The Past

Every year, for many years, I stayed at the Hotel Michelangelo in Milan. It was an anonymous kind of place, a four-star “business hotel” near Stazione Centrale and just across the street from the bus service to Aeroporto Malpensa. I stayed there for a night at the end of every summer since the 1990s (it seems like longer), in transition from the pleasures and pains of Italian family life and art-historical travel, back to my working life in America. It was a redundant luxury, comfort American-style, clean, aggressively neutral, and modern, with the flags of several nations displayed on an array of modest (not to say pathetic) flagpoles outside. In the past, the Michelangelo typically came at the end of a day in emptied-out summertime Milan, a day of ritual visits. First to the Accademia di Brera and the astounding Montefeltro Altarpiece by Piero della Francesca. You know, it’s the one with the ostrich egg hanging above the Virgin from a pristine scallop-shell niche. And then the always unexpected surprise—a number of little paintings by Giorgio Morandi, whose sacred ancestor Piero must have been. Oh Morandi! His Madonna was a leaden-gray milk pitcher, and his young girls were tiny strigilated porcelain boxes on pedestals, occasionally shaded with roseate glazes. Famous for his huddled, beloved objects, Morandi is the artist people tend to forget when they’re not looking. And then to the Castello Sforzesco with good old Bernabò Visconti mounted on high horseback. Lord of Milano, Bergamo, Brescia, Cremona, and Crema. If Bernabò was stalwart in sempiternity, so was his steed. Bonino da Campione was a mighty sculptor of Lombard tombs. I no longer remember who...
made the equestrian Cangrande I della Scala in Verona (Bonino?). But I remember the theatrical grin of this big dog. He conquered a great many Lombard towns, and was known for extravagant mood swings. Dante Alighieri wrote the Paradiso in Verona at the court of Cangrande della Scala, the poet’s “earliest refuge” in his perpetual exile.

In the past, I would walk around from Brera to the Via della Madonna to the boutique of Angela Caputi and her witty, elegant bijoux made of beautiful plastic resins. “My favorite designer!” I would say, glowing with desire. (Now, to my surprise, “vintage” Caputi is sold on a website.) As a younger woman I loved those days, filled with novelty, appetite, and anticipation, and I mourn them now along with everything else that has passed. Going back to America was an adventure every year, and upon arrival in Boston the thrill of transportation lingered for days, maybe even a week.

These days, the trendiest people I know tend to define an experience like my annual day and night stays in Milan in terms of “liminality.” Some people use anthropological terms to describe everything, correctly and not. Yes, the north of Italy was an anthropological adventure in the 1970s and ’80s. I can see that now looking back. But the most liminal space was the Hotel Michelangelo, with its cleansing mechanisms of mega-shower, hair dryer, and a breakfast of fruit, croissant, and cappuccino taken in a dining room with people from Germany, Brazil, and Japan—all deracinated and denatured, awaiting departure. It was in this hotel, on this liminal edge, that a mystery in found photography would arrive in an unceremonial manner. Let me explain.

The Present

It was only natural that when I met the love of my life, following numbing months and years of widowhood, I would take him to Italy. The point is not so much that we spent time in Rimini or Rome, but that David and I ended our ten-day vacation with a day and night in Milan. Our first stop was the colonnade of sixteen massive Corinthian columns from an ancient bath or temple that was garishly out of style, but yet still “fashionable.”

San Lorenzo and Sant’Ambrogio were stupendous, somber, medieval churches. (We did the wise thing not to wait in line for the ruined surface of Leonardo da Vinci’s Last Supper from 1495–98, where visitors are admitted only in increments under raking lights.) The resting place of Aurelius Ambrosius (called Saint Ambrose) contains an ambo with a medieval Daniel, downcast, resistant, swaddled in his tight shirt and skirt, eyes inset with black marble pupils, shouldering the grandiose lions and jumping canines that would eat him alive. Not nude and heroic, like his counterpart in Pisa, not transcendent, but rather bound and burdened. How strange in light of this mighty Daniel that Ambrogio considered the Jews, despite their diligent study, a transient, unproductive people, dispersed like leaves in the wind. He proclaimed this in the fourth century. But Daniel was not made until the twelfth, in an early renascence of the syncretism we find in Michelangelo’s Capella Sistina from 1508–12.

In August the city was dead and the atmosphere depressed, but for David and me it was new and yet still a journey to the past. Our last dinner in Italy at a deserted Milanese cafeteria was desultory, with a hopelessly confused itinerant woman insulting a smart-aleck waiter who refused to serve her. All that remained was to spend the night at the Michelangelo. No beautiful breakfast the following day. For our super-early flight we took a taxi, rather than bus, to Malpensa, grabbed our cappuccini at the airport, and arrived in Boston in the afternoon.

