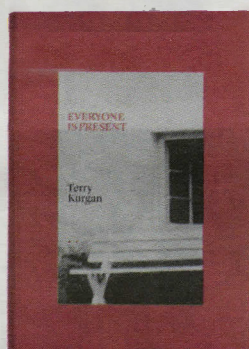


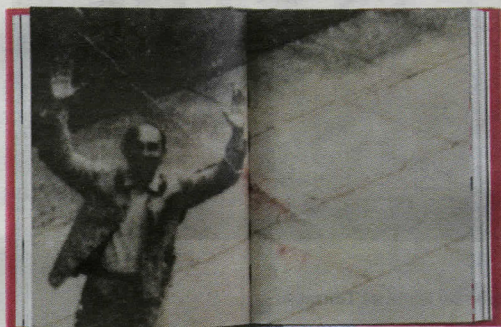
# Everyone Is Present: Essays on Photography, Memory and Family

Oluremi C. Onabanjo on Terry Kurgan



**Terry Kurgan**  
*Everyone Is Present: Essays on Photography, Memory and Family*

Fourthwall Books · Johannesburg, 2018 · Designed by Carla Saunders · 6¼ x 8¾ in. (16 x 22 cm) · 280 pages · 59 black-and-white and color images · Hardcover with jacket · fourthwallbooks.com



Sometime in July or August 1939, Karol Joachim (Jasek) Kallir took a candid snapshot in the garden of the grand Jasny Paac Hotel in Zakopane, a resort town frequented by the Polish intellectual and artistic set in the Tatra Mountains. Portraying his daughter, wife, and an acquaintance of the family, the image is a candid, perhaps even an uninteresting one if found while leafing through the pages of an album. Yet within the context of *Everyone Is Present: Essays on Photography, Memory and Family* (Fourthwall Books, 2018), a hybrid collection of images and essays by South African photographer and writer Terry Kurgan, it becomes clear that this image “masks a secret. A secret that is too big for [the] page” but also critical to an understanding of the complex tenor of familial relations “at the very outset of what was to become one of the greatest atrocities of the twentieth century.”

**But most important, it is a book about photography—as medium; as storytelling device; as portal or memento; as marker of capture, fugitivity, or freedom; as site of expression and iterative contemplation; photography as vernacular.**

This enigmatic photograph and others like it—battered, worn, and “captioned on the back with [Kallir’s] spidery cursive writing”—serve by turns as the anchor and springboard, a cause of contention or contemplation for Kurgan’s meditations on photography, memory, and family. Kallir is her grandfather, and it is through Kurgan’s compassionate examination of his journal entries and photographs that we are introduced to multiple generations of their family—circumnavigating the spaces, communities, and individuals they encountered, as well as the historical events and geopolitical shifts they endured in the wake of World War II. The book tracks the family’s extensive, winding movements from Poland to South Africa, by way of Turkey, India, Iraq, Syria, and Kenya. In each overture of their journey, we are privy to moments of devastation, repression, and violence, but also intimate instances of joy, comfort, and aspiration.

Kurgan’s virtual and physical retracing is illuminated by her deft treatment of photography. She divulges her personal relationship to the images featured—the process of viewing them, encountering them, and then searching to ascertain more. A close reading of family photographs yields to leafing through identification documents and scanning social documentary images, then surveying Google Maps cross-sections and YouTube video screenshots. More than the subject of Kurgan’s consideration, photography serves as a generative conceptual node,

through which multiple temporalities and materialities are produced by extension.

The sequencing, pacing, and repetition of the book’s images reflect this approach, communicated elegantly through designer Carla Saunders’s graceful hand. Whether staged portraits or candid captures, photographs appear strategically and work in tandem with the text: a full-bleed displays the entirety of an image powerfully; or an iterative appearance of a photograph emerges, strategically cropped and interspersed between passages with a gradual crop. These images display minimal to no re-touching; all scratches and surface wear remain present to reflect the materiality of the photographs encountered and their role as both window and witness to the passage of time. Paralleling their multiplicities, Kurgan’s literary voice appears as simultaneously conversational, rigorous, and diaristic throughout.

*Everyone Is Present* is an atmospheric project, wide-ranging in its treatment of prose and image. Following Kurgan’s cues, it is easy to become engulfed in the act of looking, discovering, and deconstructing moments in time. The book reflects core themes in Kurgan’s artistic practice—one deeply concerned with familial intimacy and the historical legacies of sociopolitical fracture.

*Everyone Is Present* is a welcome arrival from Fourthwall Books, a nimble publishing house based in Johannesburg, with a penchant for refined, incisive publications. It was founded in 2010 by designer Oliver Barstow and writer and editor Bronwyn Law-Viljoen, and where Kurgan has worked as codirector and coeditor since 2015. Winner of the 2019 *Sunday Times* Alan Paton Award for Non-Fiction (Johannesburg) and shortlisted for the 2019 Prix du Livre (Arles), *Everyone Is Present* encompasses many concepts. But most important, it is a book about photography—as medium; as storytelling device; as portal or memento; as marker of capture, fugitivity, or freedom; as site of expression and iterative contemplation; photography as vernacular.

Kurgan deals with photographs that one would consider vernacular representations, but also deploys them to channel a way of speaking, a vernacular form of expression and encounter—ultimately extending the bounds of what we can consider vernacular photography capable of achieving. In the process, she demonstrates how our relation to a photographic object continually shifts and changes, despite the seemingly physical fixity of its surface and the images it renders. With that, there is the implicit refutation of possible resolution in the book. Kurgan’s final account of seeing her reflection elegantly drives home this sentiment. Akin to her own assessment, *Everyone Is Present* embraces the power of photography to evoke poignant sensation and memory, while highlighting the “complete impossibility of a very particular kind of retrieval.”

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