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***Lips That Touch*, a novel & 'Tiny Jubilations', a critical essay exploring photography,
narrative and inspiration as haunting**

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Abstract

This practice as research thesis comprises two elements:

- 1) Vol. 1 is a novel, *Lips That Touch*, set in small-town Scotland between 1935 and 1969. Centring on two main characters, Rena and Bobby, it is a story of family, thwarted ambition and complicated love.

- 2) Vol. 2 is a commentary that approaches the question of whether inspiration can be understood as a form of haunting through an exploration of photography, memory and narrative. Writing in a way that is personal and postcritical, I consider my use of family photographs and photographs of the built environment (specifically Kilmarnock) as research for the novel, including the role of place, postmemory and inherited narratives. Particular reference is made to the work of William McIlvanney, Janice Galloway, Roland Barthes, Eugène Atget and Hervé Guibert.

Introduction

In this part of the thesis I explore the idea of inspiration as haunting over three chapters. The first, 'Growing Up in the West', considers place and background from a personal viewpoint, contextualized against the dominant depictions of the town of Kilmarnock found in the work of William McIlvanney. In 'Tiny Jubilations', the second chapter, I focus on accessing the past and inventing narrative through the use of both family and archive photographs, and discuss this with reference to Roland Barthes and Janice Galloway. The final chapter, 'Once More With Feeling', draws together thinking about photography, affect and memory and considers their transmutation into fictional form. It brings the thesis back full circle, to place and the past as sources of inspiration.

Chapter 1: Growing Up in the West



When William McIlvanney sent a contribution to Karl Miller's 1970 collection of essays, *Memoirs of a Modern Scotland*, he chose the title 'Growing Up in the West'. 'It is perhaps not too fanciful to suppose,' McIlvanney writes, 'that special contour lines of experience invisibly demarcate certain regions from others or that the West of Scotland, where nature and industry contend along the seaboard, is one such region. Certainly, the towns there have always seemed to me to form a loose fraternity, to sport flora of matching colours and breed fauna of like habits' (1970: 169). One of these habits, perhaps, is the need to begin by establishing credentials. McIlvanney does this by delineating his working class background and how he has 'seen service on the fronts of Troon, Prestwick and Ayr' (1970: 168). Possibly I am establishing my own kind of credentials in beginning this part of my thesis in this way. McIlvanney and I share a home town, Kilmarnock, and as I am coming to understand, its influence looms large in my formation as a writer, and perhaps as a person.

The title of McIlvanney's essay also offers a nod to John Galt, who proposed *Tales of the West* as a collective title for his writings, but its aptness is not entirely geographic. Ayrshire has always had a touch of the Wild West about it, a sense of being on the edge, with everyone else agin you. It is early in *Annals of the Parish* that Reverend Micah Balwhidder tells us of the increase of smuggling around Troon, turning the area into a 'whirlpool of

iniquity' in which: 'There was nothing minded but the riding of cadgers by day and excisemen by night – and battles between the smugglers and the king's men both by sea and land. There was a continual drunkenness and debauchery' (Galt 1910 [1821]: 15). As I was growing up, metaphors were gleaned from endless reruns of cowboy movies, and it goes without saying that we liked both kinds of music: country and western. Graithnock is McIlvanney's nom de plume for Kilmarnock, and across his oeuvre its streets hold the dangerous possibility of 'the wild frontier' (McIlvanney 1996: 56). In *The Kiln*, Allison muses that 'chaparral' might be a handy word for the main street (1996: 181), and young Tam understands his burgeoning sexuality in terms of the Hollywood films showing in the town's seven cinemas. The proximity of Maddie Fitzpatrick turns him into 'an Indian in a Western seeing his first white woman' - 'How!' - and the novel ends with his mind shouting 'GERONIMO' (1996: 96, 216). It isn't simply a shared cultural reference; Westerns offer a parallel moral code. When Angus and Conn prepare for the fight at the end of *Docherty*, Angus comments, with something like admiration, 'Christ. A gunfighter in the family' (McIlvanney 2013: 300).

Women contributors are in a minority (of one) in *Memoirs of a Modern Scotland*, but Karl Miller also reprinted an essay that Muriel Spark had originally written for the *New Statesman* in 1962. 'It is impossible to know how much one gets from one's early environment by way of a distinctive character, or whether for better or worse,' she wrote (1970: 152). Spark was the first female Scottish writer I recall reading, and although I fell in love with her work, the Edinburgh of Miss Jean Brodie was far from the Kilmarnock in which I grew up. That was a place pummelled by the steady falling away of industry and some disastrous 1970s town planning. The Pevsner Guide describes it as:

The county's engine house, whose late C19-early C20 heyday took its name to every corner of the globe, on water hydrants, shoes, railway engines, carpets and whisky. Those days are behind it, especially with the closure of the Johnnie Walker bottling plant (2012), and the town seeks to reinvent itself for the C21, and to forget the damage the late C20 wrought on its economy, communal psyche and built environment (Close & Riches 2012: 415).

Still I feel a frisson of connection if, overseas, my eye catches a hydrant or manhole cover forged in Glenfield and Kennedy.¹ In 1936, the company catalogue boasted that, 'Our Works

¹ My dad was made redundant from the Glenfield in 1982, which didn't mean much to me as a seven-year-old other than that my supply of interesting magnets scavenged from the shop floor was curtailed. He found work at the Roche chemical plant in Dalry when it opened, supported by massive government incentives, in 1983,

are the largest in the Empire specialising in the production of equipment for the control and measurement of water.’² Kilmarnock’s name is laid into the fabric of many streets, in many places. There is nothing particularly Scottish about its rise or decline; we can see the same in the north of England, and in many parts of the industrialised world. As a teenager in the late 1980s and early 1990s all it meant was that much of the town looked like shit and there was nothing to do.

It is in *Lanark* that Alasdair Gray has Duncan Thaw tell us, famously, that, ‘if a city hasn’t been used by an artist not even the inhabitants live there imaginatively’ (Gray 1981: 243). Small towns are closer, more claustrophobic, and I am not sure the same theory applies.³ Certainly when I read *Docherty* for the first time, I found it heavy going. I was in my early teens, had enjoyed *Laidlaw*, and had used my Christmas book token to buy another McIlvanney novel from Justin Theodas’s newsagent and bookshop in Wellbeck Street. While I must have guessed that Graithnock was Kilmarnock, it was an almost unrecognisable version of it. A lot of the fine old buildings of the town centre had been demolished and it was dominated by what is described in *The Big Man* as ‘a kind of monumental slum they called a shopping precinct’ (McIlvanney 1985: 20). There wasn’t a Mairtin Docherty to ‘conjure exotic past out of mundane present’ (2013: 104). The novel might have been set decades before, but it felt too close to the bone as it described ‘the martyrdom of women’ (2013: 17). That ‘beating a wife unconscious one pellucid summer evening’ did not earn ‘permanent contempt’ because it was ‘too real’ seemed bleak beyond words (2013: 34). Getting out of the town was my priority, and pausing to look back seemed maudlin at best and risky at worst.

The word ‘pellucid’ stands out in the line quoted above. It may be intended to create an effect of ironic incongruity in this instance, but it is worth taking a moment to consider the linguistic tension that is a feature of much of McIlvanney’s fiction written in the third person. For Cairns Craig, the ‘meeting place between authorial voice and character’s thoughts is one in which the vernacular stands in mute deference, erased by English’ (Craig 2009 [1999]: 82). When these thoughts appear in language that is, ‘extravagantly erudite and literary’:

and remained there for about twenty years until he was made redundant again. The Christmas presents for workers’ children were much more impressive at Roche: chemistry and physics sets, and one year a microscope.

² <http://www.firehydrant.org/pictures/glenfield-kennedy.html> (accessed 12th July 2018).

³ Besides, as Cairns Craig demonstrates, ‘Thaw is the inheritor of Scottish culture as erasure [...] all-encompassing cultural amnesia’ (Craig 2009: 33).

...they can only be read [...] as a *translation* from one language system into another, a translation designed to elevate the characters not by giving dignity to the actualities of their speech but by insisting on the complexity and integrity of their feelings, no matter the apparent limitations of the language in which they might be expressed (2002: 82).⁴

James McGonigal, in turn, refers to the way in which ‘education over succeeding generations erases even the dialectical energy of Scots from McIlvanney’s authorial voice’, leaving us sometimes with language that can seem ‘heavy or overstated’ (McGonigal 2005: 29). He describes the scene in which Conn Docherty is punished by his teacher for using Ayrshire Scots as opposed to Standard English as, ‘a memorable one where various strands of the author’s own experience, as a working-class boy become teacher and novelist, are tensely knotted’ (2005: 29). Speech can be one of the first things to change when we leave where we come from, and it is evident that linguistic tension is related to class tension, which I will return to later in this chapter.

While it took me a few more years to get to grips with *Docherty*, its author was a recognisable figure. Once I saw him ‘down the town’, and pointed him out to my friend. I was interested in writing, but the process by which bedroom scribblings turned into the bound pages of a book was entirely opaque. Somehow, this person was a writer. He was from Kilmarnock, and you could buy his books in Theodas’s. I hadn’t yet read *The Kiln*, so I didn’t think of Tam’s recognition that Alexander Fleming was born in Darvel: ‘An Ayrshireman did that. There’s hope, there’s hope’ (1996: 30). A proposition rather different to Thaw’s, not that the idea of inhabiting my home town imaginatively was high on my agenda. Instead I convinced my friend that we should follow this rare creature, an author. Perhaps he would pull out a typewriter and start writing, or reveal other mysteries of his profession. He didn’t. He went to the General Post Office in John Finnie Street, where I bought a second class stamp and he withdrew cash. Then we trailed him down Bank Place and along Bank Street, where he disappeared into the Goldberry Arms. Our school uniforms precluded entry, although apparently it had once been quite the haunt of teachers and older boys from Kilmarnock Academy. The school magazine, which McIlvanney edited in 1954-5, was called *The Goldberry*.

⁴ In this, Craig follows Keith Dixon’s 1989 article ‘Writing on the Borderline: The Work of William McIlvanney’, which in turn explores the notion of translation in the ‘dilemma of the inarticulate character and the interfering author’ (Dixon 1989: 152) by relating it to earlier propositions by both Lewis Grassic Gibbon and Douglas Gifford.

I regret, in a way, that we didn't manage to see him hold forth on his home turf. I wonder if his love of fancy prose is part of the instinct as intellectual and performer that may have helped propel him from the classroom to the bar to the stage at literary festivals. Before the industry went, the spirit of the town is described in *The Big Man* as being made by workers:

It was raw. It was sentimental songs at spontaneous parties, half-remembered poems that were admitted into no academic canon of excellence, anecdotes of doubtful social taste, wild and surrealistic turns of phrase, bizarre imaginings that made Don Quixote look like a bank clerk . . . the pub-talk flourished, the stories were oral novels and the songs would have burst Beethoven's eardrums if he hadn't already been deaf (McIlvanney 1985: 19).

Meanwhile 'other people could get on with the higher things, what they liked to call 'culture'' (1985: 19). The Quixotic pub talk may still have been flourishing amongst the men propping up the bar at the Goldberry, but anything else resembling culture was thin on the ground; I'd have seconded McIlvanney's earlier observation that 'the mental climate in the West of Scotland is not conducive to the more delicate aesthetic pretensions, and Kilmarnock is typical of the West of Scotland' (1970: 171). Home my friend and I went, to do our homework and hope that one day our exam results would be enough to get us away. I was writing stories then, but it did not cross my mind that I would ever choose to set one in Kilmarnock.

The title of my novel – *Lips that Touch* – is a contraction of an old Temperance slogan: *lips that touch liquor shall never touch mine*.⁵ Few writers understand the – now much diminished – Scottish relationship with pubs and alcohol like McIlvanney. The excuse of being drunk is available to men like Tam Docherty, just as Dan in *The Big Man* can 'nip out and have a look at Indo-China' (1985: 21) in order to escape domestic life. In *The Kiln*, Tom uses the Akimbo Arms 'to refresh his sense of himself and where he came from', while a very young Jack Laidlaw explains that he'll have to practice being guttered: 'Ah think Ah'll get better at it' (1996: 104, 138). Not that pubs are always safe havens 'for killing half-an-hour' (1970a, 50). In his poem 'Casual Meeting', McIlvanney describes a chance meeting in which two men 'exchanged / The names of mutual friends like conversation', ending on the line: 'People are suffocating, locked in smiles' (1970a: 50). By then the Old Men at Union

⁵ Used mainly in the USA, it seems. Images abound online, and sheet music for a song of the same title by George T Evans can be found in the Library of Congress: <https://www.loc.gov/item/sm1874.05123/> (accessed 18th February 2019).

