

I

I don't have any new photos to show you.

I don't know why.

I haven't gone on any trips.

Even propositions with the word photograph make me stutter.

Dear Photographer:

I dreamt I was at the recycling bin again with my damp newspapers neatly bunched in twine. I had gathered, stacked and admired my collection of news a few years ago from a library's recycling. I saved them for the hope that time accrued would deliver purpose. Eventually, I would display the papers to convey excess and compulsion, in regards to the image stream. This was not a nostalgic collection, or a hoarded one--but I was aware it risked being misunderstood for both those things.

Yesterday the decision hit to not continue saving the papers. I began throwing them out one by one, each time shocked by the intentionality. I would counter the doubt with reminding myself of realities like mold. The pictures on the front page are not realities. Basements and allergies are. I don't have space in my transformational expectations of being to stay weighted with old newspapers. They must become ethereal, simple, more true.

In the dream, I was no longer spending time with each paper. I went from spit clinging kisses to the rash of heartbreak. I had an assistant there with me, so efficiency was reducing self-reflection. The memorializing couldn't be private so it somehow disappeared. I was safeguarded from talking to the front-page photo, and so protected from the photo not talking back to me.

The assistant photographed me holding newspapers above the bin. Each paper I held became like a medal I had just won, held next to my chest. An award for what, I don't know. Unclear survival? Metabolizing denial? The assistant was trying to figure out how to get a better backdrop. But the sun was harsh, so the shadows were too, and the garbage bins were ugly, or they were just boring, recognizable to everyone who lived in this city--even if no one in the neighborhood would see the photographs. The shot was formulaic. Are you getting the front-page picture in it, I asked faintly. I could feel myself giving up on the details; I wanted to finish the routine.

Dear Photographer:

Everyone was talking about photographs at the table. About have you seen this historic one, or I want to send you photos of where I work. And you jumped up, reminded, to show us the picture. It was printed out from the album section of a profile onto regular office paper, which gave the backside a dark cloud of translucence. The print out was mostly of a baby in a belly: the black and white flattened triangular view from a medical machine. Then everyone talked about knowing the gender while passing it around. I held it the longest—fascinated by the thumbnails on the right side of the page. One was an ad for winter vacation swim wear, another for a flat tummy diet via work out videos, and finally, Botox surgery. A real ink zap. Over the womb image, disproportionate and off center read: I LOVE YOU. I wondered if that's how the file came from the doctor or if the parent went into Photoshop to decorate the fetus.

II

I'm only here to take pictures.

I possess an urge not to be noticed.

The public desire for these images is strong.

But I can't make images if I'm injured or captured or worse.

I receive only praise and gratitude for my photos.

Dear Photographer:

We discovered a game called PHOTO HUNT at this bar. We looked over two sets of shoulders, as if at a crumbly stone fence, an almost wall, where we began to help, once we caught on. The idea is to find where two of the “same” Penthouse photos don’t match because of five instances of retouching. You tap the screen, for example, where a bikini strap is missing at the top of her waist in one but is squeezing against the skin of her leg in the other photo.

I had to guess if the photos were altered to not be replicas or if the game company buys before and afters from Penthouse. I also had to guess if the game uses published photos or discarded ones. The retouching was done in a sloppy way: so sloppy it seemed to be generated just for the game with juts of pixilation. The area to hunt is often tussled, like a swirl of water moving opposite to the current.

The photos were of women almost completely naked, usually alone, in scenes of bedrooms or leisure. These photos did not make me horny. I think the guys playing were gay, so maybe we had an advantage. Was being turned on supposed to distract the player? Is that one way to lose?

III

We're looking for the person responsible for this picture.

It says Unknown or Unidentified.

The website's name is not an adequate trace.

There is more than one, picture, actually.

Do you know the pictures I am talking about?

I am looking for the person who hacked into these pictures.

Maybe hack isn't the right word.

