

The Photographs' Story

2004-2016

This story involves six photographs – published in a newspaper in 2003 – and over which a small boy has superimposed his own graffitied, unknowable, response. Each photograph has its own voice, allowing it to tell a part of the story. The idea of the photo (object) narrator is borrowed from W. G. Sebald, who wrote: *'Because things outlast us, they know more about us than we know about them: they carry the experiences they have with us inside them.'*

1 *me*

every so often he comes ... a solitary visitor, this father ... and then ... into the light we're drawn ... pulled out ... put back ... night again

the writer who once said because things outlast us, they know more about us than we know about them – was right – we do ... we who speak in silence – of what truths ebbing here – between us and the words of an eight-year-old boy ... 'me', 'da', 'Not', 'No', 'So', 'Shit e'

we look through them from our side – these irruptions – from a son who, with his father, once looked upon us as evidence of the tragedy of conflict and the singlemindedness of bullets and who, when older, never ceased to be perplexed by the mystery of his childish flourishes ... which had the effect of enticing his father to scrutinise us in an attempt – futile in our opinion – to reconcile his son's words with his own measure of our effacement ... for it was as if, in his mind, some truth resided therein ...

... but no vision of the truth, as considered by all sides, will emerge – or so said the journalist – who, in his search, wrote that this boy, 'our' boy, may have been murdered by his own people for political advantage – or so countered the enemy – who were, themselves, equally subject to accusation about him – a child of twelve – for whom, at this moment, seconds split and spill ... and who, aching to be invisible, clings to his twelve years of life ...

... and the eight – year - old son, who looked at us with his father then later returned, and unobserved, branded us with his earliest graffiti ... a Delphic chorus behind which we conceal some of our pain – a relief we tell ourselves ... to those eyes that fall upon us, although there is no denying we remain the site for a collision of assaults for which his father, who was never without a noticeable reluctance and – to our way of thinking – quietly discomposed on each occasion ... maintained the habit over the years of periodic visits to stare at us ...

... as did that journalist who in an earlier time also fixed his gaze upon us – perhaps even more intently – while researching and writing his piece ... a long time ago now ...



2 *da*

we might have pictured the boy differently were it not for his father who brought us together, his son seen here in photographs bang, bang, banging on his drums ... his small hands have since grown bigger, stronger – a drummer's hands ...

... they are, you will have guessed, the very same hands that looped across us those inscriptions we describe as arabesques ... 'me', 'da', 'NoP', 'No', 'So', 'Shit e' – looked at in sequence we are an affront to any definition of humanity and a reminder of how little is understood, even now, of what really occurred – although of one matter we remain certain – because, as aware as those observing were ...

... only one conclusion can be reached – that under such circumstances as portrayed by us, any notion of a paradise ... of love, kindness, happiness, tranquillity ... can, in the minds of the protagonists, be of little consequence – paradise? ... here?

... and later, in the days following – and weeks, months and years thereafter – different versions of the boy's death circulate, casting shadows of doubt across the atomised stains from which we are constituted ... the implication being that as a visual record, we lack the veracity to rebut the arguments of those who deny that the boy was shot dead because, in light of contradictory accounts, the truth of what we represent gets messed up – so swamped is it by equivocation, distortion and obfuscation proffered during interrogation which, itself, may or may not ... be a genuine attempt to seek the truth ...

... 'the boy, that boy, the one who was shot ... he raised his hand to his eyes a moment later ... others saw it too' or, 'no, he was not killed by gunfire – but a remarkable performance nonetheless – because it worked ... a great political embarrassment' or, 'now they shoot their own people, children too ... for political advantage'...

... times specified and shadows pictured ... don't match ... don't add up ...



3 *Not*

how inconclusive it now seems, our photographic grasp of death – at the moment of its making – and how vexing the omission from all reports of the grove of trees, the shadows ... concealing everything ... except two hands, forearm, and wrist watch which would, were it lit by a shaft of light, have told the real time although, to be fair, in every description of the tragedy's location no account contradicts the evidence of the film footage which recorded the crossroads, the building – from where there issued sporadic fire – the wall and a concrete drum behind which, inexplicably – as if conjured from nowhere – the twelve-year-old boy and his father first appear, in any visual record... their arrival the subject of a tangle of exhortations that bounce off hills once touched by history before ascending into an ultramarine void from where the remonstrations below seem tiny and from where, were time slowed, bullets could

be seen in flight – pushing aside air they leave a wake of outward spreading turbulence – when, unexpectedly, as though the tumult itself has grown weary, there is a pause ... before the firing resumes ... redirected now at the boy and his father, both of whom are doubled over and shrunk to the ground where – pinned against a wall – they shelter behind the drum ...