Street Corner are ‘the survivors, defenders / Of a fortress long since fallen’ (1970a: 42) This strikes a chord with the Kilmarnock I recall from the late 80s and early 90s. I can remember hearing two, somewhat inebriated, men at a bus stop having a conversation that consisted entirely of the word ‘aye’, repeated with different intonation and emphasis.

The network of transversals that runs through the Graithnock novels (and beyond) is an overwhelmingly masculine one, lubricated by drink. It is in the pubs, along with street corners, pits, Graithnock Academy, and the brickworks, that the paths of characters cross. The High Street of *Docherty* has ‘an invisible network of barriers and rights-of-way . . . behind it a deep and muffled sense of what it meant to be a man, a realisation that there were areas which were only your own, and that if these were violated formidable forces might be invoked’ (McIlvanney 2013: 34). There’s a cosiness, a complicity in this world of men that can feel exclusive; or at least it did to me, as a younger female reader with ambitions to write, and then as a new writer sharing the stage a couple of times at book festivals. The dedication of *Walking Wounded* is ‘FOR MY FRIENDS’, and the source of its epigraph ‘A man I think I overheard in a bar’ (McIlvanney, 1989). To this day, I’ve never set foot in the Goldberry.

Most compelling, for me, is the role played by the mine. Near the beginning of *Docherty* we see Tam and Buff, ‘steeping in warmth’ by the fireside, speaking little:

Yet their silence was a traffic, more real than words. They had known each other a long time and both were miners. Their friendship was fed from numerous tubers, small, invisible, forgotten, favours like help with shifting furniture, talk in the gloaming at the corner, laughter shared. Intensifying these was that sense of communal identity miners had, as if they were a separate species (2013: 24).

Early on in my career, in an article, I referred to the ‘dull, thudding masculinity’ of McIlvanney, amongst others from the male, Scottish, literary establishment (Strachan 1999).⁶ Now, eighteen years later, I enjoy transcribing that passage about Tam and Buff. It is beautiful, and if sentimentality is there, it is perhaps more forgivable in something that now is elegiac.⁷ Naturally it is easier to romanticise when one has not faced the very real danger

⁶ While I agree with Keith Dixon that McIlvanney uses his hard man characters to interrogate the ‘whole ethos of Scottish machismo’ (1989: 144) I am not convinced of the extent to which he seeks to undermine it across his body of work. Scott Hames makes a good argument for the way in which ‘the arena of masculinity’ in McIlvanney is ‘outside the self, in the public sphere’ (Hames 2007: 70). Therefore, ‘Textually speaking, this stable “objective” sphere is *produced* and ordered by a notably ‘masculine’ narratorial consciousness’ (2007: 70).

⁷ I might equally describe my novel as being ‘fed from numerous tubers’, with this slightly rhizomatic non-fiction writing an attempt to recall and quantify some of them. My colleague Theo Van Heijnsbergen from

incurred in being a miner oneself. My grandfather left school on his fifteenth birthday, and started at a pit near his home in New Cumnock the next day. He left long before the Barony Colliery was closed in 1989. The A frame, ably protected by a local trust, is an Ayrshire landmark and the only one that remains standing in Scotland. The final deep coal mine to close in Britain was Kellingley in Yorkshire, in 2015. Reading of the scenes after the last shift finished, I was moved by the resilience of the mining culture that my grandfather was part of, and struck by the profound sense of loss that the Kellingley miners felt.

To my teenage self, McIlvanney's observations only proved that Ayrshire's industrial heritage was gone, and that the wound to the communal psyche was, as the authors of the Pevsner Guide recognise, deep. Kilmarnock became a different place without the mines, and the carpet factory, and the locomotive works, and the engineering works, and the Johnnie Walker bottling plant. A few of those were still in place when McIlvanney wrote:

When the money went, Graithnock turned funny but not so you would laugh ...
Something like honour, something as difficult to define and as difficult to live
decently without, had gone from a lot of people's sense of themselves ...
Graithnock didn't know itself as clearly any more. (1985: 19).

It is inevitable that we experience a sense of palimpsest in places we know well. In *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, Andreas Huyssen notes that:

Since Romanticism and the decline of the rhetorical traditions, memory was increasingly associated with ideas of experience and its loss . . . If the Romantics thought that memory bounds us in some deep sense to times past, with melancholia being one of its liminal manifestations, then today we rather think of memory as a mode of representation and as belonging ever more to the present (2003: 3).

When I look at the boxy modern flats on Portland Street I recall the Victorian infirmary that loomed there, ruined for the most part, when I lived in Kilmarnock. All the times I walked

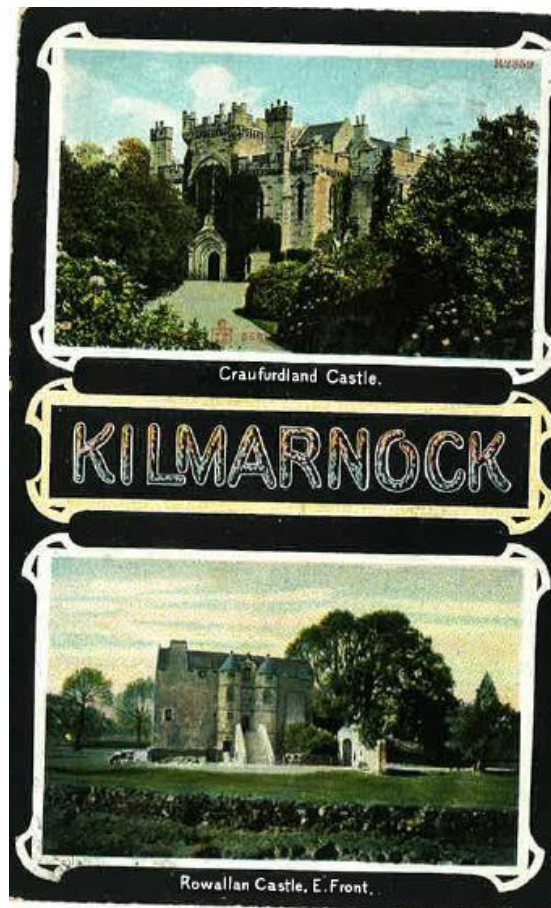
Scottish Literature at University of Glasgow made a point (on kindly reading this section) that I'm very interested in, and cannot with a clear conscience claim as my own. He suggested that there is also a universality here, bolstered by the immaterial yet organic nature of shared humanity suggested in that tuber metaphor, and asked whether that universality might override the past-ness that 'elegiac' implies, in a way that is still current and in the future, part of the land and the landscape. Yes, I agree, and that in turn connects to the way in which photographs work in time, as I'll mention with reference to Walter Benjamin in Chapter 2, and – if it isn't pushing it too far – to the way in which I hope that what is at surface level a historical novel will work. In trying to turn family stories into something fictional, I think I may have been trying to express that sense of the past not being past. These stories were and are current, part of my everyday lived experience, and that currency (the experience of which we might even call haunting) is what sparked the novel. Nevertheless, my agent suggested the ending was too elegiac, which I understand.

past it, and a few teenage urban explorations within. Beyond our living memories are the stories we've been told, of who was born there and who was rushed in under medical emergency. Further back, intangible but not wholly gone, there's the town that could raise and extend a hospital by subscription, individual philanthropy, a charity bazaar.⁸ The gateposts of the old hospital remain, as do the wall and railings that separated its grounds from the street. Even if Kilmarnock didn't 'know itself as clearly' by the 1980s, there were – and are – plenty of ghostly traces haunting its built environment. While Huyssen acknowledges that most buildings are not in themselves palimpsests:

...we have come to read cities and buildings as palimpsests of space, monuments as transformable and transitory [...] an urban imaginary in its temporal reach may well put different things in one place: memories of what was there before, imagined alternatives to what there is. The strong marks of present space merge in the imaginary with traces of the past, erasures, losses, heterotopias (2003: 7).⁹

⁸ For the history and an image of the Infirmary, see <http://www.futuremuseum.co.uk/collections/life-work/social-history/emergency-services/healthcare---hospitals-infirmaries/kilmarnockinfirmary.aspx>, accessed 31st December 2017.

⁹ This expresses very neatly much of my approach to place in fiction, when I'm thinking about the dialectic between past and present. Most of the topographies of *Lips That Touch* are quite accurate though; the hotel was/is where it was, as was/is the shop. Other places are fuzzier, deliberately misnamed or their interiors eagerly invented.



In his memoir piece in 1970 McIlvanney recalled Kilmarnock as still ‘an industrial town’, although one ‘under siege from what Pound calls “the green world”’ (1970: 170). The claustrophobia of that siege can be broken by embracing rather than resisting that ‘green world’, and here another glimmer of recognition creeps in. For the young McIlvanney, ‘the country was an escape route, place for divesting the identities the town imposed on me and going naked in my imagination’ (1970: 171). The Craufurdland estate, where I used to walk my dog, becomes for Conn Docherty ‘Indian country’ (in this case an Africa populated by fierce Zulus) (2013: 203). My own favourite route was through Rowallan estate, where I indulged in a heady mix of fantasy and class envy; until, that is, I heard the barking of dogs from the home farm.

Nature is one form of escape, another is books. Conn Docherty’s son Tam, the one who will end up able to ‘howk wi’ his heid’ rather than go down the mine, feels the power of reading early on (2013: 27). In a rather less politically incorrect reference than the one above, Tam ‘became D’Artagnan and Ayrshire was Gascony. Called in for a meal that had nothing to do with him, he found it awkward to sit at the table with his sword on’ (1996:14). In the

library – the Dick Institute, it would have been, opposite Kilmarnock Academy – Tam sees a woman ‘trying to find the book which, when she pulls it from the shelf, will – as in some Gothic castle – activate the secret doorway to admit her to a life richer and more dramatic than her own’ (1996: 85). Many of my childhood memories play out in landscapes and libraries, most of them ones that McIlvanney would have known. I’ve written about the Dick Institute before, partly because of a role that he and I shared, as Patrons of Imprint, East Ayrshire’s Book Festival.¹⁰ Authors aren’t such rare beasts in Kilmarnock these days, and the library is still enriching lives.

In my novel *Ever Fallen in Love*, one of the characters – a computer game designer - pulls a book from his shelf and notices a line that matches that of Tam’s that I have quoted above. The narrator is:

... full of curiosity and the faint, unrecognized apprehension that here, at last, I should find that low door in the wall, which others, I knew, had found before me, which opened on an enclosed and enchanted garden, which was somewhere, not overlooked by any window, in the heart of that grey city (Strachan 2011: 131; Waugh 2000 [1945]: 32).

The book in question is *Brideshead Revisited*, although that isn’t acknowledged in the text. Part of my endeavour then was to try to write an anti-Brideshead, something that might pick at the chip that many of us carry, or have carried, on our shoulders regarding class.¹¹ With my first novel, in 2002, I knew I was writing against many of my favourite books, books by male authors in which it seemed that only men could fall prey to existential angst. While eventually I understood that the secret doorways of fiction might not have to lead anywhere as exotic and other as Narnia, it is only recently that I have lost some of that sense of pushing against a place and its past.

McIlvanney once wrote that, ‘to judge working class culture, once you have left it, by the standards of the established literary culture you have entered is to judge it by terms that were created to deny it. You have no option but to impoverish your past. The rules are made to work that way’ (McIlvanney 1991: 225-6). It’s an interesting thought, given the working

¹⁰ A short piece commissioned by Scottish Book Trust & BBC Woman’s Hour can be read or listened to here: <http://www.scottishbooktrust.com/myfavouriteplace/womans-hour-on-bbc-radio-4/zoe-strachan> (accessed 15th August 2018)

¹¹ And I wonder, in retrospect, if I was also thinking about how *Brideshead Revisited* works in terms of memory, place and inherited narrative. In an interesting article on the novel and what he calls its modern historicization of memory, David Rothstein observes that it features characters who are, ‘acutely aware of their break with the past and seek to anchor themselves through their active relation to sites of memory’ (Rothstein 1993: 319).

class one-upmanship that used to populate much of the Scottish literary scene. We might take solace in the epigraph for *The Big Man*, two lines from Camus, a writer McIlvanney admired for the way in which ‘he tried to marry theory with real living, which to me was what socialism was also trying to do’: ‘What is a rebel? A man who says no: but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation’ (SRB 2010, McIlvanney 1985).

