

**April, Raymonde. — «A fly in paradise». — Thirteen essays on photography. — Ottawa : Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, p. 195–207.**

**A FLY IN PARADISE**

**RAYMONDE APRIL**

His shadow lay over the rocks as he bent, ending. Why not endless till the farthest star? Darkly they are there behind this light, darkness shining in the brightness, delta of Cassiopeia, worlds. Me sits there with his augur's rod of ash, in borrowed sandals, by day beside a livid sea, unbeheld, in violet night walking beneath a reign of uncouth stars. I throw this ended shadow from me, manshape ineluctable, call it back. Endless, would it be mine, form of my form? Who watches me here? Who ever anywhere will read these written words? Signs on a white field.

JAMES JOYCE

*Ulysses*

SUMMER

I am here for the summer.

I often think of my work in terms of the seasons, because it follows such a definite rhythm. I trust this rhythm, which I know from experience never changes. Each time I head into a new creative period, I feel the need to step back and look at my life from a distance. My creative cycle is not unlike that of a school year. Summer is an important season.

During the spring and summer I make a lot of photographs. My contact sheets are filled with outdoor scenes, with landscapes and, most of all, with people in landscapes. In the summertime I step outside my everyday existence. I plunge into another life, timeless and fundamental, though less familiar; a life that I observe even as I live it.

Then, before fall sets in, I go back home. I pore over my contact sheets, establishing relationships between the images gathered so spontaneously. I arrange them into series, give them titles, decide on formats. I begin to really see their content and the elements at play. I plan what shape to give them. The more I look at them, the more they seem like illusions or like visions whose origins

will be remembered for a while longer. They are like white pebbles hidden in the hollow of my being. One day, almost without my noticing, they start to shift and become disorganized again.

In the deep of winter I settle down in the darkroom and begin transforming these images into works of art that I will later exhibit somewhere. I look them over affectionately, then renounce my claims on them forever. After that they belong to those who will view them. Some people read them as biographies, as though they were personal histories recorded in literary form, like a diary or memoirs. But I prefer to think of them as expressing a photographic present, a never-ending now that lives on in my favourite images, within a space that is theirs alone.

## THE OBSERVATORY

I said that I was here for the summer.

I am living with Gérald in a house overlooking the St. Lawrence River like an observatory. It is an imposing structure that could easily have been a hotel. It has a name because the people who used to live here made wood, leather and metal crafts, and they ran a shop here to sell their work. The house is called La Chimère, and it lives up to its name.

Perched on a cliff, it has what is curiously known as a “view.” We soon realized that it did not offer that sensual connection with nature that is the charm of summer cottages; no direct contact with the dry, rustling branches of the trees, no rising tides to flood the castles in the sand. Its windows open only to the wind and the scent of freshly mown hay wafting through its rooms on the breeze. We live on the third floor, and I work in the attic. Our feet never touch the ground. A pathway leads through the woods and over the fields to the river. We go there on expeditions, equipped with all sorts of paraphernalia. The surrounding area we explore by car.

We spend a lot of time on the roof. We look through binoculars at the vast perspective. We enter into it through the tiny details — the changing shape of the clouds, the flight of the sea birds. We sweep the horizon in a pattern that would drive a sea captain crazy. The landscape is so immense.

Faced with a panorama like this, the camera is powerless. All it can do is clip out a few scraps of horizon with no depth — as if we needed a visual reminder of our own insignificance. So I take no photographs. I love being here like this, buoyed up on the wind from the sea, looking across at mountains as unreachable as the stars, sitting on the sidelines like an attentive spectator. I am

profoundly moved by the differences of scale, by the boundless perspectives, and I feel that I am living in a romantic painting, with an ocean of mist at my feet.

But then one day there are cracks in the roof.

In a fortress built to withstand the elements, childhood memories flood my mind with tales of legendary storms. We have so much water below us, but it is water from above that finally filters down on us. Grey and yellow drops seep in around the joists of the ceiling, dripping onto the curtains, the table, the musical instruments and the boxes full of negatives.

