What Photography Is

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Preface

It has been thirty years since Roland Barthes published his "little book," *Camera Lucida*. In the intervening years photography has become a major part of the international art market, and a common subject in university departments of art history and philosophy. An enormous literature has grown up around photography, its history, theory, practice, and criticism.

I think that three interests drive the great majority of current writing. First is contemporary fine art photography as practiced by the internationally prominent figural photographers such as Jeff Wall, Beat Streuli, Thomas Struth, Rineke Dijkstra, Thomas Ruff, and Andreas Gursky. That literature includes texts by Wall, Michael Fried, Diarmuid Costello, and numbers of newspaper critics and commissioned writers. What matters for it is modernism, postmodernism, the gallery system, the art market, and the status of photography as fine art.

Second is photography's social significance, a subject that has attracted a host of writers including contributors to *The Meaning of Photography* (2008) and *Photography Degree Zero* (2009), Margaret Olin, Georges Didi-Huberman, Paul Frosh, and even the novelist William Vollmann. What matters for those writers is photography's use as social glue, as witness to war, as mirror of the

middle class, as medium for constructions of race and gender, as a political tool, and as a principal determinant of our visual culture. It matters that photographs are made by the millions, sent by email, uploaded to photo-sharing services, sometimes even printed and framed. Much of the academic study of the history of photography also involves these issues.

The third subject is photography's way of capturing the world. Writers who care about this meditate on how photography provides us with memories, how it preserves the past, how it seems real, how it captures time, how it shows us other people's lives. For these writers, many of them philosophers, photography is centrally about representation, time, memory, duration, presence, love, loss, mourning, and nostalgia. This literature includes Roland Barthes's book, and also texts by Susan Sontag, Jacques Derrida (*Six Derrida Texts on Photography*), Serge Tisserand, Henri Van Lier, and many others.

I am not much interested in any of these subjects. I refer to the recent literature throughout this book, but the references are not systematic. Photography is a fine art "as never before," as Michael Fried says; and it has been a mirror and model of society since its inception, as Baudelaire knew. Often enough it is about time and representation. But for me photography is essentially not about art, society, or representation: I find seeing is essentially solitary, and photography is one of the emblems of that solitude.

While I was writing this book, I was editing a book called *Photography Theory*, which assembles thirty scholars' opinions about how photography can best be conceptualized. *Photography Theory* is skewed somewhat to a discussion of one theory in particular (the "index," which I will mention later on), but the book is reasonably representative of the directions of current thinking, and well stocked with references. The principal writers on photography are there—Liz Wells, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Rosalind Krauss, Joel Snyder, Geoffrey Batchen, Margaret Olin, Victor Burgin, Nancy Shawcross, Anne McCauley, Margaret Iversen—and so are the major points of reference, from Vilém Flusser and Pierre Bourdieu to the strange and encyclopedic Henri Van Lier. By comparison this book is wayward and badly behaved. If this book seems unhelpfully disconnected from current concerns, you might turn to *Photography*

Theory or other recent scholarly books on photography such as *The Meaning of Photography*, *Photography: Theoretical Snapshots*, *Photography Degree Zero*, Fried's *Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before*, Joan Fontcuberta's *Photography: Crisis of History*, or the new journal *Philosophy of Photography*. If you are a historian of photography, or a critic engaged with the currently famous photographers, please don't expect this book to be either helpful or relevant.

What I propose is to return, once again, to *Camera Lucida*, but in order to write against it, to find another sense of photography. Despite the rapidly growing literature, Barthes's "little book"—so he called it, reminding us how much is really in it—remains a central text. The punctum—little point of pressure or pain, hidden in every photograph, waiting to prick the viewer—is still one of photography's indispensable theoretical concepts, and *Camera Lucida* itself is widely assigned in classes and mentioned by critics, historians, and artists in a bewildering range of publications.

(If you haven't read *Camera Lucida*, you could stop reading this book about here, and take it up again after you've read Barthes's book. I rail about *Camera Lucida* intermittently throughout this book, but mainly in Chapter 1, so you could also begin with Chapter 2.)

Camera Lucida is both scapegoat and touchstone, marginal and model. It is cited in passing, trivially; but it's also pondered at length. For many people, it is too familiar to re-read, but it is still taught in college classes. At one moment it seems intensely scholarly, and in the next refreshingly free of academic pomp. It is understood as part of the history of postwar art theory, but it is also taken as a source of insight into photography.

It seems hardly a symposium goes by without an appearance of the punctum or the "Winter Garden photograph" (the photograph Barthes describes, showing his mother as a little girl). In autumn 2003 I attended a conference on visual culture in Nottingham; in his closing remarks the event's organizer, Sunil Manghani, asked why nearly every speaker had alluded to Barthes. We were surprised, I think, to realize we had each mentioned him, even though we hadn't all been talking about photography and even though we came from fields as different as geography and journalism. Manghani proposed

that *Camera Lucida* is still read because the writing is beautiful. There isn't an easy way to assent to that because the text's beauty, if that word could ever be the right one, is not clearly linked to what it has to say. Yet Manghani's remark wasn't wrong, either, and no one demurred. The conference ended there, with Barthes briefly on everyone's minds.

Like its author, who had recently lost his mother, *Camera Lucida* is unstable: on one page it lectures, and then suddenly it becomes a rhapsody or a soliloquy; at one point it is lucid, and then instantly nearly incomprehensible; in another place it is gentle and calm, then almost demented with sadness. The text pricks you, and then softens the hurt with prose: it mimics the punctum and its sterile salve, which Barthes calls *studium*. (For Barthes, studium is the punctum's often uninteresting counterbalance: it means the transmissible analysis of images, whatever is public and publishable and makes sense in classrooms. Studium has become the daily business of visual studies, a field Barthes would have disliked.) What kind of reading can follow that ebbing and flowing of voice, authority, and purpose? It seems Manghani's remark could never be wholly irrelevant, but neither could it ever be enough to describe what happens in *Camera Lucida*. As Geoffrey Batchen has pointed out, the photographs in *Camera Lucida* amount to a "carefully calibrated" "full survey" of photography, covering most decades from the 1820s to the 1970s, and ending, in suspense, on the question of what photography had become. (*Meaning of Photography*, 76–91.) So it's a document of its moment, the same moment that puzzled Susan Sontag, Rosalind Krauss, and others: true, but as Batchen says, that does not explain why it still speaks to so many people.

