

Into the Loving Nowhere

EUGENIA PARRY

*Have you ever been at sea in a dense fog, when it seemed
as if a tangible white darkness shut you in ...
and you waited with beating heart for something to happen?*

—Helen Keller

*But can you think of anyone who's not
hazy with smoke?*

—Jelaluddin Rumi

Disquiet

This art is estrangement, underwater slumber, interstellar space, mysterious sameness. Dusk is perpetual. It doesn't cover things; it issues from within them. A parked car, pine tree, barn, darkling nudes, or people on city streets are earthly facts, difficult to see clearly. What was real and terrestrial has become veils of subatomic particles, the primordial substance called "ylem"¹ that made up the cosmos before forms evolved. Through the pall, light looks billions of years old, like that from ancient stars and faraway galaxies.

This art is "sorrow dressed for the journey."² Grief permeates the reinvention of matter, which presents the world as if through tears in moonlight. If a field and a country road are inklings of locales, ordinary earth dwellers are vestiges of former selves, exiles from gesture, touch, and sound. Released from usual associations and past learning, subsumed into halated hues, all things invite the Invisible. They suggest the nebulous infinity of the Milky Way, but their psychic equivalent is closer to the body. It is the vital current of the breath. Silent partner in stilling the anxious heart, breath frees it through meditations that crumble certainties and dissolve the perils of self-deception.

Bill Jacobson is a photographer, but his soft-focus color work opposes anything even approaching the flagrant facts of documents. He descends beneath the surface and stays there. His deliberate obfuscations are not part of photography's recurring interest in glamorizing softness that seeks beauty for its own sake. Jacobson's art is as fragile as butterfly wings. Some images recall the blurred-retina landscapes with figures by the late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century Austrian photographer Heinrich Kühn. But Kühn, in the thrall of Impressionism, idealized the splendors of broad daylight. Jacobson's devotion to twilight rejects bedazzlement and through introspection suspends thought and action. His aims are close in spirit to the ancient wisdom of Chinese painters. Rejecting explicit subjects, avoiding resemblance, they acknowledged the "visible-invisible" aspect of all things. They "interiorized the external world" by painting it, contradictorily, as a *Void* that is *Full* of smoke, fog, clouds, "invisible breaths" that respire as in a living organism.³

At the Edge of the Visible

Photography was not invented for introspection. Yet the visual debate inherent in Jacobson's refusal to gather facts is as old as photography itself. From the birth of the medium, people who were used to attentive looking sensed the basic conceptual and psychological differences between daguerreotype's cold clarity in minutely describing and fixing the world, and paper negatives' modification of pure description, which attempted to capture the air circulating around things. There was nothing particularly spiritual in any of this. Daguerreotype, reveling in the small, demanded a magnifying glass. Paper negatives attracted certain sensibilities, for whom seeing dimly felt natural. They loaded their cameras with paper negatives and traveled to forests and dark woods. They discovered trees, brush, and rocky streams cloaked in chaotic shadows and intermittent light. In these shape-shifting subjects, the photographers uncovered not picturesque effects, but something verging on the spiritual, a chance to contemplate the mysteries that lay at the edge of the visible.

Photography triumphed as a useful producer of descriptive documents; and the impressionistic mist of so-called Naturalists and Pictorialists, like Kühn, continued to enchant those who craved beautifying vagueness. By now, the contest between these two alternatives has changed into a way of seeing that absorbs them both. The wisdom of this comes from voices beyond photograph-

ic circles. In the words of a Native American holy man, to see profoundly means “to look at the world twice,” minutely as well as dimly, in order “to see all that there is to see.”⁴

Jacobson’s definition of photography involves a version of this double-looking. “Often when I swim,” he has written, “I bob up and down, alternately noticing what might exist beneath the surface and also above it. Photography, I think, is sort of like this.”⁵ Jacobson’s photography is like this, especially in asking viewers to fathom the differences between direct experience and the secret mutations of fact that constitute memory. The mournful dusk of his pictures may seem passive, even stagnant; but it has gossamer teeth, which devour any signs of the known, leading those expecting certainty into troubling territories.