The Past

At home on Cape Cod, David said he wanted to show me something. He reached into his night table drawer and pulled out a small object. It was a fading Polaroid photograph, and its subject was immediately disturbing. A naked figure on a bed of tousled sheets and pillowcases was seen foreshortened, in a semi-fetal position, with head and arms forward nearest the photographer and intertwined ankles resting on one of the pillows. You might call it a nude study. The gender of this subject was not apparent and the face was hidden, under a lowered head of black, shiny, medium-length hair. A slender bony body, whose spinal cord led into the neck in explicit serpentinata, the hands were beautiful, but not sexed. Feet were crossed with grace on the pillow behind. The overall palette of the image was pale and blackish green—those shiny irritating colors made by a technique that was garishly out of style, but yet still “fashionable.”

The most surprising thing about the photograph is that it was set in the bedroom of the Hotel Michelangelo—the industrial textile of the king-sized headboard duly recognizable.

“Where did you get this?”

“It was in the night table drawer of our hotel.”

So it was a picture of the room we stayed in, found in the night table of the room we stayed in, and now transferred to David’s home bedside drawer: a photograph truly en abyme. The mysterious nude was also an object in motion—a transnational image of a person in an inherently transitory place—a hotel room in a liminal city. It prompted a sense of the uncanny in the mind of the beholder: familiar and shocking to the same extent, like a memory recovered in psychoanalysis. Was the subject of this photo a woman or a man? Sleeping or awake? Living or already dead? Who took the picture? Who was the model? But why, why was the picture deposited in the room where it had been made? It had been conserved (for how long?) in a drawer next to the bed seen in the photograph. As for the naked subject, I thought of a slender Asian man, or a young Patti Smith, perhaps. Not a ring or a scar or even a tattoo to identify the epicene body. A model from “fashion Milan”—denuded and deprived of identity? Someone’s beloved? A crime scene?
The Historian’s Gaze

I have heard that Polaroid pictures remain a mainstay of testing in constructing fashion shoots. For me, spring fashion week in Milan was only a distant thing, vaguely related to journalism and photography, known only in paging through *Vogue* or by reading newspaper reports by Guy Trebay. Then I remembered Andy Warhol’s *Polaroids* (1958–87) in New York, in the upstairs gallery of Gotham Book Mart where I worked in the 1970s. Viva came in without makeup to meditate with closed eyes before her own image. Was Gerard Malanga on vacation in Milan in 2013? But, no, his portraits would have been made before. Long before, when I was still young and easy to enthrall. (I met Anaïs Nin in that upstairs gallery early one morning and was conscious of her black dress and black espadrilles. She was seated at a round table in full composure, as though waiting for a portrait photographer; very quietly. I don’t remember whether a photograph was made.) New York had mysterious places and people in those days. There were what the Irish call “soft places” in the city—soft, dark, lambent, incandescent places of enchantment, lamplight on West End Avenue, music. Places that disappeared when you weren’t looking.

Not as shocked as I, David agreed that the photograph was about something mysterious. He had found it and kept it and waited several days before revealing the image to me. He had played the piano for at least six hours before disclosing it. Then the photo was like mercury in my hands, polymorphous and occult. We brooded about the photograph on and off, inspected it for non-conscious clues, for what photography theorists called “the optical unconscious,” for the involuntarily visible minutiae of which even the photographer was unaware. Yet I—by then I considered myself a sort of “expert” on photo theory—was blinded by the visual evidence, by the materiality of the photo itself, and by the obscurity of its purpose.

Our friend Agnieszka was blessed with a wonderful eye for intrigue. Perhaps it was her long experience with French Surrealist photography that enhanced her curiosity, or perhaps it was her upbringing in communist Poland where people didn’t really “have” too many “things” and there was a premium on thinking and imagination. Agnieszka was able to observe things like art and literature at that particular distance that makes one’s spine tingle. It’s what we call fascination. She took the Polaroid to Warsaw for some detective work and then brought it back in the spring, so it crossed the Atlantic two more times before I settled down to look at it again.

The anonymous detective’s statement was phrased as follows, and I report it verbatim.

Your photograph was taken with a Polaroid SX-70. This model was first introduced in 1972 and became available in most stores a year later. They stopped producing it in 1977 but you could buy films for it until 2005. It quickly became a cult object. One of the advantages of it was that one could manipulate the image when it was still not fully developed by pressing its surface with a finger. The effect was that of a blurred or “dissolving” image. This possibility attracted artists.

