ABELARDO MORELL'S POETRY OF APPEARANCES

Like a slide show of dimly remembered, long-unvisited scenes of our lives projected on the wall of a large bedroom languidly crisscrossed by shadows. Half-lit faces and objects made even more strange by their recognizability in the midst of much that remains blurred and fragmented. That uneasy feeling of being uncertain whether I'm dreaming or lying sleepless. My own room, which I suddenly do not know, its darkness shimmering nebulously as if its walls and ceiling were covered with mirrors. An insomniac's secret collection of grainy, black-and-white images that flicker on and off, mystifying in their randomness, in their scrambling of the familiar and the unknown.

We have all awakened in a hotel room or a friend's house after deep sleep not knowing who we are, disoriented about the time and the place, watching the light slip between the drawn curtains to examine a pair of dust balls on the bare floor or woo something we cannot see on the table. Here's the poetry of the overlooked and invisible dailiness. A framed photograph of the New York skyline no one has looked at closely in ages, a sphinxlike armchair, a Gideon's Bible perused solely by book lice, an unretrieved button, a pencil stub, a penny secreted under a dresser or in a shadowy corner, and a menagerie of water stains caged on the high ceiling. The realm of memory is a hotel room sewing kit open in my hands. I sit naked in the silence of this unknown room drawing a red thread through the eye of a needle. "It is not seeing—hearing—feeling," the eighteenth-century German poet Novalis wrote, "it is the combination of all three—more than all three—a sensation of immediate certainty—a view of my truest, most actual (psychic) life." This is what I wish to sew together here.

But how? The moment I begin to explain in detail what I have seen and felt, I run into difficulties. Our strangest dreams, as everybody knows, can never be fully told. Our afternoon daydreams with their play of ephemera are even harder to convey in their elusiveness. As long as we keep our mouths shut, all the nuances of sight and feeling appear in place. It is that very impossibility of describing them that is responsible for the lasting impression they make on us. The world as we have never seen it before in its *unreality* lasts only as long as our silence does.

The same can be said of the experience of viewing a photograph. As long as we need only to point it out to someone without a comment, the way a small child does or a weary museumgoer, and expect merely a nod of agreement in return, innocence reigns. Language fails us as much as it empowers us. What is perceived and what is said rarely match. We approximate, we invent, we seek the

Paper Bag, 1992

help of metaphors and similes to close the gap. That's why poems get revised and the history of philosophy is three thousand years old. When it comes to immediacy of being, the best words can do is to make a pact with a demon of analogy.

"Such is the photograph, it cannot *say* what it lets us see," wrote the French critic Roland Barthes. Still, the silence of the image, the obscurity of language, and the clarity of objects invite a dialogue. I talk back to them. I'm their ventriloquist. I want to make the photographs of Abelardo Morell speak back to me loudly enough so you, too, reader, can overhear our conversation.

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Two Forks Under Water, 1993

> *I turn your picture every which way, but you still find a way to look elsewhere and so with a calm and almost deliberate intention.*
>
> *—Franz Kafka, from a letter to Felice Bauer (translated 1973)*

It compels me to look at it again—this is how I define the peculiarity of a memorable photograph. Something in it has become a trap for my imagination. I'm caught between what I see and that which I cannot see, but suspect may be there. It's as if I had suddenly become even more nearsighted than I actually am. I need to squint and close my eyes and open them again. Even a photograph of a blank wall without any scratches is an invitation to enter a labyrinth and promptly be lost. Let me give an example.

