

*Martha Morseth*

# **Parallax**

*of time, technology and the camera*

## **i. At First**

Life through my box Brownie Kodak camera  
was always black and white. Best friends,  
Babs and Pat, grin at my lens, their lips

dark against teeth, their faces shades of grey.  
My special Sunday coat, doubled breasted  
with silver buttons, may have been navy,

but it's only a dark coat-shadow I hug to myself  
in the photos bordered in white, fastened  
to night-sky pages of an album coming apart,

the binding broken, the small, hard corners  
once holding memories firm, now falling away  
like our past, when we lived in monochrome houses

built on pale grass; swam in charcoal lakes,  
wore ebony lipstick to match our nails,  
rode to picnics in hearse-coloured cars.



## **ii. The Kodak Target Brownie**

She's fourteen and happy, those years ago,  
laughing from a second-storey window

of a high school classroom, her face in sun,  
brick walls behind her, her friend leaning

from another window, holding the Target  
Brownie, yelling 'smile', before work begins,

before the class tumbles back to desks,  
before the slam of door and the teacher,

dark haired, severe in a stiff dress and frown,  
stands as tall as the blackboard, holds the book

of answers, tests each student in turn, like  
dominoes collapsing from the surprise algebra

drill and no fire drill to scream escape  
down the twenty-six polished wooden steps

to the safe geometry of footpaths and grass.  
If only there'd been more questions before

her turn, before she slipped in the swell  
of wrong answers and drowned in guesses.

In the reprieve of the yellowing photo, she laughs,  
her shoulder-length hair touching the white

puffed sleeves of her new peasant blouse. The  
friend with the camera, what was her name?



### **iii. Special Effects**

Old movies filmed  
in black and white,  
no special effects,  
only the camera twisting  
to show the hero fall.  
The shutter closing  
for time passing, the  
heroine dreaming.  
Mystery was easier to  
fabricate; dark-edges  
outlined setting;  
characters moved  
in shades of grey.

Our Kodak Brownie,  
also black and white,  
had no effects, couldn't  
tell us where to stand,  
when to avoid sun.  
Silhouettes were always  
accidents. Distant forms  
could be lovers, their  
shadows, ambiguous,  
suggesting story lines.  
Now shots of bush walks  
seen with electronic eyes  
are only that; nothing more.



#### **iv. Before Close-up and Zoom**

Before fillings and nasal hair,  
moles and pores, asymmetrical  
smiles and blemished complexions  
all pixilated themselves onto  
big screens and glossy magazines,

we remembered ourselves as  
fuzzy-focus gorgeous, long-shot  
good-looking, shadowy romantic.  
Cameras kept their place, recorded  
only the distant images they saw,

three giggly girls, friends on a ferry,  
their backs to a railing, clutching  
their coats against the cold, waving  
at the fellow tourist, a stranger,  
who agreed to take their picture.

My wide-shot photos of New York  
show science-fiction landscapes,  
grey towers like jutting rocket ships,  
eager to slit the heavy sky, and  
the agitated sea where underneath

amphibian monsters bide their time.  
On city streets dinosaurs lumber among  
the buildings, preying on populations  
who hide themselves in tiny squares  
of emulsion affixed to albums.



## **v. Two Dimensions in Black and White**

A woman and a boy sit on  
the edge of a tractor tyre,  
her arm around his shoulder.  
He wears a summer shirt  
dark as his jeans. A dog  
stares beyond the frame,  
its head turned away  
a black spot over the right  
eye, its neck straining.

We piece together partial  
memories from the photo's  
clues: the cottage behind,  
an overgrown garden,  
fruit trees unpruned. We  
wonder who else was there:  
someone preparing a picnic,  
icing a cake, stirring homemade  
lemonade, blowing up balloons?

Or was it a limbo time, after  
endings, before beginnings,  
their smiles showing how well  
they're doing, how much she  
loves the boy. We try to recall  
their names, piece together  
their future, wonder why they  
are pressed so tight against  
the tyre, why the boy's eyes  
are closed, what the dog sees.



## **vi. When Light Overshadows Truth**

“The innocent and the beautiful,” Yeats  
once wrote, “have no enemy but time.”  
Our photos prove him right. An error

we learned too late: hoarding those images  
from the day a professional time-catcher  
seized our beauty and youth, and possibly

innocence, and fixed them on paper in  
black and white profiles, slices of ourselves,  
one-dimensional lies we kept in an album

on a shelf, for easy access and reassurance.  
Without an artist to manage light, so shadows  
fall just right, so leaves on ordinary trees,

framing our faces, become exotic, our hair  
fingered with morning sun we'd never much  
noticed before, our skin like satin: without

the fraud of a favorable lens, we have to face  
what's gone, look at semblances of what we'd  
like to think we were, of what we'd like to be,

would have been if life was a better camera  
and we had the artistry to make the simulation  
real. Ah, how we could have been much more.



## **vii. Colour and Flash '65**

Even the new square flashbulb  
attached to the Brownie Starflash  
Camera with Coca Cola Decal

can't save the couple on the couch  
from fading, her dress not quite  
so red, his trousers, indecisive grey.

The leopard skin on the party man  
has tired spots; his face and the room  
reflect a sickly tint of green.

Orange rabbit ears, bow tie  
and frilly Playboy apron his partner  
wears have lost their brilliance.

Behind the couch, two women  
grin like tarnished wide-mouthed  
penny banks in the flash cube's

white explosion, turning what we  
remembered into flat impressions,  
second-hand images hung on racks.



## **viii. Great-great Aunt Tackles Time**

My great-great aunt on my father's side  
got rid of time.

Like a god trying to remove mistakes  
she cut her head from family photos  
with cuticle scissors she kept in her purse.

My children ask what she looked like.

I answer with legends from family gatherings:  
something like your grandfather around the eyes:  
a bit like your grandmother in the nose and chin;  
a fine looking woman, I add, to allay their fears  
of abnormal kin.

She was a woman content not to be remembered,  
if remembering  
meant an image not to her liking.

They say she smelled of lilac talcum,  
moved like a bear,  
wiped her children's noses with starched hankies  
made from squares of lawn she'd tatted edges on.  
Her voice was a harp, trilling her moods,  
She made the best banana cream pies in town.



## **ix. Film 400**

With plastic fly swats, one yellow, one pink,  
two small girls batter at windows,  
movements caught  
by Kodak 400 for action.

The flies are too fast for technology,  
so are the girls,  
their profiles multiplied by the speed  
of intention,  
their hands smeared into smudges of colour.

After the flies escaped and the turmoil ended,  
the girls swatted each other.



## **x. Digital Reality**

I catch you in my finder  
your back straight, stretching into the stroke, pulling against the tide.  
You watch the waves ahead, your face scoured by wind,  
lips pressed like stone,  
outrigger and body fighting the sea.  
From the shore I focus the camera, check the monitor,  
release the shutter.  
I need more tension, more pain. I delete the image,  
another shot, another.

In front of my computer, I heighten the waves, deepen the furrows,  
increase the spray, touch the clouds with threat of storm,  
print the reality I remember.



Dunedin writer **Martha Morseth's** poems have been published in her collection, *Staying Inside the Lines* and in popular and literary journals, including the *Listener*, *Landfall* and *Sport*. She's published two books for teenagers, *Yeah!*; and *Let's Hear It for the Winner*. She's written and produced three one-act plays and a drama about New Zealand's first woman doctor.