

"She always says, 'Now I will stay in Delhi', but then she always goes away"

Mona Ahmed

GO
AWAY
CLOSER

A Distance of One's Own

Aveek Sen

There is nothing at all, except the title, to help the viewer along in Dayanita Singh's book of photographs, *Go Away Closer* (Steidl, 2007). Accompanying exhibitions in Delhi, Varanasi and Mumbai in 2007, this is a slim, featherweight volume, which looks rather like a medium-sized exercise book one might pick up from an exclusive, but no-frills stationer. It simply contains thirty-one black-and-white photographs of exceptional clarity, each 11 x 11 cm, without a title-page, price, page-numbers, captions, acknowledgements, or any sort of preface or commentary – unlike her previous book, *Privacy* (Steidl, 2003), which came, memorably, with most of this. The muted beige of the cover of *Go Away Closer* is the same colour as the plain inner binding of *Privacy*. It is as if the artist's latest work comes upon something more austere and reticent, something purer, that was glimpsed and held within the sociability, the public privacies, of the earlier photographs, but was not made entirely visible then in the fullness of its silences.

In this sequence of photographs – and *Go Away Closer* almost asks, however gently and intriguingly, to be “read” like a sonnet-sequence – the first image stands on its own. The remaining thirty seem to make up fifteen pairs of twinned images. The principle behind the pairing goes back to the arrangement of images in *Privacy*: presence counterpointed with absence. Rooms and furniture, intimately inhabited by those who possess them, are also shown bereft of that human impress. They remain beautiful, valuable and old, richly imbued with their own history, but are rendered strange, empty and forlorn, haunted by the spirits of their mortal users. Yet *Privacy* is a warmly human book about the solidness and vitality of families and friendships, and of the things and spaces that come to embody these bonds and networks. Its absences and empty spaces become all the more poignant because they invoke, if only negatively sometimes, a luminous faith in human presence.

The true predecessors of these quintessentially Indian “family portraits” in *Privacy* are, however, the paintings of Vermeer, Velázquez and Sargent, recording the living history of human beings and the sumptuous interiors they create. Yet the chastening coldness of black-and-white does something to this opulence, giving it a distinctive modernity of tone, character and poise that has its own visual history. For Dayanita, this history possibly goes back to the haunting and enigmatic stylishness of the European cinema of the 1950s and 1960s. Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*, Antonioni's *La Notte* and *L'Avventura*, and Resnais' *Last Year in Marienbad* come to mind most readily; their vision of bodies, clothes, spaces and time, of life itself in all its avant-garde restiveness and detachment, could never



have been in colour. And it is this range of visual histories, together with the allusiveness and wit it brings to her art, that allows Dayanita to work herself away from the deadening stereotype of the “Indian” photographer – and a woman, at that – churning out her repertory of “disasters or the exotic”.

Go Away Closer – in its resolute withholding of all identification – is a departure from the human archives and networks of *Privacy*, even as it subtly revisits the earlier work. It is also a book about imminent or necessary departures, almost as a condition (in every sense of the word) of intimacy itself. This makes the photographic relation a twin, or ghostly double, of human intimacy: a way of positioning oneself in relation to other people, things and moments. Going away is often an attempt to come closer. (Why does putting it in so many words give it a faintly banal ring?) And the photographer's access to another's privacy is only possible through her necessary or chosen apartness, stopping at the foot of a bed instead of coming closer towards the face on the pillow. Intimacy, or closeness, is always, therefore, a regulation of distances, a mix of caution and scruple, though with the necessary proviso that, within an intimate relation (including that between a photographer and her subject), one can be both the controller of one's own distance and at the mercy of a distance imposed by the other person. Hence, such an intercourse is kept alive through an unresolved conflict between freedom and anxiety, liberation and paralysis, possession and loss. “Control of the passes was, he saw, the key / To this new district, but who would get it?”, W. H. Auden writes in “The Secret Agent”. The poem ends with an image of intimate separation that is akin to the dream-like going-away world of *Go Away Closer*: “Woken by water / Running away in the dark, he often had / Reproached the night for a companion / Dreamed of already. They would shoot, of course, / Parting easily two that were never joined.”

But Dayanita's title, *Go Away Closer*, is not the statement of something attempted or achieved, but a difficult and contradictory command. Who is speaking these words, and to whom? In the opening photograph, the girl lying on the bed turns away from the source of light and also hides her face from the camera. Or has she fallen asleep after returning from school, still in her uniform, shoes and socks, shutting herself out from everything that she is expected to do with the rest of her afternoon? Whom is she sending away, and whom or what is she drawing close to her with the same gesture? The light falls freely on her, but the horizontal bar of the bed's footboard is the barrier at which the photographer has chosen to stop. The entire image is a combination of the girl's playful vulnerability and the photographer's gentle mix of scruple and intrusiveness.