Being the first person in the family to go to university does impart that ‘sense of being outside any social norm’ that young Tam Docherty recognises (1996: 76). It is through writing that Tam realises that ‘You can’t disown your past without becoming no one. To challenge conditioning without trying to eradicate it, to modify it honestly in the light of individual thought, was to become yourself’ (1996: 92). The books we have read are part of our past, and *Docherty* is particularly significant because, as James Peacock writes, it, ‘paints a picture of a lost era of working-class, civic values, a kind of “foundational myth” of the West of Scotland’ (Peacock 2013: 73, citing Ryan 2002).¹² The novel was also, coincidentally, first published in the year I was born. While challenging the conditioning of the West Coast and its fraternity was a spur to my first fictional undertakings, in the past few years I’ve found more to inspire than to kick back against in Kilmarnock. It is more quirk of fate than homage to McIlvanney that I’ve written a novel steeped in alcohol that owes a great deal to the buildings I’ve walked past and the stories I’ve listened to since childhood, but it is a result of growing up in the west. In that essay, McIlvanney writes of beginning to ‘see a marriage between my present and the past which had been mine before I was born’ (1970: 173). That marriage is as complicated as any relationship described in the Graithnock novels, and it is something that resonates with me as I think of the fictional marriage between my two central characters, Rena and Bobby, and the negotiating with the dead – to borrow Margaret Atwood’s term - that creating them has entailed. Renunciation may well be lurking there, under one of the murky layers of the individual psyche; Huyssen writes that ‘Inevitably, every act of memory carries with it a dimension of betrayal, forgetting, and absence’ (2003: 4).

As this section of the thesis progresses, I will try to articulate the processes that part of that negotiation with the dead has entailed. By nature, any discussion of inspiration is likely to be either boring (in that it might comprise a level of self-exegesis that would render the thesis as a whole tautological), or somewhat evasive; there are artistic processes, I

¹² Peacock also offers an interesting reading of *Strange Loyalties*, in which he suggests that for Laidlaw, ‘it is all about the strict border between before and after, and about traumatic loss of a precious, unsullied, homogenous identity. So arriving in Ayrshire, Laidlaw speculates that “what I was seeing was a kind of absence, a self no longer there” (*Strange Loyalties*, p.182)’ (2013: 82).

believe, that rely on intuition rather than interrogation. In the next chapter I go on to describe my critical approach as ‘magpie’, which is a way of acknowledging that I am aware of some of my elisions and hope that the novel functions as a work in itself, without this critical commentary. This section is about context, specifically the context of place and literary depictions of that place, and the main omission is the necessary one that lends itself to my overall endeavour to explore the idea of inspiration as haunting.¹³ If I could describe the full effect of place, say, on my artistic development, there might be no need to write this kind of novel, set in Kilmarnock.

Some writers have conceptualised haunting in refreshingly direct ways. In Muriel Spark’s fiction, the supernatural is entirely natural, a real part of everyday experience.¹⁴ ‘He looked as if he would murder me and he did,’ observes Needle, matter-of-factly, in between ‘mooching’ down the Portobello Road and browsing in Woolworth’s, just as she did when alive (Spark 2001: 520, 496). For Hilary Mantel, it’s a little more complicated; haunting takes both explicit and metaphorical forms.¹⁵ The set up for her fascinating memoir *Giving Up the Ghost* is indicated by its title: she is challenging herself to say how she came to sell a house with a ghost in it. In the process she addresses what she refers to, lightly, as her ‘*mauvais quart d’heure*’ (Mantel 2010: 152; her italics), aged seven and playing in the (secret) garden at her home in Brosscroft. She sensed a ‘creature . . . as high as a child of two’ amongst the long grass and bracken, ‘some formless, borderless evil, that came to try and make me despair’ (2010: 106, 107). The specificity of the setting is important. In an interview with Sarah O’Reilly in the P.S. section of the 4th Estate edition, Mantel is asked about ‘the trigger’ that launched her into memoir. Her answer is almost entirely about place, about ‘an

¹³ It is worth mentioning here that I will avoid, on the whole, the Derridean idea of hauntology in this thesis. Writing in *The Guardian* in 2011, Andrew Gallix suggested that hauntology was now haunting itself: ‘Julian Wolfrey argues in *Victorian Hauntings* (2002) that “to tell a story is always to invoke ghosts, to open a space through which something other returns” so that “all stories are, more or less, ghost stories” and all fiction is, more or less, hauntological [...] For the reader or critic, the mystery of literature is the opacity – the irreducible remainder – at the heart of writing that can never be completely interpreted away. [...] And then, of course, there’s the death of the author ... All this, as you can see, could go on for quite a while, so perhaps we should wonder if the concept does not just mean all things to all (wo)men.’ Gallix concludes, however, by proposing that hauntology is also haunted by ‘a nostalgia for all our lost futures’. In the examples given in the next paragraph, of Spark and Mantel, haunting has a less theory-bound meaning and the effect and affect are in turn more individual on the level of craft (Spark, but also Mantel in *Beyond Black*) and self-reflection (Mantel). I think this is because they are not in the position of looking from outside in, as a critic might, but from the inside out i.e. as primarily as creators of, rather than readers of, their work. While sadly I can’t compare my own work to either of theirs, I find their approaches appealing.

¹⁴ Many critics have picked up on this, most recently at time of writing Allan Massie in his introduction to the new Polygon edition of *The Comforters* (2018).

¹⁵ I mention Spark and Mantel in the same paragraph because there seems to be a connection between them; Mantel’s wonderful *An Experiment in Love* reads partly as homage to *The Girls of Slender Means*, my favourite of all Spark’s novels.

accidental piece of writing – something private, which sprang out of our decision to sell our cottage in Norfolk’ (2010: P.S. section, 3), and as the memoir progresses we discover various houses and locations, some of which have found their way into fiction. Describing the convent adjoining the church where her baby brother was christened, she writes, ‘It was the only time I ever entered that building, ever crossed the threshold, and my eyes must have been so busy that they stripped the varnish from the chairs, stripped the paint from the walls: because years later I would write a novel largely set in that convent’ (2010: 66).

For me, haunting is a metaphor forged in memory and aided, as I will begin to describe in the next chapter, by the study of photographs. Its tenor is inspiration, and its vehicle the ghost or haunt. Place, growing up in the west, gives it a frame in which to manifest itself. The American poet and teacher of creative writing Richard Hugo collected his lectures and essays on poetry and writing in a book called *The Triggering Town*. In the first chapter he proposes that:

A poem can be said to have two subjects, the initiating or triggering subject, which starts the poem or “causes” the poem to be written, and the real or generated subject, which the poem comes to say or mean, and which is generated or discovered in the poem during the writing. That’s not quite right because it suggests that the poet recognises the real subject. The poet may not be aware of what the real subject is but only have some instinctive feeling that the poem is done (Hugo 1979: 4).

If I read this with the form of the novel in my mind then it seems a sympathetic view. I can remember carrying around the idea of laundrettes for a while, knowing that I wanted to write a novel about a laundrette. The finished novel turned out to be about various other things, generated or enabled by the initial idea of laundrettes, but I would not have been able to list these when I began, or even when I was halfway through. Hugo refines his proposition by saying that he suspects that, ‘the true or valid triggering subject is one in which physical characteristics or details correspond to attitudes the poet has towards the world and himself. For me, a small town that has seen better days often works’ (1979: 5-6). That phrase chimes with McIlvanney’s Graithnock in the 1980s, and the Pevsner Guide’s Kilmarnock in 2012. Hugo is concerned with getting off the subject though, with how to ‘switch your allegiance from the triggering subject to the words’ (1979: 12). He turns again to towns, and what we might see as our individual and affective palimpsests:

The poem is always in your hometown, but you have a better chance of finding it in another. The reason for that, I believe, is that the stable set of knowns that the poem needs to anchor on is less stable at home than in the town you've just seen for the first time. At home, not only do you know that the movie house wasn't always there, or that the grocer is a newcomer who took over after the former grocer committed suicide, you have complicated emotional responses that defy sorting out (1979: 12).

In the strange – but familiar – town that you have taken 'emotional possession' of, 'It is easy to turn the gas station attendant into a drunk. Back home it would have been difficult because he had a drinking problem' (1979: 12).

As McIlvanney describes in *The Big Man*, Kilmarnock fell victim to some destructive town planning decisions as part of the Town and then District Council's redevelopment scheme in the 1960s and 1970s. The Cross became unrecognisable as such, 'many important buildings were lost' (Close and Riches, 2012: 417) and by the late 1980s the industrial heyday was almost entirely an object of memory. This is the Kilmarnock that I grew up in, but thinking of the triggering town in the past transforms it into a different place, a place glimpsed in crumbling masonry and whisky bonds, twists of wrought iron and Covenanter's graves.



The feeling of flicking through old photographs is not unlike that of driving through a small town that has seen better days, catching a hint of recognition and moving on. Any narratives relating to this Kilmarnock of the past have been gleaned from the memory of memories and stories related to me as a child. Writing about Kilmarnock back then lets me make it afresh, in imagination. Taking emotional possession of the equivalent of the gas station attendant with the drink problem is a taller order, and one that has necessitated what I hope represents that shift from the triggering subject to the words of the novel.

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Chapter 2: Tiny Jubilations



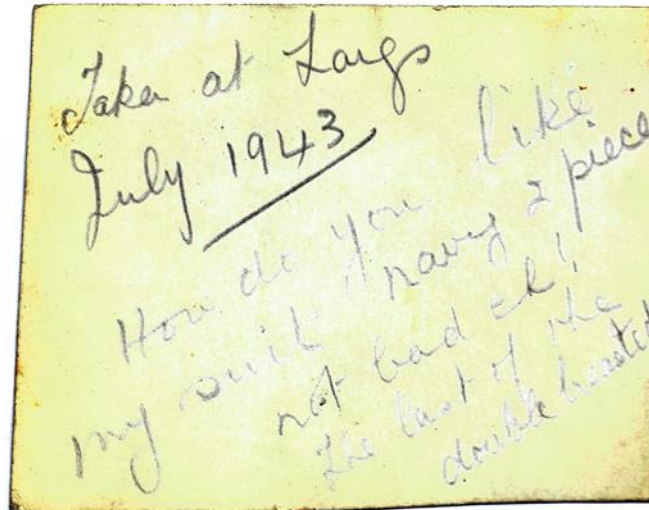
Largs, July 1943

Street photographers were a feature of seaside towns in Britain from the 1850s until the 1950s and beyond. Their heyday was in the 1930s. On the August Bank Holiday of 1939, the fifty ‘reflex men’ working for Sunbeam Photos of Margate took 35,000 photographs of holidaymakers and day-trippers (Harding 2013). The typical image was the ‘walkie’, in which the subjects were snapped as they walked along the promenade, and then handed a receipt so that they could purchase the image from a shop or stall once developed. The photos might be retained as keepsakes or sent to a friend as a holiday postcard.

I relied on two particular kinds of photographs to help me write *Lips That Touch*: family photos from an album that belonged to my grandmother, and archival photographs taken of Kilmarnock by the town planning department of what is now East Ayrshire Council. These latter – discovered by a librarian friend in a musty box, ignored for decades - depict buildings scheduled for demolition and new builds, amongst other, sometimes incongruous, sights. While it would be accurate to say that the photographs were part of the historical

research process, as I have begun to suggest in the previous chapter, their role was more fundamental and more complex than that. Partly because the novel is set in my home town of Kilmarnock, and partly because the characters and their stories are based, loosely, on real people and events.

