

City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

Publications and Research

John Jay College of Criminal Justice

2010

Photograph: Poet on Dust Jacket, Richmond, Virginia 1996

Alexander Long
CUNY John Jay College

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/jj_pubs/204

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).
Contact: AcademicWorks@cuny.edu

Photograph: Poet on Dust Jacket, Richmond, Virginia 1996

Alexander Long

No writing can give me this certainty.
– Roland Barthes

I. The Photograph

There was a time when all I wanted was to understand a poem and a photo the right way. That time has passed. My desire has not. I know I will fail continually. So, I write.

I have this black-and-white photograph of Larry Levis. It's nothing special; it's not mine. It's on the dust jacket of his last—posthumous—book, *Elegy*. But there is something authentic to it, something lacking occasion, extravagance, pose, artifice.... He's wearing a dark blazer, and a light striped oxford shirt. He's sitting, I think. There's a certain pensiveness to the way his shoulders slump, the way his whole person seems to lean or bend with interest in—or is it fatigue with?—whatever he's thinking, whatever's being said to him or by him at that moment. Interest or fatigue? I can't tell. Either way, there's a melancholic current running through his meditative, mediating gaze.

Yet there's also something indefatigable in his expressionless expression. Wrinkles burrow under his eyes and along his forehead. The heavier bags nestle under his left eye. He's looking squarely into, then through, the lens. There are streaks of white in his gray hair; his black mustache is salted with gray. His barely-open mouth offers a slight under bite, his jaw protrudes a little, as if he's just finished mumbling, "OK, let's get this over with...", maybe thinking there's somewhere else I need to be....

Behind him is a small, modest yard with a white stone wall separating one's property from another's. Have I been there? No. I've tried, in my mind, to sit on that wall. Far back to the right, I can almost make out part of a garage. Would that have been my studio apartment? A huge maple or oak or sycamore, blurred, hovers like a flock of bats or linnets over his head. The entire composition—its composure—tilts left. Is it the yard, or is it his posture? Is it the world, or is it the man? Which way has the camera—the photographer—angled it all?

The longer I look at it, the more I feel myself begin to slide a little down the yard, off the dust jacket's margin, out of the story, into the out-of-focus, the infinite cleavage where Imagination begins. I get dizzy, but nothing's happened.

All I'm doing is gazing into a gaze. His gaze, the gaze of a dead man. I want my vertigo to be symbiotic, but I never met—and never will meet—Larry Levis.

My gaze is my only story, and my story is a desire to glimpse something beyond the margin...a margin that, maybe, has no end.

Maybe that's what Roland Barthes means when he says at the end of chapter 1 in *Camera Lucida* that "[s]uch a desire really meant that beyond the evidence provided by technology and usage, and despite its tremendous contemporary expansion, I wasn't sure that photography existed, that it had a 'genius' of its own" (3).

That feels right.

But what I find myself doing is not looking at the photograph of Levis at all. To tell the truth, I'm grieving everything outside of it.

I don't know where this photograph was taken. It could be anywhere. Maybe it's Levis' backyard in Richmond, Virginia, the last place he lived. That yard in Richmond, Virginia...that was a place I was to have poured him some Scotch—call it Oban—on some spring or fall afternoon. He would hand me back some poems, his sprawling, looping script offering an image here, a cut there....

I'm doing it again.

That's not the story at all. I don't know what the story is, and I never will.

So, I write about it.

But each time I write about it, I move further and further away from whatever the photograph's story is. What, then, am I moving toward?

My own last photograph.