A conversation between Alice and the White King in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass* suggests, through word play, the deliberate contradictions in Jacobson’s photographic purpose:

“I see nobody on the road,” said Alice.

“I only wish I had such eyes,” the King remarked in a fretful tone. “To be able to see Nobody! And at that distance too! Why, it’s as much as I can do to see real people, by this light!”⁶

When Jacobson cries, “Description is a cheat!”⁷ he concurs with Alice’s creator: the barely-seen is sufficient to give us all we need to know, especially in an imaginary world that appears *through* the looking glass in visual realms beyond simple mirroring. To screw up our faces, straining to see what conforms to direct experience in Jacobson’s photographs, is to mistake eyesight for inner knowing. As a photographic community, we have become slaves to this mistake, habitual responders to photographic pre-conditioning.

Glass Eye versus Third Eye

Photography’s lens-driven capacity for pitiless realism has come to mean indisputable evidence, the exclusive and privileged state of *being-there*. It is practically a truism that to appreciate most photographs is to realize that they may contain more than the human eye can see; a split-second can seem to entrap an entire universe. The magical-poetic truth of this is as consuming as a daguerreotype under a magnifying glass. Photographic technologies can make lens-faithful detail

hallucinatory. In mental dialogues, a photographed object may assume its own life and, like our image in a mirror, stares back.⁸

The focused lens intensifies the discriminatory, analyzing, inspecting features of cone vision, or left-brain seeing. Leonard Shlain, a vascular surgeon, has observed that this brain-directed perception extends beyond one-at-a-time photographic detail that declares *what is* (or *was*, then). It leads to temporal sequencing that goads the fickle mind, always seeking entertainment, into inventing a *what-next?* or an imagined, illusory future.⁹

Visual discomfort with Jacobson's work lies in habits of impatient, *what-next?* thinking. Since his photographs cancel all notions of moments in time, *what-next?* is an impossibility, for there is no *now* in any of them from which the mind can leap. Instead, the pictures exhibit an earlier, dilated, unfocusing rod vision of cat-like animals at night, or of infants. Rod vision sees the entire visual field. "Looking at nothing, the eye in this state sees everything. It is a receptivity that affects the whole body. Consciousness idles and a person slides into the integrated mental state of *being*."¹⁰

This is why it is fruitless to try mentally to restore Jacobson's soft-focused deformations to the solidity of their original state, to simple figures against backgrounds. His pedestrians, buildings, storefronts, automobiles, trees, and fields, engulfed in cosmic dust, have surrendered their particulars to the seen-all-at-once, big picture. The witness must join them in this grander and more penetrating awareness.

Agnostic

If clear photographic description is technology's answer to cone-vision, to visualize conditions of non-knowing is not only photographically retrograde, but aberrant. Jacobson's forays into non-knowing are aberrations. When Helen Keller recalled her physical and psychological blindness before the arrival of Anne Sullivan, her liberating teacher, she compared her condition to a "dense fog" at sea, "a tangible white darkness" that shut her in.¹¹ The claustrophobic fog in Jacobson's photographs is also a threshold beyond which lies insight. Two films about blindness moved Jacobson deeply, especially through the visual effects used to simulate experiences of receding

sight. Derek Jarman's last film, *Blue*, 1993, has no descriptive visual imagery; an unchanging, ultramarine blue field from an Yves Klein painting fills the screen. Onto this the director superimposed a track of densely interwoven voices and sounds. Jarman saw the color blue when eye drops were put into his eyes in hopes of alleviating his on-coming blindness. Through Klein's example, he also recognized the spiritual power of monochrome as a way of keeping the blindness at bay. When Jacobson noticed a similar use of a "sort of blue fog" in the opening moments of Lars von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark*, 2000, the blue fog portended, for him, the fate of the main character who would quickly lose her vision.¹²

