an inquiry into the essence of photography – the conversation takes place largely through the medium of photography.

For Barthes, the very essence of the medium is its spectral conjuring of death in life. Loss and mourning are the substrata of this narrative too. But, for Kurgan, the fixation is less with the mortality of the recorded moment than with the vital emotional information the photograph might carry for the living.

Her narrative loops back and forth in time, driven by a forensic impulse – an impassioned desire to piece together a coherent story from the notebooks, photographs and remembrances that linger in the wake of her family's flight from their home in the southern Polish town of Bielsko on 1 September 1939 as the German Luftwaffe launched air attacks on the major cities of Kraków, Łódź and Warsaw and on road transport routes, bridges and airports.

Kurgan traces her extended family's epic flight from Nazi-occupied Europe – country by country – and onward to Turkey, Syria and Iraq, where they spend a few months in Baghdad, then aboard the HMS Bambara to Bombay via the Persian Gulf, then on to Mombasa where they are quarantined for more than a month due to smallpox. They have their Brazilian landing cards and their intended destination is Rio de Janeiro but, by a further twist of fate, they end up in Cape Town, South Africa, where they start their lives anew. Echoing her ancestors' journey, Kurgan's is a narrative of detours and deviations.

'My Polish grandparents never discussed their past', she writes. 'There is very little evidence beyond a small, battered album of black-and-white photographs, each one captioned on the back in my grandfather's spidery cursive handwriting' (p. 14). In some ways, her quest recalls the protagonist's search for an image of his lost mother in WG Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001), a novel that was profoundly influenced by *Camera Lucida*. But whereas the images in Sebald's book are small, impressionistic moments of pause that punctuate his spell-like prose, here the photographs are the central pivots around which the armature of the text is built. They are blown out to their grainy limits, always extending to the outer edges of the page and often spanning the gutter in generous double-page spreads. In some instances, entire pages are given over to a telling detail in a single photograph that could provide some critical fragment or clue.

There are two key presences in the book: her late grandfather Jasek Kallir, whose photographs and handwritten notebooks (translated from the original Polish by Kazimierz Pater) provide an intimate lifeline to the past, and her mother Leonia Kallir, who is alive and living in Los Angeles, and whose voice and interjections root the book firmly in the present. Her grandmother Tusia is a more mysterious and frisky figure, whose spectral presence weaves its way through the narrative in a ghostly dance, but whose voice and version of events are largely absent, signalling, again, the impossibility and loss at heart of the project.

Part I opens with a snapshot taken by Kurgan's grandfather in 1939 in the garden of the Jasny Pałac Hotel in Zakopane, which was then a fashionable resort town in the Tatra Mountains of south central Poland, where the extended family used to spend their long summer holidays. The insouciant mood of this photograph and others shot from the same roll of film on the same holiday in 1939 belies the horror of what it is to come. It also masks a risqué family secret that ripples like a silk ribbon through the subtext of the book.

Part II begins with a reading of a photograph taken by her grandfather of two men on Theodore Sixta Street from the window of the family apartment just before he left it for the last time. 'As I enlarge the photograph to the point just before it dissolves into a two-dimensional grid of pixels, my inability to

uncover the meaning of that gesture is perhaps part of the meaning of that time', writes Kurgan. 'It is very clear that the man with his arms up in the air is looking directly up at the man in an open bay window, and I want to be able to see what he sees' (p. 87). This image from 1939 is juxtaposed with a Google Street View image captured in July 2013, triggering a fascinating commentary on the way Google has changed our relationship with photography – depersonalizing it via the 'detached obliviousness of the automated camera as it goes about capturing all detail on the street' (p. 92).

Part III ends with a gripping visit by Kurgan and her mother to the apartment building in Bielsko from which Leonia fled as a young girl in 1939, and a wistful stay at the Jasny Pałac Hotel in Zakopane where the family holidayed that same year. The subject of this narrative might be the past, but its form and mode are compellingly contemporary. It is a vital, energetic text that unfolds in the present.

In addition to being a writer, Kurgan is a Johannesburg-based contemporary artist whose practice explores photography. Her projects, which have been sited in spaces as varied as a maternity hospital, a public library, a popular Johannesburg shopping mall, an inner city park and a prison, have often explored themes of forced migration and xenophobia, as well as the power relations at play in domestic photography.

There are no captions in the book. Rather, the essays function as a series of extended stream-of-consciousness captions in which Kurgan reads the images, unpacking their meaning and excavating any possible fresh information that might shed new light, a fresh perspective, on the story of her family's escape, as she has come to know it. Writing about Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, Brian Dillon (2011) comments on the 'the strange air of searching and susceptibility' that pervades the book. Kurgan's meditations on these photographs are shot through with a similar air of radical receptivity and vulnerability. This said, her prose is immaculately poised and contained throughout, adding to its poignant power.

## References

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