II. The Moving Picture

The elegy for the self is one of Barthes' obsessions in *Camera Lucida*. Painting (photography's parent) and cinema (photography's child) are, for Barthes, too reliant on artifice; there is always the implied (or not-so-implied) "once upon a time." The elegy, then, in painting and cinema is made up: it's make believe. But, when we enter a photograph, particularly one of someone deceased (and beloved):

...the presence of the thing (at a certain past moment) is never metaphoric; and in the case of animated beings, their life as well, except in the case of photographing corpses; and even so: if the photograph then becomes horrible, it is because it certifies, so to speak, that the corpse is

alive, as corpse: it is the living image of a dead thing. For the photograph's immobility is somehow the result of a perverse confusion between two concepts: the Real and the Live: by attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive, because of that delusion which makes us attribute to Reality an absolutely superior, somehow eternal value; but by shifting this reality to the past ("this-has-been"), the photograph suggests that it is already dead. Hence it would be better to say that Photography's inimitable feature (its noeme) is that someone has seen the referent (even if it is a matter of objects) in flesh and blood, or again in person. Photography, moreover, began historically, as an art of the Person: of identity, of civil status, of what we might call, in all senses of the term, the body's formality. Here again, from a phenomenological viewpoint, the cinema begins to differ from the Photograph; for the (fictional) cinema combines two poses: the actor's "this-has-been" and the role's, so that (something I would not experience before a painting) I can never see or see again in a film certain actors whom I know to be dead without a kind of melancholy: the melancholy of Photography itself (I experience this same emotion listening to the recorded voices of dead singers). (79)

Barthes differentiates photography from cinema for one simple and vital reason: in photography, we supply the story.

In cinema, the story is spoon-fed to us. The probability in getting the story "right" in cinema is exponentially higher. Relative to the potential infinity held within a photograph, the experience of movies is shorter. Movies have a beginning, a middle, and an end...however elliptical.... We may be lifted by an image—say Streep's Sophie at the very end of Bakula's adaptation of Styron's *Sophie's Choice*, that ghostly, desperate, gorgeous visage—into melancholy. But the image passes us by. The film has to end. We're forced to move on. At the end of the images, when the credits begin and then resolve their slow ascension, the projector clicks, its blue beam of light cut, and we too have to rise from our seats and go somewhere else.

But with a photograph, we stay seated at the table forever. The melancholy, nostalgia, and ecstasy are ours because we have created it. In cinema, the melancholy belongs to the actors, the director, the cinematographer.... We catch, in cinema, melancholy only by deflection—by orchestrated chance—in a predetermined amount of time (two, three hours) and space (a twenty-by-forty foot silver screen).

In a photograph, we are melancholy, we are desire—we are implicated by—are in—the story simply through gazing. The only limit of story with a particular photograph is the mind.

In cinema, we can't die; any death we might endure is strictly metaphoric.

In photography, our death is confirmed. In photography, our desires are ratified.

And that's the problem: photographs hold us, quite literally, up to our mortality. We want to speak, but it's too late. We're struck dumb in our attempts at articulating the story.

Or, we get it right by dying.

III. Some Sources & Theories

“This is not really a problem,” says Mieke Bal in the introduction to the second edition of her *Narratology* (3). Bal contends that there is no the story. And I want to believe her. She says, “One should not expect to actually be able to say that the corpus consists of all narrative texts and only those texts which are narrative. For one of the first problems in advancing such a theory (of narratology) is the formulation of characteristics with which we can delimit that corpus. Although everyone has a general idea of what narrative texts are, it is certainly not always easy to decide whether or not a given text should be considered narrative, partly or wholly” (3). A bit later she says, “The textual description obtained with the aid of this theory can by no means be regarded as the only adequate description possible. Someone else may use the same concepts differently, emphasize other aspects of the text, and, consequently, produce a different textual description. For reading is an activity of a subjective nature” (4).

So, Bal might say to me: you worry too much; what you’re fretting just isn’t; an ideal reader doesn’t exist. And I’m reminded of Cleanth Brooks: “There is no ideal reader, of course...and I suppose that the practicing critic can never be too often reminded of the gap between his reading and the ‘true’ reading of the poem. But for the purpose of focusing upon the poem rather than its reactions, it is a defensible strategy. Finally, of course, it is the strategy that all critics of whatever persuasion are forced to adopt” (Leitch 1368). Truth, then, is a position: something posited, assumed, laid down; something dealing with fact, an affirmation; it’s an attitude, a posture; and, the etymology says, it’s also something unqualified. Brooks is an idealist hiding a scientist’s white jacket. He knows, perhaps, that he will fail. He doesn’t, however, believe it.

