

Dead Kennedys

by Gary Percesepe

I have a recurring dream. I am a boy climbing stairs to the top of the Texas Book Depository

I enter a dark room. A man stands hunched by the window. I see now that he has a gun.

I sprint to the window.

I am always too late.

I do not understand memory. Specifically, how memories become collective. Can a nation have memory? Is there a collective brain? Is it the internet; is it TV, CNN?

There is a book called *Shooting Kennedy*, by David Lubin. Inside are the usual photographs. Jack and Jackie sailing at Hyannis Port. President Kennedy smiling and confident in Dallas, with the first lady by his side, radiant. The Zapruder film. (Why is it never called a movie? It has a beginning, a middle, and an ending. It tells a story. There is an arc to the characters' story. Something changes over time. It is tragic. And so on.)

Jackie Kennedy veiled in black. The skittish horse, Blackjack; the boots backward in the stirrups. John John salutes.

The book blurb: "In *Shooting Kennedy*, David Lubin speculates on the allure of these and other iconic images of the Kennedys, using them to illuminate the entire American cultural landscape. He draws from a spectacularly varied intellectual and visual terrain--neoclassical painting, Victorian poetry, modern art, Hollywood films, TV sitcoms--to show how the public came to identify personally with the Kennedys and how, in so doing, they came to understand their place in the world. This heady mix of art history, cultural history, and popular culture offers an evocative, consistently entertaining look at twentieth-century America."

The French novelist Marcel Proust believed that memory is lodged in things; memory adheres to objects, it is not located in the heads of people, not tucked in a mental container located somewhere behind the brow. The narrator of *A la recherche de*

temps perdu tastes a madeleine, releasing a flood of memories; it is a work of three volumes, and over one thousand pages. That's quite a cookie. But no longer than the stories we could tell from the barest encounter on the train of a scent of a woman we once knew, or a sweater that resembled one your mother wore, or the smell of my father's shaving lather in the morning, the aesthetics of our average everyday existence.

When we lose an object of value—a photograph, a favorite item of clothing, a ring, a house we once lived in—do we lose an essential connection to ourselves? In the gospel Jesus tells a story of a woman who lost a coin. She searches everywhere in the house, and rejoices when she finds it. What is the lost coin in us? What does it mean to "lose" a friend? Someone has said, "A true friend is like another you." Have we killed off something essential in ourselves, then, when we lose a friend? When we relocate an old friend, do we get ourselves back, or is everything altered, so that, try as we might, we cannot recover what is essential, which lies hidden from the eye?

Death, as Terry Eagleton points out, is both alien and intimate to us; neither wholly strange nor purely one's own. To this extent, Eagleton says in his book, *After Theory*, one's relationship to death resembles one's relationship to other people, who are likewise both fellows and strangers. The absolute self-abandonment which death demands of us is only tolerable if we have rehearsed for it somewhat in life. (This idea is as old as Plato's *Phaedo*.) The self-giving of friendship, says Eagleton, is a kind of *petit mort*, an act within the structure of dying.

One February night I was a guest at the Lodge in Sun Valley, Idaho. It was my birthday. I had drinks outside in the pool with a friend I had not seen since high school. The stars were shining. Steam was rising off the water. Around me guests were splashing, laughing, and drinking. I laughed with them. But on the walk through the hallway to the pool I had seen on the walls photographs of the dead, guests before me. Averil Harriman, Austrian Count Felix Schaffgotsch, Ernest Hemingway. Bobby Kennedy, his chin tucked and his gaze averted in that familiar way, on the slopes of Bald

Mountain. There was also Teddy Kennedy looking fit in a new ski jacket, circa 1968. These photographs were not "iconic." They were new to me. These are the images that I saw in that long, narrow hallway as I walked over to join my friend in the pool.

She looked at me, my friend. I barely knew her, in her new life out west. What did she see when she looked at me? She wasn't saying, and I didn't ask. But we went on looking, as if trying to find something we had misplaced. We had once skied together back east, a long time ago. We had sat in classes together, walked the halls, and ate lunch in the cafeteria. We may have been lovers, but walked in separate directions one fall day before the start of college. But had I loved her, once upon a time, in memory. Yes. Was I then a repository of images and memories for her, a link to her girlhood, a place-holder of time and memory, a way back to the self she once was? What we were to each other could not be separated from the events chronicled in the hallway of the dead, our memories lodged in the body. Who were we? The tenses of time were spinning. We were two New York kids on a cold winter night, in Idaho. We were at least that.