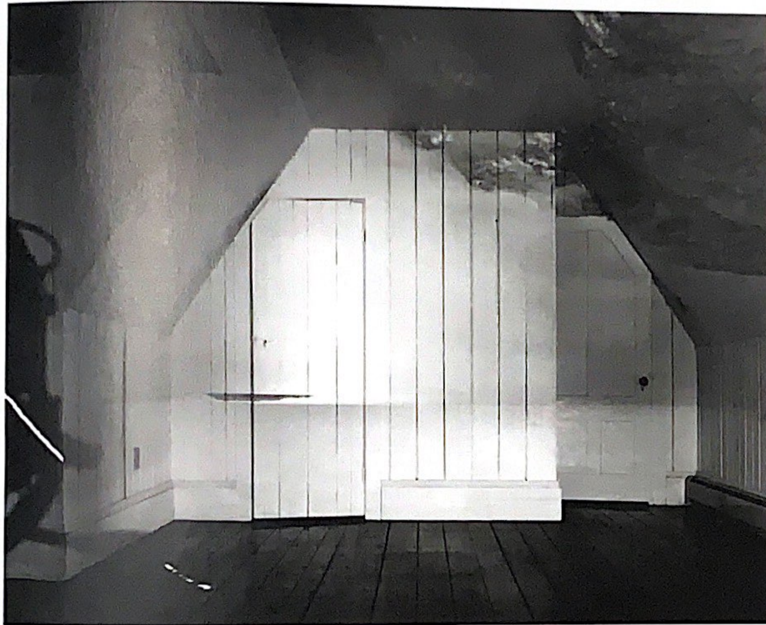
It occurred to me the other day that the way I look at a photograph today and respond to its imagery is tied to my first distinct memory of lingering over a photograph. I was not much older than six or seven. One Sunday, in German-occupied Belgrade, I went to visit my great aunt, an old, retired schoolteacher who lived in an apartment cluttered with furniture and paintings of several generations of dead relatives. To occupy me, I was provided with a thick photo album, but first, I remember, I had to wash my hands thoroughly, not once, but twice, after they failed to pass her inspection. That made me take extreme care with the album and pay close attention to every picture.

There were hundreds of them. Unknown men, women, and children in clothes of another era posing in their backyards and gardens, in front of some monument or an early model car, or in a few cases laid out in open coffins. Among the photographs, I came upon a sepia one that I can still see clearly. It is of a young teacher (my great aunt) standing in front of the blackboard of what looks like a village classroom, smiling faintly at a boy on the other side of the blackboard who is not much older than I was then and who is pointing at the sentence written on the board in large, ornate letters, so perfectly legible I have no difficulty reading it even today:

SILENCE IS GOLDEN.

The boy appears ill at ease. His hair is cut so short, his head appears shaven. He wears a suit of a rough cloth that must have

made him itch and a white shirt open at the neck. It must have been a special occasion, the photographer making a rare visit to a remote village. Three other students with similarly cropped hair are visible



in the front seats, but their backs are to the camera. Although I cannot see their faces, I know their eyes are on the teacher and not on the charts and maps hanging on the wall to the side which, in any case, are blurred. On that same wall, there's also a window with black panes, giving the false impression that night had already fallen.

My aunt, who is seen in profile, wears a dark, Sunday-kind-of-dress and has her hair cut so it just barely covers her ears, causing her long, pale, muscular neck to stand out with determination. I immediately notice her resemblance to my father, who at the moment I'm studying the photograph is missing in the war, and that makes it very spooky.

For years, every time I called on my great aunt, I asked for the photo album so I could take another long look at the fading photograph of that schoolroom. The enigma of "them" still standing there and of myself watching them seemed inexhaustible to me. Here was, in the words of the Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico, "a solemn sheet of paper witnessed by a moment and stamped by eternity." I have forgotten much in my life, but I can still visualize the small, white scar on the head of one of the students whose back is turned in the photograph. Against all probabilities, this unremarkable scene continues to enrich my imagination.