It is essential, I think, to sit down with Barthes's strange little book and take time to absorb it, consider its felicities and opacities, what it declines and admits, and above all what kind of writing it gives us. (Not only what kind of photography, but what kind of writing: the two are commingled.) One of my intentions is to read *Camera Lucida* as well as I can, and to give it back to current practice in a new and more problematic form: one that takes on board what Barthes did with writing, and what he did to writing. The format of this book mimics *Camera Lucida*'s format: I have written brief numbered sections, and, as in the English translation of *Camera*

Lucida, each section begins with a numbered black-field drop capital. The idea, which I will try to justify as I go along, is to write about photography by writing into or through Barthes's book—ventriloquizing if necessary, inhabiting the book, writing at first from inside it, in order finally to be outside it.

Like Barthes, I will be arguing about photography as well as working with writing, and my argument is that Barthes's book is too full of light to capture what photography does. *Camera Lucida* is generously lit with metaphors of memory and sentiment, but its thoughts are very carefully tended, as if its subject were tender and prone to wilt in the glare of harder inquiry. Of the many things elided in Barthes's book—not least of them his own lifetime practice of structuralist analysis, which he throws over to make room for his personal search for his mother's image—the most important is photography's inhumanity. For me, Barthes gets photography perfectly right when he sees how it hurts him (and how, although this cannot be a different subject, it hurts his habits of writing) and badly wrong when he imagines it mainly as a vehicle of love and memory. *Camera Lucida* is at the beginning of a flourishing interest in affect, feeling, and trauma in the art world, and that may be the best explanation of its staying power. Before the art world was caught up in affect and identity, Barthes's book was an anomaly, which needed to be rectified to be used. Now it seems much closer, and its warmth and weirdness feel just about right. In a sense, then, this book is against everything I think Barthes's book might be charged with starting—but none of that is aimed well, or done systematically or carefully.

Camera Lucida hides photography's non-humanist, emotionless side. Photography is not only about light and loss and the passing of time. It is about something harder. I agree with Barthes that at one of its limits, ordinary photography of people has something to do with the viewer's unfocused ideas about her own death. But I also think that photography has given us a more continuous, duller, less personal kind of pain. Again and again photographs have compelled people to see the world as they had not needed or wanted to see it. Photographs have forced something on us: not only a blurred glimpse of our own deaths, a sense of memory as photographic grain, a dim look at the passage of time, or a poignant prick of mortality,

but something about the world's own deadness, its inert resistance to whatever it is we may hope or want. Photography fills our eyes with all the dead and deadening stuff of the world, material we don't want to see or to name. I am after a certain lack of feeling, a coldness I miss in Barthes.

The beauty of Barthes's book, its watery spill of ideas, its gracious turns of phrase, the cascades of evanescent thoughts and throw-away terms that don't always quite follow from one another . . . all that beauty works hard, drawing my attention away from the other face of photography. I think Manghani is right that *Camera Lucida*'s beauty is a principal reason the book is still on our bookshelves, and I am going to take that beauty seriously in the pages that follow. (Even if I won't be calling it "beauty" any more.) But for me the famous punctum is just a pinprick. I think the wound is much larger. Photography insistently gives us the pain and the boredom of seeing, and the visual desperation that can follow. The strategy of this book is to find that less pleasant, less emotional photography by writing directly into the one book on photography that is both inescapable and too often avoided.

*   *   *

Another book, *What Painting Is*, is intended to be uniform with *What Photography Is*. The two are not companion volumes in the usual sense, and if you are coming to this book after *What Painting Is*, you would be right to see no connection, no common argument. Neither book is a summary of the consensus views about either medium, and neither is a reliable guide to the preponderant directions of research. Both books abandon much of what has come to matter to their two media. They are personal attempts to capture what I care about when I am not preoccupied with academic concerns. There is career and community, and then, for me, there are also sources of visual pleasure and fascination that just do not fit with current critical discourse. It's like Freud's division of desires into "love" and "work." I see that for many of my colleagues, there is a fairly good match between the things they love about visual art and the writing they produce as scholars. For me, love and work have finally been coming apart. It's not a divorce, exactly: I still spend

most of my time writing as an academic, contributing to books like *Photography Theory*. But increasingly I find that it matters a great deal to resist the tremendous tidal pull of academic discourse, to recover and nourish the things I have seen and felt on my own. So many scholars are overwhelmed by the oceans of words that well up from the past, by the intoxicating sharpness of academia, by the occasionally riveting language of scholarship, by the glow of hard-won approval. They come to forget that they are not writing about what it is in art that gives them pleasure, that transfixes them, that makes them speechless. Or they think they are, but what they are producing is books that only other scholars read, where moments of encounter are braced by hard argument or safely cosseted in soft footnotes. That kind of writing can produce rewarding careers, but not books that speak beyond the conference circuit. It is dangerously easy to live a full academic career, imagining that your writing expresses your best thoughts about art, when in the end it never really has. What matters in scholarship is research, argument, persuasion, and originality, and those ideals make it easy to spend your entire working life without thinking of your own voice. I know that almost nothing in this book can be justified as scholarship, or even as criticism, but it is what I want to write because it is what I have seen for myself.

Someone once wrote an essay with the lovely modest title "Part of What a Picture Is." That is more or less what I would say about this book and its deliberately very distant companion.

One
Writing
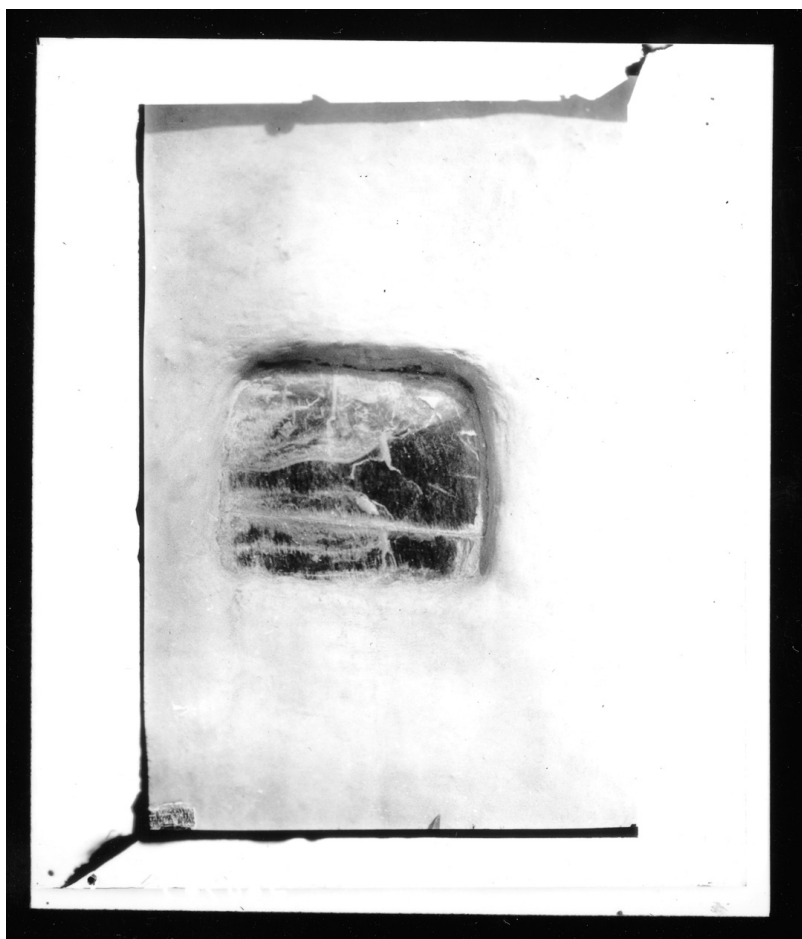
"This is the condition of photography"

ANONYMOUS PHOTOGRAPHER. A SELENITE WINDOW. C. 1927.

