

Manifesto

“The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it,” writes Flannery O’Connor. When reflecting on my work and the works of others that have had an enduring significance for me, the common thread tying them all together is this commitment to presenting the truth at all costs—however fractured, ugly, or violent it may be.



Romania, 1990
James Nachtwey

Time Magazine released James Nachtwey’s photo essay “Romania’s Lost Children,” which included *Romania, 1990*, six months after Nicolae Ceausescu’s rule over Communist Romania ended in 1989.

This haunting image bears witness to an atrocity so great that words alone could never do it justice. Much like Edvard Munch’s painting, *The Scream* (1893), *Romania, 1990* pulls you in and has you asking why.

In 1965, Nicolae Ceausescu declared abortion illegal for any woman under 45 who had not yet produced four children. Tens of thousands of infants were abandoned and left in the care of the state after Ceausescu’s reign ended and were either placed in orphanages, psychiatric hospitals, or, for the ones who were disabled, in “institutions for the irrecoverable.” The conditions were deplorable; the children were malnourished, forced to share cribs and baths, and if they became agitated, they were tethered to their cribs (Hunt, 1 1990).

This one image—this tiny glimpse into someone else’s reality—was enough to transform the way I saw the world. I still remember the carpet in the room where I first saw this photograph. My mother tells me I cried all night long and then demanded we adopt a Romanian child from one of these institutions. Unlike a drawing, a painting, or a sculpture, photojournalists like James Nachtwey have an advantage because you cannot refute the squalid conditions at Romania’s “institutions for the irrecoverable,” just as you cannot claim that New York’s skyline looked the same on Sept. 10, 2001 as it did on Sept. 11, 2001—Nachtwey’s pictures are the evidence. But it is not the technical elements of Nachtwey’s photography that have left an impression on me. It is his dedication to giving a voice to the voiceless that I admire and hope to emulate with my writing.

Words can be just as powerful as photographs at evoking strong emotion. Poetry teaches that if you can select the right words, in the right order, that you can create an experience more powerfully felt than any photograph. Philip Levine’s poem, “You Can Have It,” is powerfully felt—not because it uses lofty language, grand style, or because it elevates the soul towards the sublime—but because it captures so precisely the experience of blue-collar industrial workers in Detroit.

Thirty years will pass before I remember
that moment when suddenly I knew each man
has one brother who dies when he sleeps
and sleeps when he rises to face this life,

and that together they are only one man
sharing a heart that always labors, hands
yellowed and cracked, a mouth that gasps
for breath and asks, Am I gonna make it? (9-16)

Am I going to make it? That one question sums up the human experience. At one point or another, we've all gasped for breath and asked, Am I going to make it? "You Can Have It" and *Romania, 1990* resonate because they capture human experience more concretely and with a greater degree of actualization than other, inferior works. That is why it is so important for writers and artists to utilize their talents to give a voice to the voiceless.

I believe it is an urge to know more about ourselves that develops into a fascination with the plight of others. Empathy allows us to transcend our differences and see the world in a new light.

Words, like images, have resonance. They have meaning and carry weight. That is why it is so important for writers and artists to draw attention to critical social issues. Making other people aware of what's happening in the Congo is more important to me than useless bickering over which art movement has it right or wrong. It's as if we are saying to the hundreds of thousands of Congolese who are denied the most basic human rights, 'Sorry, we're too busy high-fiving each other for totally sticking it to the bourgeoisie to care about your plight!'

It is not that I'm opposed to re-evaluating the established standards of taste, or that I think that I have somehow developed a style that owes nothing to anyone who came before me. I simply think that there is more important work to be done.

I want to write something that will resonate with readers, the way "You Can Have It" resonates with me. I want to shock them out of complacency the way *Romania, 1990* shook me to the core. I don't care if I break literary conventions or if high school students write five paragraph essays about me someday. I will be satisfied if I can make one person see the world through my eyes. It is empathy—that willingness to see things through the eyes of others—that forces change. That is what I want my writing to accomplish.

Works Cited

1. Hunt, Kathleen. "Romania's Lost Children" *New York Times* (1990), 1-2, [http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?sec=health&res=\(accessed 11-7-2006\)](http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?sec=health&res=(accessed 11-7-2006)).
2. Levine, Philip. "You Can Have It." *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry*. Ed. J.d. McClatchy. New York: Vintage Books, 2003. 314-316.