Brooks confirms my failure as a reader. He also confirms my process as a writer. Could it be that I desire failure? Wolfgang Iser says no. The process I’m engaged in is what he calls the “virtual text,” the treaty reached between the text and its recipient:

Central to the reading of every literary work is the interaction between its structure and its recipient. This is why the phenomenological theory of art has emphatically drawn attention to the fact that the study of a literary work should concern not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to that text. The text itself simply offers ‘schematized aspects,’ through which the aesthetic object of the work can be produced.

From this we may conclude that the literary work has two poles, which we might call the artistic and the aesthetic: the artistic pole is the author’s text, and the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader. (Leitch 1673-74)

This is a fine middle ground, an air-tight compromise. It feels just right. Too right. I cannot deny the existence of the artistic pole: the Levis photograph is right there, and the poems are lying beneath it. But this aesthetic pole is something Iser himself doesn’t seem convinced of: “A text cannot adapt itself to each reader it comes into contact with. The partners in dyadic interaction

can ask each other questions in order to ascertain how far their images have bridged the gap of inexperienceability of one another's experiences. The reader, however, can never learn from the text how accurate or inaccurate are his views of it" (Leitch 1675). Ergo, there is no aesthetic pole; there are only as many aesthetic poles as there are configurations of what Derrida calls the gramme: not even the letter, but the single stroke that, for instance, crosses the T in this Pertpetua type face.

To constellate each gramme is, perhaps, quite literally an astronomical project, "that greatest of all/ Impossibilities, that unfinishable agenda/ Of the stars, that fact...."

There was a time when I all wanted was to understand a poem and a photo the right way. That time has passed. My desire has not. I know I will fail continually. So, I write.

IV. The Poem, & Some Tools

My ambitions and desires to get it right arrest me under the increasing shadows of Bal and Brooks and Iser and Barthes.... I'm still looking at the edge of the shadow where the Levis photograph sits. A shadow grows over it. Soon enough, the photograph and I will be under the same shadow; this is the mortal motion: the horizon pink and bleak, the penumbral swell of dusk as quiet as always. But, I'm thinking, not yet. I open Barthes again: "...I had perhaps learned how my desire worked, but I had not discovered the nature (the eidos) of Photography. I had to grant that my pleasure was an imperfect mediator, and that a subjectivity reduced to its hedonist project could not recognize the universal. I would have to descend deeper into myself to find the evidence of Photography, that thing which is seen by anyone looking at a photograph and which distinguishes it in his eyes from any other image. I would have to make my recantation, my palinode" (60). I begin moving. I walk to the shadow's edge. I pick up the book. I read the poem again:

Photograph: Migrant Worker, Parlier, California, 1967

I'm going to put Johnny Dominguez right here
In front of you on this page so that
You won't mistake him for something else,
An idea, for example, of how oppressed
He was, rising with his pan of Thompson Seedless
Grapes from a row of vines. The band
On his white straw hat darkened by sweat, is,
He would remind you, just a hatband.
His hatband. He would remind you of that.
As for the other use, this unforeseen
Labor you have subjected him to, the little
Snacks & white wine of the opening he must
Bear witness to, he would remind you
That he was not put on this earth

To be an example of something else,
Johnny Dominguez, he would hasten to
Remind you, in his chaste way of saying things,
Is not to be used as an example of anything
At all, not even, he would add after
A second or so, that greatest of all
Impossibilities, that unfinishable agenda
Of the stars, that fact, Johnny Dominguez.

I'm responding to a language text—the poem—and a visual text—Johnny's photograph—mediated through that language text. I see things in the language text, and I hear things in the visual text. I'm filling gaps in the language and visual texts while simultaneously creating new gaps.