We are caught in a trap, like mice.

## ROOM OF LIGHTS

We lie in bed in the master bedroom. Eyes open, I watch the walls where the headlamps of passing cars cast squares of light. Following the twists and turns of the road, the beams appear from a distance, pale at first, then flood the entire room for a brief second at the curve. After that, nothing. The night grows even darker than before. Then the cycle resumes, in a sequence repeated over and over again. Hurrying home, the drivers know nothing of the effect they create.

I get up and go to the window to watch for the next car. My eye is caught by the shadows of the trees against the house, dancing a stately saraband. Inside, the windows project geometric patterns. I start to plot the trajectory of the beams and shadows, as though I had to choreograph the whole performance for some future ballet.

Now we are both watching, holding hands. We are silent and still, small and gentle, together and alone, like in a movie theatre. I am reminded of a friend's mother who used to say it was always better to be two, if only to look at something beautiful together.

We are spectators. If we were actors in a film, there would be a script. We are merely present. The only action is the creation of a marvelous setting with no characters. It is like a film of which the critic writes, "The real star is the rugged landscape of such-and-such a place."

A few years ago I made photos out of thin air, with effects created entirely through lighting and perspective. I transformed everyday objects and studio walls, and gave substance to the space between the objects. Under neon light or flash, these airy nothings became fleeting structures in

the afternoon sun. I turned light bulbs into comets. I made grandiose compositions from simple images. Often the back or the silhouette of a spectator would enter the realm of my special effects, adding a human dimension, caught up in my game of worlds in miniature.

My summer home reminds me of the studio in Montréal where I created *Cabanes dans le ciel*. Located on the fourth floor of an apartment building, it too was perched high above. Faint sounds of the street drifted up to its windows. The sun poured in and all the floors were creaky. I would go there to think, to read, to make photographs. My friends had set up tables there, and the materials they left lying around — brushes, pieces of wood, cardboard, found objects — were my treasures.

For a few seconds more, my eyes follow the path traced by the light as it rises and falls. Then I go back to bed. I fall asleep in a giant camera.

## THE LANTERN

In the evening, the house is a lantern instead of a giant camera. No one can see me, sitting on the roof of my giant lantern. But I see all the lights shining below me: the yellow rectangles and diamonds of windows lined along the fields, and the sign of a diner gleaming in the distance. Hidden from view, I can watch my friend when he comes to the kitchen window to stare at the moths fluttering there, pensive, a cigarette in hand, in the listless attitude of someone looking out with no inclination to actually go outside. Like the shadow of the trees, his shadow is the merest whisper of his presence.

In the country, people take an interest in the performance put on quite unintentionally by their neighbours. There is always useful information to be gleaned, rudimentary but reliable: “Someone is home, because there’s a light on,” or “They must be home, the car is in the yard.” It is tempting to circumvent a logic so naive. Lovers having an affair will park at a distance, but even on the back roads someone is sure to discover them.

## RHUBARB AND SMALL TOMATOES

I am still photographing myself with a tripod-mounted camera. Despite all my experience with the field of the camera lens and the space in which I persist in posing, I never get used to it. I still have trouble focussing, because I cannot see myself. I have given up all hope of technical

perfection; now I just take my chances. I do not always have my tripod within reach, nor is there always a large piece of furniture or flat rock on which to place my camera. Sometimes I ask someone to help me. Occasionally people volunteer spontaneously, and so the photo they take of me becomes one of my photographs.

There is something very touching about couples on vacation. They are victims of the camera's cruel limitations. They cannot simultaneously kiss, see themselves kissing and click the shutter. They are forced to ask for help from the first passer-by with a camera around his neck, and they have to settle for just any kind of kiss.

