

Companion Essay By Ashraf Jamal For Barry Salzman's *The Other Side of Christmas*

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In *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rainer Maria Rilke provides a modicum of cheer to a depressed soul: 'If your daily life seems poor, do not blame it; blame yourself, tell yourself that you are not poet enough to call forth its riches; for to the creator there is no poverty and no indifferent place'. These inspirational words can fittingly be applied to Barry Salzman's project, 'The Other Side of Christmas'.

Shot in 2014 while on a road trip across the Southern US, *The Other Side of Christmas* is a sobering reminder that there is *no indifferent place*. No matter how dispassionate or detached our everyday encounters might appear, it is within these fleeting moments that our existence assumes its deepest traction. We know ourselves best not through special or extraordinary circumstances, but in-and-through the indifferent bilge and bric-a-brac which is the binding sump of life.

A pit or hollow in which liquid collects, a sump is where drainage fails and the unbidden detritus of our lives amasses its implacable force. No matter how earnestly we try to smooth the surfaces of our crumpled lives and despatch what we imagine to be needless and excessive, we accrue far more than we purge. Superfluity defines our cluttered lives. In Salzman's photographs it is not vacuity which assumes centre stage – the scene as vacant lot – but the tell-tale objects, randomly strewn, which break the tidy boundaries we set up. Order begets chaos. System is the hither side of a thither nothingness. As the French Philosopher, Gilles Deleuze, reminds, the system works *because it does not work*.

Weeds tear apart an empty sidewalk. Rainwater, flat as piss on a platter, skims a deserted alleyway just shy of an untended pot plant, while across the street an ox-blood red sign marking America's governing fear reads – Abdalla's. Two overfed grub-like

boys stand at attention beside a blue port-a-pool, dwarfed by a bloated SUV sliced in half by the image's right flank. The low rectangular facade of a clapboard building, null, void, insistently announces that it is open for business. An empty parking lot, sporting signs designated for invalids, overlooks an equally empty field, the flattened scene broken by a towering palm tree which splits the frame.

In three photographs the exhibition's seasonal theme, Christmas, is haplessly commemorated through randomly placed garden décor and an unlit spangled star on a lone lamppost. Physical human presence is minimal and distantly recorded. It is the mise-en-scene of everyday life, the structures both man-made and natural which are uppermost in the photographer's sight-line. And yet, despite the unerring sense of desolation which Salzman's photographs evoke, a contrary impact is also generated – Rilke's realisation that 'there is ... no indifferent place'.

Salzman is not interested in reprising the cliché of existential nausea one experiences in the face of nullity. Rather, his viewpoint and felt sense of the world asks us to cherish what we mistakenly imagine to be superfluous. In his photographs it is the elemental world which contains the urban sketch we create – a night-lit mall, makeshift home, car, chair, or bright yellow trolley on a green lawn – which we now find clarified and heightened by nature's mute and sentient presence – a gloaming sky, groaning palm, forlorn weed, or the calligraphic flurry of a winter tree. Through this interplay of the man-made and natural we are reminded that ours is not only a world which we awkwardly inhabit, but a world which inhabits, enfolds, and exceeds us.

Humility is the true temperature and temperament of these photographs. They are the product of an artist who both inhabits and refuses his dislocation. Having spent thirty years in America, Salzman remains someone who cannot wholly embrace a sense of belonging. The phrase, 'naturalised American' rings hollow to his ears, because, for him, the natural is not a rooted condition. Neither, however, is the photographer rootless. Rather, he finds himself compromised by any conscripting designation. If he allows himself the luxury of defining himself as a privileged, urban, 'New York centric' being, this description cannot, in truth, bind him. This is because selfhood – the

manufactured sense of a self - cannot explain away the sump that seeps into a life, the realisation that we leak, fray, distend, and ceaselessly founder.

Salzman's photographs, then, are the unresolved sum of an unresolved life. It is not Being that defines him, but Becoming. Which is why, after the cultural analyst Michael Foley, Salzman's way of seeing is one in which 'The crucial thing is to start paying attention *now*'. It is this presence of heart and mind, unmoved by dread or anxiety, which gives his photographs their currency. For these are not photographs which endorse an existential cliché the better to coolly sum up human folly, but records fragile and tender which ask that we still ourselves and allow for wakefulness.