

Seeing Red

Kilby Smith-McGregor*

Fecha de recepción: 16/08/2016

Fecha de aceptación: 08/11/2016

Resumen

Este ensayo, una narrativa reflexiva en estilo lírico, se centra en el encuentro entre su autora, de origen canadiense, con una exhibición de mujeres fotógrafas sobre la guerra, ocurrido en un viaje por Irlanda en 2006. Entretejiendo recuerdos de su salida de la adolescencia durante la primera y segunda Guerra del Golfo con reflexiones acerca de temas como la distancia, la mediación y la empatía, el texto indaga sobre el cuerpo como sitio de conocimiento y, a la vez, de falsedad. La autora nos invita a pensar sobre lo que realmente “vemos” en los documentos y las representaciones de violencia geopolíticamente distante. El texto navega entre los medios narrativos y asociativos con los cuales intentamos cerrar las brechas en nuestra comprensión.

Palabras clave: narrativa, violencia, empatía, cuerpo, fotografía de guerra.

Abstract

This essay, a reflective memoir in the lyric mode, centres on the Canadian author's encounter with an exhibit of works by women war photographers while travelling in Ireland in 2006. Weaving coming-of-age memories from the era of the first and second Gulf wars with considerations of distance, mediation, and empathy, it interrogates the body as a site of both knowledge and fallacy. It asks us to consider what we truly 'see' in documents and representations of geo-politically distant violence, and negotiates the narrative and associative means by which we reach to close gaps in our understanding.

Keywords: narrative, violence, empathy, the body, war photography.

* Kilby Smith-McGregor is a Canadian literary writer and critic who holds a MFA from the University of Guelph. She has been anthologized in *Best Canadian Essays* (Tightrope Books, 2014) and *Best Canadian Poetry* (Tightrope Books, 2016). Her debut poetry collection, *Kids in Triage* (Wolsak & Wynn, 2016), was released in the spring. Email: kilbysm@rogers.com.

*[If you type the word Herat into a Microsoft Word document,
it will be automatically changed to Heart.
The word Herat does not exist.]*

I should not have accepted the wine from the young volunteer with the striking white teeth. I should not have accepted the wine but I've been trailing around the Irish National University's Galway Campus for half an hour under threat of a sky about to split open, searching out this photography exhibition. The first sting of drops have already started. Time to be inside. I'm at the Galway Arts Festival on a whirlwind weekend hiatus from my summer studies in Dublin. This is my last morning and only chance to see the Women War Photographers exhibit that exists, to me at least, uneasily within the festival bracket of "art," but so long as people see it what's the difference? And if I'm about to take on some art that is also not art, insofar as the subject is not determined by the photographer, only the angle of witness, insofar as the content is something captured, even stolen, as some believe. Kashmir, the former Yugoslavia, Israel/Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan—if that's what I'll be seeing, something slightly more forensic than aesthetic, and since I have only a granola bar and a train ticket to get me through the rest of the day, why wouldn't I want the drink, or five drinks, ten.

It's because the show's opening's today—the volunteer gatekeeper with her official badge smiles broadly; she balances two disposable plastic goblets like Lady Justice. Well, Miss, what will it be, she wants to know, red or white? She glances past me, out the doorway at the downpour.

Red it is.

Secretly I'm thinking that I've seen it all before. Emergency without infrastructure. I have seen it on the news, flickering at frequency timed to skip seizure and strobe straight to blindness. Mine was the first generation of children to receive real-time war beamed to black boxes in heated winter rooms in cold Western countries. January 1991 was my tenth year, and I was visiting Toronto. Just the two of us that night, my dad and I on the third floor of his city house; he let me stay up late to watch what the start of the war looked like in the Gulf. The Gulf War. With a "u" means big water bracketed, not a sport, I figured out when I finally read it on the screen. And he tried to explain to me about politics, about the word geopolitical, which was maybe politics in relation to place or distance. He would say War, and I would watch his mouth move, his chest rise and fall under his bathrobe as he said History. We watched missiles bright green on black in back of CNN lips mouthing loops of sound and static. Immediate access. Easy to watch, difficult to see. That strange feeling of knowing the green *wasn't*, somewhere, the distance *wasn't*. The knowledge of unwitnessed red in a faraway place that was not my home. I put my head against his chest and listened for something closer, beating, warmer, wanting to be safe; also so sleepy, closing my eyes and still feeling apart, cut off. Neither was home in this house with my father, not really, I realized.

History's the past, I was pretty sure, so then this would be just news, I guess.

