Introduction to Ronit Matalon’s “Photograph”

As Ronit Matalon’s short story “Photograph” opens, a woman—presumably Israeli—is sneaking illegally into the Gaza Strip while the Intifada rages. But more than the law is broken in this story: the social pressure that keeps Palestinians and Israelis bitterly divided is undermined as well. For it is a Palestinian friend who helps her sneak in, and it is the disappearance of other Palestinian friends that she is determined to learn about. In this sense, as well as in its laconic and unsentimental style, Matalon’s is a highly unusual short story whose stimulus was her own experience covering the Gaza and West Bank from 1985 to 1990 for the weekly supplement of Israel’s prestigious newspaper, Ha’aretz.

Ronit Matalon’s background is Mediterranean and Levantine: her parents were from Egypt, and her grandparents from Italy, Lebanon, and Egypt; she speaks Hebrew, English, French, and Arabic. Born in 1959 in Ganei Tikva, a new immigrants’ town near Tel Aviv, she studied literature and philosophy at Tel Aviv University. On the faculty of the Camera Obscura School of the Arts in Tel Aviv since 1993, she also continues to write for Ha’aretz and serves on the Council for Culture and Art of the Ministry of Education, and on the Forum on Mediterranean Culture for the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem.

She began publishing her short stories in the 1980s, mostly in the literary journal Siman Kri’yah but her much awaited and heralded first collection of stories, Strangers in the House, did not appear until 1992.
and her novel *The One Facing Us* appeared in 1995. She received the Prime Minister’s Award for Literature in 1994. *The One Facing Us*, which continues her fascinating exploration of the connections between narrative, autobiography, and photography, was published in English by Metropolitan Books (Henry Holt), translated by Marsha Weinstein, in 1998.

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**Photograph**

*Ronit Matalon*

First they put the black cowl on my head, just a cowl, a kind of veil, slightly pushing on my back with a long sharpened pole toward the gap in the huddle of bushes.

*Ahalan, ya Nurit, ya Ronit, ya Madame, said Khaled, a young companion. His eyes were white. His clothes were different.*

The photograph as a reflection of the times interests me, I said, as we pulled out our papers, mine yellow, his rose, mine red, his blue, mine white, his white, everything matching. Khaled was pleased: an unusual fit, I could’ve searched for hours, he said gently. Is anyone with you?

I spread my fingers open and he silently counted. One by one, like the cars of a mountain train, the children came crawling through the gap in the bushes, getting their clothes nicely dusty and presenting their fingernails to Khaled to inspect. *Habibi*, Khaled exclaimed in surprise, red gummy bears!

Khaled, I said.

Yes?

I have a personal request.

It’s okay, everything is personal, said Khaled.

No, seriously, I said, seriously. A friend of mine and his wife have disappeared. I telephone and people tell me strange things. Every time I come close, it’s as if little animals nibble at my toes. You think it’ll be okay for you to . . .
Don't insult me with questions like that, he said, I have demons of my own.

So we drove the blue Mercedes to my dead friend's family home and we easily managed to locate the place. The light was dim, deflected, and the begonia plants were burning in the windows, not many of them... just a few. Khaled explained: In this gloomy desert, I suddenly come across a specific photograph... and it blows the winds, the spirits, of life into me. And I blow the winds of life into it too. It's not as if the photograph is alive—I don't believe in photographs that "live"—but it has that something I need to arouse life in me, wake up the spirit of adventure.

I believe it, I said, I really do. Meanwhile the children had fallen asleep and we were glad that they were spared the most difficult part—though not out loud, Khaled admitted it also. He too trembled for a moment as he registered the words "The most difficult part." We went on like that. What does all this have to do with me, I asked. I keep seeing a house that's all inside, nothing external, a climbing vine, pomegranate, flattened iron gate.

This is the house, he said. I looked at it to erase any remaining doubts. It was in one piece, its face sealed like a blank slate. I left everything behind me and came into the house, all alone, repelled, but with a sense of obligation. Khaled entered later on, after he peed. He bowed toward two black female ravens, the sisters of my dead friend. I kissed the palms of their hands, hating the ground they walked on: I love Gaza more than a second skin, this expiation for the ass of the world. I know my friend, and perhaps even his wife, were murdered last night, I said. One of them clutched a long candlestick that lit up the coarse brown wall. Not enough, she decided. I tried again: I need photographs of him, even something like an ID photo, so I won't have an image of his severed head with me for the rest of my life. It's that simple.

They didn't approve or disapprove. They turned the back of their neck to me, that bare section underneath the hairline.

I was lucky I had my excellent position, lucky that I could hide from the suffering behind my own importance, lucky for the sudden transparency of Khaled as a good-for-nothing middleman, lucky I tilted my head slightly when they laid his death on me, lucky that we searched the nooks and crannies of the dark room after the photographs were taken, lucky, lucky, lucky.