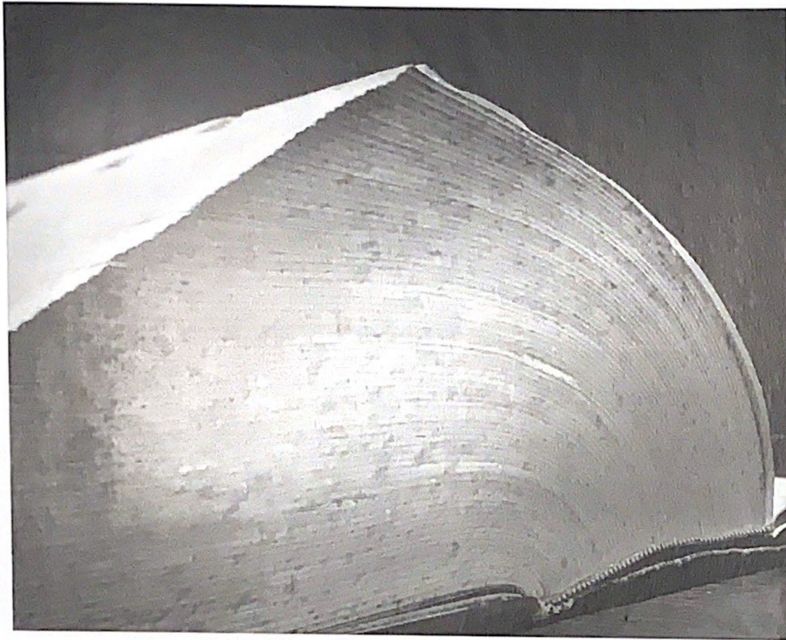
Moments far apart in time come together thanks to photographs. Someone's old reality becomes my new reality. How astonishing that is! After a while, the space of every closely observed photograph becomes an inhabited space. The real and the imaginary take turns exchanging identities. If there's an empty seat in the 1900s classroom, and there happens to be one, I find myself seated in it with my shoulders hunched and my face turned away from the camera. The same is true of many other powerful photographs in whose corners I've been hiding for years.

"It is important to see what is invisible to others," photographer Robert Frank maintains; and who could disagree? Morell stares at drops of water until he notices their resemblance to letters of the alphabet. There's an air of divination about his photographs. He wants the unseen to show itself, the marvelous to overtake us in the course of our daily lives.

How does Abelardo Morell go about doing that?

He turns a room, he tells us, into a camera obscura by covering its windows with black plastic so that the room is completely dark. Then he makes a 3/8-inch hole looking out at something interesting. Next, through this tiny opening, a fairly sharp, upside-down image of the outdoors appears on the opposite wall. After his eyes become accustomed to the dark, Morell gets his view camera and focuses on the projection on the wall. Chance and strict calculation combine to bring the images from outside into the room.

Camera Obscura Image of the Sea in Attic, 1994



Calculation is present in the way Morell explores the optical properties of the camera—varying, for instance, the size of the pinhole—and chance comes into play during the long exposure of about eight hours' time, as he's not able to predict how the weather and light will change and what random images may yet drift in from the street. His aim is to surprise himself and to defamiliarize and undermine our habitual way of experiencing our surroundings by introducing a troublemaking ambiguity between illusion and reality. When chance is invited in, when it cooperates as it does here, it opens a door to what is not ordinarily visible. Chance, the redeemer, needs the camera obscura to show us the poetry of appearances that's always around us.

Underwritten by Emerson and Thoreau more than a hundred years ago, the quest of the ordinary—in American philosopher Stanley Cavell's phrase—is the great project of modern literature and art. The inexhaustible power of common objects continues to be a preoccupation of some of our best photographers and poets.

Dictionary, 1994

This may turn out to be the most original undertaking of our century: the quest for the magic substance to be found in the ordinary. To attempt that, it has been necessary to peek under our beds and into the darkest corners of our rooms.

"The soul stays home," Emerson told us, and Abelardo Morell concurs. The philosopher Seneca claimed that he could not philosophize in a palace, but only in a pauper's room, where one sleeps and daydreams on a pile of straw. A lived-in room is a trope factory. Its walls and ceiling have been read like a mystery story. The emptier the room, the more intricate the plot. Think of Morell's images of Manhattan caught through camera obscura in empty rooms. Morell's photographs are dream catchers. They objectify our most poetic reveries.

