

The Weight of a Photograph

Bikal Ghimire

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It was 1 p.m. in my dorm room, a quiet afternoon in the U.S., but back home in Nepal, it was midnight — perhaps too late to call my family. Homesickness hits me again, a familiar ache that always deepens with the distance. In these moments, when everything familiar to me felt so far away, I turned to the one thing that offered me a sense of connection: old family photographs. As I scrolled through the images on my phone, I traced the faces of those I missed, who are more than 13,000 kilometers away from me. Each picture felt like a small lifeline, grounding me to a place that felt both distant and deeply present.

As I scrolled through the images, my fingers suddenly stopped. There, on the screen, was a photograph of my grandfather. It was an image I hadn't seen often, the image that I had first discovered when I was 16. It hit me when I realized how distant this man had always felt. He was someone whose existence I had known for my whole life, but whose face I hadn't seen until I was nearly an adult. And now, I am staring at this picture, so far from home, feeling this weird, unexplainable connection to him, like the distance between us doesn't matter at all.

As I look at his face which is long gone from this world, I found myself overwhelmed by a question that I hadn't fully thought about before: How does a photograph, a moment frozen in time, transform from a simple object into a profound emotional presence? How does it become more valuable than the memories or relationships it captures? This photograph is not just a image anymore, but it is a story that I never heard, a presence that I never felt, and

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something whose weight I couldn't quite put into the words. That afternoon, my grandfather, whom I had never met, felt closer to me than ever before, and that's all because of that single photograph.

My grandfather was a person who lived in the shadow of my family's history. He went to India when my father was just two years old, promising to return soon. But he never did. While he was there in India, a car accident took his life, leaving my father to grow up without ever knowing the man who should have been there to guide him. None of our family members knew what he looked like, until the day my uncle brought a photograph of my grandfather from his workplace in India. It was such a coincidence that my father got a chance to see his father's face for the first time in his 41st birthday. It was the first time when my father saw a face of a person who had been there everywhere in his life and nowhere at the same time.

The first time I saw this photograph, I was 16. For my father, this photograph is the way to feel the presence of his father after all of those years. And for me, too, that image suddenly became real. It was a gateway for me to connect to a history I never truly understood. It revealed how the absence in my father's life shaped my own, and made me realize that "The past is never really past. It's always there, behind you, part of you, always with you" (Ishiguro 157). It showed me many things I hadn't seen before: how loss is carried through generations, how absence somehow becomes presence, and how one picture can hold so much weight.

Since that day, the photograph of my grandfather became an important part of our family's history. It was not just a photograph of a person from the past, but a living part of our narrative, connecting us to someone we never

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met but whose influence was felt through generations. As a young person, I didn't fully understand what that photograph meant. I could see it, I could feel the connection, but I didn't quite grasp why it hit so hard. It would take time for me to understand the significance of photographs as "a way of holding on to something that would otherwise be lost forever" (Berger 10).

The true significance of the photograph hit me when I was scrolling the family photographs in my dorm, far away from home. In the quiet of my room, surrounded by silence and distance, I found myself looking at the same photograph again. This time, the emotions I had felt years ago—the curiosity, the longing, the connection—felt sharper and deeper. This photograph now carried such a weight that I no longer could ignore. That's when the question arose clearly, one I hadn't considered before. How does a photograph, a single captured moment, hold so much more than what it shows?

As I sat there, far from everything familiar, I was continuously thinking about the significance of this image. What made this photograph of a man I had never met so emotionally powerful? How had it transformed from something just visual record of a person who had long gone from this world to something far more meaningful? And why did this image, feel like it contained a part of my grandfather's spirit, despite the fact that I never had the chance to know him? I was overwhelmed by the emotions described by literary scholar Roland Barthes in his *Camera Lucida*. Barthes talks about two elements in photography: the studium which is the cultural, intellectual interest we bring to a photograph, and the punctum, which he describes as "that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)" (Barthes 27). The punctum is that moment when a seemingly minor detail in

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a photograph suddenly gains deep emotional significance which can even change our perception of the image forever. This concept connects deeply with my own experience of my grandfather's photograph. This photograph transformed from just a family keepsake to something very powerful. As Barthes' words suggest, the punctum in my grandfather's photograph was not just the image itself, but the emotional weight it carried—memories of a life that was lost, the legacy of absence, and the connection I felt despite never meeting him. Through the punctum, I was able to feel my grandfather's presence, not in a physical sense, but through the emotional layers tied into the essence of his absence.

Just as Barthes describes, the photograph of my grandfather didn't just provide a glimpse into the past, but it brings the past into the present, if only for a moment. In this quiet moment, far from home, it became clear to me that **photographs don't just freeze time; they fracture it. They create emotional prisms through which we see not just what was, but also what could have been. They capture not only memories, but also the absences, the gaps, and the the unspoken stories that shape our overall understanding of the past.** In this sense, the image of my grandfather was an emotional bridge to a man whom I never met, but whose presence felt so real in that moment. Now I began to understand that photographs aren't just the records of the past, but they are living connections that influence the way we understand ourselves, our families, and the people who have impacted us, even in their absence.