Initially, I see two things at once: first, the poem, the words properly arranged on the page; second, the photograph of Johnny Dominguez. Initially, the latter is more opaque than the former; but it's the poem's project to reverse all of that.

Similarly, I hear three things at once: first, the poem as Levis would read it (I'm remembering his reading voice in another poem and am translating into this poem); second, the poem as I read it aloud to myself; and third, Johnny's "chaste way of saying things."

The levels of possibility confuse and overwhelm me primarily because "Photograph:..." is a poem of insistence. The poem desires its monad: the right perception of Johnny Dominguez. But in my initial reading, I see and hear five separate but related actions. I want only one interpretation, the right one; moreover, the poem insists I have the only interpretation. I turn back to Bal; she promised "an instrument with which (we) can describe narrative texts" (3). Perhaps with her definitions, I'll be able to dovetail my simultaneous and sometimes incongruous moments of illumination borne by the twenty-lines of this poem. Here is a crucial portion of a vital paragraph in Bal's theory of narratology:

A narrative text is a text in which an agent relates ('tells') a story in a particular medium, such as language, imagery, sound, buildings, or a combination thereof. A story is a fabula that is presented in a certain manner. A fabula is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors. An event is the transition from one state to another state. Actors are agents that perform actions. They are not necessarily human. To act is defined here as to cause or to experience an event.... It is...useful to examine the text separately from the story. Since 'text' refers to narratives in any medium, I will use this word with an emphasis on the structuredness, not the linguistic nature of it; to keep this in mind I will use it interchangeably with 'artifact.' (5-6)

This is a good start. But there is more. Bal unpacks some these definitions into more definitions: "The fabula, understood, as material or content that is worked into a story, has been defined as a series of events. This series is constructed according to certain rules. We call this the logic of events" (7). And there is time, which "has a hypothetical status: in a fabula the events have not

‘actually’ occurred, or at least, their reality status is not relevant for internal logic.... Furthermore, events always occur somewhere, be it a place that actually exists...or an imaginary place.... Events, actors, time, and location together constitute the material of a fabula” (7).

Who pieces all of this together? “A choice,” Bal says, “is made from among the various ‘points of view’ from which the elements can be presented. The resulting focalization, the relation between ‘who perceives’ and what is perceived, ‘colours’ the story with subjectivity” (8). The focalizer performs the focalization. There are two types of focalizers: character-bound (inside the fabula) and external (outside the fabula).

Now I’m faced with a difficult choice, and it is a choice: do I cling to my desire to read the poem and see the photograph in the right way (as the poem’s words and Johnny Dominguez’ gestures and words-never-spoken in the poem demand)? Or, do I fall in line with Bal when she says: “it is both impossible and useless to generalize about...the author’s activity...,” e.g., intentions, ambitions, etc. (7). I’m using Bal’s tools. Do I turn them against her? Can I turn them against her?

There was a time when I all wanted was to understand a poem and a photo the right way. That time has passed. My desire has not. I know I will fail continually. So, I write.

V. Line by Line

Bal’s definition of focalization helps me hear and see more clearly the multiple levels of perspective at work in the poem and in the photo. But I’m still not sure if it will crystalize into a monad as the poem demands. “Focalization,” Bal says, “is, then, the relation between the elements presented and the vision and that which is ‘seen,’ perceived” (142). Or, focalization is the tacit expression of the relationship(s) between voice and object, spoken and spoken to/about/for. Levis’s focalizer presents his vision of Johnny Dominguez; simultaneously, he refuses expressing Johnny’s vision. For the poem’s focalizer, speaking on behalf of Johnny would be a violation of the most grave order: this would be one more imposition of silence upon Johnny by a supposed more powerful entity. What pulses at the core of the poem is, finally, possession: possession of identity, vision, and self...which is to say, power. Power....

Is that what I want, power? Control? The right reading? Possessing it? Maybe it will be helpful to map the fabula, “or the series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors” (Bal 5), of the poem. Maybe descending line by line narratologically, I’ll begin to know—see and hear—Johnny and the focalizer, their circumstances, and their desires.