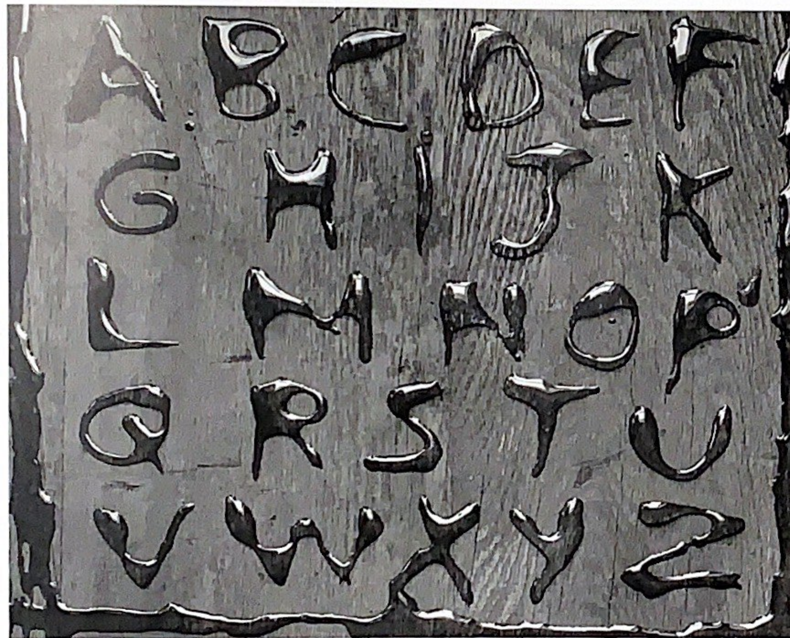
"Every photograph is in a way a test for the viewer's imagination," wrote Mary Price in *A Strange Confined Space* (1994), her invaluable book on photography. This is where the poetry comes in. It is the poet in ourselves who, closing the eyes, enters the imagination's darkroom to recover the speech that bridges the gap between image and word. In that sense, photography is a "medium" in its true sense. It is both a technique and an instrument of the spirit.

Morell's titles are usually specific and matter of fact: *Paper Bag*, *Brady Looking at his Shadow*, *Two Forks Under Water*, *Camera Obscura Image of the Sea in Attic*, *Dictionary*, and so on. We are given the actual, what is in front of the camera, and it's up to us to do the rest. The alternative would be furnishing the photographs with the kind of titles the surrealists used to love to give their paintings and sculptures, titles in which the real is already renamed: *Palace at 4 A.M.*, *Chinese Nightingales*, *The Snake Charmer*, *Immaculate Conception*, *Child's Brain*, *Enigma of the Day*, *Captain Cook's Last Voyage*, etc. What we see and what we are told we are seeing are intentionally at odds in such works.

Not so with Morell. His titles tell us: First take a good look at what is in fact there. Admire the formal qualities of this open, brown, paper bag sitting on the floor or this toy horse. The commonplace object is singled out, brought out of its anonymity, and

stands before us fully revealed in its uniqueness and its otherness. In the metaphysical solitude of the object we catch a glimpse of our own. Here is the unknowable ground of appearances, that *something* that is always there without being perceived, the world in its nameless, uninterpreted presence which the camera makes visible. That's what casts the spell on me in Morell's photographs: the evidence that our daily lives are the site of momentary insights and beauties that lie around us to be recovered.

The photographer and the poet share a love for unusual images. Both arts are about intuiting resemblances, noticing how a



tower of children's blocks can mean more than itself. The ideal is to arrive at an image that would imprint itself on our memory and become inexhaustible to the imagination. Who hasn't made towers of blocks, playing cards, or pennies and grown breathless as the tower begins to sway? The trick is to see it from underneath, to make ourselves as small as some imaginary pedestrian looking up at

Water Alphabet, 1998

its commanding presence. The game being played is the game of becoming smaller or bigger to acquire a new point of view as one yields to the imaginary.