The photograph reproduced at the beginning of this chapter comes from a family album. Although walking photographs were far less common during the war, I assume it was taken by a street photographer. Largs was a seaside resort, and an overflow seaplane base operated there, so there would have been plenty of visitors in 1943. Although taken in great numbers, and not conceived as art, walkies demanded skill, an almost instantaneous assessment of time and movement by the photographer: ‘The trick was to focus slightly in front of people walking towards you to allow for the slight delay in taking the photograph after releasing the shutter,’ explains Colin Harding, Curator of Photographic Technology at the National Media Museum (Harding 2013). Today we value such images as social history. They offer naturalistic glimpses of the past, often unposed; in *On Photography*, Susan Sontag notes that, ‘The good manners of a camera culture dictate that one is supposed to pretend not to notice when one is being photographed by a stranger in a public place’ (Sontag 1990 [1977: 171]). When they are discovered in the heavy pages of family albums, as Sontag says, ‘Those ghostly traces, photographs, supply the token presence of the dispersed relatives’ (1990: 9). It might not have been at the forefront of the reflex men’s minds when they paced the promenade at Largs, but when we take photographs we ‘participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time’s relentless melt’; that is why, indeed, ‘All photographs are memento mori’ (1990: 15).



*How do you like my suit navy 2 piece not bad eh!
The last of the double breasted.*

Given that photographs necessarily depict the past, we look to them often for evidence, thinking perhaps of the assumed veracity of reportage and scene of crime photographs. Sometimes that evidence is incontrovertible: Betty, the model for my character Rena, did wear a trouser suit, as I'd been told. There it is in black (or navy) and white. But the photograph as hard evidence has long been seen as problematic, even if we do not become entangled in its peculiar phenomenology. Walter Benjamin referred to Brecht's *The Threepenny Trial* to describe why:

'For the situation,' says Brecht, is 'made complicated by the fact that less than at any time does a simple "reproduction of reality" express something about reality. A photograph of the Krupps factory or AEG reveals next to nothing about these institutions. Actual reality has slipped into the functional. The reification of human relations, as in, for example, the factory, no longer makes these explicit. Effectively it is necessary "to build something up", something "artificial", "posed"' (Benjamin 2015: 91-2).

Susan Sontag offers an additional slant: 'in the situations in which most people use photographs, their value is of the same order as fiction' (1990: 22), while in his response to *On Photography*, John Berger tells us that, 'Photographs in themselves do not narrate' (Berger 1980: 51).' I believe that not only do photographs contain narrative, they invite us to invent it: Betty was a fan of Katherine Hepburn, that's why she wore the suit. The

‘something’ that it is necessary for us to build up is the fictional endeavour, and although mimesis is part of it, it is not the whole story.¹⁶

With this in mind, we can understand why the examination of family photographs might provide a useful opening strategy for Janice Galloway’s two volumes of memoir, *This Is Not About Me* (2008) and *All Made Up* (2011). The titles suggest an ambivalence, to say the least, about the notion that memoir is more ‘truthful’ than fiction, and about the way in which we categorise literary works. In the first volume, the narrator surveys a photograph of herself, her sister and her mother sitting in the living room of their home in Saltcoats, North Ayrshire: ‘There are three chairs, a wicker rocker with embroidered cushions and a pair of short bare legs poke into the picture from the right, suspended by unknown means. It’s a doll all right, and if it’s a doll, it’s mine. I am implicated in these surroundings by this evidence alone’ (Galloway 2008: 2).

The description of the furniture, of the strangely positioned, dismembered doll, as well as the language used (‘implicated’) suggest that Galloway’s investigation is forensic. She is seeking evidence for something, but what? In the second volume, the photograph described at the beginning is of young Janice and her mother standing outside the house, ‘waiting for the shutter release to set us free, our self-consciousness rising through the gloss finish paper’ (Galloway 2011: 2). The shadow of the photographer is visible in the photograph: ‘without him, the evidence we were here together on this day would not exist, even if it’s partial’ (2011: 4). The reproduction of reality is in full colour rather than black and white, but any proof it can offer is incomplete. Contemporary cognitive theories of memory suggest that while we are likely to be able to come up with a reasonably accurate narrative of our lives, it is not simply a case of whipping out the relevant images from a mental card index. Instead, every instance of remembering is also an instance of retelling.¹⁷

Family photographs are more than aides memoire. They do not simply record times gone by, and our responses to them are deeper than nostalgia. Taking photographs, collating them, looking through them, all of these actions can serve to reinforce the idea of the family unit. Marianne Hirsch makes a further argument:

¹⁶ For Roland Barthes, narrative is ‘Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances’ (Barthes 1979: 79, my underlining). Greg Battye quotes Emma Kafalenos’s simple formulation that ‘any photograph of a living being can be read as evidence of the elements that constitute a minimal narrative: an initial state and an event that changes it’ (Kafalenos in Battye 2014: 43).

¹⁷ See Eakin, Paul John (2008), *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

. . . the family is in itself traversed and constituted by a series of “familial” looks that place different individuals into familial relation within a field of vision. When I visually engage with others familiarly, when I look through my family’s albums, I enter a network of looks that dictate affiliative feelings, positive or negative feelings of recognition that can span miles and generations: I “recognize” my great-grandmother because I am told that she is an ancestor, not because she is otherwise in any way similar or identifiable to me. It is the context of the album that creates the relationship, not necessarily any preexistent sign. And when I look at her picture, I feel as though she also recognizes me (Hirsch 1997: 53).

Galloway’s description of looking at family photographs is a wonderfully vivid expression of this. In *All Made Up* the mother and daughter picture is interrupted by the glimpse of the older sister:

And we are not alone. Hidden, or so she thinks, is a sliver of another woman: a partial tumble of black, black hair, one cheek, the corner of an eye on the extreme right of the snap [...] Hoping Cora will calm down enough to take the train to somewhere else has been my guilty secret for ages and it’s not the only one, but today no one is admitting their dark side. The sun is up, the sky is blue and somebody, by being here and holding a camera, is helping to ensure we pull out the stops (2011: 2-3).

Say ‘cheese’. We all perform for the family photo, but some kind of reciprocity may be expected. Martha Langford makes a compelling argument:

The showing and telling of an album is a performance. Most of us are spoiled by the ideal circumstances in which we normally encounter an album – with an interpreter in the home. Viewing an album in company must be considered the normal spectatorial experience, so persistent is the framework in scholarly and literary description. This is not because a private album is so openly accessible, but precisely because it is not. Its personal nature and intended restriction to a circle of intimates, even to an audience of one, licenses singular arrangements of situational images that need explanation and are enhanced by a tale (Langford 2008: 5).

Any Christmas with a difficult relative will have convinced us that the effort of playing the game of happy families for the camera, can, in Hirsch’s words, ‘reduce the strains of family life by sustaining an imaginary cohesion, even as it exacerbates them by creating images that real families cannot uphold’ (1997: 7).

Galloway’s description of her family snaps exemplifies this, and in doing so sets up the real work of the memoirs; to trace the network of looks that delineate family

relationships, to create a space in which the ‘dark side’ may be exposed to the bright sun. Hirsch describes the remembrance and act of definition intrinsic in tracing the familial look as forming ‘part of the story through which I construct myself [...] It is fundamentally an interpretative and a narrative gesture, a fabrication out of available pieces that acknowledges the fragmentary nature of the autobiographical act [...] Photographs are fragments of stories, never stories in themselves’ (1997: 83).

Photographs may not be able to narrate, but they do contain narrative. While they may provide a discourse, they cannot offer us the whole story; the fun parts that take us beyond ‘A man and a woman walk along a street in Largs’ to the ‘what and why’ of this action.¹⁸ The interpretative and narrative gesture that Hirsch describes takes place later on, for me through the process of writing. It is no accident that the photos Galloway describes are not themselves reproduced, although the covers of both books do use images of her as a child and young woman. Besides, she has warned us already that the texts we are reading are ‘All Made Up’ and ‘Not About Me’. For all we know, the photos she shows us with words may be invented or amalgamated from similar images. Either way, they are the prompt for the story she goes on to tell.



Betty, Sauchiehall Street

¹⁸ See also Battye, Greg (2014), *Photography, Narrative, Time: Imaging Our Forensic Imagination*, Bristol: Intellect, pp40-43.

Benjamin and others have taught us that the idea of photographic truth has its limits. When we look at family photographs, we might as well dismiss any aspirations towards objectivity altogether. We cannot escape what the American professor of human communication and auto-ethnographer H. L. Goodall refers to as our ‘narrative inheritance’:

. . . the afterlives of the sentences used to spell out the life stories of those who came before us. What we inherit narratively from our forebears provides us with a framework for understanding our identity through theirs. It helps us see our life grammar and working logic as an extension of, or a rebellion against, the way we story how they lived and thought about things, and it allows us to explain to others where we come from and how we were raised in the continuing context of what it all means. We are fundamentally homo narrans—humans as storytellers—and a well-told story brings with it a sense of fulfilment and of completion. But we don’t always inherit that sense of completion. We too often inherit a family’s unfinished business, and when we do, those incomplete narratives are given to us to fulfil (Goodall 2005: 492-3).

Each of the photographs that I have included here was taken before I was born. There is no date attached to the one above, although the pencilled annotation in the album – in the subject’s own handwriting - tells me it is ‘Betty, Sauchiehall Street’. If I had to hazard a guess, I might say it was taken in the early 1930s. Parts of Betty’s story have been passed down to me, and their tantalising incompleteness has provoked a need to make a fictional response, or a retelling, but of course I am writing well after the fact, at a distance of decades, an entire generation. For this reason I find myself interested in Marianne Hirsch’s idea of ‘post-memory’:

. . . post-memory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Post-memory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation (1997: 22).

This concept is developed by Hirsch in a context entirely alien to my own, that of the children of Holocaust survivors. While I do not wish to dwell on trauma of any kind, it is interesting that in *Present Pasts*, which I mentioned in Chapter 1, Huyssen sees the 1990s (when Hirsch is writing, although Huyssen doesn’t refer to her directly) as, ‘haunted by trauma as the dark underside of neoliberal triumphalism’, in a way that forms, ‘a thick discursive network with those other master-signifiers of the 1990s, the abject and the uncanny, all which have to do with repression, specters, and a present repetitively haunted by the past’ (2003: 8). He is coming from a very different place than Hirsch, in that he focuses on memory politics in

terms of the relationship between public memory and history in the context of specific cities, but it is perhaps worth quoting him once more before moving on:

Surely, the prevalence of the concern with trauma must be due to the fact that trauma as a psychic phenomenon is located on the threshold between remembering and forgetting, seeing and not seeing, transparency and occlusion, experience and its absence in repetition [...] After all, both memory and trauma are predicated on the absence of that which is negotiated in memory or in the traumatic symptom. Both are marked by instability, transitoriness, and structures of repetition. But [...] memory [...] is always more than the prison house of the past (2003: 8).¹⁹

Even if we set Hirsch's context aside, there is great resonance for me in her statement that: 'Post-memory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated' (1997: 23).

Writing this novel has been, in part, an interpretative and narrative gesture along the lines described above, and I see a clear parallel between Goodall's narrative inheritance and the narratives preceding birth of Hirsch's argument. The site at which these two distinct concepts intersect is for me a site of inspiration, and it is in order to exploit that possibility that my process of writing has revolved so intimately around photographs. For Hirsch, photographs 'are the medium connecting first- and second-generation remembrance, memory and post-memory. They are the leftovers, the fragmentary sources and building blocks, shot through with holes, of the work of post-memory' (1997: 23).