Dear Photographer:

You called to ask if I knew the photographer who has just been captured along with other journalists. No, I don't know him! I laugh. The reason you thought I knew the detained photographer is because someone I went to school with went to the Middle East, as a photographer. There was a conflict in Lebanon and he was there. Then for a year he was the Lebanon guy: if there was a story about Lebanon, he had a picture in the paper.

This is when my whole fiction of news images started to crumble, like the way I had learned to hold a fork, tie my shoes, was being challenged, simply because I knew one of the photographers. It was like I had to relearn how to look at pictures of all the relative conflict, poverty and government break down that is sent to us from non-local places. I couldn't just look at a photo--I was preoccupied with who took it.

I tried to understand why you thought the detained photographer was the photographer I sort of know. Maybe we'd like there to be just one photographer because we are desperate for feeling a personal attachment to the photographers, detained or not.

I am so glad you are not one of those warzone photographers, you said. It seems absurd for you to be relieved that I am not a war photographer, as if I spend my time tempted by that fate. I barely even take pictures--how could I be a war photographer?

Dear Photographer:

David Levi Strauss says it's not that we mistake photographs for reality, we prefer them to reality. We were standing around trying to make conversation and you seemed detached. Like you were listening and decided what we were saying wasn't interesting. You pulled a camera out of your tote bag and pointed it to the old map of the city that was hanging on the red wall above the stove. The sensor lingered as a blue spotlight for a moment over one of the rectangular folds. Meanwhile we were talking about the photos on the fridge of the people that lived in the house when they were younger. How it seems funny that people change. We were talking about the torment of sitting on Santa's lap or being in a school portrait.

I thought I'd mention being Santa's photographer at the Manhattan Mall. I had a code to get into the staff bathroom, the same one the women who worked at the stores used. They all seemed to wear tight black pants as they scurried through their breaks. Our photo studio was set up in the desolate entranceway to a bankrupt department store. This was a downgrade from winter wonderland being in the center of the food court, so everyone I worked with was pissed off about the pay-cut. Customers would tell us about how Macy's has gone digital but they were staying loyal to us. Sometimes they brought previous years photos to show their loyalty. These people wanted the same Santa, so tracking the progress of people growing seemed more exact. I had to shake a toy to make the babies smile, which didn't always work. Sometimes if the babies were crying I just took their picture anyway, figuring tears would be hard to detect if they hadn't accumulated enough to gloss their faces. Laughing and crying can be interchangeable in pictures. Sometimes the parents refused to pay for the pictures I'd taken of their crying babies and I had to redo them. That was embarrassing. As punishment, or to have a break from photographing, I'd be switched to the register, which meant slipping the photo into a card or cutting it to fit into a keychain or a snow globe. I was always afraid of ruining it with these more expensive holders.

IV

I am not a hero like other photographers.

Semi-nude photos I've taken of myself turn me on.

I send photos to strangers.

But I have not broken any law.

This exposure routine is treated as a trapped identity.

I meant to send it, not post it.

I apologize for these photos, for the way I handled them.

Dear Photographer:

I offered to take the picture you needed of the clock tattoo on your arm. It's a hand drawn circle with a jumble of numbers in one asymmetrical side. You had to turn it unnaturally by holding your right boob away from your arm at the same time. It has to be a picture you kept saying, not just a snapshot of the clock. With a composition you demanded. I know, I said. It was like we were siblings. I was more amused and you more frustrated; it was your creative process, not mine. We tried different backdrops like fabric and a table and a bookshelf. I hated that I was moving things around. Or I was more disappointed that things wouldn't need to be moved around. You wanted to keep looking at what I took and then referencing this one that was almost okay but not good enough. To take the pressure off, you said it didn't have to get done now. That these could be sketches, but I insisted we do a few more. Then you said let me see, stop, that's the best one. But I didn't understand how it was different.

V

I have seen imitations of the photos we will not release.

The pictures that claim to be evidence--those are not our pictures.

I can assure you that is not who we are.

We do have a picture of us deciding not to release the picture.

A classified document seen in that photograph has been obscured--and we tell you.