1 One day, quite some time ago, I happened on a photograph of a selenite window. It had once existed, and may still exist, in a pueblo house on top of Ácoma mesa in New Mexico. And I realized then, with an amazement I have not been able to lessen since: "This is the condition of photography." Sometimes I would mention this amazement, but since no one seemed to share it, nor even to understand (life consists of these stretches of solitude), I forgot about it.

My interests in photography took a more cultural turn. I decided I liked photography *in opposition* to painting, from which I nonetheless failed to separate it. This question grew insistent. I was overcome by an "ontological" desire: I wanted to learn at all costs what Photography was "in itself," by what essential feature it was to be distinguished from the community of images. Such a desire really meant that beyond the evidence provided by its tremendous market expansion, I wasn't sure that Photography exists, that it has a "genius" of its own.

2 So Roland Barthes wrote, with a different photograph in mind, on the opening page of *Camera Lucida*. I imagine him sitting at a large Empire desk, in the house where he had lived so many years with his mother. The shades are drawn, and he has spread out the family photographs, along with his favorite clippings from photo magazines and "the latest 'emergency' reportage." (p. 111) He is in a singular frame of mind. For some reason all that matters now is to think about photography: to think his way *into* it, pushing right to its "essence." He wants, perhaps obscurely at first, to use the imaginative journey to speak about his mother's death, to pin the meaning of her memory to a photograph, to "fix" it, in the inevitable photographic pun.

At least that is a picture we are permitted to conjure while we read *Camera Lucida*. This Barthes is not the same as the one that readers knew from his other writings: this is no longer the voice of the scintillating essayist, the famous interpreter of Panzani pasta or the Marquis de Sade. It is a sad and concerted voice, given

to melancholic parentheses, distractions, abrupt changes of mind, and pages, like this one, that quietly turn away from their opening ideas.

The Barthes of *Camera Lucida* is even loath to deploy his well-known semiotic analyses. He is given to writing numbered sections so short that they would not even fill a double-spaced typed page. (I have learned this by copying him, and discovering how short his book really is.) As he writes, some sections become dense, like prose poems, and at times the book is a whispering-chamber of French aphoristic prose from Baudelaire to Mallarmé and even Proust. For me Barthes is especially close to Proust when I start hearing the sections as excerpts from some tattered but richly patterned inner monologue. I hear the narrator's voice in *Camera Lucida* as an intimate steady undertone, a combination of softly muttered confession and public lecture.

Margaret Olin puts the voice that speaks in *Camera Lucida* in quotation marks—"Barthes"—to distinguish it from the voice in his more public books, which she assigns simply to Barthes. (*Representations*, fall 2002, 99–118.) Alternately, the letters and documents that preserve Barthes for us outside his own texts could be denominated Barthes, so that "Barthes" could stand for the voice that speaks in certain famous semiotic, sociological, linguistic, and structuralist texts: in that case it would be necessary to invent an elaborate notation, for example "'Barthes,'" for the singular character who speaks in *Camera Lucida*. This "'Barthes'" would have himself written "Barthes," but given him up for a reason that is not wholly clear; and "'Barthes'" would also have attempted to overwrite Barthes. But I will leave those branching distinctions to one side, because I am fascinated, as I am meant to be, by the melancholic author in his darkened and empty house. (Let's just call him Barthes, not forgetting his scare-quote avatars.)

What I want to know is: why does this figure make me so annoyed? His obsession with pictures of race, of mental debility, of lost places and people, and above all with what he thinks are unusual costumes and faces: all that might be annoying on a first reading, but it also makes sense as the very personal, mainly unthought, always inadequate solace of a person who has lost someone he loves. I can understand his "exotic" tastes even if I

don't sympathize with them, and even if I find his choices over-determined and over-familiar. I forgive him his orientalist attraction to what he thinks of as strange people, because I know he is searching, and I feel he knows he will be forgiven for just that reason. At the same time it's also clear that his central obsessions, especially concerning the photograph by James Van Der Zee, aren't visible to him as obsessions. In this regard I like the variable anger and empathy in essays by Shawn Michelle Smith, Carol Mavor, and Ruby Tapia. (*Photography Degree Zero*; *English Language Notes*, fall 2006.) But for me, all that just makes Barthes's book more complicated and intriguing.

Perhaps it is the voice itself that I find annoying. The closeted calm narrator's voice is certainly more obtrusive than I would expect in a book on the "nature" of photography. In some passages, the voice I imagine speaking the words of the text reminds me of the nauseating tutor in Sartre's *The Words*, the one who stood too close to Sartre, forcing him to inhale the tutor's sour breath. That could also be a source of annoyance, and yet here, the close voice is right for the subject.

No, what bothers me, at least at first, is that the uncomfortable intimacy of the voice, and its discomfiting affections, are supported by a certainty I cannot understand: a certainty, almost a conviction, that the author's frame of mind is not an impediment to his project of finding the "nature" of photography. Why doesn't he think his wounded imagination might be a problem? There can't be many things stranger than the notion that mourning is accomplished by writing memoirs about one's mother as a photograph.

3 *Camera Lucida* seems soft, at times even wet. It feels pliant and unhealthy, like an overwatered plant in a conservatory. And yet it is compelling: it makes me feel a pessimistic solace that I am led to think was sufficient, a clammy comfort that Barthes created by writing it into existence. It causes me to rethink what any writer's control might amount to, or what any theory can be when it is so entangled with desires that

it hardly appears as a theory. And all that humid emotion, that fierce carelessness about theory, that apparent willingness to let words drown their own sense, adds to my annoyance: is *this* photography?