Jacobson's photographs resemble something more perplexing than blindness. They allude to the peculiar visual disorientations of the newly-sighted. The neurologist Oliver Sacks has brought to popular attention cases of blind people who regained their sight but, nonetheless, failed to see. Unable to connect actual experience to the blurred configurations entering their retinas, they became confused and despondent. Sacks uses the words, "*mentally* blind, or agnostic" to describe Virgil, a formerly blind patient, physically "able to see but not to decipher what he was seeing."¹³ The miracle of regained sight led to disaster. Virgil's case proved that everyone, whether sighted from birth or having regained his or her sight, must *learn* how to see.

Virgil saw best in subdued light. His own shadow confused him: "... the whole concept of shadows, of objects blocking light, was puzzling to him ..." Seeing his shadow, he "would come to a stop, or trip, or try to step over it." Stair steps were simply "a flat surface of parallel and crisscrossing lines" that lacked a third dimension.¹⁴ Sacks quotes a similarly afflicted patient who "had no appreciation of depth or distance; street lights were luminous stains stuck to the window panes; ... the corridors of the hospital were black holes."¹⁵ Even after Virgil touched all parts of a cat, correlating tactile experience with visual recognition continued to slip from his mind.¹⁶ Seeing without knowing was so traumatic that eventually, Virgil opted for blindness, rather than suffer the horrors of learning to acquire normal sight.

Jacobson's photographs present the same agnostic configurations that Sacks describes. Paradigms of unlearned seeing, the images ask us to die as sighted, to be reborn as partially blind. Jacobson counts on what the neurologist, discussing visual discontinuities, calls the "vicissitudes of appearances."¹⁷ Things perpetually change. A man at a bright window is a humanoid blur. More

than visual failure, the deformation is the door to spiritual energy. “Watch the dust grains moving / In the light near the window. / Their dance is our dance,” the thirteenth-century poet Rumi writes.¹⁸ Jacobson lets scalding white light enter a street and cauterize the surrounding architecture. Unfurling like smoke, smoldering like incense, architecture is pure spirit.

Philosophers of the creative imagination have reflected on our need to free reveries that are bound to objects. As Gaston Bachelard observed, “The eye itself, pure vision, becomes tired of looking at solids. It needs to dream of deforming. If sight really accepts the freedom of dreams, everything melts in a living intuition.”¹⁹ Everything melts in Jacobson’s terrains. Mediating between facts and plumbed feelings, some of his earlier black and white images depict nothing but water. Now, in the color work, many suggest moving water.

People in this work are inky, calligraphic waves. They join shadows on a building as a tenebrous fabric. A building’s shadow is the building itself. Explosive color flashes (from store signs? traffic lights?) startle the eye, attaching to nothing identifiable. Luminous stains appear to be stuck to window panes. Corridors are black holes. The continual flux of appearances, tenuously anchored to objects and space, is the usual perceptual condition of the newly sighted, who, Sacks observes, “are baffled by the concept of ‘appearance,’ which being optical has no analogue in the other senses.”²⁰

A person with normal sight, describing such perceptions, would be diagnosed with a form of brain damage. Sacks describes as “color agnosia” or “color anomia,”²¹ the failure to know, associate, or name a color, for example, being able to call a banana yellow. Jacobson’s images display agnosia’s and anomia’s disconnections. Things, as he photographs them, are neither meant to be named nor exactly remembered. All are visualizations of loss. All belong to the terrible erosion of forgetting.

“One may be born with the potential for a prodigious memory,” Sacks writes,

but one is not born with a disposition to recollect; this comes only with changes and separations in life—separations from people, from places, from events and situations, especially if they have been of great significance, have been deeply hated or loved. It is thus, discontinuities, the great discontinuities in life that we seek to bridge, or reconcile, or integrate by recollection, and beyond this, by myth and art. . . . All of us, finally, are exiles from the past.²²

Jacobson has said that his pictures are the equivalents of “people coming and going in our lives.” He used to explain that soft focusing allowed him to find the forms to express his despair at the loss of so many friends in the AIDS epidemic. “People were disappearing.” Now he acknowledges that the “tender responsibility” of the pictures has evolved into “a spiritual response to the world”²³ that discards the known in order to find visual equivalents for feeling.