Dear Photographer:

In a seventies documentary about discovering you're a lesbian as a kid, the director includes interviews, reenactments, and of course, black and white photos. Nothing matched up exactly: it was a collage of premonitions, and imagined experiences. When the credits rolled, childhood photos were listed, amazingly, as if a leading role in the film. The names were formatted, as a block of text, so there was no way to know who was responsible for providing what photo. Bullet points separated the names. This seemed similar to the thank you page of books. The photos became, after I saw their credits, a waft of collective purpose, self-effacing enough to be cohesive, something I imagine political movements strive for in gaining temporary momentum. The names made the photos seem official, more historical than personal, as these donated props of context.

VI

I had to stop walking so you watched me take the picture.

You asked if it happened.

I said I don't know if it happened.

I can't see the photo in the sun.

I don't think the colors came out.

I have to delete photos to take more.

Dear Photographer:

I was waiting for my bread in the toaster so I picked up the phonebook and turned to Photography. Resources are ordered from commercial to repair to wedding. Spreads combine titles like printing and portraiture, equipment and glamour. Coupons flash as ads, embedded among the steady columns. I imagined filling a room with the photo sections of phonebooks, from this year cities all over the country, or phonebooks from the last 50 years from one place. Conceptually, I would have to figure that out.

In this installation, the phonebooks would be laid open to the photo page, on tables like streets you would walk up and down in an easily gridded city. People would be afraid to touch them because a constant could be detected that would radiate and prohibit touch. The spreads would read like SOS from the outdated. Call my numbers, as if phone numbers were the lottery, and you were in drag delivering the winners. I took the idea further and ripped out the photo pages, to see how they might look in a frame, but decided against this isolation.

Dear Photographer:

I was going through the daily photos as if to figure out when I could feel sufficiently informed, like information was the destination.

I took a screenshot of this photo that made me pause so I wouldn't have to bother searching for it later. Searching doesn't always work; replicas do. Trying to invent keywords of a photo you once saw is a euphemism for just not finding it. But a screenshot is a reservation. It will be waiting for me, like a table to eat at alone, at a restaurant in the basement of apartment towers.

The last thing I did before sleep was think about this photo. I was walking to work the next morning and saw it was selected as the front page, the mantle-piece. What the newsstand had framed. I felt involved, and watched the edges of the paper move underneath the stone weight. Wind. I was convinced I helped predict or psychically decide on this photo as the photo of the day.

The photo was an overhead of a large countertop and stainless steel sink, layered with a grid of disorganized colors. Out of the side came hands inside yellow protective gloves, using a tool like a durable q-tip, cleaning in a eulogy style. They were saving snapshots found in destroyed and abandoned homes after the disaster. But I was confused about how cleaning the photos wouldn't make them smudge.

The cleaning process suggested the photos had somewhere to go. But did the photos deserve to go to a museum or archive? What does a bad exposure or a child growing up become without an owner? The anonymous snapshots seemed like a household item, like toilet paper. The invisible layer of the person who took it made editing seem useless.

What we now have is a photograph of the photographs--typical: a relentless act of saving. Not all the photos were legible or people could argue about which ones were worth being saved, the one with a finger over the lens, I could imagine the debate now.

Dear Photographer:

It was one of those moments when the Internet connection wasn't speaking to my computer. I began a familiar practice of clicking compulsively on the rainbow spread of bars. I was fully content passing the time like this: I had a private elevator button to release anxiety, or building more.

Then I noticed something I had never seen before. In the application that combines the search field with the address field, all the thumbnails of websites I had recently visited became rows of broken cameras.

This default is an illustration in grayscale of a simple point and shoots with a raised flash button near where the shutter might be. The break is literal: a zigzag through the lens, as if the exact middle of the camera was a fault line fulfilling its prophecy. The camera became a weather report icon: half on stable land, the other half barely hanging on. I want to rip the broken half of the camera off, like a loose tooth that seems about to discover something.

VII

We don't have a photo of us together.

We keep saying we'll take one.

I put a picture of you as the wallpaper on my phone.

You didn't know what to say.

After I showed it to you I removed it.

That picture doesn't count.

I'm not in it if I take it.