4   "This book was born of impatience": so Hubert Damisch began his book on linear perspective (a book that, not incidentally, has also made me impatient over the years). My first reaction to Barthes's book, as far as I can remember, was enraptured attention, mingled with some difficulty understanding his method. That difficulty has not diminished. Nor has it become easier to understand how to read the burden of affect, how to attend—or not attend—to the saddened voice that speaks so carefully and yet so confidently about things that only it can know.

Readers have remarked on Barthes's melancholy tone, as if the affect of patient sadness can be read separately from the argument the sad voice undertakes. "Il y a un voile de tristesse répandu sur son oeuvre," according to Philippe Roger, "un timbre mélancolique." (Anne-Marie Bertrand, *Bulletin Bibliographique Française*, 2003.) But in *Camera Lucida*, as in many books that make me think of melancholy, melancholy does not impose itself on the text "from the outside," as T. J. Clark says, describing himself typing "nearly soundlessly into screen space at the fin-de-siècle." (*Farewell to an Idea*, 13) Barthes's melancholy insinuates itself into the fabric of his argument, and even, insidiously, into my own responses, my own writing. I am aware of a cloying pull from the lulling authority of his prose. I am washed down along its currents. I adopt the French-style alternation of overly long and surprisingly short sentences. I employ apostrophes. I indulge in asides. I make sure my parenthetical remarks are slightly obscure, but never really opaque. I even, and only half in fun, dutifully format my pages with the drop capitals from the English edition. I try out the pretentious captions that Barthes, or his editor, chose for *Camera Lucida*: italicized quotations from Barthes's own text (how modest!), and the small-caps titles that were added in the English translation, as if the photographs were those pictorial headstones that can be found in

Italian cemeteries, or works of great art with engraved plaques beneath them. I am already looking forward to introducing my own rare words and neologisms. (But who can compete with Barthes: Ecmnesia! Animula!) I tell myself I am doing this to be as faithful as possible to the real openness of the book—the quality that Barthes named *écriture* and that used to be called "paraliterary"—in hopes of finding a reading and finally a use for the book, a use that begins by refusing to limit itself either to the book's half-ruined theory or its solipsistic story.

My first refusal, then, is the refusal to treat Barthes's melancholy as a symptom, and my second is to refuse to treat it *as a theory*—as Serge Tisseron does when he argues that photographs are not only backward-looking, infused with nostalgia and trauma, but also forward-looking and prospectively healthy. That argument is a nice symmetrical expansion of *Camera Lucida*, but it controls Barthes's melancholy by understanding it as a theory. (*Le mystère de la chambre claire: photographie et inconscient*, 1996, 159.)

5 *Camera Lucida* would be simpler if the unreliable adopted voice had been sequestered, say, to Part One, and the theory about photography had begun in Part Two. Then the speaker, Olin's "Barthes," could be divided from the matrix of claims about photography. Or it would have been simpler if Barthes somehow signaled each appearance of theory, temporarily suspending his experiments with writing in order to be clear. The book could then be parsed, disentangling Barthes's desire from "Barthes's" reasoning, dividing the Winter Garden photograph from the photographs Barthes reproduced. (It once would have been said: dividing the Winter Garden photograph from those out of which it was hallucinated, because a number of scholars were sure the photograph did not exist—until Barthes's diary was published, with its straightforward references to photograph, which he clearly discovered and then decided not to reproduce.) (Barthes, *Journal de deuil*.) With theory neatly divided from writing, *Camera Lucida* would become usable for thinking about photography in the way it

has often been taken to be by readers who prefer to ignore the glass-house atmosphere that nourishes Barthes's strange thoughts.

The case of *Camera Lucida* ("case," as opposed to problem, because it has to do with pathology, as in Nietzsche's *Der Fall Wagner*; and also because *Camera Lucida* seems obdurately resistant to being taken as an example of how to write a book on photography) can be succinctly demonstrated by noting what happened to two art historians who approached the book from opposite sides: one who attended to the writing's effect on the argument, and another who took the writer's argument apart from his voice.

Rosalind Krauss praised the "paraliterary" back in 1981, one year after *Camera Lucida*. She cited other books of Barthes's, and proposed to re-conceive what might count as historical and critical writing in light of Barthes's sense of the inevitable mixture of fiction and non-fiction, literature and philosophy. (*The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, 295.) A decade later she was still thinking about the paraliterary, trying, in *The Optical Unconscious*, to combine analytic expositions of art history with pages written in a literary mode. The literary passages in that book include florid descriptions of Clement Greenberg's unpleasant face—his shaking jowls, his overbearing stare—and those passages are typographically marked off from the passages of art historical analysis. The two kinds of writing are jarringly different: for me, at least, they do not create a new para-literary writing or even call one another into question. My own reader's experience is that the pages of analytic art history—the majority of *The Optical Unconscious*—highlight the writerly ambitions of the descriptive passages, prompting me to judge the written portraits of Greenberg as I would judge first-person literary memoirs. Could the passages on Greenberg stand on their own as "creative writing"? Could they be read alongside, say, a short story in McSweeney's? For me they couldn't. They are awkward, even embarrassing interruptions in a far more accomplished art historical narrative.

A diametrically opposed reaction to the writerly challenge of *Camera Lucida* can be found, appropriately, in Michael Fried, who took just a few sentences out of one section of *Camera Lucida* in order to craft his argument about absorptive photography and the punctum. (*Critical Inquiry*, 2005, 546; *Why Photography Matters*

As Art As Never Before.) He deliberately ignores the prose in which those few sentences are entangled, and makes only two passing remarks on the quality of Barthes's writing, as if to say that no matter how troubled Barthes's text might be, it is still wholly legitimate and even responsible to seize on moments of analytic clarity and use them to construct defensible arguments. I can imagine Barthes disagreeing, but declining to say why.

I won't be arguing with either Krauss or Fried in this book. (My response to Fried is in *Critical Inquiry*, summer 2005, 938–56.) I am only interested because they show how difficult Barthes's book has been to use, or even to read. One tries to emulate Barthes's living hybrid of theory and writing, and ends up producing a clanging encounter of sharp-edged theory and foundering experimental writing. The other professes no particular interest in Barthes's hybrid project, and, like a surgeon probing for a bullet in a soldier's body, extracts one line of hard theory from the entire dubious book.

The difference between Krauss and Fried on this point could be expanded into an entire monograph on the vicissitudes of experimental first-person writing in the humanities, and the parallel universe of non-experimental, "merely" or "purely" analytic or expository prose. The former has given rise to many embarrassing jowl-shaking moments, and the latter is responsible for any number of academic texts that are not well written. Academics in the humanities don't yet know what to do with writing: real writing, dangerous, unpredictable, living writing, which can quickly turn on the arguments it is supposed to nourish and devour them. Fried's work on photography jails writing in favor of adamantine argument. (He keeps his real writing imprisoned in his poetry.) Krauss dips her toes in writing, but recoils. Barthes was weaker, and in him, things fall apart.