The length of the girl's bed makes up the depth of the photograph, opening out a path of withdrawal, of moving backwards from the plane of the image and away from the viewer. This receding rectangle comes back as exactly the same tapering-away shape in the last two images of the sequence. There is the long steel table in the penultimate photograph, empty, although the clothes hanging in the lockers behind it suggest human presence. And finally, facing this photograph, a paved path, exactly at the position of the table, gridded with brilliant light and disappearing into shallow, rippling water. The whole composition, whose actual scale is impossible to figure out, looks like a slowly flooding runway, an image of being led away into an invisible point beyond the image, or perhaps, an image of arrival, if one reads it as what a runway looks like from a plane landing at night.

Departure and arrival become mysteriously inseparable in these photographs. Receiving or saying farewell to people are also inscrutably private moments that are enacted in public, on wintry streets and inside ephemeral and fantastically lit wedding-tents, in expensive costume. The sleeping girl on the bed becomes a young bride being hugged, as she already begins to look beyond the shoulder of the woman who is saying farewell to her, towards a distance that seems to open out behind the girl's eyes. Opposite this photograph is one of a deserted auditorium with rows of empty seats (a recurring image) that transforms the leave-taking on the opposite page into an unreal spectacle watched by an invisible audience. These endless rows of seats are echoed in the little phials neatly arranged in cabinets in an old dispensary, or in the rows of scooters in what one assumes to be a scooter factory. Space opens up in quite another way in these photographs – from the singularity and inwardness of the One to the impersonality and collectivity of the Many. Yet, the mystery is never dispelled. The photograph of the dispensary is placed opposite that of a basin and tap in what looks like an abandoned laboratory captured in the gloom of a cloudy afternoon. The oddness of the lone tap, with the work-top in front turning liquid with light (like the floors in some of the other photographs), takes *Go Away Closer* into a realm of recognition and response that is immediate and non-verbal, stirring up inscrutable associations within each viewer's visual and emotional memory. The scooters that are lined up inside the factory have already appeared before in front of a strangely lit house under a moonlit sky. They look like a colony of extra-terrestrial insects marooned in a human world from which the human beings seem to have disappeared. It is these photographs that give *Go Away Closer* a fine, almost inhuman, strangeness – a quality that would



¹ Ancestral home of Jawaharlal Nehru, turned into a museum that displays the memorabilia of the Nehru family. Ed.

come into its own later, in *Blue Book* (Steidl, 2009) and in *Dream Villa* (Steidl, 2010).

Another pair of images is of rows of surgical gloves hanging on the horizontal railings of a large window, their pale rubber beautifully translucent, suggesting both hands and, rather more disturbingly, the absence of hands. Opposite this photograph is one of a glass cabinet in which are arranged white shell bangles worn by married women in Bengal, and below them a row of conch shells. The two photographs are connected not only by the idea of absent hands and wrists, but also by the repeated horizontals of the railings and cabinet-shelves. And in the middle of the sequence is an image of Nehru's white clothes kept behind glass in Anand Bhavan,¹ Allahabad, facing a photograph of what, in "There's a Certain Slant of Light", Emily Dickinson had called "the Distance / On the look of Death": a death-mask in exquisite profile underneath the clear, thin glass of a bell-jar.

A key to understanding the play of departures and distances in Dayanita's art is provided by her friend and subject, Mona Ahmed. *Myself Mona Ahmed* (Scalo, 2001) juxtaposes the emails written by Mona to Dayanita's publisher, documenting her life as an eunuch or a *hijra* in Delhi, with Dayanita's photographs of Mona taken over thirteen years, seeing her from her times as the battered diva of Turkman Gate in Old Delhi to when she becomes a solitary exile, bereft of all human and animal possessions, building her house in a ruined graveyard. For Dayanita, "Mona is one of the precious gifts photography has given me", bridging an impossible distance in a class-and paranoia-ridden society, and embodying Dayanita's rootedness in India; even more than her mother and sisters do. Yet, one of Mona's laments is that her friend does not return to Delhi often enough to see her, even though, as a *hijra*, she knows that "if you can leave your house and do not look back, then you are happy". Mona's demands make Dayanita recoil with resentment at being made to feel something – the guilt of departure – that even her mother never made her feel since she became an adult. Yet this "outcaste among outcastes" gets to the core of Dayanita's art: "She always says, 'Now I will stay in Delhi', but then she always goes away."

