An Unknowable Mystery

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A FEW WEEKS ago, a Sunday supplement published an interview with yours truly, illustrated by three studio photographs taken for the occasion. On the afternoon when I arrived for the photographic session, I wasn't, as I recall, in a particularly bad mood and nothing very dreadful had happened to me. True, I was in a hurry, but I submitted patiently enough to the tedious business of posing and sitting around. The result, from my point of view, was not at all flattering: in all three portraits I look like a horrible, vicious, unpleasant person, not unlike the images they used to print on wanted posters for murderers on the run. A bad-tempered individual whom I myself would hesitate to approach for fear he might turn nasty. A killer. It's true that journalists and photographers take special pleasure in choosing the worst shots and I understand this and know how much it amuses them, just as TV cameras deliberately focus on an interviewee's bald head or on the hole in his sock, or capture the moment when he's scratching his nose or when he sneezes. It is nevertheless true that there was a moment, the moment captured by the camera, when we did look like that, just at one particular moment, in a particular light and from a never-to-be-repeated angle. Those circumstances may well never be repeated and we will therefore never again be that person or appear like that to anyone else, but the same applies to good photos, the ones we feel pleased with and that even flatter us.

The truth is that we don't know what we look like because, among other reasons, we're always changing. Mirrors don't tell us much: we see ourselves the wrong way round, our left eye is our right eye in the mirror and vice versa, and since we're all slightly asymmetrical, our reflected image is very inexact. I always give the example of Cary Grant, who wore his hair parted—very precisely—on the right. If we were to see him as he would have seen himself in mirrors, with the part on the left, he would doubtless seem like a different person entirely. I'm not sure that television or video reproduce us very faithfully either (those of us, that is, who appear on television or own a video camera). The situations in which we're filmed are so artificial that I doubt very much that our way of speaking or moving corresponds to any other moment of our lives—which is to say, most moments—spent without an audience. I hate seeing myself on a screen; I look like such a fraud, which is perhaps why I want to think that it's a false image. And that's despite my trying, on television or in photographs, not to do anything I wouldn't do normally. A little while ago, I refused to be immortalized by a magazine in the act of jumping, arguing that jumping wasn't part of my normal, everyday life. Then they asked me to stand holding a globe of the world in my arms. Again I replied that this wasn't something I would normally do. Finally—they were, of course, looking for an "unconventional" shot—they asked me to take a step forward, and I agreed to that, since I take steps all the time. During a television interview once, years ago now, I was urged to do all manner of silly things: as a young man, I used to play guitar very badly, and so they handed me one to play, but I wouldn't strum a single chord, saying that I might mess it up and how would they explain that to the person who had lent it to them; then, because as a young man I used to perform acrobatics, they asked me to do a pirouette for them right there and then, and again I refused, arguing that if I fell awkwardly, I might wreck the set or break a spotlight. When I shared an apartment with my father, photographers were always fascinated by his study, which was a chaos of papers and books that filled sofas, armchairs, and the floor. They always said: "Oh, let's do the photos here, it's got real atmosphere." In vain did I tell them that it wasn't *my* atmosphere and that I was, in fact, extremely tidy. Consequently, there are dozens of images of me buried in books and mounds of paper that had nothing whatsoever to do with me. My study never looks a tip.

It seems that nowadays we all have a fairly clear idea of our appearance, and yet I still hold that this remains an unknowable mystery to us all. It isn't just a matter of how others see us—and they might view us kindly or otherwise—but the fact that we ourselves are often disconcerted and astonished when we see ourselves: "Is that me?" or "Is that what I look like now?" What we should really ask ourselves is why we continue to believe that we stay the same from childhood into old age. I don't think it's ever due to the enigma of our changeable, multiple appearance, but to a convention and to a faculty. That convention is the name we bear, and that faculty is memory.□

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)

Magic

The Michigan Central Terminal
—now only a hollow shell surrounded
by double chain-link fences and ignored—
was once the scene of my enlightenment.
At sixteen, still blond, still Nordic, I walked
the blue-blooded pets sprung from their cages:
mainly emaciated borzois
bound for Florida or California,
though now and then a baby Bengal prized
by the Dodge brothers of automobile fame.
Later I graduated to watering the elephants,
tiny ones from distant zoos or circuses
who showed such patience and understanding
with my ineptitude. When I grew into
myself, squat and bull-necked, I worked
the long afternoon shifts unloading boxcars
crammed with the treasures of a world
I'd never dreamed: from France an elixir
called "Penrod" in elaborate bottles
studded with medals and calling forth
memories of stolen dime-store moments,
a cardboard carton that terrified us all,
weightless, scored with skull and crossbones,
marked RADIUM in letters a foot high.
We placed it alone on a wooden trundle
and stood back, awed, as before a holy relic.
One midnight my new-found companions
introduced me to the common miracle
of Seven Crown and cherry schnapps with beer
for chasers and burgers fried in pork fat—
four for a dollar—served in Spud's café.
Some of the Irish and Albanians
liked to fight, especially on Friday nights
after our shift. My friend Carey, who loved
the music of Lester Young, told me one night
if I cared to take part I was welcome.
I felt honored. At the appointed hour
behind the bar across from the terminal
we waited for the Germans from Downriver,
while Carey beat out the rhythm to "Lester Leaps"
with his black, cracked boots called "stompers."
He was so happy, so much the total Carey,
chanting, "This is my night" to a hazy sky.
I could see semis gearing down on Fort Street,
but not the familiar stars, icy and pure
in the black sky of April, 1950,
loyal companions throughout my childhood.
Though Carey raged, the Germans never showed,
a loss he took personally as a betrayal
worthy of a Judas, a verdict against creation.
Never again would the moon and stars converse
with a solitary soul trudging home
on Fridays filled with the knowledge a week
has ended changing nothing. When I tell
my grandkids I grew up in a magic world
in which cats and dogs traveled first class,
snow arrived as late as June to cool
the switch engines, and elms and maples
sprang up full grown overnight between the tracks
and held their leaves through a dozen seasons,
they wink at each other and pretend I'm sane.
I never mention Carey or his friend,
the Mexican middleweight who hit me
for saying you could spell Catholic without
a capital "c." Although I'd known facts were useless,
something essential vanished from my world
when Carey joined the air force, the county
cut down the last family of copper beeches
to make way for US 24, and the full moon
turned its back on me for the duration.
Two years later, Carey, back from Korea
with graying hair and a flying cross,
smashed his old 78s of Pres cut
before World War II, the high tenor cry
behind Billie Holiday that took us closer to paradise
than we'd ever been. It took me years to learn
a way of walking under an umbrella
of indifferent stars, and to call them "Heavenly
Bodies," to regard myself as no part
of a great scheme that included everything.
I had to put one foot in front of another,
hold both arms out for balance, stare ahead,
breathe like a beginner, and hope to arrive.

—Philip Levine