One day in September 1985, I went out into the street to photograph. I was looking for lost and lonely objects. The night before I had set up my tripod to photograph myself in my apartment, and got nowhere. I photographed trees near Jeanne Mance park; they were side by side in front of the hospital wall, their shadows reaching out for each other without connecting. I was alone and feeling sad that day. The empty park benches echoed my mood. But not the people. There were old men playing cards and young people riding their bicycles. I would have liked to be invisible. In the shadows, trying to avoid attention, I held my camera at arm's length and began to aim it at my face. A passer-by saw me, and came up and offered to help, but I refused. I kept on going, photographing myself outside store windows filled with drab mannequins, in front of houses and inside a crowded café. That day I got four uneasy images that are now part of the series entitled *De l'autre côté des baisers*. Apart from these images, the series includes portraits of friends looking right at the lens, offering their faces to the camera, and pictures of myself in various situations, taken by friends.

Two years later, again in September, I went out into the yard to photograph myself in front of the tool shed. With its doll-house appearance and its tiny, climbing tomatoes, it looked like something from a fairy tale that day. I had never seen it in this light before, although I passed it every night when I came home.

Trying to be inconspicuous as always, I first concealed my tripod between the two doors. This was because of my landlord, who lived downstairs. A retired man, he spent much of his time looking out the window and chasing away strangers who tried to park in the yard. But the screen door made it very difficult to move. Cautiously, I set up the tripod on the landing. No sooner had I finished than my landlord stepped out to chat about the weather.

I was trapped. I was very fond of my landlord. There was no way I could go back inside, much less ask him to leave me alone. I valiantly kept on with what I was doing: adjusting the camera, setting the timer, moving in front of the lens to pose — a procedure I repeated over and over again. My landlord did not seem to notice anything unusual. If I moved, he moved with me, talking about complicated matters even as the shutter clicked. Yet not once did he enter the camera's field of view. I watched the neighbours coming and going in the street as if nothing was wrong, all the while staring into the distance or at the sky. Then we had an aperitif, and I went back upstairs with a gift of small tomatoes.

I like to think that the words spoken when a photograph is made remain hidden somewhere in the printed image, and I often try to remember the words associated with a favourite photo. I know it does not really matter. But that day's photographs are true to their origins.

Yesterday I photographed myself for the first time since coming here. I was alone, the way I used to be. I was on the roof, badly dressed, my hair straight. I was holding a large bunch of rhubarb and looking off into the distance. Gérald was on the shore down below. Standing on a rock at the edge of the underwater world, holding his telescope, he was shouting insults at the gulls. He was too far away for anyone to make him out in the photos. He did not respond when I waved at him. I was alone, and for once no one would come to help me.

#### MONA LISA OF THE PARKING LOT

There was a time when I made small, very dark prints of my photographs. Some were no larger than a postage stamp, mounted on a large sheet of white paper. This size intrigued me because of the intimate dialogue it set up with the viewer, the factual details that could be tucked away and the intellectual rather than visual impact it created.

Later I made large prints that became lighter and lighter as I incorporated documentary accuracy into the composition and began to appreciate the beauty of facts experienced through fiction. Hand-developed in large fibreglass window boxes, these images had a strong presence both physically and visually. Held at arm's length, their grainy texture commanded attention and slowly led the eye to discover networks of lines, spots and details unnoticed at first glance. On the wall, they left the viewer free to draw closer or move back, and to accept their figurative and abstract content like a painting.

The largest photo I ever made was installed in the Algoma Steel parking lot in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, in the very centre of a multicoloured field of cars and trucks. It was a black-and-white print depicting a tiny figure of a woman sitting in an imitation leather chair, under a television set, between an air conditioner and a telephone, in what was obviously a motel room. It was a photo of me, which I composed and which was taken by a friend in Portland, Oregon.

I had been invited to create a large-scale work for a public area in Sault Ste. Marie. I thought it over a long time before accepting the invitation.

The only image I brought with me was this one, entitled *Femme au motel*, printed the size of a billboard, three metres by four metres. I looked around for a place to install it. There were some lovely natural settings. Then, in my car, I drove to one of the parking lots on the edge of the Algoma Steel Company industrial complex. I circled the lot several times under a sky grey with clouds that seemed to pour out of the factory's countless chimneys. I had found my second image. I did not go to look round the factory, preferring to keep a safe distance from this infernal city that belched red.

