

***An Unkindness of Ravens*, Claire Maxfield**

Essay by Jennifer Good

‘Certain violations of the social contract are too terrible to utter aloud’, writes psychologist Judith Lewis Herman, ‘This is the meaning of the word *unspeakable*.’

Violence shatters and creates fragments where there was once a whole – a whole sense of self, of safety, of place in the world. In the shattering, language often fails too, because it is a system that depends on a consensus of referents, understanding, the naming of more-or-less stable things and concepts. Hence survivors of traumatic events often struggle to name or express their experience in words. Herman says that it can be difficult ‘to see more than a few fragments of the picture at one time, to retain all the pieces, and to fit them together. It is even more difficult to find a language that conveys fully and persuasively what one has seen.’ In fact, Herman, who has written about traumas from the collective (such as war) to the individual (such as rape), likens traumatic memory to ‘a series of still snapshots or a silent movie’. Beginning with the fragmented raw material of sensation and images, which may be concrete objects or reside solely in the mind, the goal of recovery is to re-integrate these pieces into some kind of cohesive story.

Claire Maxfield writes that her process was instinctive, ‘systematically scanning and sorting boxes of old negatives from that particular time in my life. Back then I would basically photograph anything and everything. The camera was my connection with the world which I otherwise had disconnected from. Always analogue, the process was really important in keeping me going.’ Arriving at a point of being able to tell the story of a traumatic experience out loud, in writing, or in some other narrative form represents a reconstructing of one’s subjectivity as that story is integrated into our sense of self. ‘Every now and then from the images I was scanning I’d have an idea of text that connected with it. Yes, it was definitely a way of making sense of it...I was attracted to the imperfect images, and when I accepted that, I was able to continue to shoot new ones to illustrate words that were in my head.’

Maxfield is insistent that she is not a writer, but to me the fragments of text gathered together with her images are at times almost unbearably powerful. Some point to the logic of internalized abuse in the mind of abused: ‘He’s doing this to make me a better person’; ‘I stay again, I hate myself again’. Others hint at the circumstance, offering indications of physical brutality that are absent from the photographs: ‘A termination, a concussion’; ‘Cider, more cider and bleach’.

When John Loengard, editor of *Life* magazine, first saw Donna Ferrato’s famous photographs of ‘Garth’ hitting ‘Lisa’ in their New Jersey bathroom in 1982 (which went on to form the basis of *Living with the Enemy*, her seminal work on domestic violence which has so far gone on to be re-edited by Aperture four times), he remarked, ‘You have done the impossible. I didn’t think domestic violence was photographable.’ There are many reasons for the overwhelming invisibility, or impossibility, of photographs of domestic abuse. What exists instead is a strong tradition of photographers approaching violence obliquely, indirectly, in images that transcend the immediate moment by choosing to address the much longer phase of sense-making and recovery. This very often takes place in stillness, in the sometimes

mundane, sometimes beautiful 'everyday'. It fits with a long-standing convention of photography substituting symbolic objects for violence that is un-seeable for ethical, editorial or practical reasons. It is not only the substitution, but the temporal displacement of violence that gives such images their power. Their stillness and composure can perform a kind of therapeutic, integrative function, through the creation of space.

The fact that *An Unkindness of Ravens* is made up of archival photographs as well as more recent ones reflects the fact that the sense-making process following violence is not linear. Here, it performs a literal sorting, ordering and 'working through' which might have little to do with any realistic chronology, but captures the internal logic of a mind and heart. As I look, I do not know which of these images were made in what order, and I am not privy to the layers of personal meaning and signification that each one inevitably carries. I put the weight of my own interpretation on them, guided by the captions. For me, the overwhelming feeling produced by this combination of quiet imagery with such heart-rending text is tension: it makes palpable the quietness and the waiting, stepping on eggshells, wondering if today will be a good day or a bad day. Victims of domestic abuse know that even if the very bad days are rare, this just serves to draw out the fear that occupies the waiting in between. Maxfield tells me about one of the images, captioned 'Waiting for Doctor Green': 'it was taken seven years after I had left the situation, but for me it sums up the project. In rural terms it means waiting for spring grass. It has implications of being hurt, and a sense of resignation.' So I'm only half right: the pictures show what it looks like to wait for healing, as well as to wait for the next moment of threat.