The title: Photograph: Migrant Worker, Parlier, California, 1967

With the very first word, I’m confronted with two narrative texts: a poem and a photo (as I’ve mentioned above). I don’t yet have a story (which precludes fabula, events, and actors). Following the colon is “Migrant Worker.” I’ll stop there. A series of events unfolds:

- A. Johnny's birth, somewhere other than the United States (most likely Mexico or central America, but this cannot be proven by this poem), circa 1900-1952.
- B. The focalizer's birth (Levis), September 26, 1946, Selma, California to parents who own and operate a grape farm in southern central California.

Johnny leaves Mexico for the United States in search of work at an unspecified time. Implicit motivations for this relocation—this exile—for Johnny are harsh economic conditions in his native country, promise of employment in the United States, and potential reunion with friends and family.

Johnny finds employment in or near Parlier, California sometime before or in 1967.

Someone takes a photograph of Johnny as he is working, or resting while working.

The focalizer discovers the photograph at an unspecified later date.

- A. The focalizer meditates on the photo.
- B. Levis composes the poem.

The poem's title drops me, first and foremost, into memory. The title is rich in chronology, location, and politics. I see a migrant worker, or a farm hand who is perhaps one social rung above a slave. I see a tiny corner of Selma, California, which is somewhere in the brutally hot San Joaquin Valley. And I'm in 1967, an American 1967, a time before me, when revolutions (sexual and political, e.g., "free love," civil rights, Vietnam protests, Caesar Chavez's labor reform movement, etc.) and experimentation (chemical, intellectual, and artistic, i.e., psychedelism, deconstructionism, deep imagism, etc.) are given as a backdrop for this frozen moment of the poem/photograph. Using Bal's terms, the title, then, gives me a slow-down (photograph, time frozen), a summary (migrant worker), and a scene (Parlier, California). Levis, with these details, presents his certain way of seeing things; this is his certain angle, his focalization, which is rooted in historical fact. It's real, conjured by the imagination.

Line 1: "I'm going to put Johnny Dominguez right here..."

I'm, indeed, in the relative present. There's a line break; it's a poem: the narrative text is still a poem. But is it still a photograph? The focalizer says "I'm going to put Johnny Dominguez right here," not "I'm going to put the photograph of Johnny Dominguez right here...." Is the photograph implied from the title (absolutely), or is the focalizer reaching for a literalness of character within Johnny (absolutely)? There must be some critical distance for the focalizer and the reader from this turbulent historical backdrop. (This poem was published in 1997, I'm reading it [again] in 2009, and it was most likely written some time between 1991 and 1996.) The poem's tense—emphatically, imperatively, insistently present—introduces me, then, to an approximate distance of thirty years: "I'm going to put Johnny Dominguez right here...." Where was he all this time? What has ostensibly transpired in those thirty years since the photo was taken, as well as the unidentified amount of time that transpired before the photo was taken, play equally crucial roles in understanding the poem's—that is, the focalizer's—focalization. The

white space between the title and first line contains a duration replete with political and personal ramifications, which unfold about me as I work through the poem. This is also the poem's first event: the focalizer turned actor has placed the photo on the table, the desk, the mantle...something has just moved into view without me asking...

Line 2: "In front of you on this page so that..."

The focalizer/actor complicates—enriches—the fabula by specifying his mode of story: "In front of you on this page so that..." The focalizer/actor reminds us that this is a poem: a linguistic, grammatical, and musical (that is, rhythmic and sonorous) presentation of a visual and historical story—Johnny's story—the photograph. Which is frozen, yet has motion because of the focalization. The focalizer/actor's meditation, what Bal calls the "interjacent layer, the 'view'," creates this paradox (146). I'm being debriefed, as it were, on History: personal, public, political, economic, among its other components...all at once. In other words, I'm seeing Johnny for the first time...

Line 3: "You won't mistake him for something else..."

