

Random repositories of
precious slivers

I

I don't remember my first memory. That is to say, I cannot recall whether the situation I remember as my first recollection was something I *actually* experienced myself, and therefore remember, or something I made up.

All I have is a mental image of a scene where I'm sitting on the back of a bicycle in a child's seat. We are on holiday on the island of Texel. I must have been three or four years old. The police were there, and I don't know why, but a little later my brother and I were allowed to look inside the police car. We had a view of the dunes.

That's it. But whether I actually witnessed these images myself, or whether they are a construct of stories I heard later, I dare not say for sure.

It's not age-related. Our earliest memories seem to be formed somewhere between the ages of three and four. The memory may well be mine. Of course, memories are fallible; the stories we tell change over time. As Freud once noted, the myths and legends by which a state "remembers" its identity are not so different from a child's memories. Both are malleable, subject to revision, and especially susceptible to forgery. So maybe it wasn't a police car, but an ambulance or the fire department.

Sometimes, however, we have memories of situations where we weren't even present. My aunt once regaled me with a story about how she vividly remembered watching the Apollo 11 landing on the moon. The whole street had watched the live broadcast together. Some fifty years later she still had the images on her retinas. Over time, however, a medley of other people's stories and facts revealed the improbability of her recollection. It was simply impossible for her to remember watching the landing of Apollo 11 because in 1969 she was only a baby of a few months. And while her siblings were, in fact, at their neighbour's house as they were the only ones on their street with a television, my aunt had been at home with her mother. She hadn't experienced the moment she remembered or thought she had. And even if she had been there with her siblings and my mother, it would be highly unlikely that she would have remembered the event, for, as a newborn, she was simply too young.

Neil Armstrong's words and the black-and-white television images of a waving American flag gradually seeped out of our collective memory into my aunt's childhood – an indication that our memory is a highly unreliable judge of which experiences are ours and which are not.

So maybe the police car isn't mine. But where do the pictures I have of it come from? They're not part of a national archive. And as far as I know, no photographs

were taken of the bike ride on Texel, although I remember the scene in images, like fragments of a film.

The photographic memory I have of that moment is not, of course, proof that the memory is really mine, something I have indeed experienced. It's quite possible that I've invented the slivers of impressions afterwards, based on experiences I've had at another moment or with someone else, or taken them from the stories my parents and perhaps my brother have told me.

All I know is that the police car, the dunes and the bike ride are in my memory. The images I can recall are a product of my memory, be it a composite, a concoction, or a derivative of my own experiences. And images of dunes, police cars or Texel can instantly bring those images to mind. They will never leave me.

2

On the door of my fridge are two pictures. One shows the kitchen of my first flat in Brussels. The other is the view from my room in the same flat.

I can describe the photographs. In the picture of the kitchen, for example, there is a table covered with empty beer bottles, full ashtrays, cardboard boxes and lots of dishes. The floor is littered with even more rubbish, and you can almost watch the only chair in the room collapsing. These details are important because that's how I remember the kitchen.

But beyond a space, the photographs remind me first and foremost of a time, a *then*. The disorder is indicative of the way I lived my life at the time. And although there are no people in the pictures, they are there virtually. My flatmates are in these photos, the people who came to visit, the friends I hung out with. And in addition to the people, the world extends to all the places I visited, the music I listened to, the books I read, the student I was.

But what is the reach of a memento? Beyond the initial associations and direct links between this photograph and my activities and occupations at the time, I also see my grandfather, tormented by Alzheimer's, and my tottering grandmother at his funeral. When we left the flat after two years, everyone who had lived there and everyone who had not came to help clean for three consecutive days. The next day, my grandfather was cremated. During the service it started to rain, and outside I held my grandmother's hand and felt nothing but fragility. Are these moments buried in the cigarette butts?

There are no pictures of people in my current apartment. But in their absence they are present, in every photograph lying around. A blurry photo of a bag of Lay's chips contains a breakup. Not that our relationship was particularly based on eating chips together. But I know we were together when I took the picture, on our last trip.