Comparisons of Krauss and Fried were a cliché of scholarship in the 1980s, the decade following *Camera Lucida*, but in this case the comparison is not exactly what it seems, because in the end Krauss did excavate Barthes for theories: she wanted his diaphanous text to support her understanding of the index and punctum. When Krauss's or Fried's arguments matter, the thing to do, I think, is to argue against their ways of extracting what they need from *Camera Lucida*, as opposed to arguing against what they (or anyone else)

does with those claims once they are extracted—but almost no one does that, because everyone wants something from *Camera Lucida*. Mainly people have been persuaded that Barthes's text does harbor theories, and I only know one attempt to argue just that the theories Krauss claims to find cannot be found—Joel Snyder's essay in *Photography Theory*. I am not aware of any other arguments that particular claims cannot be found in *Camera Lucida*: that would be an unrewarding exercise as long as the book seems to have something useful to say about photography.

6 Annoyance is therefore partly the effect of never knowing whether Barthes's ideas can make sense outside their matrix of *écriture*, unless the book is strip-mined for ideas and then discarded. (As Fried does.) Annoyance is also knowing how treacherous it is to do anything but ignore the *écriture*. (As Krauss shows.)

And annoyance comes from realizing that there is a third option, but that it may not be achievable. I take it Barthes did not worry about *écriture* in his book in the way I am: for him the "essence" of photography was inevitably immersed in writing and discovered within it. That is a nearly unapproachable position for a writer interested in photography, because it cannot be sensible to say that the best way forward is to risk losing *any* theory about the subject at hand by writing so strongly that the writing might overwhelm what is said. As invested as I am in writing, I cannot bring myself to think that my way of writing will drown my argument, that this book will turn out to be more experimental fiction than rational inquiry. I can't believe that now and keep writing, even though I can imagine coming to the last pages of this book, looking back, and saying to myself: This is fiction after all, with "Photography" as its main character.

It even takes courage to *read* Barthes's book for the "pleasure of the text": not only because academic habits insist on interrogating a text to find what it says that might be true, but because *Camera Lucida* is more than just *scriptible*, as Barthes said of Balzac's *Sarrasine*: Barthes's book has a purpose, arguments, and a

conclusion. (*S/Z*, 4.) And who would pick up a book on photography, hoping to learn about photography, and be satisfied when the book becomes a strange muttered monologue on the author's mother?

Clearly, there are claims in *Camera Lucida*, and obscurely, we are to understand they gave the book its form and voice. But if I find myself reconciled with this, or tempted to go ahead without working on it, then I have declined to take up the challenge the text throws down. And I will have failed to actually read the book, which would leave the book free to go on being mined for its theory and admired, from a safe distance, for its writing.

Writing inflects sense, form and content cannot be unfused. Often that common truth is unimportant. I don't really care how scientists write, although I appreciate it that most scientists don't attempt to write anything other than informal spoken-style English. A writer like Barthes is a very different matter. Affect is as tightly bound to his book's message as nerve sheaths to nerves. With a book like Barthes's, reading for the writing or for the argument is like tearing the book apart one nerve fiber at a time. Any academic essay that locates Barthes's arguments and sees the writing as a symptom of mourning is not serious enough about the book's form, just as any reader who prefers the book as a meditation is not serious enough about its intention to argue.

7 There is a moment in nearly every academic text on *Camera Lucida*—at least every one that mentions Barthes's commitment to writing—that I call the turn. The author notes Barthes's beautiful, strange, compelling writing, and his willingness to follow that writing wherever it might go, and then the author says, in effect, But it is still possible to use *Camera Lucida*, to apply it to photographic practice, scholarship, history, theory, or criticism. At that moment the *danger* of the kind of writing Barthes was engaged in is closed off, the doors are shut and the room is cleaned.

Here is an example of the turn. Geoffrey Batchen introduces a collection of essays on *Camera Lucida* by recalling Barthes's

interest in "performative" texts that "refuse to fix meaning." Batchen notes that *Camera Lucida* was written a year after Barthes gave a course of lectures on *le neutre*, "the neutral," a kind of writing that resonates across the boundary between fiction and nonfiction. *Le neutre*, Batchen notes, was a continuation of a lifelong interest in forms of writing outside of genres. The title of Batchen's collection is *Photography Degree Zero*, an allusion to Barthes's idea that "how a text is written, its form, is as important . . . as what the text says." (*Photography Degree Zero*, 4.) As Barthes argued, and as Batchen affirms, there is no such thing as a "zero degree text," one without significant form. "*Camera Lucida*," Batchen concludes, "is marked by frequent double meanings, asides, learned allusions, self-assured aphorisms, and a sheer beauty of expression that all need to be appreciated at firsthand. Nevertheless"—he continues immediately, turning from the writing to the claims that may be embedded in it—"it is useful to have a general sense of how the book proceeds." (p. 12) He then summarizes *Camera Lucida*, as an editor is expected to do, hoping, I assume, to be helpful to those who haven't read the book or don't remember it clearly. The summary is silent on *Camera Lucida*'s "sheer beauty" and Barthes's invest-ment in what that "beauty" could do to argument. Batchen's own contribution, in an essay at the end of the collection, "pursues the possibility that Barthes's book might productively be read as a history rather than a theory of photography." (p. 20) That is a second instance of the turn, because it makes *Camera Lucida* into a useful, or at least an interesting, *art historical text*. I don't deny that *Camera Lucida* can be read as a history: Batchen's reading is cogent and persuasive, for what it is. In general, the essays in *Photography Degree Zero* demonstrate that *Camera Lucida* has a politics, that it raises issues about sexism, racism, and the social place of photography. But to make *Camera Lucida* into a historical document, it is necessary to turn away from the possibility that the writing might undermine and overwhelm any such reading, even without contradicting it: that the writing might wash over any "general sense of how the book proceeds," that the writing might flood scholarly designs or utilitarian purposes. Turning *Camera Lucida* into material for scholarship is a matter of not minding the flood.

