



## Inspiration

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**I**N 2009, THE WRITER and photographer Christopher Routledge sent me an email asking if I would consider a collaborative venture involving poems and photographs. We had met a year earlier, at a literary conference, where we had sat on the same panel. I was instantly drawn to Chris's easy manner, his sense of humour, his broad knowledge. At that point in my writing life, I had two main ways of finding my inspiration. It would either come from other people's stories, such as programmes I heard on the radio, articles in newspapers, encounters with friends or strangers. Or I would mine my own experiences and write autobiographically. I accepted Chris's invitation and was excited at the prospect of attempting something new. I have always loved photography. My father is a journalist and runs his own press agency, supplying both words and pictures to local and national newspapers. An early memory, way before the digital age, is the darkroom at his office, with its stench of chemicals and the washing line of shiny black and white images, the anonymous faces and bodies strung above me. Because of my upbringing, I like photographs that tell a story. I like photographs of people, action, snatches of real life. When Chris showed me his own photographs, they were not images I am typically drawn to. I found myself looking at landscapes, trees, at office windows, seemingly disconnected scenes. But then I noticed Chris's focus on the abandoned or lost: a pair of shoes hung from a barbed wire fence, a small blurred figure on a beach, the looming descent of an empty escalator. I began to see an enigmatic beauty in these images, and an intimacy, as Chris explored the relationship between the viewer and the viewed. My belief with all ekphrastic work is that the poet needs to do so much more



than simply describe the art she sees. My father knows about the power of a photograph, of what it means to frame what people see, and not see, and I think this influenced my approach to the collaboration. I found myself creating narratives to go with the photographs, the unseen stories outside Chris's frame. Who did those abandoned shoes belonged to? Who cared enough for the child on the beach to photograph her? What happened when strangers (literally) collide on an escalator? Chris sometimes rebuffed my early drafts. For him, there was just 'too much' story. Once or twice, I sent him poems for him to respond to, with photos. But his resulting images were too literal, and I told him so. Our nine-year-old collaboration worked because of the way we could be honest with each other and it was such a thrilling challenge to work in this way. I loved never quite knowing what kind of image was going to land in my email inbox or how I would react to it. I will always be grateful to Chris and his photographs, for providing unique inspiration and for his ability to make me consider the act of looking itself.