The photographs in my flat are a conduit, some direct, some indirect. On the wall of my living room there's a poster of an artist friend that another artist gave me for my birthday. It's a rather unremarkable picture of a tree. The tree doesn't remind me of anything. The scene leaves me indifferent, but the poster is dear to me: it confirms a friendship.

And next to my bed there's a photograph of a little card with a mother monkey and her baby on it. It's a photograph I took of a small colour picture from a series of collectible animal cards, probably from the 1970s. On the back was the name of the species in both French and Dutch. I don't remember how I got it, the piece of paper itself has no special meaning to me, and I don't know if I still have the original card. But the picture I took of the card with the two monkeys reminds me of a drawing I did as a child that hung in my nursery for a long time: a hand holding a small stuffed monkey. *My* hand holding *my* stuffed monkey, which I lost. The drawing itself was a memory, the picture of the collectible card is a means of preserving it.

3

A few years ago, I became a regular visitor to the flea market on the Place du Jeu de Balle in Brussels. Every weekday morning you stumble over discarded household items. Sometimes you knock over an antique lamp or accidentally break a relic from one of the great chapters of world history, which suddenly turns out to be worth a fortune.

Different, but not unlike the white walls of a museum room, the flea market offers plenty of space to look at things in isolation. There are all sorts of stories in the objects that make their rounds on the square. The stories of their former owners are now obscured by the alienation that results from such a recycling cycle. I have often found myself wondering where these things came from, who they belonged to, and where they will eventually find a new home.

Sometimes I've marvelled at the curious finds one makes there, like a parcel of postcards sent from all corners of Europe to an art historian in Leiden. Intimate and kitschy – the pictures of Bernini and Michelangelo and cathedrals and the kind wishes that, when repeated, reveal their emptiness.

One day I came across a collection of Kodachrome slides. As a photographer by training, I couldn't just pass them by. I tried to disguise my interest with indifference, hoping to get the price down a little. The family snapshots were in relatively good condition, and after my failed attempt to negotiate the unreasonable price, I took them home and pulled out my grandfather's slide projector, examining each slide as if it might hold a clue to a forgotten but unique past, a story in need of discovery.

Perhaps, too, because I had paid a small fortune for them.

I didn't find much of interest. Blurred photos of an interior. Time and again, the shadow of the photographer, probably the father. Lots of family snapshots and a Keeshond that kept reappearing. I've forgotten most of it by now. The slides are gathering dust in a damp basement.

But there is one slide I've hung in front my window, a picture of a mountain landscape. The dark blue sky is crystal clear. The camera pans up slightly to a snowy mountainside leading to a pointed peak. Beyond the peak is the white outline of more mountain crests, running in a sloping line from the top left to the bottom right. The horizon in the photograph reveals the unsteady handling of the camera.

What's striking is that the photograph is not taken horizontally, but vertically. The horizon, often the dominant feature of a landscape, is clearly of secondary importance. It is a beautiful visual reminder of the verticality of life in the mountains.

But whether the photographer intended this when he took the picture is impossible to say. In the middle of the photograph, on the top of the mountain, there's a chalet. I suspect that the reason for the photograph lies in this quaint little grey building. The structure is a narrow, tall hut made of what looks like shimmering aluminium and steel. It contains four superimposed windows. On the roof are a number of aeriels of various sizes and formats, as well as several parabolic antennas. I don't see any people in the picture.

As soon as I have the opportunity, I head for the mountains. Preferably a little higher every summer. Through spruce forests, over short grass meadows, between gravel and past impressive boulders, you finally enter a world that is disappearing at a spectacularly alarming rate: the world of glaciers and eternal snow. And every time I see a mountain hut in the distance, I think for a moment of that crooked photograph and wonder if it could be the chalet it shows.

4

The relationship between memory and possession is a peculiar one. I can never be sure that the images I remember from different periods correspond to actual events and situations.