After installing *Femme au motel* in the parking lot, I often went back to see the two of them together, the woman and the factory, the woman's back to the factory, a Mona Lisa smile on her face, the steel mill looming over the horizon with its ash and its black smoke. Sometimes, through a trick of perspective, the factory looked like a toddler playing at the woman's knees. Most often, however, the woman seemed to disappear among the chimneys and the metal roofs. *Femme au motel* was like a postcard lost among hundreds of cars. Yet the woman's face alone measured thirty centimetres across, and there was enough room to park two trucks underneath the photo. But it was only an image, and a small gesture: a woman greeting the workers.

Leaving the factory in small groups, the men would stop, their curiosity aroused. I would try to tell from their faces what kind of work they did. They would ask me jokingly if I were a boozier, or if I often went to motels. I would reply that the photograph was a story. They often compared the installation to a motionless drive-in theatre or suggested their own interpretation: their wives were at home and their mistresses waiting for them at the motel.

I did not want to say too much, or admit that sometimes I waited for the telephone to ring. They were in a hurry to get home after work. I left an image there that would greet them day after day for months.

## HEROES OF THE IMAGINATION

I choose to photograph everyday life. I want to work where the distinction between life and art is as narrow as possible. My images must be ordinary, concrete and easy to recognize, but they have to be strong and meaningful as works of art. Photographing myself among the rhubarb leaves, I know that I will simultaneously look like someone else and myself. If I succeed, the same will be true of my clothes and the rhubarb. I seek transformations and levels of meaning. I want to create a poetic journey that is inviting and open to the most ordinary interpretation.

There are people who look for omens at every step they take, creating a system of mysterious associations. Others are terrified by thunder and will gladly tell you why. Still others give nicknames to everyone they meet but forget their real names. There are some people who never throw away photographs, even when the people in them are strangers. Others have no concept of the meaning of fiction; they believe sad stories and cry at the movies. There are also people who clown around and adopt exaggerated or ridiculous poses when they are photographed, but whose faces remain expressionless the rest of the time. Finally, there are people who imagine they can make the sun come out again by keeping their Bermuda shorts on, even in the rain.

I am attracted by people who mould reality to fit a secret and highly personal anarchistic vision. They do not necessarily produce works of art. But that is not their goal. They relate to the world in a magical way that transforms and fictionalizes. People who describe their dream lives are not trying to leave their mark on the world. They create something they do not finish — perhaps because they love it too much, or they keep wanting to change it or they have nothing with which to replace it. I like this fable-making form that fragments reality, changes facts into symbols, speaks in solemn tones and mixes its tenses, periods and characters. It helps me to compose my images, to see them and most of all to put them together. I am also fond of images suggested to me by storytellers, fetishists and superstitious people.



## THE GUITAR

Gérald found the white guitar that was stolen from him years ago. A subway musician sold it back to him. Gérald paid cash, without even bargaining. He is happy to have it in his hands again. But it is in terrible condition. Tonight when we came home, he set it down under the coffee table, speaking to it tenderly. Time to rest now. Tomorrow he will take it apart completely so he can repair and repaint it before putting it back together again.

The next day, sitting at the kitchen table, equipped with tiny screwdrivers, he dismantles it piece by piece, placing the parts in small, numbered slide trays. Once the sorting is complete he puts the trays in a shoe box, which he tucks away on the top shelf of the cupboard. The only parts he keeps out are the neck and the body, two carefully shaped pieces of wood as sensuous as sculptures. After covering the table with newspaper, he turns his energy to the marks left by rough handling. He sands by hand with finer and finer grades of sandpaper. He enjoys this kind of work, it calms his nerves. Suddenly he realizes that it is dark outside, he is still in his housecoat and he has not eaten all day.

A day later he begins to spray on the paint, coat after coat, sanding between applications. He uses the paint left in the case by the subway musician, but there is not enough. He gets dressed and goes to the hardware store. He tries to find the same colour and brand. After making the rounds of all the hardware stores in the area, he has to settle for a similar colour in another brand. Inevitably there will be small differences in colour, but the old colour, antique white, was too yellowish for his taste anyway.