The photograph is quite faded. It means that either it is rather old, or it was not well stored, or—which is very possible—it was taken with an outdated film. What is most intriguing is that someone has cut out the photosensitive film from its paper frame. He or she made the cut at the bottom and both sides, so the photograph is attached to its background at the top only. This way, one can see that the layer of
white chemicals that protects the emulsion at the back has peeled off and remained on the backing paper. If the cut was made soon after the photograph had been taken, this layer would have stayed on the film. Apparently, the cut was made several months or, rather, years after the photograph had been taken.

The photograph is slightly out of focus, probably because of the insufficient light in the room. The only source of light is a window on the right side (invisible in the photograph). I myself used to work with the same Polaroid camera. My intuition tells me that the photo was taken either in the 1970s or 1980s. For some time, it must have been exposed to the daylight (not a direct light since it is not that pale). It could have, for example, stood on a shelf or a desk.

Since the hotel's rooms were radically redecorated in 1994, the nude study was made after that date (a secure terminus post quem) with a “cult model” Polaroid SX-70, probably shot with outdated film. The layer of chemicals was cut away months or even years after the photo was printed. Did I mention that David found the photograph in the summer of 2013? Although it may have lain languishing in the Hotel Michelangelo's drawer for decades, we thought, rather, that it had been placed there with some deliberation in a revisiting of the site of its creation—the scene, so to speak, of the crime. Probably the photograph was brought back to the place of its making after having been exposed to some light on a table or a shelf in a domestic or studio setting. Thus the pallid tincture, and the probability of the photo marking the anniversary of an event of an earlier time, with intervals of years between making and finding, like an archaeological dig.

All of these intricacies suggest that whoever made the picture was a sort of “professional photographer,” someone conscious of the idea that, “one of the advantages” of the SX-70 “was that one could manipulate the image when it was still not fully developed by pressing its surface with a finger. The effect was that of a . . . ‘dissolving’ image.”

Dissolving didn’t necessarily mean disappearing. Polaroid prints transferred to any kind of paper and admixed with paint create a lyrical effect. I had one by a friend that made me want to paint like Lyric effect. I had one by a friend that made me want to paint like.

To the Subject

Speaking of women photographers, I had recently finished reading Shawn Michelle Smith’s At the Edge of Sight: Photography and the Unseen (2013), which I had set aside for more than a year, just waiting for an August interlude like this. The first color plate in this book is the “first” photograph: Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, View from the window at Le Gras, a heliograph on pewter plate made in 1826 or 1827. Why couldn’t I stop thinking about this reproduction? It is suggestive, a vivid but somehow brilliant shadow with illegible highlights open to interpretation, Whistlerian in its inexactitude. For weeks I mis-remembered this image in terms of the blue tones of Chassonetta Stanley Enammon’s nocturne, Old Pillbury Homestead, a glass lantern slide that is reproduced as Plate 8 in the same book. What did I expect to find in Plate 1, so easily vanished and transformed in my memory? In Smith’s experience, the original first photograph was displayed theatrically in Austin, Texas, with an “excess of aura” in a room darkened for dramatic effect. Hardly anything is recorded visually in this picture. We know its subject by hearsay. Smith shows us what we cannot, in any case, see in a photograph. She is thinking about the optical unconscious, and the faulty or dishonest presence of an image. Vivid, but at the same time utterly indecipherable, as though masking an uncanny subject with a Freudian screen memory.

The camera operator of my found picture was probably in possession of the cult camera Polaroid SX-70. Maybe it was the mysterious model or maybe it was the photographer who returned it to the originary scene, like a letter in a bottle at sea. Or maybe it was the memo of a tryst revisited. None of this was likely and none of this was clear. Contrary to expectations, facticity is rarely present in photography, which is not always conscious and seldom makes things visible. Did photography enhance seeing, or did it block seeing toward a different kind of vision—a more imaginative, interior pursuit? As a beholder I faced difficulty, obscurity, a kind of blindness, in receiving David’s found photographic artifact. Narrative is implied but not released. (This is very different from the implied narrativity of postmodern paintings, which tend to grandiosity on a museological scale. Here we’re dealing with ephemera, abject ephemera, probably forgotten, possibly thrown away.) There is no caption—no View from the window at Le Gras, no Still Life with Plaster Casts. It was the act of finding this picture that mattered. The accidental (and then spoken) finding of this image resonates with the perennial accidental nature of the optical unconscious in photography. How do we deal with this casual, obscure instance in visual culture? Or do we? The only aspect of study to be performed in light of the episode of this accidentally excavated picture is to let the image hover without classification.

MARY BERGSTEIN is the author of In Looking Back One Learns to See: Marcel Proust and Photography (2014), in addition to many other writings on photography.