His blurred reconstructions stand for imaginative memory, which “not only stores for us the passing moments of perception; it also transfigures, distances, vivifies, defangs—reshapes formed impressions, turns oppressive immediacies into wide vistas . . . loosens the rigid grip of an acute desire and transforms it into a fertile design.”²⁴ This is to say that memory isn’t a fixed thing, but a “dynamic process of remembering.” It is rarely exact and “not at all important that it should be so.”²⁵ Inexactitude is exactly what the photographer wants.

The painter Gerhard Richter blurs things “to make everything equally important and equally unimportant. . . . so that they do not look artistic or craftsman like but technological, smooth and perfect. . . . to make all the parts a closer fit. . . . out of the excess of unimportant information.” Asked whether the blurred objects referred to something concrete, like language, Richter answered, “That’s only because we know the names of the objects. We ought to get out of that habit.” Blurring creates “a variant of Non-Showing, . . . whereby something has to be shown and simultaneously not shown, in order, perhaps, to say something else again, a third thing.”²⁶ Richter is hardly unfamiliar with unconscious processes, but he doesn’t explain what a third thing is.

Throw It Out

Jacobson, a vegetarian for most of his life, practiced Tai Chi, transcendental meditation, and yoga for years. The process of emptying in these disciplines permeates his pictures. He doesn’t make much of it. He simply says, “In going beyond the physical plane of the world,” meditation “taught me to see.”²⁷ Ancient Chinese painting theory and Zen Buddhist teaching had no mystical aims. Their aims were practical. Seeing human suffering everywhere, the Buddha said that he taught “anguish and the ending of anguish.”²⁸ He devised countless strategies to rid the mind of the

habitual, to snap it out of fixations and the relentless impulses of self-centered craving. He taught that dissolution, through stillness and meditation, would provide a release into freedom. Emptiness isn't some cosmic vacuum. Emptying the mind is a creative process. One thing leads to another. Nothing is more difficult.

The unwitting student-novice will quickly declare that he has achieved emptiness. The teacher knows otherwise. In a story about the great Zen teacher Joshu, a student once asked him:

"If I haven't anything in my mind, what shall I do?"

Joshu replied: "Throw it out."

"But I haven't anything, how can I throw it out?" continued the questioner.

"Well," said Joshu, "then carry it out."²⁹

Jacobson's pictures battle against everything in the mind. They throw it out; they carry it out. Subverting the power of photography's glass eye, they free the field of solids and achieve "a depth beyond report."³⁰

In his work, we "Close both eyes / to see with the other eye," as Rumi, the ecstatic, writes.³¹ This refers to the third eye that sees beyond thought. A precipitate of the visible-invisible, it is the eventual outcome of elementary mind emptying, illustrated by the Joshu story. For Proust, dreams had this emptying power. Every night they destroyed the dubious realities of reasoning vision by introducing us to all the mysteries that "we imagine ourselves not to know" and initiating us "into the other great mystery of annihilation and resurrection."³²

Jacobson's annihilations feel like Proustian memories, but they are not dream reports. He doesn't identify his pictures with meditation practice, with the ecstatic, or specifically with Buddhism. Meditation slows him down so that he can see more clearly. Contradictorily, his soft focus work is the result of this inner clarity. It is awareness, a form of attention.

Certain critics from within Buddhism are decrying the misinterpretations that have turned the Buddha into a mystic with privileged esoteric knowledge and Buddhism into a religion. These writers remind us that Buddhism originated as a method. Dharma practice is something to do. It involves another version of agnosticism, that of neither knowing nor not knowing.