He works in the summer kitchen which serves as a storage space in winter. It is cold there in December. The room is poorly ventilated. Black specks of dust keep landing on the freshly painted surface. Still another coat is needed, and it is never quite perfect. One evening Gérald announces that the painting is finished, and he begins applying the varnish. The odour of the varnish is strong. He has to open the window. The cold is bad for the wood — especially for the neck, which might warp. Feeling dizzy from the fumes, Gérald decides to get some fresh air. A few days and several coats later, he notices dark lines under the varnish, probably caused by the sandpaper. Frustration sets in, and he considers turning his attention to some other project.

The completed neck is smooth and shiny. He wants to decorate it with some ornament, a sort of good-luck charm. He tries several before choosing a bright red little bird and a sparkling blue

stone. Eventually he decides he does not like either one. He takes them off, sands and varnishes again, and sets to work on some sketches. After three afternoons of painstaking work, the masterpiece is complete. It is a magnificent red and black fire-breathing dragon, worked entirely in nail polish.

But that is not the end of the story. Now the body of the guitar looks dirty because of the black streaks. This tarnished look is simply unacceptable. Gérald thinks it over, then decides to change the colour. He always dreamed of having a fiery red guitar. He likes red clothes. That settles the matter. This time the dust will not show so much. He will be able to finish the work in less time.

After a few coats of bright red, he is satisfied and begins to apply the varnish. He is anxious to finish and get on to something else. He uses varnish of the same brand as the paint; you never know. But for some inexplicable reason, the varnish does not harden. It feels tacky, even after several hours. Exasperated, Gérald scratches it, at first by accident and then on purpose, with perverse delight. His fingers are stained with red. Close to tears, he throws the ruined part into a corner of the workshop. Three days later, he realizes that the varnish has dried as hard as nails, leaving the scratches plainly visible.

Rather than getting upset, he goes out to buy new pegs to replace the old ones. The ones he finds do not fit the small holes in the neck. No matter, he will simply make new holes with a drill, being very careful. But the red body of the guitar seems to be scolding him; Gérald decides to resand the whole thing and go back to the original colour.

After a vigorous sanding that leaves his fingers skinned, Gérald starts over with antique white. He accepts the dust specks calmly. He feels relieved to see his white guitar again. The red set him on edge. He buys a new plastic varnish that is supposed to dry to a hard finish. At the first drop, another catastrophe: the varnish dissolves the paint and it starts to blister. On the verge of depression he decides he has better things to do. He would sooner play music. He sets the guitar aside in a corner. He will wait till summer to strip it down to bare wood, and then he will stain it. Cherry red. Yes. The other colour was not the right red.

A few months later, sitting at a proper workbench, Gérald makes a first attempt to strip the guitar using a solvent. It does not work. So he goes to the shopping centre at the corner to buy a stronger paint remover. It works well except on the undercoat, which is probably a plastic; he has to sand again. A friend lends him her small electric sander. After a whole day's work, Gérald concludes

that he will have to do something with the neck of the guitar. But he likes the dragon. That night he dreams that the wood is of poor quality and not worth the trouble to restore. He gets up to check, then falls asleep again, still worried.

The moment of truth is at hand. Without making a single test, Gérald applies the stain directly to one face. The effect is like a fake mahogany finish on cheap cupboard doors. It is botched, the way a bad haircut is botched. Gérald gives up. Obviously, the guitar is the stronger of the two and wants to be white. Luckily, the neck is not ruined. Pretending to laugh, Gérald pantomimes throwing the guitar out the window.

He is becoming a familiar face at the corner hardware store. Today he bought two cans of antique white spray paint and two cans of the same brand of varnish. He does not have much time left. It is late August. He has to work on some new music for a production. He remembers the quality of the sound of his little white guitar. "To hell with it," he says to himself. "I'll just get the job done without worrying about it too much. Or maybe I'll start over next year when I have more time."

