

## **Ef ég hefði verið ... (If I had been ...)**

*Sigrún Alba Sigurðardóttir*

"At least you think you can remember, you believe you remember, but perhaps you are not remembering at all, or remembering only a later remembrance of what you think you thought in that distant time which is all but lost to you now."

Paul Auster

I look at a photo of a little girl in a wool sweater who holds a horse by the reins. She looks at the photographer and her expression of concentration is a sign that she takes her job seriously. She is responsible for the animal, which is considerably larger than she, many times heavier and a thousand times faster. Nevertheless, she must show that she has complete control of the situation. The sense of satisfaction that comes from the perceived power is enough to dampen her fears. She looks away from the horse, looking directly at the photographer. A moment later, when the photographer has clicked the shutter, she relaxes her clenched fist and calls her father, asking him to take over. Her father praises her and takes the reins from her, and her mother laughs and puts away the camera.

I evaluate the photograph again as if it is me. I see myself and feel the soft breeze of this Icelandic summer day, how the breeze carries the smell of horse, dirt and grass.

Unconsciously, I press my lips together when I concentrate. My eyes do not fix on the face, the glance of the eye or the blonde locks that are now beginning to gray. I get a magnifying glass and what captures my gaze is the angled fist grasping the reins, small fingers that hold the leather strap and touch the cold metal bit. I feel the hot breath of the horse on my fingers. I hold on tightly and sense how all of the concentration existing in that small body is shown in this detail.

The body is where memory resides and the body is composed of both the tangible and the intangible. On the other hand, unlike memory, recollections belong to conscious awareness alone and are definitely intellectual stimuli, driven by the power of reason and language. The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur has in this context distinguished between memories that are repetitive and memories based on imagination. For him, among other things, memories and imagination separate man from other animals, as the girl is distinguished from the horse. The horse can recollect the past, the girl can use her imagination to give a past moment

substantive meaning. In her mind there is the close relation between what is taking place and what she perceives with her body, emotions that awaken within her, and her ability to find a particular moment within the time she specifies as past, present and future. The moment thus becomes part of a larger narrative sense that can be evoked many years later. Our ability to remember is closely linked to our ability to dream. Without dreams we fade. Our lives are an eternal recurrence of the same.

Nina Zurier grew up in Detroit in the United States in the 1950s. She first came to Iceland in 2002. The feeling and experience that comes from walking the streets of Reykjavík with a north wind in her hair and slush in her shoes was familiar. She decided to come back again—and again—and again. One day she sat in the Reykjavík Museum of Photography and flipped through photo albums and film contact sheets and wondered what her life would have been like if she had been born in Reykjavík and raised there. This was the beginning of her research into photographs that show the reality of children and adolescents in Reykjavík in the 1950s and 1960s.

Nina has created a story about a life that was not lived, but nonetheless had real events, real situations, tangible things and real emotions. The narrative is based, in other words, in the reality of what actually occurred, but is nonetheless a product of the imagination. A dream about what was not. A unique experiment with imagination and reality.

American writer Siri Hustvedt, who was born in Minnesota in the 1950s, has pointed out that creating poetry is a way to remember that which never happened. When we use imagination to give the past a life, the past becomes real. The actual and the imaginary both share in what we call memories.

If the imaginary takes the upper hand it stops memory from existing and the same thing happens when reality becomes too overwhelming. If the reality of the past overwhelms us, we can no longer distinguish the past from the present moment and we lose our memories, but still are rich in experiences that we are incapable of expressing.

Photographs have reality to thank for their existence. Photographs show us the inevitable reality as it was at a given moment, and it is irrelevant whether the reality is staged or not.

The photograph shows us what was—regardless of whether what was meant to be or not. The truth will exist when reality meets imagination—when objective reality meets subjective reality. Author Paul Auster, husband and soulmate of Siri Hustvedt, has discussed how a text creates a strategic relationship between two consciousnesses—the one that writes and the one that reads. Siri adds that thus facing each other not only do two consciousnesses meet, but also the subconscious minds of the two individuals, the one that writes and the one that reads the text. I would argue that, in the same way, the photograph represents a meeting of the conscious and the subconscious. There, a passing moment meets the past. The awareness and the subconscious of the photographer as well as the conscious and subconscious mind of the viewer affect the meaning of the photograph.

When Nina Zurier chooses images and arranges them, the narrative gains a new meaning. The fact that she was born in Detroit and not on Bergstaðastræti will cause us to look at the photographs from a new perspective. Nina is a stranger in this land and gets us to look at things from a new perspective. Details draw us in. A previously familiar reality gets a new meaning. Dirty sneakers in the cloakroom in the Voga school make me think about muddy Icelandic school grounds in the spring when the snow begins to melt and the ground thaws. From the real memories Nina has created artificial memories to re-ignite the real memories within me. I remember the smell, the texture, and the shoes that I never had but looked at with longing when my classmates put them on. They were boy's shoes. Black and white. They were still popular in the 1970s.

The photographs are not only records of external conditions, the texture and shape of objects, the style of the coats, the cars, and the behavior of adolescents. They are also a source of information about a smile, a glance, a touch, all these intangible emotions and states of mind. Through photographs we find a connection with the past. My consciousness meets your consciousness and meets therefore the third. The subconscious mind floats through this magnificent meeting of different consciousnesses who do not know each other. It is not until we invite the imagination to play that we begin to understand that the glass Coke bottle is not just a glass Coke bottle, but a symbol of the days when all worries were pushed aside and daddy got paid; that the posed girl photographed in an armchair on New Year's Eve in 1952 had not only a satin skirt that rustled but also the anxiety that the forced and rigid posture

indicates. Imagination creates empathy and compassion—but sometimes it creates nothing but nonsense—and then it is good to be able to search back through reality, and to be able to find what once was real.

In the artist book *If I had been ...* Nina Zurier considers the other as herself. She places herself in the situation as well, she makes it her own. She makes a life from the lives of others. But the lives of others cannot become our lives except to a certain extent. Similarly, one can argue that our memories are not part of our past except to a certain extent. The one who remembers is not the same as the one who experienced. Our ability to experience ourselves as the other—to see ourselves from the outside—is a prerequisite for creating our memories. Without this ability we would have trouble distinguishing our experience in the past from the present moment. We could not look at a childhood photograph of ourselves and find the moment that the image shows, a place in the story of our lives. The ability to distinguish the past from the passing moment and see ourselves through the eyes of an outsider allows us, however, to be able to create a story of our own lives—to use our own memories to create a connection with the past—even if it involves the risk that we begin to remember what never occurred.

In the artist book *If I had been ...* Nina Zurier offers you an encounter with the past and reminds you of the freedom that comes from using the imagination to dream. Dreams are the creative force that enables us to wake up to reality again.

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The book is available from [Crymogeia](#).