The focalizer/actor has assumed a judgment from me. This offends me, perturbs me. I haven't had a chance to (mis)understand what I've just seen. But, this must not be the first time the focalizer/actor has shown this photograph. He has, quite possibly, witnessed reactions—how many?—that have denigrated Johnny into...

Line 4: "An idea, for example, of how oppressed..."

I'm still in the margins of the photo itself, but I can feel the focalizer/actor dragging me from it and into history. Johnny was oppressed? How would I know from looking at the photo? I may never know, I may never have that luxury of making my own interpretation...because the focalizer/actor ensures that I don't. The word "oppressed" furnishes a new layer to the fabula: this is an event simmering with political ramifications. I think of Marx, Cesar Chavez, of class struggle, of industrialization, of exploitation, and of violent revolution. I think of Benjamin's last two sentences in his twelfth thesis on the history of philosophy: "Social Democracy thought fit to assign to the working class the role of redeemer of future generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This training made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of the enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren" (260).

Line 5: "He was, rising with his pan of Thompson Seedless..."

The next event of the poem...but it's not an event proper. It's the past catapulted to the present via the poem/photograph. Johnny was picking grapes; Johnny is picking grapes. Simultaneous fabulae, chronologically—diametrically—opposed. It—the grape picking—happened back then...and it's happening right now. I'm dizzy again. I turn to Barthes: "This will be and this has been; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake. By giving me the absolute past of the pose (aorist), the photograph tells me death in the future. What pricks me is the discovery of this equivalence...I shudder, like Winnicott's psychotic patient, over a catastrophe which has already occurred. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is the catastrophe" (96). Johnny is now an actor. Johnny is also frozen, in the photo, to an eternity of picking grapes for...what?...twenty-eight cents a pan?

Line 6: "Grapes from a row of vines. The band..."

This line provides the location, perhaps outside the margin of the photograph. Until now, the focalizer/actor has kept me within the rectangular piece of paper. I am moving, slowly, somewhere else.

Line 7: "On his white straw hat darkened by sweat, is..."

Johnny's hat, Johnny's sweat...these are what Barthes would call the punctum: "very often...a 'detail,' i.e., a partial object. Hence, to give examples of punctum is, in a certain fashion, to give myself up" (43). The sweat is more piercing to me than the hat. The sweat signifies the labor, the bodily aches, and the psychological exhaustion. I'm imagining my life as if it were Johnny's. And I'm terrified. I'm no longer myself entirely.

Line 8: "He would remind you, just a hatband."

Johnny speaks...but through the focalizer/actor. This is a crucial transference of thought. I'm in the mind of Johnny now, provisionally. It's all mediated through the focalizer/actor. And the hatband, my sympathetic stylet, is "just a hatband." It's not the symbol that terrifies me. Nor is the sweat signifying hard, manual, cheap labor. It's the sweat, Johnny's sweat.

Line 9: "His hatband. He would remind you of that."

Possession. Anger. Hostile reminders. A lifetime of labor, disappointment, poverty, exile, rage.... It's the emphatic, italicized His. And it's the repetition of the reminding, as if I've already forgotten, as if my mind has drifted, so quickly, elsewhere...back to my own self-pity perhaps: "He would remind you of that."

Line 10: "As for the other use, this unforeseen..."

The focalizer/actor takes the fabula's reins back for a moment. He divulges for me all the events I'd imagined, made up, but never saw firsthand. The focalizer/actor takes from me the symbol of sweat on the hatband. My imaginings were incorrect and wrong. He takes them back for Johnny. He takes me back to the poem/photograph's title, to the hours, days, weeks, months, years picking grapes in the California sun. He takes me from my mind and puts me back in the poem/photograph.

Line 11: "Labor you have subjected him to, the little..."

This confirms my shame. The focalizer/actor knew what I was thinking before I knew what I was thinking...because he has seen it all before. This is my event of shame. This is the moment I begin to change.

Line 12: "Snacks & white wine of the opening he must..."