So perhaps it makes little sense to distinguish between "proper" and "improper" or "authentic" and "inauthentic" memories. But in fact I can't even be sure if all the things I believe I remember, and that have become part of the person I take myself to be, have been experienced by me. So, apart from a transgenerational memory, memories appear to be transitive and can change the course of my life in quite concrete ways. Both stories and images are capable of travelling from one place

to another, so to speak, to take up residence there.

Memories are probably always personal; they are stored in my view of the world. They may be shared memories, even public ones, but they are always mine. I appropriate them. And they can be triggered by a variety of objects or experiences, of which photographs are perhaps the most obvious because of their quasi-direct, visual relation to the world we perceive around us. But of course, photographs are not unique in their mnemonic function. Everything that surrounds us, including the places we visit or have visited, the food we eat or the clothes we wear, becomes a potential repository of recollection. Like a private space, public places are places of memory.

Thus a seemingly minimally furnished home is infused with an endless succession of times and people and emotions and possibilities. I am never alone. Maybe that's why we go on holiday. Not to discover new places, but to escape old ones. Because places tell stories.

I could have chosen other photos to preserve the same period. Perhaps I chose the photo of the kitchen in my student flat because it reminds me of how I never want my kitchen to be. Perhaps the choice is an aesthetic preference for the flash, which makes the opacity of too much chaos somewhat appealing. Perhaps it's a combination of several reasons; some photos are simply there, for no particular reason. And with some photos I have an unclear relationship.

But the pictures in my apartment belong to *me*. For people who are not part of the memories they evoke, they are primarily scenes, perhaps beautiful or ugly pictures. They are mine, except for one. The silver hut on an unknown mountaintop can never really be mine. As a result, the photograph retains a certain mystery, and the mysterious allure that the image has always held for me is perpetuated by it. Like the police car, the hut is in my head and never leaves. They're everywhere.

What I like is that the surface of a photograph, on which very tangible things can be seen, does not have to get in the way of the imagination. Despite its technical and indexical character, a photograph can always be so much more than what is depicted. It's the involuntary associations that Roland Barthes called the *punctum* of a photograph.

A photograph that I *know* can be transparent, as it were. It can give me access to endless assemblages of memories: I no longer see the actual photograph, only the world of which it was a part.

But a photograph whose stories I cannot decipher and whose actual surroundings remain hidden, as it were, closes all possible doors. This refusal of access can continue to speak to me through the banality of what can be seen: the oblique shot retains a certain openness precisely because it reveals nothing. The cabin clings to my memory like a cog, eager for recognition. Without a

story, everything is possible. And the possibility of association lurks, waiting for me to attach a story to it myself, which in a way I have already done, or have always done spontaneously. The hut stands on the Place du Jeu de Balle, which I have crossed so many times.

I tend to agree with people who assert that photographs aren't primarily about something like truth or demonstrability, but primarily about putting us in the presence of something. Regardless of who owns a photograph and what is on it, whether it is transparent to me or not, it can always connect us to another place, another time, another person.

Do photographs pertain only to the past? Judging by the number of photographs we take, one could say that their potential is expressed more in the present than in the past. But even if photographs don't address the world outside, and their function shifts from sharing to preserving personal memories, they don't just talk about what used to be.

Photos of the past are a record of a moment, showing something that one can hopefully say happened. They confirm the now; they speak in the present tense because they're about the past. John Berger beautifully described such photographs as "quotations" from reality. But most of the images we see, often without realising it, are meaningless to us and do not relate to either the present or the past. That is, they do not relate to the temporal arrangement of *our* lives.

And today, perhaps, even the photographic images to which we relate bear less of a trace of history and are more part of an ongoing stream of consumption in which their relationship to the past is somewhat dissolved. But even these photographs will remain memories somewhere between the time of opportunities not seized, choices not made, and the other courses our lives might have taken.

In this sense, my iPhone is not much different from a photo album in the closet, and the pictures in it have a melancholic character. But in the melancholy lies an open connection to the future. For like photographs without "history", souvenirs of a past always operate in the now and possess a similar openness, as long as I am aware of the possibility that memories are always in some sense constructions, and thus not static but fluid and malleable.

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