

## “My Blankness Exquisite”: Michael Robinson’s *The World is Not Enough*

*Everything is cryptic, crystal-queer*

-James Merrill

The poem tells the story of a trip to the post office – an attempted exchange between our speaker and his distant sweetheart: a postcard to be sent, a letter to be retrieved. But this is not how it goes. The letter is trapped beyond the dim pane of a broken post office box, the service window is un-manned and the stamp machine unyielding. Finally, and without explanation, both un-read letter and un-sent postcard are washed into unreadability by the wet snow of a winter morning: words melting unspoken into white surfaces.

The poem is called *Getting Through*<sup>1</sup>, a phrase that, in light of the story’s failures, smacks of bitter irony. But I suspect a lurking sincerity of meaning here. What, after all, is getting through? Perhaps some pictures will resolve the uneasy focus of these words.

Photographs have many inherent failings, and one thing that they can never seem to do is get us through. They can bring us, expertly, to any number of thresholds, in front of a scene, an object or a figure, but their dimensional collapses – of time and space – will never allow us across. They are intractable in this refusal. The problem, though, is that they do not make this intention clear. Vilem Flusser, writing in 1983, asserts that the danger of what he calls “the camera program” is its illusionary suggestion of access: “technical images,” as he calls them, are screens that we mistake for maps. We scan a surface and conclude that we have gleaned the understanding that will let us through. This, he insists, is never the case. We are eternally captured in the misreading of surfaces that suggest entry but suspend agency. The transparent illusion of the medium keeps us hostage from experience. But Flusser holds out a hope for the possibilities of the camera image. A “Photographer,” as he heroically defines it, is “a person who tries to make photographs with information not contained in the camera program.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Merrill, James, *From the First Nine, Poems 1946-1976* (New York: Atheneum, 1976), pp. 99-100.

<sup>2</sup> Flusser, Vilem, *Towards A Philosophy of Photography*, trans. by Anthony Mathews (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), p. 60.

Michael Robinson's image series, *The World is Not Enough*, offers many photographs of explicit thresholds: screens, windows, windshields, televisions. Already there is a particular doubling of the flat threshold that the photograph asserts. But this is not the half of it. The pictures stand beyond a layer of opaque white marks, themselves reproduced beyond the frame of the final image: an image of a world beyond a physical threshold, suspended behind three laminations of framing and distance. This is particular flatness indeed.

In front of these photographs, one's eyes snap immediately to the white over-painting in the image. The marks feel narratively discursive within the modernist language of traces, time and thought: an atomized mapping of temporal subjectivity. But they are not alone. True to the function of the artist's medium – Wite-out corrective fluid – these marks expose a gesture of addition that is also always an act of obfuscation. They cover up, and they do so with no attention to the depicted frames and spaces beyond them. The drawing speaks to the surface, but is unconscious of the image. We learn from these marks that the surface has no regard for the scene. Here, then, is where the accumulated depth of flatnesses collapses. These marks insist – along with Flusser's critique of photography, and Merrill's un-read missives – that we are not getting through.

Yet, as with the poem, these pictures do not feel like refusals. Robinson's compound photographs foreclose representation but open onto the image's surface as the site of transaction between the viewer, their desire and the image. The marks map the recipient's history of longing – for meaning, intimacy, history, understanding – projected and laid over the picture. And this, of course, is where Flusser would want us to read the invisible text of the illusionary experience of picture-viewing.

With photographs it is always, in some sense, only on the surface of this technical mirage that we can locate experience. As with letters between lovers, the sheet of paper is always explicitly not the object. It is, though, the instantiation and documentation of desire. This, then, is why Robinson's photographs – like the dissolution that animates the poet's melting postcard text – insist that the still image is always agitated. The images live in our dynamic acts of projection, not the false pedagogy of penetration.

Why, we might still ask, is the world not enough? And how, exactly, are we getting through? I will hazard that these two questions are more or less the same, and further, that their unwinding lies at the feet of the romantic and phenomenological discourses of the poetic image. Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* – a text much-loved and mostly misread by photographers – talks of the image's dramatic emergence from language into the reader's imagination as the perpetual and powerful dynamic of presence in the reception of poetry. It is a process almost explicitly anathema to the presentational realism of the photograph. Bachelard calls it a "sudden salience on the surface of the psyche,"<sup>3</sup> and here we are brought back to Robinson's pictures. They are not images of the world because the world, excerpted and fossilized in the picture plane, is never enough. Rather, they are maps of the viewer's deeply cathected processes of projection. We make it ours by desiring of it, and that alchemy – ever enacted and deferred – is photographed here.

But are we still not getting through? Merrill concludes his narrative of failed transmission with the following lines:

The stationary store's brow drips, ablaze  
Where the pink sun has struck it with the hand  
Of one remembering after days and days—  
Remembering what? I am a fool, a fool!  
I hear with joy, helpless to understand  
Cries of snow-crimson children leaving school.

The poet reclaims not knowing and not having – the inconclusiveness that characterizes unfolding experience – as the suspended and radiant point of self-consciousness. We are salient to ourselves through the liberation of desire from its supposed object. We are getting through, but only – and intimately – to ourselves.

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<sup>3</sup> Bachelard, Gaston, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. xv.