8 For Barthes, "writing degree zero"—the title of his first book—was the impossible dream of writing, where form did not matter and matter filtered transparently through form. Batchen's edited collection, *Photography Degree Zero*, is titled after Barthes's first book in order to evoke a "continuity of purpose" that links Barthes's first book to his last. But *Photography Degree Zero* doesn't participate in Barthes's theme, because its authors mainly attempt to write "colorlessly," as Barthes would have said. The essays in the book are written with minimal affect and maximal scholarly control, keeping near the impossible "colorless" temperature of absolute zero, nowhere near the incandescent pulse of the text they study. In that realm of orderly cold, the authors mostly treat *Camera Lucida* as if its form could be sequestered from its argument, as if no matter how heartbreakingly beautiful the writing may be, no matter how supersaturated and dripping with affect, *Camera Lucida* can still be read *as* history, *as* theory, *as* criticism. The essays in *Photography Degree Zero* (including one that I contributed—I am as guilty as anyone) are engaged but sober, energetic but dry, well mannered and nicely controlled. (The only essay that avoids the turn is Carol Mavor's "Black and Blue: The Shadows of *Camera Lucida*.") I'm imagining some of the authors, reading this, will protest that they care deeply about writing, that they take it seriously. Some do, but none take it as seriously as Barthes, because if they did, they would not be faithful to the studium of academic writing.

9 So now, as I write my answer to *Camera Lucida* thirty years too late, I think again of the fact that so many writers take it, and in particular the punctum, as a touchstone. Especially those who would not normally propose concepts that are so personal, so detached from history and close to solipsism. Even those who would not allow themselves to reason with such a breathtaking absence of scholarly support. It is as if that book, one of the least scholarly of the central texts of twentieth-century art, has protected itself by shrinking away from the glare of scholarly criticism, shriveling to a point-like punctum of its own.

Camera Lucida has no footnotes, and the English translation has no list of sources. The French original has a dozen marginal annotations, like this: "Lyotard, 11," and twenty-four references at the end. The omission of scholarly apparatus simultaneously declares "Barthes's" independence and leaves readers stranded on the text as on an island, with few other writers' voices in earshot and no escape from the peculiarities of the author's memory. It has even been possible to claim that the book owes everything to Lacan, or is a monumental evasion of Bourdieu. (This book, the one you are reading now, strikes a compromise in that regard. The abbreviated references in parentheses should be enough to allow you to navigate from this book to the many others that address *Camera Lucida*. And by placing those references in the text, I keep an eye on moments when my own thought is at risk of losing itself in the forest of academic citation.)

It is clear to me that a full answer to *Camera Lucida* cannot be an academic essay: three decades of scholarship have not yet produced such an answer. And it is clear that an answer cannot be a work of fiction, a memoir, or anything proposed as creative or experimental writing. The only way to reply to a book as strange as Barthes's is to write another one even stranger.

Two
Selenite, Ice, Salt
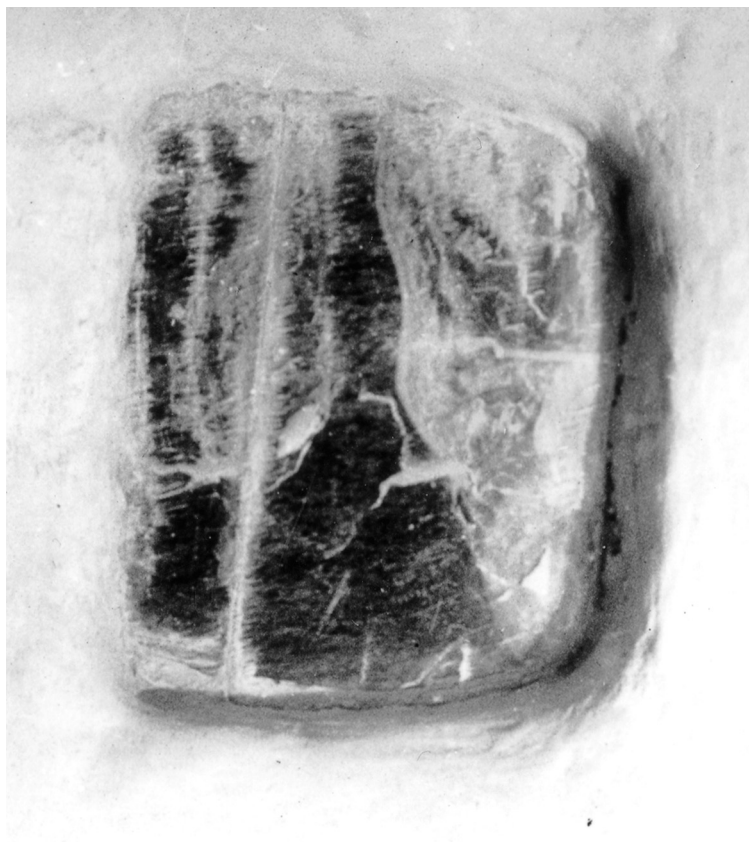
"I studied the photograph of the selenite window very carefully, and I discovered I could not tell which side was up."

<small>Anonymous Photographer. A Selenite Window. c. 1927.</small>

10 So this is where I will begin, with a selenite window. A window made of selenite is first of all a flawed window. I cannot clearly imagine what the world would have looked like through it, even though I have been to the top of Ácoma mesa in New Mexico, where the adobe village still stands, because all the selenite windows have been replaced by clear glass. The mesa sits like a cylinder of rock in an enormous bowl of desert, with mountains curling up in the distance. The little garden plots in the desert below, where the villagers still grow native corn and beans, are so far away that the people tending them can just barely be discerned from the houses on top.

Through selenite windows, people in Ácoma would have seen nothing but the blue of the sky and the similar shades of adobe, mountain, and sand. Seen through the window, the world would look like ill-fitted pieces of mosaic crushed together, pressed and refracted by the translucent mineral into a nearly indecipherable pattern. The window's inclusions, its grit and spalling sheets of rock, would make the window more a reminder of the lit world beyond it than a representation of that world. The light would bend in such complicated and unhelpful ways that the view through the selenite window could only serve to demonstrate that something was not being seen. Rigorously unseen, according to inflexible rules of useless optics.

Photography can be compared, I thought when I first found the photograph, to that selenite window. It promises a view of the world, but it gives us a flattened object in which wrecked reminders of the world are lodged.