Let me return briefly to the description of the photograph of Janice Galloway and her mother outside their house, and the shadow of the photographer looming over the image: 'It fills most of the frame and makes us one: the ghosts and the present-but barely-correct, those doing our best not to be. Our stories mesh despite the gaps and the radio that is always by my sister's side plays tinny Frank Sinatra hits on Radio 2' (2011: 4). Although we have spoken

¹⁹ Huyssen also suggests that collapsing memory into trauma 'would deny human agency and lock us into compulsive repetition' (2003: 8). I mention this as it is something that I have explored in other works, most overtly in a short opera called *Sublimation*, composed by Nick Fells (Scottish Opera, 2010; Cape Town Opera, 2010), which sonically and vocally emphasised a 'memory loop' by which trauma returned, definitely as a 'prison house of the past' (2003: 8). Escaping from this loop, by means of sublimation, was the denouement of the piece. The presentness of the past has, I realise, been a key theme in each of my novels too. In *Lips That Touch* I've tried to take a different approach to time and memory (one which, I think, explicitly rejects memory as the prison house of the past). This has perhaps displaced some of my usual obsessions into this critical commentary (not to mention into these footnotes, which allow at least the illusion of working across different temporal planes).

of photographs freezing time, something more interesting is happening here. Note the present tense: the radio is playing, now, in all the distinct moments of looking, remembering, writing and reading that this passage has and will engender. The ghosts are there, inseparable from both image and context. As another Scottish writer engaged in memory work, John Burnside, writes: ‘No memory happens in the past. To say this in so many words is, no doubt, to state the obvious – our memories happen now, in the madeleine- and tisane-tinctured present (Burnside 2014: 268).²⁰

Photographs may well be memento mori then, but they do not function in a way that is static, carved in stone. For John Berger ‘the context of the instant recorded is preserved so that the photograph lives in an ongoing continuity’ (1980: 56). In the second part of *Camera Lucida* Barthes writes very movingly of his responses to a photograph of his mother, age five, in a Winter Garden. ‘This will be and this has been’, is the ‘catastrophe’ that every photograph bears, he says (Barthes 2000 [1980]: 96). I wonder if this underpins all that we see when we look at photographs, or if, indeed, it is all that we – if we are fundamentally homo narrans – can see. Why else, after all, do we tell stories, or feel moved to write them down? In *Photography, Narrative, Time* Greg Battye suggests that, ‘Photography’s unusual relationship with time, and our uniquely human preoccupation with time and time’s consequences, make for the presence of unexpected kinds of meaning in some photographs, including narrative and fictional meanings not hitherto conceived of as possible for a medium seemingly limited to the depiction of durationless instants’ (Battye 2014: 54).²¹ When we look at family photographs we do not always consider them as sitting in durationless instants, but as parts of biographies that may reach across generations. Looking at them can bring unexpected meanings, not least in the way we think of memory and nostalgia (neither of which need relate entirely to the past). As I go on to consider some specific family photographs from my album, I’ll quote Benjamin again (writing about particular posed photographs):

...the viewer feels irresistibly compelled to seek out the tiniest spark of concurrence, a here and now [...] with which actuality has seared, so to speak, the characters in the image. We are compelled to find the inconspicuous place

²⁰ It would be possible to write a whole thesis on Burnside and haunting, and word count precludes further exposition here. For thoughts on his most recent works at time of writing, see my review of *Ashland & Vine* and *Still Life with Feeding Snake* in the *Scottish Review of Books*: <https://www.scottishreviewofbooks.org/2017/03/the-ghost-writer/> (accessed 4th August 2018).

²¹ Here Battye is considering photography as art in general, rather than family photographs in particular, but the point holds. It is also worth noting that family photographs are taken in anticipation of remembering.

in which, in the essence of that moment which passed long ago, the future nestles still today, so eloquently that we, looking back, are able to discover it (2015: 66-7).



Campbell Street

This discussion risks neglecting the simplest ways in which we can read photographs, the ones which yield pleasingly easy answers. In the family album which I have on my desk, several small photographs appear laid out in a grid, inviting some gentle detective work. A magnifying glass reveals the names of films opening at the Plaza: *Black Narcissus*, *The Gallant Blade*. A second on the internet determines that it was in 1947 that Deborah Kerr starred in *Black Narcissus*, and that *The Gallant Blade* was released a year later, featuring Larry Parks. The two photographs in which these titles appear are themselves almost identical, save for the changing cinema posters. A view taken from across a wide road, looking towards a small shop called the Bungalow Stores, the advertisements outside which invite one to buy Craven A or Players Please. A view repeated to document, to reinforce, the idea of the family as the owners of a shop. In another photograph, three sisters ('Aunt Bess,

Min & Mother'²²) stand across the road from the shop. The shop itself is out of view. A cat is stalking behind the women, its head obscured by Mother's striped suit. It looks like a stray, but perhaps not. Someone has laid a shopping bag, or something, on the grass to her left, possibly believing it to be out of shot. The billboard posters range in a row behind them. I need to take off my glasses and squint to read the text. Left to right: 'Whiteways Cyder'; 'VD can be cured, if treated early'; unintelligible but it looks like a soldier; 'Aitken's Beer, just what I want' (a Scots Guard is pictured drinking it, so it must be the ticket); 'Good mornings begin with Gillette'; 'Unionists would let the builders build you a house now'; 'Golden Shred' (and yes, that is a golly striding in front of the marmalade jar); '5 years in the army'.

These small historical details are useful to accumulate. They enhance an imagined sense of time and place. Detail works harder than that in fiction though, and the details we see in photographs may strike us in different, more personal, ways. Sontag wrote that, 'Insofar as photography does peel away the dry wrappers of habitual seeing, it creates another habit of seeing: both intense and cool, solicitous and detached; charmed by the insignificant detail, addicted to incongruity' (1990: 99).

One of the many things I admire in Janice Galloway's writing is her use of detail, the specificity of what is noticed, in the descriptions of the photographs and of other places, people and scenes. Even if we can't trust the ways in which familial looks are revealed or obscured, I am quite convinced that young Janice liked her eyelids 'slathered with purple sparkles' because 'Rimmel makes everything possible', and that her split ends had a tendency to 'fray out like burning rope', conditioner not having been invented (2011: 2). Likewise, in that odd way by which we picture fictional characters from only a few brushstrokes²³, her mother is entirely constructed for me by 'two dabs of powder and a modest blot of an old Estée Lauder number called Egyptian Coffee she's had for years' (2011: 2). The title, *All Made Up*, refers also to the way in which women create or conceal their identities, the way in which they face the world. In *This Is Not About Me* another kind of detail is chosen to make a similar point: 'There was always a fag, always a fag burn, so these details make the composition evocative. There is a photographer present and we're not at ease, not really, but if every picture tells a story we want this story to suggest we amount to something, that we are at the least getting by. In our best duds, our bravest faces, we're trying our damndest to look right at home' (2008: 2).

²² My great-great-aunts and great-grandmother.

²³ For more on this see Mendelsund, Peter. 2014. *What We See When We Read: A Phenomenology with Illustrations*. New York: Vintage.

While most writers would surely agree that it is a useful endeavour to find strategies for peeling away ‘the dry wrappers of habitual seeing’, I am not convinced that this will always result in a coolness or detachment of gaze. Mark Doty begins his ‘Description’s Alphabet’ thus: ‘Description is an ART to the degree that it gives us not just the world but the inner life of the witness’ (Doty 2010: 65). The details we choose are loaded, usually specific to a point of view, and in most kinds of fiction we expect them to work as hard as Galloway’s fag burn does in the quote above. There is a strange doubling of subjectivity; that of the narrator who notices such details, and that of the author sitting behind her. Many of those details are, I suspect, chosen as we form mental photographs of the scenes we are creating. As Moholy-Nagy wrote, since the advent of photography, ‘we see the world with entirely different eyes’ (Moholy-Nagy 1969: 29).

Thinking of detail in photographs, and by extension in fiction, makes me turn again to Barthes and *Camera Lucida*. He apprehends ‘the co-presence of two discontinuous elements’ in certain photographs that arouse his interest, and names them the studium and the punctum (2010: 23-27). The studium is the surface subject and its context, that which accounts for our general historical, political or aesthetic interest in a photograph, and recognising it means we ‘encounter the photographer’s intentions [...] enter into harmony with them’ (2010: 27-8). Barthes is more interested in the punctum, an idea that appealed to me even before I began using the photographs I described earlier in this chapter. The punctum in a photograph is: ‘that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)’, the element that disturbs the studium when it ‘rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me’ (2010: 26-7). It is a detail that attracts us, and changes our reading of the photograph, and crucially it is not predictable or explicable, but depends on the lens of the viewer rather than that of the photographer. Initially Barthes uses the example of the Mary Jane shoes of a girl in a 1926 photo by James Van der Zee of an African American family but later, once the photograph has ‘worked within’ him, he realises:

. . . the real punctum was the necklace she was wearing; for (no doubt) it was this same necklace (a slender ribbon of braided gold) which I had seen worn by someone in my own family, and which, once she died, remained shut up in a family box of old jewellery (this sister of my father never married, lived with her mother as an old maid, and I had always been saddened whenever I thought of her dreary life) (2010, 53).²⁴

²⁴ It might also be worth noting that the punctum has what Barthes calls a ‘power of expansion’, a possibility of transcendence that might circumvent the peculiar phenomenology of photography that I mentioned at the

In this, and in responses to it, we can detect echoes of Susan Suleiman's idea of autobiographical reading: 'the autobiographical imperative applies not only to writing about one's life but to reading about it; reading for it; reading, perhaps, in order to write about it' (Suleiman 1993: 563).²⁵ In *Black and Blue*, Carol Mavor's response to *Camera Lucida* and other works she identifies as bruising passions, she notes that in Barthes's 'neither racist nor not racist' reading of the Van der Zee photograph, 'the "négresse nourricière" is adorned with no "slender ribbon of braided gold" . . . she seems, instead to be adorned with pearls' (Mavor 2012: 44, 47).²⁶ When conflating his own Aunt Alice with the woman in the Van der Zee picture, Mavor's reading is that Barthes, 'turned a black woman's pearls into gold, perhaps in defence of his own "auntie" nature' (2012: 51).²⁷ For Brian Dillon, rereading *Camera Lucida* for *The Guardian*, 'It's this (in academic terms quite scandalous) embrace of the subjective which allows Barthes to begin the quest that makes his book so moving' (Dillon 2011). And just in case there's a risk of haunting drifting by the wayside for a moment, he also describes *Camera Lucida* as 'a ghost story of sorts' which is, 'more in keeping with one of Poe's portrait tales than a work of critical theory' (2011).²⁸

When I look at photographs of my family, or of the place where I was born and grew up, I wonder if, consciously or not, I am searching for the punctum. Perhaps I am reading for it in order to write about it, and in order to find the details that will prick and bruise in fiction. Barthes writes too of the effect of particular photographs that have 'passed through the filter of culture', that is, been chosen; published, exhibited, curated: 'I realized that some provoked

beginning of this essay by enabling the photograph to 'annihilate itself as a medium... be no longer a sign but the thing itself' (2010: 45).

²⁵ Barthes himself lived with his mother until her death, and although sexually active, did not speak openly of being gay. In *Camera Lucida* the author is far from dead, and it's almost impossible to read the book other than through my own queer lens. In their introduction to *Feeling Photography*, Elspeth H. Brown and Thy Phu write that 'the punctum is a powerful concept because it, in fact, introduces a theory of feeling photography [...] a theory of feeling photography that, accordingly, amounts to a queering of photography' (Brown & Phu 2014: 5). I'm not sure I'd go quite that far, but I do think that one of the things that's at stake in *Camera Lucida* is a queering of feeling itself.

²⁶ Mavor acknowledges that she is following, up to a point, Margaret Olin's reading of Barthes in 'Touching Photographs: Roland Barthes's "Mistaken" Identification' in *Representations* 80, no. 1 (2002): 99-118.

²⁷ Cf. note 25 above, Mavor also writes that Barthes 'colors his Auntie like a black and blue nancy, a black and blue pansy' (2012: 48). Much later in the book, when discussing *Hiroshima mon amour*, she makes the pleasing observation that, "'Pansy" is connected with the French *une pensée* (a thought)' (2012: 128); we might choose to think that Barthes's queer lens allows him to express the intellectual side of his homosexuality.

²⁸ This is one of the reasons, I think, why I'm giving it so much space in this discussion. Dillon wonders if perhaps it is artists and writers who have, 'come closest to capturing and developing Barthes's insights' (2011); I can't pretend to be doing so, but in my most recent sound work (*Static Flux*, with Nichola Scrutton: Radiophrenia 2017; Hidden Door Festival 2018) fragments of the book have emerged almost as found text during a part-improvised 'sonic séance'. The performances have certainly made me feel closer to some of the images and ideas than sifting through the paperback, Post-It notes in hand.

tiny jubilations, as if they referred to a stilled center, an erotic or lacerating value buried in myself (however harmless the subject might have appeared)' (2010: 16). The photographs I have been using are largely unseen, chosen only to be wedged into cardboard corners on the pages of one green leather album, curated only in that they were jumbled together in folders in a decaying box in an archive. But these too can spark, 'an internal agitation, an excitement, a certain labour too, the pressure of the unspeakable which wants to be spoken' (2010: 19). I have felt it in the striped socks worn by the small boy in the background of a photograph taken in the garden of a house called Kirkton in East Kilbride, in the lilies ill-chosen as a wedding bouquet by an unsmiling bride, in the vast shadow of a coach-built pram being wheeled across a lawn pictured from above on VJ Day. That which wants to be spoken takes many forms. It might be a bubbling up of inherited narratives, the flickering of inspiration, or the recognition that we have seen is common to all photographs of people but that we rarely articulate: this has been and this will be.²⁹



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²⁹ In the second half of *Camera Lucida*, the punctum becomes 'Time', with all its implications for memory and mortality (2010: 96).