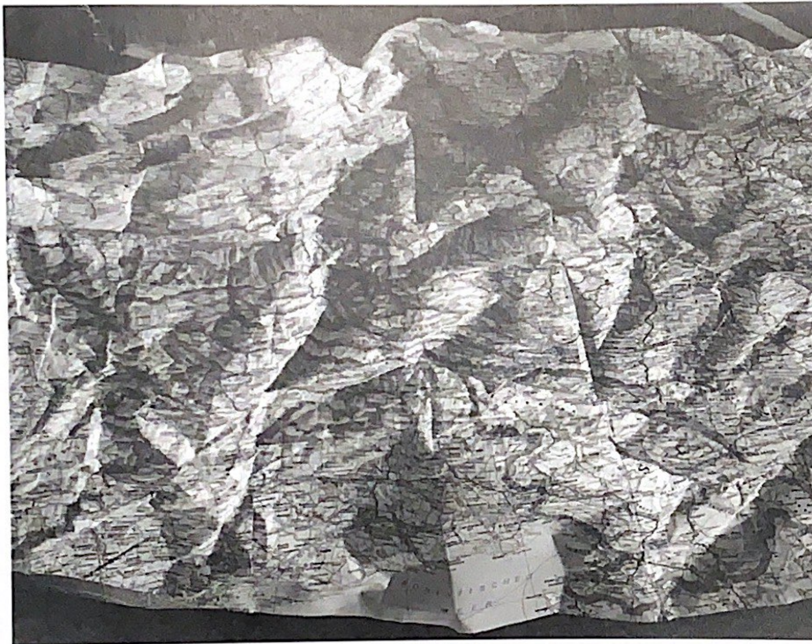
"The individual is not the sum of his common impressions but of his unusual ones," said the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard. Often, of course, the subject matter explains why we remember certain things better than others. A child lying in a pool of blood in the street, or a sheep with two heads at the country fair, is not easily forgotten. But, and this is worth reminding ourselves, we also remember empty rooms, "certain slants of light," tree shadows on the ceiling, odd stains on the bare, wood floor. Memory's museum has room for both the assassinations of Presidents and the image of our grandmother's black comb with a few white hairs in it at the back of a rarely opened drawer.

The astonishing aspect of Morell's photographs is their ability to give this old world a new look. What is this he's got here, we continually ask? Morell has found the way to domesticate the fantastic. In this photograph, it seems perfectly natural to find the reflection of sea waves on the ceiling of an attic. How delightful it must be to stretch in a bed with the upside-down image of the Empire State Building and midtown Manhattan hovering over one's head! Morell's is a magic realist show. Nothing is quite what it appears to be. Mirage and reality perform side by side, providing a new aesthetic experience for the viewer.

His photographs of open art books are a part of the same strategy. The camera is held up to the book at a reader's distance, or more accurately, a nearsighted reader's distance. Or even better, this could be the solitary child's view, the child who has just begun to imagine stepping into the picture in the book. Who hasn't done that? This is how children always read their stories, as the philosopher-critic Walter Benjamin reminded us: "Children know such pictures like their own pockets; they have searched through them in the same way and turned them inside out, without forgetting the smallest thread or a piece of cloth. And if in the colored engraving,

children's imaginations can fall into reverie, the black-and-white woodcut or the plain prosaic illustration draws them out of themselves" (*Selected Writings*, volume I, 1996).

Who can refuse the temptation to climb Morell's huge dictionary, whose pages invite us to climb them, providing we can make