We didn't find a thing. Our minds drifted more and more toward the unnatural darkness. We answered the dead's sister's questions after all, claimed the darkness was unnatural, the wall silent, the stone screaming, the dead living through his death and dying through his life: stuff, stuff, and nevertheless, when a man is at stake and not some object, there's a completely different fate contained in the powerful evidence of a photograph. When you look at the photograph of a bottle, the stem of an iris, a chicken, a palace—only the concrete reality is involved. But a body, a face—and even more so, often the body and face of a beloved soul?

We were close to giving up, feeling heavy, sitting on stools and waiting only because it was the polite thing to do. We suddenly spotted something on the rough walls of the cavernous room: a flickering on the walls, brown, white, that seemed like giant close-ups of his face, intermittently appearing and disappearing, when we concentrated. Did they all see what I saw? Could I have caught something triggered in the memory of someone else?

One of the sisters, the bony one, pulled on my coat. Look, she said. She was holding up a pair of man's pants. They were stiff, as if someone was actually wearing them; rigid from mud and coagulated blood.

They're his, she said. No one knew what he thought when he was alone. Everyone mistook him. You, too. They knew nothing. They all thought he was one thing and he was something else entirely. Then that moron went and married that American girl who used to go around kissing the wounds of the poor. So what. She's dead, two.

I fell to her feet. Have pity on me, I said, don't kick me when I'm down.

Khaled turned aside. With his finger, he drew a path leading to the house of the parents of the young wife, the stranger. They got married five months ago in a friend's home, a doctor. Her fine hair grew yellow in the summer, one arm crushed an orange flower on her skirt, the other hand covered her ear to hear better. My friend stands on her right, his face radiant. His mouth is agape, his eyes contracted—apparently from a sense of danger—but the expression on his face defies analysis.

We stood there, Khaled and I, in the entrance of the home of the young wife's parents, next to a strange winter garden, too strange—just like in dreams I hate, said Khaled. This time our paths were separate: the blackberry bushes over there, the tall white flowers, the muslin curtains, all instructed us not to interfere with the intimacy of this experience. Khaled promised to handle the situation, even though, he said after a moment's silence, even though he doesn't have much trust in young
photographers who run all over the world determined to capture current events, unaware that they really serve as agents of death.

My intention was different, I said.

Khaled wrapped the metal lock chain around the gate. He was kind to me for the first time. The intention is always different, always different, he said. But death has to find some place in society—if it’s not to be in religion anymore (or there at least to a lesser degree), it has to be somewhere else. Maybe the same image that tries to protect life really creates death.

I climbed high up on the metal gate so I could watch his image walking away. Goodbye, dark companion, ally of the moment, thanks to your openness we could see everyday life in a place already beyond simple sorrow. Goodbye, attentive ears that occasionally, selectively, would sharpen. Goodbye, half-torn Reebok shoes. When the news will cover the great and the obscure, your memory will stand as an emblem of human-ness.

All this time, the dead wife’s parents were watching us through the living room window, standing side by side, look-alikes. A lock of hair from the mother’s bun dangled loosely on her nose. She was playing with something in her hands. A handkerchief? A scarf? The edge of a curtain?

The father’s head was leaning on the window ledge, his fingers supporting his forehead and holding a cigarette. He’s not from around here. He’s from Cleveland.

You could come in or not, it’s all the same. The vase of Hebron glass will forever be secure in its place in the middle of the table on the handmade oval tablecloth. The straight-back chairs will always face one another, red, said the mother.

I felt profoundly sad. I knew the young wife well and only fear stopped me now from asking about the circumstances of her death. The mother stood in front of me, her arms supporting the rolls of her stomach, her head bent toward her chest, particularly her chin. She was whispering in a colorless monotone, and I bent down to hear what she had to say. After my daughter made this hole her home, this depressing town, we had to believe so we came, brought what was ours, we adjusted ourselves, we made everything fit in. Those pictures you see? She’s in all of them.

Where? I asked.

To see a photograph well, you have to look beyond it or close your eyes. The photograph must be still. It’s not a question of balancing considerations—but of music. We get to complete subjectivity only in the state of trying for silence. Don’t say a word, close your eyes, let every detail emerge by itself and take its own form, said the mother.

Now I saw: how many dozens of photographs there were stuck one on top of the other. They were everywhere—on the wallpaper, on little labels on all their possessions, framed on the heavy sideboard. I took off my shoes, sweating and shaking from fear: in all of them I saw a Madonna and Child, Madonna and Child, Madonna and Child. That’s her, the mother’s voice spoke from behind me. She’s in both of them.

Forgive me, cried the father, forgive me, is this a photograph or drawing? He tilted my elbow, wiping his face with his tattered hat.

Shh . . . I said to him . . . Shhh. I had to understand, the intensity of the knowledge tore me apart. I knew that whether I laid my eyes on the Madonna or the Child didn’t matter. The young wife would come to life again through the power of my look alone, whole, undamaged. She gathered up the hem of her dress with her fingers, drew a lock of hair behind her ear, and stepped out of the photograph toward us, into the strange big room. I could see her, with that same pale bird-like figure and secretive smile. She emerged from the Madonna or from the Child. I recognized her well, but I had to stay silent about what I saw. I had nothing but the look.


—Translated by Gal Keidar with Miriyam Glazer (1992)