#### THE OTHER SIDE

When we sit on the roof at night with all the lights out, we gaze at the stars. We look across to the other side of the river where tiny lights glimmer in the distance, though we cannot tell exactly what they come from: a beacon, a house, a fire, a plane, a telephone pole, a car? Their constant flickering has an uneven rhythm. Probably because the light has to pass through several layers of air before reaching us.

Gérald asks me suddenly, "When you were little, watching the lights in the distance, did you ever wish you were over there? Over there instead of here, I mean?"

I rummage around in my memory. I think not. I liked to watch the lights and repeat to myself the words "over there." But I knew that the lights over there were the same as here and came from a beacon, a house, a fire, an airplane, a pole, or a car. I loved them from afar. He confesses he has never looked at the lights in the distance without feeling in himself a deep longing to go over there.

"Even now?"

"Even now."

## PARADISE

Fall is coming. The air feels crisp already. In the evening the sun sets in a different place. At night we have to wrap up in plaid blankets to watch the shooting stars. The birds are already congregating in flocks along the river's edge. They no longer sing the same songs as they did in summer, at the height of July, when the sun drenched our hair. Maybe they are not the same birds. The fields are alive with giant grasshoppers. We talk of all these changes to make ourselves realize how time is passing, as though we have neither watch nor calendar to count the days we have left to spend here.

Back when the sun drenched our hair, we spoke of paradise, of a magical state that would go on forever, fresh and new every day. We were bathed in a golden light that cradled us in the air and calmed our bodies. We told ourselves we could live here for the rest of our lives, that we had never known anything like this before. Night after night we were present as the setting sun turned the sky to flame, and we felt honoured and blessed. The tiny lights on the other side of the river sparkled, and we talked about this strange, numbing, frightening happiness. We spoke of our irrational fears. The fear of being pulled under and drowning in the current of the falls where we used to swim. The fear of having a car accident. The fear of a witch hiding in some cranny of the house. The fear that the other might suddenly stop loving and leave. Montréal seemed far away to us. We were in a little corner of paradise. When I thought about it, I realized I had been striving for a state like this in my photographs, especially the latest ones, the ones of figures with their eyes closed, standing in the light, formal and unreal like statues of saints in churches. These figures surrounded by surrealistic visions, substantial and shadowy at the same time, I called *Les coeurs en bois de rêve*. They were like trees in the forest that one takes for living creatures.

At night we dreamed dreams in which objects and animals could speak. In the morning we awoke younger, as though we had somehow returned to childhood and, like children, were eager to greet the day. We set up studios in holy places, like the attic or the old workshop, and we would go there to dream again by the windows. We were not disappointed that we had produced no masterpieces. All the photographs I took seemed dull and empty, grey, faded and small compared to the life I was living.

Although I had always worked in black and white, I began to long for colour. I started taking photographs like an amateur, trying to store up memories like supplies for winter. Of course the

colour in the pictures disappointed me. Then, out of curiosity, I printed them on black and white paper, and I liked them best of all.

The composition was different, crude, sensual, happy. I saw the original colours more clearly when they were hidden under the black and white. And I wanted to keep these photographs to myself, like secrets.

Our friends who were spending the summer near us were the first to go. Gathered together one last time around a fire on the beach, we talked about how quickly time passes and how difficult it is to have no regrets. I questioned my friends about paradise. Some spoke of their fears. We talked about time, about the tenses of verbs in language and the expression of time in photographs. There are past-tense photographs so full of death they hurt the eyes. Others are in the imperfect, as improbable and as inviting as the intoxication of some evenings. There is the present in its multitude of forms. I wanted my photographs to be in the present, because the present is immense. They told me that some are in the present and some in the present perfect, and that only the past is infinite. And that summer is the best time for reading Proust.

As the fall approaches I once again see my images gain power. They become almost phantasmal. A brooding sky underlines their strangeness. They will take over the darkroom. Already their only reality is their separate existence, their life as photographs.

*August 1988*

*Saint-Roch-des-Aulnaies, Québec*