An agnostic Buddhist looks to the dharma for metaphors of existential *confrontation* rather than . . . *consolation*. The dharma . . . is a method to be investigated and tried out. It starts by facing up to the primacy of anguish, then proceeds to apply a set of practices to understand the human dilemma and work toward a resolution. . . . An agnostic . . . stance is . . . founded on a passionate recognition that *I do not know*. It confronts the enormity of having been born instead of reaching for the consolation of a belief. It strips away, layer by layer, the views that conceal the mystery of being here—either by affirming it as something or denying it as nothing.

Such deep agnosticism is an attitude toward life refined through ongoing mindful awareness. It may lead to the realization that ultimately there is neither something nor nothing at the core of ourselves that we can put a finger on. Or it may be focused in an intense perplexity that vibrates through the body and leaves the mind that seeks certainty nowhere to rest.³³

Jacobson's soft-focus color photographs are agnostic in simulating mental-blindness, in Sacks' neurological use of the word. They rid the field of the thinking mind. The photographs also perform the remarkable task of having invented visual forms for the non-knowing consciousness of dharma practice that develops in the seeker "an appetite for groundlessness."³⁴ Whether he would avow this Buddhistic connection or not doesn't matter.

Looking at the "poignant tranquility" of his pictures is like watching the breath and "all of life . . . in ceaseless mutation: emerging, modifying, disappearing." Nothing is "permanent or reliable." Nothing is solved. Jacobson's work should be seen as a form of probing into "what is still unknown."³⁵ Jacobson is not alone in using blurring as a strategy,³⁶ but his is not fuzzy-school photography, nor is it stylish, aesthetic vaguery. It is an art of profound estrangement from the anguished mind. The photographer's forms allude to the constructive effects of dharma practice. In the Buddhist sense, it is practical in visualizing reflective meditation, "which is a way of translating thoughts into the language of feeling. . . . It evokes the poignancy implicit in the transitoriness of all things."³⁷

Comfortable with Uncertainty

Beyond expressing, through discontinuities and agnostic anomie, what is always changing and has no answers, Jacobson interprets estrangement as compassion toward oneself and others. His forms expand, like the breath; they don't respect everyday boundaries; they enfold all beings in a community of uncertainty, "Knowing that conscious decisions / and personal memory / are much too small a place to live, / every human being streams at night / into the loving nowhere."³⁸ Rumi seems to refer, like Proust, to dreams as gateways to liberation. But, for the poet, nowhere is also a condition of sacred love. Jacobson hasn't read much of Rumi. Yet the visual conditions that signify compassionate awareness in the soft-focus color work—blurred, sub-aqueous motion, disorienting light and shade, searing points of sudden color from a perpetual haze—find an origin in the supreme love of the ancient poet's language of enlightenment:

Late, by myself, in the boat of myself,
no light and no land anywhere,
cloud cover thick, I try to stay
just above the surface, yet I'm already under
and living within the ocean.

Does the sunset look like the sun's coming up?
Do you know what a faithful love is like?

You're crying. You say you've burned yourself.
But can you think of anyone who's not
hazy with smoke?³⁹