As this discussion weaves back towards inspiration, that most intangible of concepts, I hope to pull together my magpie approach in seizing and documenting some of the points of connection I have discovered in my reading around photography; reading which, combined with the reading of particular photographs themselves, I recognise as autobiographical.³⁰ It is an ongoing process. Like many writers, I have a vexed relationship with autobiography. In the first meeting I had with my agent, when we were talking about my first novel, he employed a delicate subterfuge to determine whether the story I was telling – of a young woman grieving for her beloved brother – was true. Whether it was my story. I said that I was an only child; clearly it wasn't. And yet on a fundamental level it was. All writing is autobiographical, even when we pretend it isn't.

I have mentioned already that my novel uses characters based on real people. It puts them in places that do or did exist. Occasionally, it has them play out events that actually, as I understand it, happened. I am relying on my memory of stories told to me from the memories of others for much of this. Some of the thoughts and feelings I ascribe to my characters must be mine, or recognisable to me, but the novel is set before I was born. I can share none of their experience, not even of place. The photographs I look at may offer details – of clothing, hairstyle, advertisements – but there are no revelations to be found there. In the last lines of *Family Frames*, Marianne Hirsch talks about her wish to construct the lost world of her parents' childhoods in Eastern Europe, and the difficulty in doing so given that they will not visit with her and share the memories such a trip would provoke. The process will instead be an imaginative one, powered by her own 'curiosity and desire' as well as by stronger emotions pertinent to her circumstances, and: 'it will certainly include the many old pictures of people and places, the albums and shoe boxes, the ghosts that [...] populate the domestic spaces of my imagination' (1997: 268). Photographs are not the focus for Hilary Mantel in *Giving Up the Ghost*, but she gets to the heart of the matter when she writes: 'What's to be done with the lost, the dead, but write them into being?' (Mantel 2010: 231).

When we talk about writing we talk necessarily about memory, and when people write about photography they seem usually to mention ghosts. Viewing an album alone, outwith the 'real-life domestic experience' with its 'inside stories' and 'compensatory pleasures – intimacy, conviviality [...] perhaps a slice of cake' (Langford 2008: 5) makes for a very different kind of reading, as Janice Galloway's writing around photographs exemplifies. Even when we find words written in a familiar hand on the back of a black and

³⁰ I'll return to this one final time in Chapter 3.

white photograph, there are huge gaps. Space enough to be filled with fiction, which is at the root of my longstanding fascination with photography, from Atget's early-morning Paris and Brassai's perfectly posed demi-monde, to Larry Clark's *Tulsa* and Nan Goldin's *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. Perhaps in this I can find a good-enough description of the writing process: allowing oneself to be haunted, and seeking the tiny jubilations that will give one's ghosts flesh.

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Chapter 3: Once More, With Feeling



There is a delightful moment in Alison Bechdel’s meticulous and hilarious memoir *Fun Home*, in which the narrator (adult Alison) shows us the narrated Alison in a college seminar on Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Adult Alison comments above the frame: ‘I still found literary criticism to be a suspect activity’ (Bechdel 2007: 206). This, for me, expresses the tension I experience sometimes if I imagine a Venn diagram with a set containing ‘writing creatively’ and ‘writing critically’.³¹ In a review of Rita Felski’s refreshing book *The Limits of Critique*, Matthew Mullins recalls hearing the author (dare we say critic?) giving a talk titled ‘Doing the Humanities’ in which she questioned what scholars are doing if they are not performing critique in its traditional academic form.³² She suggested the answer might be fourfold:

³¹ A bit like being a poacher and a gamekeeper, and with similar risks and rewards; as other ‘creative’ writers might recognise as the position of the author in academia.

³² Felski envisages an application of Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory to texts. Exploring this further here would constitute putting the cart before the horse (if the horse is the novel and this essay the cart) but there are two nicely pithy quotes from an article by Felski that are worth including. Firstly, under the heading of ‘History is Not a Box’ she discusses the ‘temporal turbulence’ caused by contemporary troubling of historicism in literary and other critical fields (Felski 2011: 75-6). This is stimulating to read after writing what I’ve acknowledged reluctantly as an historical novel; it wasn’t ever conceived in those terms, but rather as something in which each chapter would exist in the present tense (a bit like a photograph, maybe, holding its

curating, critiquing, conveying and composing. In Mullins's words: 'We make. Composition is not creation out of nothing, but creation through gathering, assembling' (Mullins 2015). It is in this spirit of enquiry that I will pursue my magpie approach into a final chapter that I hope will nest together some of the ideas around affect, inspiration and place that have haunted this thesis so far.

Some years ago, in a second-hand bookshop round the corner from my bedsit, I was moved to browse the photography section. There weren't many books there, and those there were concerned the more practical aspects of the medium (or, rather disingenuously, the technical intricacies of photographing nudes). The exception was a large and pristine Flammarion edition of Eugène Atget's Paris photographs, gathered by its editor Josiane Sartre from the collections of the *Bibliothèque des Arts décoratifs*. It was expensive in terms of my second-hand book-buying budget (£20, according to the pencilled price) but, for reasons I couldn't quite discern, it seemed an essential purchase. Atget, I read, had started by selling photographs of landscapes, animals, flowers and monuments for the use of artists (Sartre 2002: 13). 'Later, for close to thirty years, he was to crisscross the streets of Paris tirelessly, assembling a kind of jigsaw puzzle from the facades of great houses, from their fountains, from statues in the Tuileries Gardens and from out-of-the-way parts of the Parc de Versailles' (2002: 24). Sometimes he was consciously assembling his Views of Old Paris, sometimes tracing the curves of bannisters, the spirals of ferns. Looking at the photographs there is a tantalising sense of something just out of view, beyond the frame or awaiting the close-up enlargement that will reveal its mysteries.³³

'During his peregrinations, Atget became fond of certain places, taking more shots there than elsewhere,' Sartre explains (2002: 29), before discussing one of his Versailles shots, of a marble urn by Hurtrelle. She describes it as, 'the essence of his oeuvre, imbued with balance and control, with silence, but without any human presence – a work perfectly suited to seducing our own twenty-first century, so adoring of its past' (2002: 30). The

pastness within that presence). Secondly, Felski notes that: 'Of course, the siren calls of *Mrs Dalloway* or "Brown Eyed Girl" do not echo in a void; no explanation of their appeal can omit the high-school clique that finally convinced you of the genius of Van Morrison; the ambitious parents whose rapturous praise of your second-grade assignments propelled you toward graduate school; the vocabularies propagated by *Critical Inquiry* or *Rolling Stone* that gave you a language through which to articulate and justify your obsession' (2011: 582). I suspect my enthusiastic embrace of the footnote in this essay is an attempt to keep my anxiety about justifying my obsessions firmly below the line.

³³ Barthes was less taken with them, asking: 'what have I to do with Atget's old tree trunks?' (Barthes 2010: 16).

mention of absence is key; we might occasionally glimpse the photographer's plate camera or his reflection in a window, but otherwise people and movement are not his concern.³⁴

For Benjamin, the emptiness in Atget's pictures prefigures Surrealism's, 'medicative alienation between environment and person'³⁵; the images 'are not lonely, but are without atmosphere' (2015: 84). Ultimately 'all intimacies abate in favour of the illumination of details' (2015: 85). As I discussed in Chapter 2, the illumination of details is a significant part of why I look at photographs and what I try to achieve in some of my writing. My twenty-first century response to Atget's photographs is harder to pin down though. Memory and melancholy are undoubtedly part of it; the affect arising from the tone of the prints, the slight fade as we move out from the area of central focus to the edges, the sense of this has been and this will be. I see a much more immediate tension there too though, somewhere deep within the photographs. With Goldin and Clark, mentioned at the end of the previous chapter, there is a cast of characters and the undertaking is much more obviously auto-ethnographic, if not auto-fictive. Atget is doing something different and for me, his images are far from lacking in atmosphere.

In *Why Photography Matters*, Jerry L. Thompson considers Atget's multiple views of more urns at Versailles, the mythic figures in their reliefs, 'oblivious both to the scrawled graffiti of a later age and to the close attention of an impolite stranger who thrusts his viewing lens so close to their revels': these views are, he writes, 'too carefully made, too numerous: clearly, the photographer is finding some content, and getting some pleasure, apart from his success at piling up marketable documents' (Thompson 2016: 25). This content and its attendant pleasure are, I think, what I'm describing as 'tension' in the paragraph above. It is subjective, of course, on the part of myself as viewer, but I like the idea that it is a response to something felt by the photographer. In Chapter 2 we wondered whether photographs narrate; here I'm suggesting that sometimes a body of work – or the jigsaw puzzle it implies - reflects the inner narration of the photographer.³⁶ Thompson makes his assertion based on a value judgement of photography 'at its best':

³⁴ In Sartre's curation, that is; livelier (although perhaps more typically picturesque) images featuring street-workers and storekeepers as well as shop windows populated by dummies and dolls can be found in Taschen's *Eugène Atget's Paris*, edited by Hans Christian Adam.

³⁵ Man Ray was a fan of Atget, and his assistant Berenice Abbott was highly instrumental in preserving and promoting Atget's work.

³⁶ It might also be worth mentioning that Thompson's eponymous question strikes at the what I think I'm trying to do in this thesis. He writes: 'Essays written to the modernist taste – unfootnoted, brief, crisp, aphoristic, tendentious – make up a large part of present-day discourse on photography. Taken together, these dozens, by now hundreds of efforts make up our present-day attempt to *understand* photography: what it is, what it can do, its importance. A student new to the field may feel a little like a hiker who encounters

...that is to say, when photography is exploiting the epistemological potential that it alone among all pictorial mediums has access to - there exists a balance between the outside (our visible world womb/home/tomb, which, like Keats's nightingale, is, whether we are alive to hear it or not) and the inside (the perceiving, shaping, intelligence of the photographer) [...] these two elements cooperate as in a dialectic: one side presents a proposition, and the other counters it; a new proposition emerges, one also countered in a similar fashion, and on and on as a progressively refined result appears, something neither partner [...] could have produced alone (Thompson 2016: 19).

This is fine as far as it goes, and I assume that most enthusiasts and critics would agree that Atget represents photography at its best. For the purposes of this chapter though, I prefer to turn the dialectic into a triangle in which the subjectivity of the viewer can play its part. Let me assemble the evidence: that £20 profligately spent; the as-yet-untorn flyleaf that proves my copy of *Paris in Detail* has been carefully shelved; my response to those banisters and door knockers that is still, in some way, emotionally charged. It is clear that something about Atget's work is pricking and bruising, provoking tiny jubilations. Trying to locate the punctum in a particular image is a trickier matter.