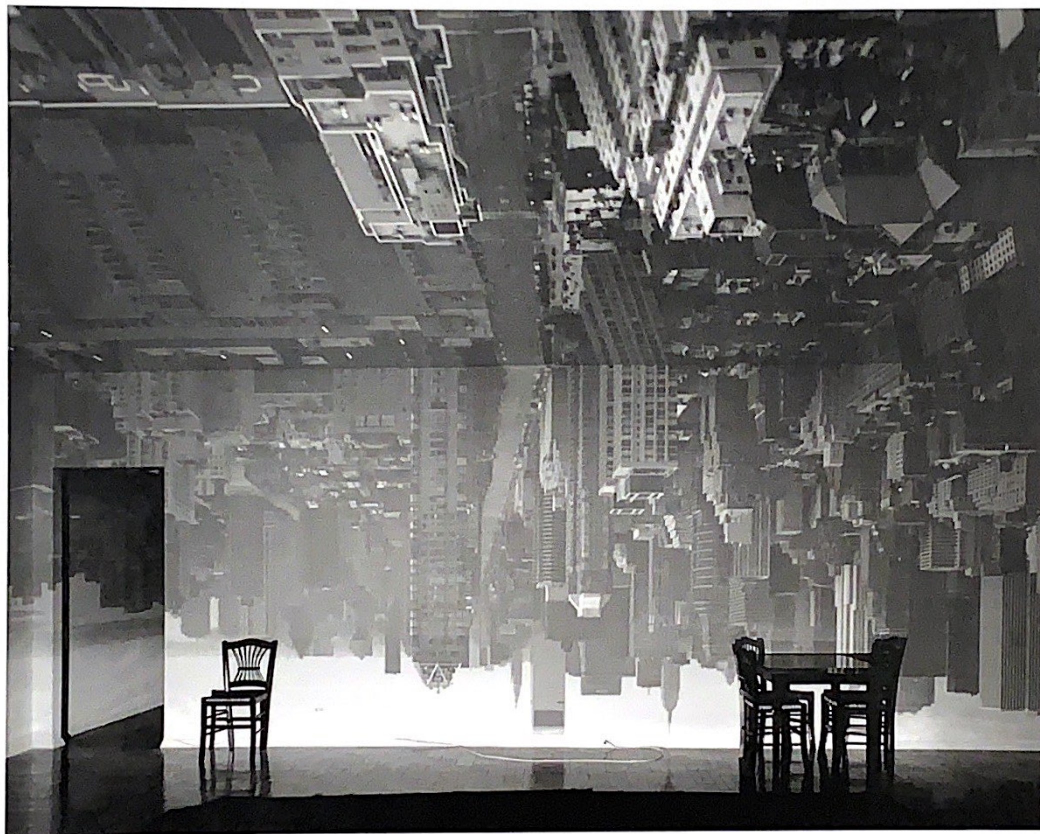
ourselves very tiny? The smaller I can become in my imagination, the more marvelous the world becomes. This coliseum of Piranesi is now as immense for me as the universe. The whole of creation is a realm of pure imagination, his photographs prove. The world is a big, thick book full of wonders admiring themselves through our eyes.

Morell speaks of his new work done in the Gardner Museum as "marrying faces." "I just love the idea," he says, "that a young maintenance man (who, as it happens, is also an artist) can portray the same intensity as a young, cocky Rembrandt." We have all had the experience of catching someone viewing a portrait they resemble. In museums in northern Italy, one occasionally meets Madonnas who could have stepped down from the paintings. To discover the same thing in America, with its diverse population, has the feel of Whitman's democratic vistas. "You shall stand by my side and look in the mirror with me," the old poet said, and he meant all of us. As Morell says: "To my mind I think that guards end up looking at these works of art longer than any scholar and that some of the people who work here are as beautiful and haunting as anything on the wall."

In the same letter to me, Morell wrote about wanting to "combine things like a close up of a beautiful silver tea set on display with a secretary's coffee mug next to her computer." This, I think, is the heart of his vision, the perception of similarity in disparate things, the bringing of two separate realities together, not to cancel out their individual properties, but to officiate at an alchemical wedding. A visual innovation is the result of collaging, of discovering the dimension of transcendence out of the literal. For Morell, to find resemblance is to find an image of something never seen before, and to do so as often as he has done it is no small accomplishment for any photographer or poet.

Charles Simic

Map #1, 1996



Camera Obscura Image of Manhattan View Looking South in Large Room, 1996