

A.J. Betts
SHUTTERSPEED

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‘There’s a fine line ... between fear and desire’ muses *Shutterspeed*’s adolescent protagonist, Dustin. His may not be a novel revelation but A.J. Betts provides an intriguing study of obsession and its disastrous results through a narrative set on this tremulous boundary.

The story opens with brisk descriptions of unrequited love between Dustin and his friend Jasmine, but soon progresses into more haunting territory, following Dustin’s discovery of a photograph depicting the enigmatic Terry Pavish and Dustin’s subsequent, disturbed fixation on her. The theme of photography opens up a rich world of metaphor for the transience of memories and love relationships, with pleasing narrative momentum. Betts offers young adult fiction at its best, successfully engaging a poetic literary aesthetic: ‘he doesn’t know what makes him stretch the photo between his fingers, or why it breathes open like a flower. The picture exhales in his hands.’

The main plot is paralleled by Dustin’s quest to discover the truth about his mother’s death and to comprehend his father’s stoic grief. Dustin is tormented by nightmares, recurring images he cannot interpret. The sub-narrative of *Shutterspeed* is concerned with psychological disturbance in the fallout of loss: the moment when curiosity turns into dark infatuation. This takes us into discomfiting realms as we follow Dustin’s obsession, which culminates in scenes in which it is acted out beyond the limits of common morality.

The theme of transgression – ethical, physical, psychological – creates a disturbed order of intimacy through recurring scenes in which characters seek, discover or witness something that should otherwise remain clandestine. These are large ideas for a short work of fiction, and some are left unresolved at the sudden climax and surprising conclusion. *Shutterspeed*’s open ending hints at Betts’s intention to go on exploring Dustin’s world.

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