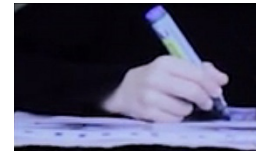
... but then, now, this instant, neither the boy nor his father is afforded any protection from another round ... fired this time from a different angle these shots come from the shadow of trees some distance away and portend our arrival at the time when ... well ... not that long after, we go public, and enter the world in a combination of flowing ink and newsprint while on luminescent screens we are re-played frame by frame ... a confronting presentation by any standard and always accompanied by commentary although, with the passage of time, we have come to respect one particular journalist's response to our depictions, this being, we should add, the footage that is the source of all our published appearances ... 'these moving images ...' the journalist writes 'are unforgettable ... with each re-playing hope arises anew... the boy will get himself down low enough ... the shots will miss him?... the shots will miss him ...

4 *No*

those words ... 'me', 'da', 'Not', 'No', 'So', 'Shit e' ... over time the father comes to imagine them dissolving, these words of his son ... his transgressions rubbed out – erased – the father's answer to his fixation that the whole episode is a misunderstanding on his son's part to his disquisition on the tragedy of conflict ... inflicted in the name of politics, it is but another name for cruelty and savagery when ...

... on that day, after the first few shots, another burst, and the body of the twelve year old boy goes limp, bequeathing us the pain of our documented evidence from which, in time, the gaze of those we once held will retreat so that ultimately no trace of our moral force will remain – but ... and here's the rub ... because, what in time occurs naturally – the moral charge of images to fade is, for this father, too long in the coming ... the words, 'me', 'da', 'Not', 'No', 'So', 'Shit e' – his son's transgressions – so lacking in understanding and feeling, he thinks – better, he imagines, that his son's words be rubbed out... erased... obliterated... annihilated ...

although ... were we able, we'd have dissuaded him from that bleak view for we incline to a different perception of his son's action being, as we were, on the receiving end ... because it is our opinion that the boy, as moved as he was by the encounter – as well as his father's words – proceeded, later, to score in his own crude way – but nonetheless with deep feeling – a libretto ... for when there are no words ...



5 *So*

and so it is that we have company in the darkness of our drawer ... other pictures ... collected by this father – for what purpose we can only speculate – but soothing? ... a balm to our anxious state?... yes, that they certainly are ...

... these images of mists streaked with dazzling light, birds soaring over mountains ... rivers below ... there is a beauty here that touches us, that speaks in truth's name – a voice so clear it lights the air around us... now we see the features of this man, father of an eight-year-old son ... his boy ... a drummer – and our graffitist – a lyricist who writes when there are no words and who, even now, and grown up, is unaware that his words 'me', 'da', 'Not', 'No', 'So', 'Shit e', possess a truth – his father blind to its presence ...

... and it's this blindness, his father's failure to see ... to find and know the truth ... that can set loose a deeply felt fear of failure in the mind of his father – a psychic state to which we, ourselves, are sympathetic – being, as we are, too familiar with our own failure to establish the truth of that which we claim to show ...

the bullets ... the bullets

... did they really ...

... did they really ... miss him?

6 *Shit e*

our visitor ... this father of the eight year old boy... who comes every so often to look at us – and the words ... believing that his attempt to convey to his son the truth about conflict and hatred, guns and bullets, didn't succeed ... his son, as he sees it, having responded so insensitively – although there is more to it than meets the eye – a claim we make with some confidence having observed that in all of our encounters with the father he appears subject to a troubled, silent drumming ...

... a bang, bang, banging in his head, or his heart – perhaps both – brought on by a fear of failure ... it's a project he has concocted ... in which we are somehow to be involved ... and it is this fear that draws him to a photograph, one in particular, amongst those he has accumulated – a picture of falling snow – it competes with us for his attention, his mind directed to remnants of quotation that float across a wintry sky ... "... to be ... an artist ... is to fail, as no other dares to fail ..." a sentiment close to our heart ...

... we, who have strained to tell the truth, glance at other photographs ... those of the young drummer and former graffitist who, now older and wiser, says when playing, that he plays truth or that, put another way, he plays to express the full range of emotion that comes with truth ... in any case ... it's bound to be risky – the chance of failure being greater than the chance of success – but it's something he maintains is within his grasp ... 'I want to play so well ... to get it right' ... he confides to his father – before going on ...