Notes

- Timothy Ferris, *Coming of Age in the Milky Way* (New York, 1988), p. 273.
- Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*, edited and translated by Richard Zenith (New York, 2003), p. 177.
- François Cheng, *Souffle-Esprit: Textes théoriques chinois sur l'art pictural* (Paris, 1989), pp. 39–67. Italics in this citation are mine. For other connections between the photographer's work and Chinese art, see John Wood, "Flying Mist and the Transcendental Camera of Bill Jacobson," *21st: The Journal of Contemporary Photography*, vol. 2 (1999), pp. 85–87.
- Recounted by Jamake Highwater in *Breathing on Your Own: Quotations for Independent Thinkers*, compiled by Richard Kehl (Seattle, 2001), p. 29.
- From Bill Jacobson's statement in *The Revealing Image: Photographs by Bay Area Lesbians and Gay Men* (San Francisco, 1981), pages unnumbered.
- The Annotated Alice: Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking Glass by Lewis Carroll*, illustrated by John Tenniel, introduction and notes by Martin Gardner (New York, 1960), p. 279.
- From conversations between the photographer and this writer in Santa Fe, New Mexico, summer 2004. Hereafter cited as *Conversations*.
- See James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing* (New York, 1997), *passim*.
- Leonard Shlain, *The Alphabet versus the Goddess: The Conflict between Word and Image* (New York, 1998), p. 25.
- Ibid.
- Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life*, edited with a new foreword and afterword by Roger Shattuck with Dorothy Herrmann (New York, 2003), p. 25.
- Conversations* (see note 7).
- Oliver Sacks, "To See and Not See," in Sacks, *An Anthropologist on Mars: Seven Paradoxical Tales* (New York, 1996), p. 117.
- Ibid., p. 120.
- Ibid., p. 121.
- Ibid., p. 122.
- Ibid., p. 127.
- From "Music Master," in *The Essential Rumi*, translated by Coleman Barks, John Moyne, et al. (New York, 1995), p. 106.
- Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, translated by Edith Farrell (Dallas, 1983), p. 106.
- 20 Oliver Sacks, "To See and Not See," in Sacks 1996 (see note 13), p. 128, note 7.
- 21 Ibid., p. 126.
- 22 Oliver Sacks, "The Landscape of His Dreams," in Sacks 1996 (see note 13), p. 169.
- 23 *Conversations* (see note 7).
- 24 Sacks is quoting philosopher Eva Brann, "The Landscape of His Dreams," in Sacks 1996 (see note 13), p. 176.
- 25 Ibid., p. 173. Sacks is quoting from Frederic Bartlett's book *Remembering*.
- 26 Gerhard Richter, *The Daily Practice of Painting, Writings and Interviews 1962–1993*, edited by Hans-Ulrich Obrist, translated by David Britt (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), pp. 37, 68, 130, and 226.
- 27 *Conversations* (see note 7).
- 28 Stephen Batchelor, *Buddhism without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening* (New York, 1997), p. 15.
- 29 "101 Zen Stories," in *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones: A Collection of Zen & Pre-Zen Writings*, compiled by Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzarkai (Rutland, Vt., 1958), p. 57.
- 30 From Fragment 71 in *Fragments: The Collected Wisdom of Heraclitus*, translated by Brooks Haxton, foreword by James Hillman (New York, 2001), p. 45.
- 31 From "A Community of the Spirit," in *The Essential Rumi* (see note 18), p. 3.
- 32 Marcel Proust, *Within a Budding Grove*, translated by C. K. Scott Moncrieff (New York, 1970), p. 290.
- 33 Batchelor 1997 (see note 28), pp. 18–19.
- 34 Pema Chödrön, *Comfortable with Uncertainty: 108 Teachings on Cultivating Fearlessness and Compassion*, compiled and edited by Emily Hilburn Sell (Boston, 2003), p. 210.
- 35 Batchelor 1997 (see note 28), pp. 25, 26, and 27.
- 36 It is beyond the scope of this essay to treat Jacobson's work in relation to that of other photographers who blur their pictures. To one writer, he belongs, with Barbara Ess, Brian Weil, John Brill, Gary Schneider, Michal Rovner, Randy West, Uta Barth, and Robert Stivers to a "fuzzy school" of collective thinking. See Vince Aletti, "Not Fade Away," *Village Voice*, vol. 41, no. 10 (March 5, 1996), p. 64. The purpose of the present essay is to spare Jacobson's soft-focus color such generalizations by placing it in new contexts.
- 37 Batchelor 1997 (see note 28), pp. 32–33.
- 38 From "The Milk of Millennia," in *The Essential Rumi* (see note 18), p. 273.
- 39 From "Saladin's Begging Bowl," in *ibid.*, pp. 12–13.