11 The selenite window itself, not the photograph of it, was my first idea for a model for photography. Sometime later I thought photography could better be compared to a sheet of black lake ice. "Black ice" is what drivers call it when the road surface is frozen but the ice is not visible. This other use of the expression is less common: it is a kind of ice that forms overnight on a lake when it is bitter cold and there is no wind. I know from experience that it can be terrifying to walk on black lake
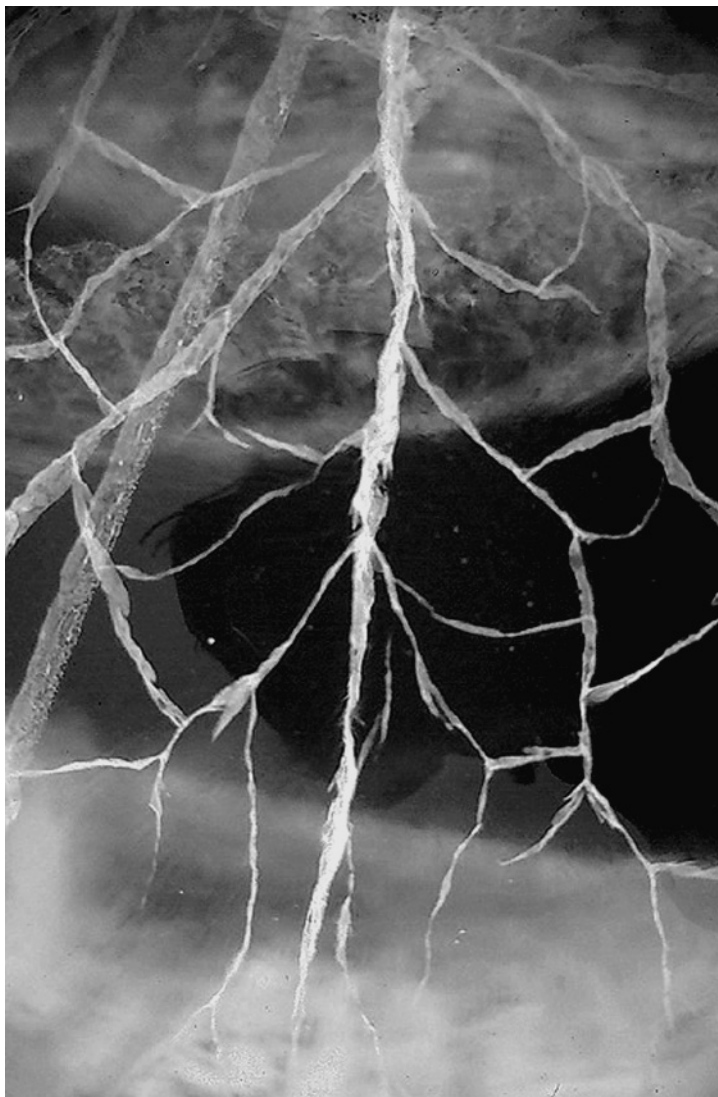
"it can be terrifying to walk on black lake ice:
it fractures with each footstep and the breaks squeal and shriek as they
spread out on all sides"

BLACK LAKE ICE, LAKE BONNEY, ANTARCTICA. C. 2005.

ice: it fractures with each footstep and the breaks squeal and shriek as they spread out on all sides. Underfoot, the fissures look like white crystalline ribbons moving through the darkness. Somewhere a foot or two beneath the branching fractures, the ice ends, and the black water begins. Black ice is a horizontal window that looks down onto nothing visible. You see into it as if into a thick deep darkness: you do not see a black surface like the wall of a room at night, but a place where light becomes weak, where it loses energy, slows, and dies in some viscous depth. The lake water underneath the ice seems unreal. The pooling cold water is like an abstract idea of sinking or drowning. That place beneath the black ice, where I know that water must be, admits light but does not give back any image. ("Ce lac dur oublié," as Mallarmé says in *Le vierge . . ., the poem about the frozen swan.)*

So I thought that looking into a photograph is like standing on black lake ice and looking down into the water beneath it. Like black ice, the material surface of a photograph is often transparent to vision: my eye moves right through the thin shiny surface of the photographic paper, except where I see scratches or dust, or where the coating reflects my face. If I look closely enough, a photographic print does have a certain minuscule thickness, and in that layer the mixed crystals and paper fibers create an exquisite, shallow, and uncertain illusion of depth. (Or: my eye moves right through the monitor, except if I see a greasy film on the screen, or if I notice my face reflected in the glass. If I look closely enough, a photograph on a computer monitor does have certain minuscule thickness, and in that layer a minuscule grid of soft phosphorescent lights creates an exquisite, shallow, and uncertain illusion of depth.)

How seldom Barthes mentions the surface of the photograph: he looks through, habitually, and does not reflect on how his gaze has penetrated the paper. Partly that is because he studied photographs reproduced in magazines, and partly it is the common reaction to photographs. Rosalind Krauss calls this the "it's" response: "it's a portrait," "it's a landscape," "it's a very beautiful woman," "it's a man on the right who is in drag," "it's an *x* or a *y*" ("A Note on Photography and the Simulacral," in *Overexposed*, 171–73.) For Barthes, the light of the object comes directly through the print, as if it were perfect commercial plate glass.

And Barthes is right, because normally looking at a photograph is only looking beyond its surface, seeing the people and landscapes back there somewhere beyond or behind the photograph itself. The lake ice metaphor made me reconsider. I thought, The light of my eye is lost in the darkness on its way to the object. I can try to look *through* the water, and see the bottom, but it is hopeless. Or I can try to look *at* the water, but nothing there catches the light. There is no foothold, no certainty, no object. Even the black ice hardly catches my eye at all. Only its cracks, its surface imperfections, and some faint reflections show that it is there at all, and so I look deeper, below it, searching for something to see: but there is nothing definitely there beyond the flaws and frighteningly thin thickness of the nearly invisible ice.

By contrast, Barthes looks confidently straight at the objects he desires. I am not sure of those objects. I am worried about the surface. And I wonder if the surface and the spaces beyond it are as different as they might seem. The black lake ice stills the water beneath it, and floats weightlessly on the surface of the water, so that the water has no surface, no beginning. Indeed there is no distinction between the coldest, most frigid water just below the ice, and the softest boundary of the ice itself: the pane, and the world beyond the pane, fused.

12 I chose these examples of stunted seeing because photography tends to be conceptualized with the help of brilliant metaphors: people write about perfect windows, lucency, transparency. Cameras are still imagined, despite their increasing complexity, as machines of logic and light. The pinhole camera, the camera obscura, the diagrammed eye with its inverted retinal image, and the Euclidean ray diagram, are all metaphors of the ease with which photographs are thought to capture accurate images of the world.

It has long been a problem that the medium provides its own concrete metaphor: once it was the simple Kodak box camera, and now it is the autofocus autoexposure professional-black megapixel

camera with wireless internet uploading, face recognition, blink detection, and diffraction-limited, multicoated computer-designed aspheric optics. Either way the actual machinery prompts the metaphoric machinery, facilitating the notion that photography is mechanical and therefore, in the logic that can only be persuasive to people who don't think too closely about their machines, potentially the equivalent of the simple pinhole camera.

The crushed-looking selenite window and the unstable sheet of lake ice were antidotes—so I hoped when I started thinking about this book—for those misleading and relentlessly optimistic metaphors.

