

# THE ROOM IN WHICH I WORK

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Andrew Seguin

REVIEWED BY CLAIRE TRANCHINO

Andrew Seguin's *The Room In Which I Work* doesn't just engage with Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, it reincarnates him. Selected by Calvin Bedient as the winner of the Omnidawn Open Poetry Book Contest, Seguin's first book gives space for Niépce to "speak again," as Louise Glück writes of her subject in "The Wild Iris." To revive Niépce, the creator of the first photograph, Seguin uses many forms — poetry, dialogue, lists, and prose, a lyric essay spliced with Seguin's own cyanotypes (including a reproduction-bust of Niépce with a bough growing from his head featured on the cover). *The Room in Which I Work* thus joins such hybrid company as Douglas Kearney's "Freedom of Shadow: A Tribute to Terry Adkins," in which Kearney brings Adkins's voice and vision to the page using documents shared between himself and his collaborative partner.

In fact, one of Seguin's strengths in the book is pulling documents from Niépce's life into the present, recontextualizing them in the space of poems. It's an act of recovery. Such work is seamless, as in "The Experiments," in which Seguin translates and adapts language from a letter of Niépce. As Seguin pushes beyond historical and biographical documentation, we see events of Niépce's life not as they happened but as if they are *happening*:

I coated paper with brothers  
to the sun, rust and saffron:  
I gassed them; I watched until

all I'd done had gone jonquil;  
I'd changed my mind to oxygen;  
I invited acids and switched

paper for stone, but stone  
stayed its way for centuries,  
opaque; the luminous fluid

would stain nothing, nothing  
besides my wonder at what it is  
to be at once everywhere, and fugitive.

Seguin treats the poem as a process (see also “Camera Obscura” and “Cut List”). As materials combine, line breaks transform the image. I feel as though I’m with Niépce, observing as he makes additions, watching the page change. Besides the imagistic language, what I love about this poem are the final two stanzas. Just as the experiment seemingly finds its end, “the luminous fluid / would stain nothing,” Seguin opens the poem once more by leading us into Niépce’s thoughts. The poem ends in curiosity, as all good experiments do.

As in *The Experiments* many of Seguin’s poems, to paraphrase *Your Packet, Dear Cousin*, are guided by imagination. The dialogues, in which Seguin imagines a voice for Niépce, are especially visionary. These scenes happen five times throughout, one in each section of the book, and echo the straight-faced humor of Anne Carson in *Autobiography of Red*. The book opens in such a fashion, as Niépce and Seguin discuss the etymology of photography, taking stock of what has been lost and gained since the inception of the medium. I think of these moments as a channeling:

I: Can we talk a little about your vocabulary

NN: You mean words

I: Words—you never used just one to describe the camera

NN: What’s a camera

I: Right, the apparatus or box you were using, once technicians and history had their way with it, it came to be called camera in English or *appareil photo* in French

NN: So I wasn’t too far off. But my use of *helio* didn’t last then

I: No they took the sun out of it

NN: Hard to do

I: Ha, yes, but we say *photographie*, photographer, *photographique*, *photomaton*, photo booth, photochemical, photo finish, photo lab, photo sensitive, family photo, passport photo

NN: I see the reference to writing is often lost

I: True

NN: Light is the most important part of the word

Despite the poem serving as a merging place for the two voices to come into contact, the distance between them feels increasing. Perhaps it is the difference in time — Niépce speaks from a past-as-present position while Seguin is situated in the present.

“Meditation on an Album” addresses this concern of distance. Writing on the photographs in an album (a similar gesture to Forest Gander and Sally Mann’s *Eye against Eye*), Seguin brings us to an inherent difficulty in our effort to save a presence:

In so many houses  
    the living rooms  
go on living

With a yellow  
    assembly of people  
who are not

And it smells of olives  
    to remember  
And it feels of wood gloss on the palm

And in the picture  
    they speak again  
but the neighborhood is gone.

We find ourselves asymmetrically positioned, as what appears in the photograph is at odds with reality. However, it is the at odds nature that makes me have faith in the arts. Our mediums — whether photography or poetry, or a combination of the two — make possible what would otherwise be impossible. It is impossible to bring back the dead. But Seguin’s writing proves that there is a possibility our art can capture a glimpse of living, even in the dead.