Did he drink that night, my father? Because of his own parents, he rarely did. But maybe after, in those early morning hours, I can imagine it: him leaning into the bedroom doorframe, watching me sleep, melting ice cubes slowly thinning whisky's proof. He had crossed the border to march on Washington against the war of his own generation, albeit with an ill-gotten Press badge, and he had followed through with a politically active (albeit comparatively subdued) life. Bathed in the strange glow of American cable news that night, had he been initiating me into the lifelong responsibility of seeing red or inoculating me against it? What did he see for me, in a world like this, and what did he see in me? The hot coal of my little round body's impending reality, the becoming-woman-and-growing-up-of-it, slept, more mediated, framed, farther from his understanding or comprehension than a lifetime of television wars closely attended. A greater distance sometimes between our two selves in a single room than between Canadian television sets and smart bombs.

And whatever he wished for me that night and every other, whatever prayers whispered him to sleep throughout my childhood, I would be privileged with a certain kind of safety, and there would be a screen between myself and these external threats. I would have access to resources in the pursuit of happiness. I'd have access to knowledge, or at least education and information, blood-apple seeds of that original contested desire which burned so expediently through the promise of Edenic bliss. If you subscribe to the biblical version, happiness and knowledge don't mix. I've heard many parents profess wishes for their children to be happy above all, few for their offspring to *know* above all, to know more than can ever be commensurate with a picture of happiness.

In *Seeing Red: A Study in Consciousness* Nicolas Humphrey tells the story of an Oxford philosopher conducting lectures on the subject "What do we see?" He begins hopefully with the idea that we see colours, abandoned after three weeks in favour of the argument that we see things, and by the close of the academic term he admits: "I'm damned if I know what we do see." I'm damned if I know what I see. Damned if I know. An expression that catches in some crevice of my anatomy like a remnant of that unchewed apple. I'm damned if I know what I see in red.

I would become a young woman who keeps on the corkboard above her desk the quote "Geography is the bride of history, as space is the wife of time," from Guy Davenport's *Geography of the Imagination*; a white index card, rubber-stamped with "Words Tend To Be Inadequate," given to me by my grade twelve art teacher, as well as—sandwiched between a photograph from the opening of my high school art show, and a photograph of my first boyfriend's hand in mine—a Polaroid snapshot of my friend Ruth with her arm around me. October 31, 2004. Ruth is smiling for the camera, and my back's turned. Bright lipstick and her hair in rollers, a modest pink floral blouse and a big cardboard button that says *Real Women for Bush!* with red and blue ribbons springing from its base like forked tongues. Directly parallel, hand-inscribed in black marker across the back of my tan

t-shirt is the word *Casualties*, with attending numbers, divided under the headings: *American Military*, *Coalition Troops*, *American Wounded*, *American Civilians*, and *Iraqi Civilians* (this last being the greatest of the tallies). The picture was taken at a Halloween party in Kensington market. Second year of the second war in the Gulf. My hair was freshly buzzed and I wore parade boots and army surplus cargo pants. Bush's re-election loomed, and our costume instructions were: best dream or worst nightmare.

I ended that make-believe night sucking face with the Devil in a stairwell. He was a Russian actor from Vancouver with a pitchfork, easily twice my age and the only person I'd ever made out with upon meeting, possibly the third person I'd made out with period. My first-serious-love-cum-first-serious-ex was returning from six months in Italy the following day, from the place where he had gone to research, cook, and, certainly, engage in acts I counted a foregone conclusion between earthy Italian women and impressionable Canadian men. I witnessed myself hover just above the thrusting squirm of saliva, my own numb lips, this strange stranger's crudely probing fingers—and in the moment when he gripped my hand and pulled it toward the cab I achieved my opportunity, realized a mission: my invitation to fuck. Suddenly so clear. And I had a snap decision to make about how much I was willing to hurt myself for the sake of experience, to close a gap. I thought I could be anyone that night, I guess—that I could project my body into mortalities, carnalities, entirely other to me. I imagined the possibility that fucking Someone Else, a stranger, as Someone Else, a stranger, could open me to a vision of something without being implicated in it. But it would still be my flesh, really, there wasn't any way around that.

There's another corkboard photograph above my desk which I've left out. People say it looks nothing like me—strange because it's nothing but me, naked in the bathtub in black and white; bad lighting, a basement apartment. Longest my hair's ever been, like water-snakes, worth growing out for one true Medusa moment. Look at me. Don't look at me. The ribbons of Hershey's chocolate syrup, like Hitchcock used for *Psycho*—in the drain—resolving themselves from clots to clouds around my submerged curves and angles. I remember my classmate Janice, standing above, straddling me with an old Pentax 35 mil., her pants rolled up to the knee, like at a wading pool or beach, but I do not remember what words passed between us, my eyes shut and her afterimage through the redded-black of vesseled lids. I do not remember my invitation to this undertaking—*D'you wanna do fake suicides later?*—maybe, dropped into the interstitial silence of a dragging grade twelve History lecture. But I never would have said that word out loud. Some hungry teenaged virgins practiced kissing to try and prefigure the future. We staged something else entirely.