This makes me realize that photographs aren't merely still images, but they are dynamic emotional artifacts that somehow gives life to something

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that's not even there. W.J.T. Mitchell, in *What Do Pictures "Really" Want?*, explores this concept further. He argues that photographs aren't just passive objects, but "animated beings" with their own essence, transcending mere representation. He states, "Pictures are things that have been marked with all the stigmata of personhood: they exhibit both physical and virtual bodies; they speak to us, sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively. They present, not just a surface, but a face that faces the beholder" (Mitchell 72). This concept of the photograph as a dynamic, living entity fits beautifully with the way I now perceive my grandfather's photograph. His image now confronted me, it looked back at me and then pulled me into an emotional dialogue where recognition, interpretation, and feeling were not just optional, but necessary.

In that moment, staring at my grandfather's photograph, I realized that this photograph is a living presence that carried generations of untold stories and unresolved emotions within it. Mitchell writes that pictures "want" something from us; they seek our attention, urging us to look beyond their surface and grasp the layers of memory, identity, and feeling they hold. My grandfather's photograph became a bridge that connects absence with presence, and the past with the present. Even though he was not physically part of my life, his image created a presence that felt incredibly real, as if he were standing right there beside me.

This interplay between presence and absence, where what is missing becomes an active and almost living force, reminded me of Maurice Blanchot's reflections in *The Space of Literature*. Blanchot observes, "The image is not the same thing at a distance but the thing as distance, present in its absence, graspable because ungraspable, appearing as disappeared" (Blanchot 256).

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This idea perfectly captures what I felt as I looked at my grandfather's photograph. The image, while it captures just a moment from the past, embodies a presence shaped by its absence. This photograph is both a memory and a gap, an entity that was shaped by what was present and what was absent.

When I look at my grandfather's photograph, I see the vast emptiness of all that was never captured: his voice that my father never heard, the warmth of his embrace that was never felt, and the lifetime of moments that remained unlived. Yet, in that same frame, I find an overwhelming fullness. The weight of forty-one years of my father's imagination finally meeting reality, the story of our family written in the contours of a face we had only dreamed of, and the countless meanings we continue to discover in his eyes. It's as if a photograph is both a window and a wall—showing us everything while reminding us of all that remains forever beyond our reach. This tension between what is shown and what is forever hidden is where the photograph truly comes alive, a space where loss and discovery dance together, where absence doesn't just linger but shapes the presence we experience.

This idea of presence within absence is also explored by Jacques Lacan in his work "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," where he writes, "When a child gazes into a mirror, they see not just a reflection but an idealized version of themselves—a whole and complete image that contrasts with the fragmented reality they feel within, creating a tension between who they are and who they aspire to be" (Lacan 2). Similarly, my grandfather's photograph is not just a photograph but is a kind of a mirror reflecting not only the man he was but

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also the relationship I always longed for. This stillness of the photograph actually turns absence into presence, making both memory and imagination meet out there, where I feel a sense of closeness to him, even though he has been gone for a long time.

This is the intriguing paradox of photography: how something as simple as a photograph can hold both the memory of a person and the emotional weight of them at the same time. Through the photograph, we forge a connection to what has been lost, and within that loss, we uncover a deep bond. This absence transforms into a form of presence which continues to exist in our memory, emotion, and understanding. Thus, the photograph is not just a static image of the past; it serves as a dynamic, living space where presence and absence meets together. It's a place where we feel the weight of what's gone, even as we reach for what remains.

In essence, Roland Barthes' concept of punctum which is the small, personal detail in a photo that grabs us emotionally, the idea of a picture speaking with us, and the notion of presence within absence all explain how "Photographs are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy" (Sontag 43). But beyond these emotional layers, what really stands out about photographs is how they blur the line between reality, truth, and fiction. Viewers do not see the photograph as it is, rather they see it through their own emotions, memories, and beliefs. They may view the person in the photograph not as they truly were, but as they want to remember them. This is not a flaw but a feature of the photographs. They give us a way to cope with the reality which is too painful or unreachable sometimes. They create a space where emotional truths can exist, even if they aren't factually accurate. As

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literary scholar Hal Foster explains in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, “photographs are not simply objective reflections of the world; they are projections that, while offering a mirror to the past, also distort reality by filtering it through both the photographer’s intentions and the viewer’s imagination” (Foster 242). In this sense, photographs do not show reality as it truly is, but instead reveal it as shaped by personal experience and emotional resonance.

In the end, my grandfather’s photograph becomes a living testament to how photographs transcend their physical form. Through this single image, I’ve realized that photographs aren’t just snapshots of the past, but they are the emotional landscapes that connect generations, transform absence into presence, and help us navigate the complex web of memory and loss. I can visualize all of these things in my grandfather’s photograph. It doesn’t just freeze a moment in time, but fractures it, creating an emotional prism that reveals not only what was—a man who left too soon, a father never known, and a family forever shaped by his absence—but also what could have been. It carries the weight of my father’s longing, my own sense of connection, and the generational echoes of absence. It reminds me that understanding the past is a layered, messy, and emotional journey. In this way, my grandfather’s photograph stands as a testament to how deeply connected we are—not just by what we see, but by what we feel. And in its silence, it speaks louder than words ever could.

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