The fruits of Johnny's labor. The side dish and spirit served at gatherings for the middle and upper classes. And Johnny bearing witness to his own photograph by way of the poem. The always-out-of-reach-but-always-gleaned grapes...Johnny's disdain for grapes must be, by now, ineffable, perhaps pure. I am outside the photograph again. I'm picking grapes again. But he must pick them, he must...

Line 13: "Bear witness to, he would remind you..."

Johnny speaks to me again. The focalizer/actor speaks for Johnny again. Neither of them says

anything new. They're repeating themselves. They're vigilant. They're angry. They're becoming the same person.

Lines 14-15: "That he was not put on this earth/ To be an example of something else..."

On a metaphysical level, I'm longer looking at the photograph; I'm no longer reading the poem. I'm composing the first draft of my obituary, and I'm making very tentative and frantic plans that ensure that I won't do hard, menial labor for the rest of my life. On a very literal level, I'm insulting Johnny Dominguez beyond apology. I'm ignoring him, the individual, the man, the Mr. Dominguez. Because I am frightened. My fabula has taken over, and in a moral sense, that's a mortal sin. Johnny is not an example. He is a man, a man equal to me and me equal to him. I must be reminded of this, of who he really is.... This is...

Lines 16-17: "Johnny Dominguez, he would hasten to/ Remind you, in his chaste way of saying things..."

Johnny speaks austerely. And it's his stare, his posture, and his composure that speak. Which is to say that it's the photo that's speaking, my gaze into the photo I've never seen, my imagination now properly informed—reminded four times now on how and what I should think, feel, see, and hear—and reformed. The focalizer/actor wants me to get it right. After the initial shock and shame I feel, I begin to see not a symbol, not a sign, not an inscription, not an angel blown backward into the future, not the puncturing detail of sweat. I don't even see a poem/photograph anymore. I begin to see a man. That is the event. That is getting it right.

Lines 18-22: "Is not to be used as an example of anything/ At all, not even, he would add after/ A second or so, that greatest of all/ Impossibilities, that unfinishable agenda/ Of the stars, that fact, Johnny Dominguez."

I've not separated these last five lines for a few reasons. First, to catch the crux of their thrust requires unity, not fragmentation. (Of course, that could be said for the entire poem.) The crux is clarity. Objective, verifiable, irrefutable clarity. The achievement of clarity on part of the reader is the event of the poem. The reader is transformed. The reader, all along, has been a primary actor in the poem/photograph. I, the reader, am being addressed, confronted, challenged, chastised, ridiculed, reminded, and finally, transformed. Not Johnny, and not the focalizer/actor. Still, this poem/photograph is not "about" me. This poem/photograph is about one man, Johnny Dominguez. That fact. I don't know his life. I've gathered clues. I've felt things for him and for myself. I've seen and heard and almost tasted. The event is the epiphany. The epiphany is the event. The photo is taken away, and I'm left with my memory of it. It will fade.

There was a time when I all wanted was to understand a poem and a photo the right way. That time has passed. My desire has not. I know I will fail continually. So, I write.

VI.

So what if I'd gone to Richmond to study with Levis? I would have an entirely different image-repertoire. And it would be finite. But my imaged vignettes—histrionic, melodramatic, right—are untamed, open. Pleasure passes through them. These vignettes will be generalized, what

Barthes calls “de-realized,” maybe because they have yet to be realized and will always be on the cusp of realization. They will, someday perhaps, become authentic. Authentic as Johnny Dominguez.

My desire to get it right is nothing more than a confrontation with my own mortality.

Works Cited

- Bal, Mieke. [Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative, second edition](#). Toronto: UP Toronto, 1999.
- Barthes, Roland. [Camera Lucida: Reflections on the Art of Photography](#). trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981.
- Benjamin, Walter. [Illuminations](#). ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 1969.
- Hoad, T. F., ed. [The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology](#). Oxford: UP Oxford, 1986.
- Leitch, Vincent B., Cain, William, et. al. [The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism](#). New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001.
- Levis, Larry. [Elegy](#). Pittsburgh: UP Pittsburgh, 1996.