The same applies to the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, with their dedication to categorising the forms of water towers, gasometers, grain elevators, blast furnaces and so on. As with Atget, my suspicion is that the punctum is somewhere halfway between myself and the photograph. The Bechers created typologies of industrial buildings, and the industrial past is, as I suggested in Chapter 1, one of the ghosts that I can see haunting my work. We can surmise that the Bechers weren't taking all those perfect pictures of cooling towers against neutral skies to provoke an emotional response in the viewer, and we know that they left scant space for accident in their process. 'The artists' intention is not to depict subjective responses but to describe the outside world in the most precise terms possible,' writes Susanne Lange in her introduction to my edition of *Basic Forms* (Lange in Becher 2005: 8). It isn't all typology though; choices were made of which subjects to document: 'Such decisions were always subjective [...] free of the constraints of commissions, and thus indicate priorities and preferences in the Bechers' work' (2005: 12). The couple came to Scotland in the 1960s, but as far as I know, they didn't photograph the Barony A frame or any of Ayrshire's other industrial sites. Why do I wish they had? Perhaps because their

some kind of thicket of underbrush' (2016: 78). Reassuringly, he goes on to say that as 'A protean medium, photography connects to and insinuates itself into other disciplines, other modes of thinking, and invites analyses from multiple points of view' (2016: 79). As I will try to develop in this chapter, my endeavour is not so much explain what or how, but why it matters.

winding towers and gasometers, ‘Rendered timeless by the camera and isolated from their original, often perplexingly complex surroundings [...] appear as monumental symbols of their own history’ (2005: 7).³⁷ One of the interesting things about the Bechers is the way in which the documentary and aesthetic agendas merge. If we replaced ‘by the camera’ with ‘by art’ or even ‘in a novel’ in the quote above, would the sense of it change?³⁸

I am writing in the awareness that it is impossible to tell if any or all of ‘my’ photographs were conceived as art. Family photos aren’t usually, and the anonymous photographer – or photographers – of the Kilmarnock archive photos I’ve been using is likely to have been tasked with documenting buildings due for demolition and particular new builds rather than anything more aesthetically elevated. Amongst the images are anomalies though, signs of unexpected life that indicate choice and subjectivity. I will avoid juxtaposing an picture of Atget’s Versailles with one of the slums of Soulis Street, although perhaps there wouldn’t be a problem if I did. For Margaret Olin, ‘The fact that something was in front of the camera matters; what that something was does not’ (2002: 112)³⁹. She is proposing that Barthes’s famous Winter Garden photograph may have been a fiction, and emphasising that its ‘fictional truth [...] is powerful enough to survive its possible nonexistence’ (2002: 112). In Olin’s opinion:

A reading of *Camera Lucida* suggests that the most significant indexical power of the photograph may [...] not lie in the relation between the photograph and its subject but in the relation between the photograph and its beholder, or user, in what I would like to call a “performative index” of an “index of identification” (2002: 114-5).

She writes of a photograph’s ‘user’ here, as I have been writing of ‘using’ photographs for research. Now I want to try to interrogate further what that ‘use’ is, and how it connects with my shape-shifting premise that inspiration is a kind of haunting.

³⁷ Thanks to the Barony A Frame Trust, the winding tower remains physically in the landscape, in its original location, as a monumental symbol of its own history. I’m using it as an example here because a tiny – the tiniest - bit of that history agitates in me as what I quoted McIlvanney as saying in Chapter 1: ‘the past which had been mine before I was born’ (McIlvanney 1970: 173).

³⁸ I am thinking here too of the work of Candida Höfer, who emerged from the Dusseldorf School under Bernd Becher and whose photographs document public and institutional interiors that should, to our eyes, be populated. Those empty spaces have the monumentalism of Atget and Becher, and the same tantalising tension which I have suggested could be an opportunity for narrative. See for example Höfer, Candida (2004), *Architecture of Absence*, New York: Aperture. Concluding an essay for this collection, Virginia Heckert writes that, ‘Höfer’s abilities to merge functional and aesthetic concerns, to enliven structure with detail, to present public spaces as privately experienced, and to enlist absence as the greatest indicator of presence constitute a remarkable balancing act’ (Heckert in Höfer 2004: 34).



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Family is the site at which we first approach photography as a medium, and photographs of people – especially people we know, or love – are a little more complicated than pictures of buildings. ‘Telling stories about the past, our past, is a key moment in the making of our selves,’ writes Annette Kuhn (Kuhn 2002: 2; see also Eakin 2008). Family also, ‘provides the model for every other memory-community’ (2002: 167). Camera phones have accelerated many of the processes of situating ourselves in the network of our family, just as digital images have complicated the ontology of photography, but Marianne Hirsch’s point about the recognition of more distant relatives requiring mediation still holds (see Chapter 2). We need to be told what our relation to people is, either in person over a cup of tea or by the pencilled text on the back of the image itself: *Betty, Sauchiehall Street*. And when we find a family photograph that, ‘exerts an enigmatic fascination or arouses an inexplicable depth of emotion’ we might consider engaging in memory work of the kind performed by Kuhn in *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (2002: 7). Her objective is, ‘to unravel the connections between memory, its traces, and the stories we tell about the past, especially – though not exclusively – about the past of living memory’ (2002: 4). If writing *Lips That Touch* has involved memory work, it is of a different order to that undertaken by Kuhn. For Benjamin, ‘History decays into images, not into stories’ (Benjamin 1999: 476). History with a small ‘h’, family history, may well function in the same way,

fragmenting into albums and loose Kodacolor prints, but I am aware that I have been coming at it the other way around. I have been starting with story – remembered, misremembered, inherited, embellished, fictionalised – and then seeking its reflection in image.⁴⁰ Kuhn’s epigraph to her first chapter is, nevertheless, particularly resonant: ‘*Although we take stories of childhood and family literally, I think our recourse to this past is a way of reaching for myth, for the story that is deep enough to express the profound feelings we have in the present*’ (2002:1; Kuhn’s italics). Those profound feelings need not stem from anything hugely dramatic even though Kuhn, as her title suggests, is concerned with secrets:

A family without secrets is very rare indeed [...] Sometimes family secrets are so deeply buried that they elude the conscious awareness even of those most closely involved. From the involuntary amnesias of repression to the wilful forgetting of matters it might be less than convenient to recall, secrets inhabit the borderlands of memory. Secrets, in fact, are a necessary condition of the stories we are prompted by memory to tell about our lives (2002: 2).

One of the most interesting things about her project is that the order of those secrets does not particularly matter. This is similar, perhaps, to the way in which it does not matter to Margaret Olin what was in front of the camera. ‘Since my family secrets are no doubt shaped by the same kinds of amnesias and repressions as other people’s,’ Kuhn writes, ‘their substance will very likely seem familiar, commonplace even. Few of my secrets are likely to be particularly out of the ordinary. But if my family secrets are neither unique nor special, that is precisely the point’ (2002: 3). What secrets do propagate, however, is tension.⁴¹ That tension might be between our experience of memory as personal and ‘the social moment of making memory’, as well as the fact that, ‘Meanings and memories may change with time, be mutually contradictory, may even be an occasion for, or an expression of, conflict’ (2002: 14). In my use of photographs, these tensions and conflicts – some of which are, no doubt, personal – may be sublimated through the act of fiction. As we might expect, Hilary Mantel has an elegant way of approaching this kind of idea: ‘I am writing in order to take charge of the story of my childhood and my childlessness; and in order to locate myself, if not within a

⁴⁰ Kuhn, inspired by protocols developed by Rosy Martin and Jo Spence for use with family albums and in phototherapy, works the other way around (2002: 7-8). She does not mention Latour, but her comment that, ‘memories evoked by a photo do not simply spring out of the image itself, but are generated in a network, and intertext, of discourses that shift between past and present, spectator and image’ (2002: 14) recalls my earlier comments cf. Felski. In a few pages, I will go on to consider another kind of tension, that between memory and history.

⁴¹ Secrets also, to preempt my discussion of Hervé Guibert’s *Ghost Image*, ‘have to circulate’ (Guibert 1995; 159).

body, then in the narrow space between one letter and the next, between the lines where the ghosts of meaning are' (Mantel 2010: 222).

The writer and photographer Hervé Guibert also uses – or muses on – family photographs as he pursues his own kind of memory work in *Ghost Image*, a collection of sixty-three short essays (for want of a better word) that form a kind of self-portrait apparently written in response to *Camera Lucida*. Haunting becomes explicit almost immediately. At the end of the eponymous piece, the narrator describes an attempt to photograph his mother that fails, on one level, because the film has not been attached properly inside the camera. The text we are reading, he explains, 'would not have existed if the picture had been taken [...] this text is the despair of the image, and worse than a blurred or fogged image – a ghost image . . .' (Guibert 2014 [1982]: 16). In a later section on 'Favorite Photographs' Guibert discusses the possibility of buying particular examples of work by Cartier-Bresson or Bill Brandt, imagining how he could go to galleries in Paris or New York and have them removed from their drawers and portfolios, how he might even have included them in the book if it were not that, 'as I progress, they become foreign to my story, which is really becoming a negative of photography' (2014: 113). The positive images, by the famous photographers, 'pass through my story, they stumble against it, make themselves at home within it, but will never be mine' (2014: 114). Instead, his text, 'speaks only of ghost images, images that have not yet issued, or rather, of latent images, images that are so intimate that they become invisible' (2014: 114). I concluded Chapter 2 by suggesting that sometimes we wish to give our ghosts flesh, and that fiction might be a means of doing so. The intimacy is, I hope, near invisible even as the ghost images are rendered into words.

Family photographs, of course, are rarely kept in portfolios in drawers, unless they have been acquired by a museum. Even then, I'd argue, our response is very much predicated on our assumptions (perhaps encouraged by the museum curators) about how they enable the telling of a story.⁴² We are more used to being able to touch as well as look at such pictures, finding them fixed in albums or, 'heaped up haphazardly in old glove boxes, empty tins of Christmas chocolates' (2014: 27). We cannot help but be subjective, and we have seen in the previous chapter how our reactions might be bound up with mortality. For Guibert:

⁴² Martha Langford describes very well the experience of viewing a family album in a museum. If the album is on display and we succumb to the urge to turn the pages, 'eviction from the building will be swift' (Langford 2008: 5). In the 'clinical surroundings' of the archives the atmosphere changes, 'from artificial cosiness and regulated distance to bibliographic sobriety' (2008: 6,5).

They are the kind of photographs that quickly turn yellow and crack around the edges whenever they're exposed to light or handled too often (after a while, light always revenges itself for having been taken prisoner – it gathers itself back). So family pictures remain in their little cardboard coffins where we can forget them; like crosses planted in the ground they arouse a melancholy pleasure. When we open the box, the death within is immediately obvious, and life, both of them knotted and wrapped together, covering and hiding one another (2014: 27).

Once again, haunting emerges as part of the affect. What we determine from the photographs is of the past, but knotted and wrapped together with the present.⁴³

It is Guibert's position as artist that allows him to pursue his thoughts about photographs and haunting further. Towards the end of *Ghost Image*, the strategy he employs is 'Proof by the Absurd', and it is through anecdote, gracefully related, that he invites us to believe that, 'photographs are not innocent, that they are not dead letters, inanimate objects embalmed in fixer' (2014: 146). Almost as an incantation, he continues:

Here is the proof that they are an active force and that they betray what is hidden beneath the skin. Here is the proof that they weave not only lines and grids, but plots, and that they cast spells. Here is the proof that they are an impressionable material that welcomes spirits (2014: 146).

The 'true story' he tells concerns a woman who visits an occult bookshop on Rue Saint-Jacques in Paris⁴⁴ after having felt for several months that she was 'being crushed by something she couldn't identify' (2014: 147). Significantly, we assume, he calls the woman 'I.' (whilst assuring us that her real name is well known) and classifies certain superstitions as 'feminine' (2014: 147, 146). A friend has suggested that I. is under a spell and has recommended that she consult a man who can detect this by looking at a photograph. This man requests a fresh picture, 'that hasn't passed through the hands of strangers' (2014: 148) and I. obtains one, almost still damp, from a photobooth in the Maubert subway stop. Sure enough, the man in the occult bookshop does detect a spell, relating it to 'a little Indian that's been bothering you' (2014: 148). Guibert explains to us that I. had a photograph pinned to her bedroom wall of her husband's friend who died of an overdose (of a drug provided by the husband), sitting cross-legged and captioned by its subject as so-and-so 'the Indian'. For Guibert the story is disturbing: 'During the year, the Indian in the photograph attached to the

⁴³ I am not sure if Guibert was writing in the knowledge that he had AIDS. Certainly he must have been aware that it was likely, which may contribute to this death-in-life image.

⁴⁴ Editions Bussière, perhaps.

wall would have had the time to enter I.'s body, like some harmful emanation [...] You don't believe it?' (2014: 149).

The point of relating Guibert's anecdote has nothing to do with its order of truth, curiosity or creepiness, nor of its potential as metaphor. It speaks to the intimacy of our relationship with photographs, and to the ways in which their contexts work upon us. I remember having a belief when I was young that the presence of a photo, face up, of someone I knew well might allow them somehow to 'see' me, or for my thoughts or actions to be revealed to them. Even now I prefer to view photos in an album, to conjure ghosts and then close the book on them.