In September of that same grade twelve year, 1998, conceptual artist Vic Muniz, who had recently copied Leonardo's *Last Supper* in chocolate syrup, told the *New York Times*: "I have neither the interest nor the means to produce illusions that expand the concept of what an illusion is—George Lucas and Stephen

Spielberg are doing that for us...I want to make the worst possible illusion that will still fool the eyes of the average person." I, who for my own part, had recently done gelatin transfers of the bloody bathtub film onto canvas, partially obscuring the images with coffee, wax, sand, salt, more syrup and other kitchen cabinet discoveries, informed my art teacher: "This self-portrait is called *Avoid Seeing Red*." I did not elaborate. How far could I get without being called on it? How far in could I get? I was also interested in the worst possible illusion, so interested I was willing to strip down for it and splash around in something thicker, sweeter, ultimately stickier, quick-sandier than anticipated. The average person I was interested in fooling was myself and I thought my awareness of that fact negated it. Not so. The fact only doubled up on itself like some subliminal gut-punch. Here is a picture of what bleeding out will look like. Violence as escape from the body, from the physicality of consciousness, the bombardment of perception; violence as relief from desire and lack of desire. But don't say that. Real violence is men with guns. Real violence is hit with fists. Oppression. Imperialism. Draw the line definitively. There's a measure of safety in a clean break, surety. A distance that can never be bridged.

I have not come to see *Women Photographers of Rainbows and Puppies*, I know that. And here I am with the free wine and the blood, daring myself to keep my eyes open. Paint the town red, I think. I drink. I walk through white rooms with vaulted ceilings and creaking hardwood floors, drinking. Images of wronged flesh, or more poetically, its absence, wash over me—this is the truly artful stuff I think, that which gestures toward that which cannot be represented. Remains of this or that in scorch marks, cracked tiles caked with blood, a slur in paint, a pock-marked wall; litter of shell-casings like hard confetti on pavement. Initiated, mercenary, I can find words to describe these surfaces.

In the upper gallery I smack up against something more difficult. This one, dreadful. Ugly picture of too much charred flesh; immodest, unflinching reveal. Material, body, without gesture. Stark lack of sublimity. No haunting eye or child's transcendent face to burrow into.

Fine. Have a drink then. Lean in a little. Look.

What picture's to be made of this? What story? This tiny old woman has surely been bombed, blazed and been put out, caught in the crossfire between kamikaze rebels and callous Americans. Shutter-click; full stop. This snapped, flashed, captive print of her suffering exists to live up to my every preconception of her suffering. Their suffering. The suffering. Suffering.

I read the little foamcore rectangle affixed to the wall beside the photo. 2004. Herat, the place, yes, Afghanistan. Parigul, her name, yes, age 22. What? Wrong words, these contextualizing stabs, like a great opera skipping in the CD player, aneurysm, burst blood vessel. Burns over fifty percent of her body, it says. Mother of a three-year-old daughter, it says. One of the many women in Herat, it says, who have turned to self-immolation—what?—who have turned to self-immolation as a rebellion against—yes? what?—against...unbearable marriage.

Oh. Oh. But the war...

Even war, I am struck, cannot preempt this body, this burn.

Look again. And for the briefest moment I allow myself a vision of my mother, her face in 1984, barely older than I am now, transforming from the face of a wife and mother of a three-year-old-daughter to an ex-wife and mother of a three-year-old daughter. A face half-mine in the mirror, darkened, contorted by forever leaving and being left. I am filled with rage at the person who admits this image into her consciousness. At the person who stupidly tears up for the wrong woman, and then the wrong woman again, a child: herself. Can I forgive myself for not being the burned woman on the other side of the world, unknowable, for constructing her self-immolating impulse from my own?

Probably, somewhere, often—on the street or in the market—men with guns. Known men, friends, family, enemies, allies, strangers. And likely—in the bedroom, at a bureau office, behind bars—hit with fists. Oppression. Imperialism. Unbridgeable. And yet. Maybe, shared, some complex violence both more and less familiar. I know I don't know.

Again. I look again. I look, having never felt so exposed in seeing. Seeing without division, without subject, resisting judgement. And when my body moves to go, something of my strength and weakness will outlast me here, leaning in and trying again: eyes open, only that. Holding time and space until, kneeling down, I place the half-drunk glass on the floor against the white wall, walk down the stairs, out into the rain.