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In Palo Alto

Denis Johnson

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In Palo Alto · *Denis Johnson*

Every day I have to learn more about shame
from the people in old photographs
in second-hand stores, and from the people
in the photographic studies of damage and grief,
where the light assails a window and the figure's back
is all we see—or from the very faces
we never witness in these pictures, several of whom
I passed today in their windows, some hesitant,
some completely committed to worthlessness—
or even from my own face, handed up suddenly by the car's
mirror or a glass door. When I was waiting
for a bus, the man beside me
showed me a picture of a naked youth
with an erection, and the loneliness
in his face as he held this photograph
was like a light waking me from the dead.
I was more ashamed of it than I was of my own
a few days later—just tonight, in fact—
when solitude visited me on a residential street
where I stopped and waited for a woman to pass
again across her unshaded window, so that
I could see her naked.

As I stood there teaching
the night what I knew about this sort of thing,
a figure with the light coming from in front
while the axioms of the world one by one disowned me,
a private and hopeless figure, probably,
somebody simply not worth the trouble of hating,
it occurred to me it was better to be like this
than to be forced to look at a picture of it
happening to someone else. I walked on.
When I got back to the streets of noises and routines,
the places full of light of one kind or another,
the motels of experience, a fool in every room,

all the people I've been talking about were there.
And we told one another we ought to be ashamed.