

MICHAEL JOYCE

“Spending One’s Life Trying To Find One’s Way Home” Meditation upon an installation by Din Q. Le

Buying the photographs in bales or by the kilo
then pinned to a curtain in an uncertain cascade
like butterflies in a seine, the faces flickering
in the vagrant breeze of the white gallery
the guard, a boy in a collarless black suit,
half dozing in the corner on a Chinese bench
chignon and crepe blouse of a young woman
formally posed in a yellowing snapshot, Hanoi,
pinked edge of the print still surprisingly crisp;
laughing young man with a gold tooth and strap
teeshirt, a French bicycle reclining at his feet.
At Neuengamme the blond wood cabinets
held drawers of such photographs, gold crowns
and fillings, faux celluloid tortoise haircombs
quite flammable he recalls his mother saying.
In time the concentration of images wearies
witness, whatever their banality or horror
their promiscuity outlasts. Benign objects
compound and dull us, pince-nez, Shema,
loquets, hat pins, mounds of pretty pearls.
We, too, have drawers of such memories
our pains not the least comparable to be sure
the drawers of the *Lager* close in a whisper,
yet to attend to all these voices is impossible.

A trapezoid of dark tape on the museum floor
defines a perimeter one may not easily cross,
while at Neuengamme painted footprints
mark a “tour path” to the prisoners barracks,
former brickwork, SS base, and harbor basin
where up to their chests the *Muselmänner*
slipped helplessly beneath black water
no longer able to lift brick or arms, eyes
long since dimmed. A few, of course, may
have lived beyond these photographs
though never as who they were then,
Lucille Eichengreen, we know, survived
to tell her story, “It was an ugly world

and we looked away," it begins. Bà
tending to charred dry beef, *Thit Bo Kbo*
over charcoal, surely gone by now, war or
no, the grandchildren at her feet off
to a new world, San Gabriel strip mall
instant photo now become digital kiosk.

Lost quotidian and horrific incommensurable
we are left with what we can account, stack
of fading colored prints still not in books,
an album in which the faces stick to acetate
empty space of an unsmiling group portrait
seated in lawn chairs by a stockade cedar fence.
Ginko leaf shape of an ultrascan someone
sent with a birth announcement, nameless
spectral infant or mezzotint medieval saint.
At Neuengamme the mountain of shoes
just inside the gate was duly captured
by Signal Corps liberation photographers.
In the cafes along Halong Bay in the 60's
the photographers moved among the tables
speaking French to young lovers, *Désirez-
vous un souvenir?* Pretty boys and fancy
girls arrive there still *comme des fleurs*,
gather rosebuds, and, posing, take their
places among the soon to be forgotten.

Wish

Let those who wish to
speak of apricots, tinsel,
twigs, ATM receipts
There is time enough for sorrow
and much of what we've thought
unique about this place
drifts aimless as the skiff
a sheet makes on a balcony.
Ahoy, immigrants call out
but the fast train (Lyon to
Milan via Turin) worms
southward through the din:
philosophically neutral,
unheeding, faintly
sulphurous as in Berlioz's
songs from Faust.

The names of things
are not their music,
trombone or forel
we are held within
what we call ourselves
or are ourselves called to.
Let those who wish to
tell us what they have seen
along the fringe of the future
beach grass, plastic mottle,
achromatic skim of neap tide,
shot silk, random iridescent shell.

The brief half-life of wish
deliquesces to local history,
lyric inventory for instance
a shed left bereft after a long
illness, grass whip, mattock,
the old ladder grey as driftwood,
ropes rotting, rung locks rusting,
what angels could ascend such
rigging, what horizon show itself
past the mottled roof where
the iron river wends its way.