'Here is a reason to believe native Americans, who regard the taking of a photograph as a kind of murder,' Guibert writes at the beginning of 'Proof by the Absurd' (2014: 146).⁴⁵ As we would expect, anthropologists have investigated different beliefs around photographs, amongst which my own quirks are quite mundane. Elizabeth Edwards asks in what ways photographs are, 'things that demand embodied responses and emotional affects?' (Edwards 2012: 222). Taking a very different approach to Thompson, she is trying to determine what she poses as the, 'central ethnographic question', which is: 'why do photographs as "things" matter for people?' (2012: 224). This represents, as Edwards delineates, a shift from thinking about how things signify in distanced, intellectualized terms to how they matter in relation to practices and experience. For my purposes here, one of the exciting aspects of this anthropological approach is the way in which it destabilises, 'the normative assumption about the nature of photographs and has challenged and complicated the dominant categories of Western photographic analysis: realism, referent, trace, index, icon, and the power of representation' (2012: 225).

What interests me is, 'a sense of how users position themselves in relation to photographic images, how they view, handle, wear, and move with photographic images' (2012: 228). There are clear echoes of Olin's 'performative index' or 'index of identification' here (2002: 115), as well as of Sontag's repurposing of Wittgenstein's argument about words: 'that the meaning *is* the use – so for each photograph' (Sontag 1990: 106). In everyday terms, this means opening albums and gently removing images to see if there is anything written on the reverse, sorting through the loose, uncontained pictures and those established within the photographer's cardboard frame (*Ian Barry, 20 West Campbell Street. Phone Cen. 4219;*

⁴⁵ In fact, as Carolyn J. Marr has investigated, responses to photography were often mixed to begin with and changed rapidly between the early 1860s and the mid-20th century. First Nations people were taking their own photos for use in cultural activity from the early-20th century (Marr 1990, 1989).

Walter Kerr, Photographer, Millport, Tel No. Millport 164). The first stage is identification of and with the subject (as family member or family friend, known or long dead) and all that holds in terms of memory and story. When the photograph is of someone we know or have known, it is read in what John Berger describes as ‘a context *which is continuous with that from which the camera removed it*’ (Berger 2009: 55; his italics). He asks:

What served in place of the photograph, before the camera’s invention? The expected answer is the engraving, the drawing, the painting. The more revealing answer might be: memory. What photographs do out there in space was previously done within reflection (Berger 2009: 54).

Nevertheless the photographs in my album enable reflection, imbued with what Berger reminds us that Sontag called, ‘a trace, something stencilled off from the real, like a footprint or a death mask’ (2009: 54).

In other words, the images do more than represent, they connect to ‘life as experienced’ (Edwards 2012: 229) and are the means by which the past and the present connect, and so one of our few mechanisms for negotiating with the dead, or at least dealing with the haunts that they leave us. The trace that is stencilled from the real may be to do with our relationships, memories and inherited narratives. It might also, when we are looking at a photograph of a place, be to do with how we locate ourselves in time and space and try to fit our lives into some larger narrative. Berger proposes that:

Photographs are relics of the past, traces of what has happened. If the living take that past upon themselves, if the past becomes an integral part of the process of people making their own history, then all photographs would re-acquire a living context, they would continue to exist in time, instead of being arrested moments. It is just possible that photography is the prophecy of a human memory yet to be socially and politically achieved (2009: 61).

Taking the past upon oneself as a way of making one’s own history is a neat enough description of what lies behind this text and the novel it accompanies. That can work in various ways, as is implied in Chapter 2’s discussion of inherited narratives and postmemory, neither of which are quite where Berger is coming from. Part of the argument of this chapter is that photographs are not arrested moments at all. When we engage in any kind of memory work involving photographs we could be said to be achieving Berger’s aim, ‘to construct a context for a photograph, to construct it with words [...] to construct it by its place in an ongoing text of photographs and images’ (2009: 64).



This picture postcard of John Finnie Street⁴⁶ shows what the Pevsner guide describes as, ‘the most dramatic street in Kilmarnock and, as an example of a planned commercial street of the late C19, without parallel in Scotland’ (Close & Riches 2012: 438). Postcards in particular illustrate that our individual moment with a photograph is one amongst many, as is any memory we might have relating to an actual street and its buildings. As Edwards points out, ‘photographs have divergent, non-linear, social biographies spread over divergent multiple material originals and multiple, dispersed and atomized performances’ (2012: 223). The pictures I have been using meant one thing to the photographer, another once printed (or replicated, in the case of the postcards), and they have attained multiple unique meanings with every viewing and every viewer. The presence of reproductions in the thesis adds yet another layer to the network. If the first stage of my use of photographs has been to seek points of recognition, traces of connection through looking, touching, smelling, then the next performance is the one that leads to fiction and is distinct from what I actually feel when I hold them in my hands.

The first building on the left hand side of the John Finnie Street postcard is:

⁴⁶ The John Finnie who supplied the funds to build the street benefited from a family fortune made in Ayrshire coal mining, augmented by his work as a merchant with Finnie Brothers in Rio de Janeiro (Hawksworth 2011: 25).

...the two-storey Franco-Italianate former OSSINGTON TEMPERANCE COFFEE HOUSE (Nos. 2-4), of 1883-4 by J. R. S. Ingram. It has an oriel window in the centre of the three-bay return elevation in West George Street, and a single-bay wrought-iron balcony on the main elevation, between deeply channelled pilasters (2012: 439)

It is just where I have written it in *Lips That Touch*, immediately across from the train station. The architectural description is solid in a way that reassures. The name of the building material, red Ballochmyle ashlar, conveys permanence. If you look closely at the picture, you can make out 'OSSINGTON' spelled out in gold letters on the balcony. The sign is long gone, and at time of writing, the building is covered in scaffold that I hope signals some kind of care.

We might try to make a case that John Finnie Street as a whole is a *lieu de mémoire* in Pierre Nora's sense of a, 'significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community' (Nora 1996: xvii). As a street it does symbolise: a wealthier, more successful past, the outward projection of civic pride, the possibility of ruin or regeneration in the future. It is part of the town's Central Conservation Area, and the façade of what was once the Opera House has now been employed in flagship new council offices. There is some evidence of human will then, but other buildings are empty, near derelict; a physical reminder, perhaps, of what Nora describes as an, 'increasingly rapid slippage of the present into a historical past that is gone for good, a general perception that anything and everything may disappear' (Nora 1989: 7). Early on in this thesis I presented a quote from the Pevsner Guide that suggested that Kilmarnock as a town was trying to forget the damage that recurrent industrial closures had exerted on its 'communal psyche' (Close & Riches 2012: 415). While I believe that places do engender communal psyches, I am not convinced that John Finnie Street has the 'sense of historical continuity' (1989: 7) that Nora requires in a *lieu de mémoire*, of which the, 'most fundamental purpose is to stop time, to block the work of forgetting' (1989: 19). And, of course, attempts to pin down what constitutes a community tend to be problematic.⁴⁷ Kilmarnock isn't France, and much as the former Ossington Coffee

⁴⁷ And if it is problematic to consider a small town as a community, with all its differences and diversities, it is also problematic to consider a nation in this way. The Barony A Frame meets the criteria of *lieux de mémoire* much more readily; it has the 'symbolic aura', 'the play of memory and history', 'the will to remember' (1989: 19). Photographs and photo albums, as I have been using them, do not fit as they do not necessarily, 'stop time' (1989: 19). Collections of photographs on the other hand, such as those of Glasgow by Oscar Marzaroli, do contribute to what Nancy Wood describes as, 'the "memory-nation" as the main principle of social identity and cohesion' (Wood 1994: 124; see also Blaikie 2015); as do novels (see Craig 1999).

House is part of my own imaginative heritage, and in spite of Nora's reassurance that 'some seemingly improbable objects can be legitimately considered *lieux de mémoire*', it isn't the Arc de Triomphe (1989: 20).

Andrew Blaikie, in discussing the 'forgotten places' of twentieth-century Scotland, problematizes the notion of a neutral cultural imagination while saying that:

...in a country like Scotland, where the cultural imagination has conceived a series of dualistic filters through which places may be seen—beautiful/ugly, virtuous/evil, rural/urban—we are led to question the paradox that the visually unremarkable places where most people live, and which might thereby appear the most socially representative and worthy of analysis, are the very places about which we know least and have imagined even less (Blaikie 2015: 66).

John Finnie Street is visually remarkable when you look at it through the eyes of an architectural historian. Driving around an interminable one-way system and musing over Kilmarnock's many town planning missteps, never mind walking past the boarded up shops, is rather a different experience, and not one that lends itself so readily to what McIlvanney called, 'going naked in my imagination' (McIlvanney 1970: 171). I think that in its post-industrial decline, it constitutes part of what Blaikie terms the 'occluded middle' of the country (2015: 72).⁴⁸ The most recent photographs from the Kilmarnock archive (1970s) show redeveloped areas of the town that come close to what Blaikie describes as the ordinary, nondescript places of, 'near-contemporary suburban Scotland [...] lacking because few have thought to consider such places distinctive of Scottish identity [...] amorphous because we have no clear picture of them' (2015: 84).

⁴⁸ At risk of seeming obsessed with the Barony A Frame, it is notable for having forged its own path through what Blaikie describes as the fate of many of its sister sites and artefacts: 'the ruins of heavy industry—its decommissioned cooling towers, pithead gear, or empty harbours—have been quietly decaying, been demolished, landscaped, built over, or, in some cases, repositioned as "heritage"' (2015: 77).



Foregate, 1970s

The story of *Lips That Touch* was always conceived as leading up to the time when the town began to change for the worse. Much of that change took place before I was born, although I was around to hear the last gasps of Armitage Shanks, and Saxone, and BMK, and Massey Ferguson, and Glenfield, and then, from a little further away, Johnnie Walker. These closures are part of the town's history, but their impact on its collective memory, or communal psyche, is arguably more powerful. I agree much more strongly with Nora when he discusses the opposition between memory and history: 'Memory, insofar as it is affective and magical, only accommodates those facts that suit it; it nourishes recollections that may be out of focus or telescopic, global or detached, particular or symbolic' (1989: 8). The historical timespan of my fiction allowed me to see Kilmarnock in its boom times, through the years of opportunity that now can only be glimpsed in corners of the built environment or related from the memories of those who were there. The facts that suit me are intuitive, stemming from the details that linger and haunt. In the novel, the menu served at the De Walden dinner is historically accurate right down to the last *carotte Vichy*. It doesn't matter a jot to the story, nor does it result from any sense of obligation to what really happened.

Rather, it is commemorative in another kind of way. Of finding a menu card tucked inside a photo album, of thinking of the person who was moved to have it signed by each of the distinguished guests and who kept it for so many decades afterwards. As a source of pride, as a site of memory? Perhaps. Even if it wasn't quite archived in Nora's sense⁴⁹ it was deliberately retained and as we have seen from my earlier discussion of photographs, 'memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images and objects' (1989: 9).

Placing the Ossington Hotel in fiction, as I have done, might be an attempt to restore its 'social memory' (Berger 2009: 65), at least in ways that matter to me and my understanding of the past which was mine before I was born. I would like to think that novels might share some of the temporal and ontological properties as photographs, and have the potential for just as many divergent readings. For Cairns Craig, 'The novel is an "embodied argument" which both carries forward a tradition as an inheritance from the past and projects a path for tradition by defining or redefining the *telos* towards which the tradition is directed' (Craig 2009: 24).⁵⁰ This is too grand a claim for any novelist to make, or at least this one feels somewhat queasy even transcribing the quote in this context. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this thesis I am content to present *Lips That Touch* as an embodied argument for all I have said here about my own inheritance from the past and the ways in which that inheritance has been handed down to me. Stories of the Ossington Hotel, and stories that went before and came after it, have haunted me for years. I am under no illusion that these stories are unusual or special, or even of interest to others, but I have learned that I cannot underestimate how formative and inspiring they have been for me. Quite apart from the novel, I would like the building that was the Ossington Hotel to remain standing in order that it might become a monument to its own history, which is part of the history of Kilmarnock, with its landed gentry and merchants, its civic pride and temperance campaigns, its industry and unemployment, and all the milestones and vagaries of human life that are celebrated or commemorated within a hotel.

⁴⁹ For Nora, 'Modern memory is, above all, archival' (1989: 13).

⁵⁰ Craig is following Alasdair McIntyre's idea of tradition as, 'the inescapable context without which thought could not proceed at all', in which narrative, 'is the fundamental organising principle of human experience' (2009: 23).

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Daniel Quinn, Jr. "Proctor"

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Terence

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