13 The camera lucida, Barthes's choice for master trope and title, could be mistaken for one of those metaphors of light. The camera lucida is a device with a semi-silvered prism, which makes it possible to trace the outlines of an object, a person for example. It was popular in the early nineteenth century among silhouette artists and portrait painters, and again from the mid-nineteenth century through the 1960s, when it was adopted by naturalists to trace objects seen under the microscope, and by archaeologists and biologists to produce accurate outlines.

Barthes could have called his book *Camera Obscura*: that would have been historically appropriate given photography's origins, but he wanted an archetypal image of light and Enlightenment. He chose *Camera Lucida*, I suspect, in order to oppose the camera obscura's connotation of darkness. "It is a mistake to associate Photography, by reason of its technical origins, with the notion of a dark passage (*camera obscura*)." (p. 106) When he says this, he is prohibiting himself from "penetrating" or "reaching into" the photograph. ("Je ne puis approfondir, percer la Photographie," original edition, 164.) He quotes Blanchot saying photography is at once "altogether outside, without intimacy, and yet more accessible and mysterious than the thought of the innermost being." ("Plus inaccessible et mystérieuse que la pensée du for intérieur," 106, 165 in the

original.) Somehow that means photography's most appropriate metaphor is the camera lucida.

(The Blanchot quotation is one of the darkest moments of *Camera Lucida*. Even though the quotation is pivotal, and even though it is one of the densest and longest of the book, Barthes doesn't say where it comes from, and Derrida did not find the source when he cited it in "Les morts de Roland Barthes." I take the lack of citation as a mirror of the lack of argument—there is no clear link between the camera lucida and Blanchot's chains of paradoxes. Of course, scholarship being what it is, the text has been identified: it is from Blanchot's "En hommage à l'imaginaire de Sartre"; Camille Joffres, "De la photographie, faire son deuil, rêves et variations," *La review des ressources.org*, March 11, 2009.)

Even aside from its hermetic justification, the camera lucida is hardly a suitable metaphor of light: as Geoffrey Batchen says, it's a perverse choice for a title. (*Meaning of Photography*, 84; he also calls the choice "abstruse" and, finally, "apt," in *Writing Degree Zero*, 10–11.) The real camera lucida is a finicky instrument, which involves peering into a small aperture or squinting at a tiny prism, and when it is attached to a microscope, as it often was, it can be difficult to balance the little light it provides with the bright light of the microscopic object. Drawing a person with the help of a camera lucida clamped to the tabletop in front of you is like trying to read a book without glasses and with a tiny piece of sharp machinery hovering a few millimeters from your eye. Nor does Barthes notice, or care, that the point of a camera lucida was drawing, not photography. The camera lucida is just wrong for *Camera Lucida*: it's not about photography; it is a weird, difficult little instrument, not a metaphor of light; and it is not connected, by any logic I can follow, to Blanchot's observations about intimacy.

It is true, on the other hand, that a camera obscura can be very dark: it can take a good five minutes until your eyes adjust to the darkness of the image projected in a room-sized camera obscura. But even the camera obscura is too light for my purposes, too effective at pulling the world into a dark room and projecting it onto the walls: too spectacular, too easy, too successful. As long ago as 1568 Daniele Barbaro praised the motion and color of the image he saw projected in a camera obscura. In a well-constructed room-sized

camera obscura, ghostlike clouds move slowly across the floor, and birds fly by, upside-down, flattened against the walls. Buildings are vertiginously upended, hung from the ceiling, as Abelardo Morell's photographs tirelessly demonstrate. (abelardomorell.net) The image is dusky, but it can be enormous and thrilling even in the age of virtual reality and IMAX theaters. The camera obscura isn't really a "dark passage": it is the overgrown theatrical cousin of cameras, photography's ordinary little metaphor-machines.

All this is just to say: Barthes's chosen metaphor isn't about light, as he hoped, and the metaphor he rejected, the camera obscura, isn't enough about darkness.

14 There was another reason, too, for the rock window and the ice sheet. I choose them to avoid the *indexical sign*, a concept that has served for a long time now as the crucial property of the photographic medium. (In brief: Indexical signs are those that physically issue from what they signify. Smoke rising from a chimney is an indexical sign of a fire in the hearth. In painting or drawing, so it is said, the artist is an intermediary between the world and the picture, so those media are not indexical. But photography is, because the silver compounds in the negative are causally affected by photons from the object. Light physically, directly produces the photographic image.)

The indexical theory of photography's nature was helpful for some art criticism in the moment of minimalism, when it was important to stress photography's material nature and its independence of ideation. That purpose aside, the allegedly indexical nature of photographs is not often convincing. Barthes's ruminations on time and death do not lean on Charles Sanders Peirce, the inventor of the indexical sign. To think of a photograph as indexical, you have to pay attention to the machinery and the physics of light. What is gained, Barthes might have asked, by proposing that the familiar elements of photography are best understood in terms of Aristotelian cause and effect or the most esoteric and abstract interactions of subatomic particles?

And there is hardly any help to be found in Peirce himself: he wrote prodigiously, monstrously, on the subject of signs. Once I took great pleasure in losing myself in Peirce's ten thousand kinds of signs and his mazes of mathematized logic. (*Culture, Theory, and Critique*, 2003, 5–22; *Overexposed*, 21.) I like, but I don't understand, his ideas about photography. An iconic sign of a rainy day, he says at one point, is "the mental composite photograph of all the rainy days the thinker has experienced." (*Collected Papers* 2.438.) But what is a "mental composite photograph?" I can't say I have ever experienced such a thing.

But because Barthes started his career as an expert in signs, some readers miss those themes in *Camera Lucida*. Perhaps the punctum is a special kind of sign, or maybe the book has a new sort of sign in it, one "that just is." (Ann Game and Andrew Metcalfe, in *Social Semiotics*, 2008.) Other readers have turned to signs of production and consumption, or to more exotic fauna of semiotics—post-semiotics, sub-semiotics, and supra-semiotics. (Paul Frosch, *Semiotica*, 2003; *Pictures and the Words That Fail Them*, 1998; Sunil Manghani, in *Culture, Theory and Critique*, 2003.)

The game of semiotics, signs, and photography is hard to stop playing, and I hoped that the frightening lake ice and the flawed rock window would help cure me.

15 The indexical sign might not be a good fit for photography, but in another sense photographs are all about touching. When I hand someone a photograph, I am touching its surface. If the print was made in a darkroom, my fingers slide or grip the water-resistant coating, and I can feel the paper base that holds the layers of dyes and silver halide molecules. If the photo is onscreen, I may touch the glass to point out something, smearing it a little with the grease in my fingertip. I can't agree with the notion that photography has become "information in the pure state" just because it is digital. (Joan Fonctuberta, *Photography: Crisis of History*, 11.) There is always the surface, and now there's light from the screen.
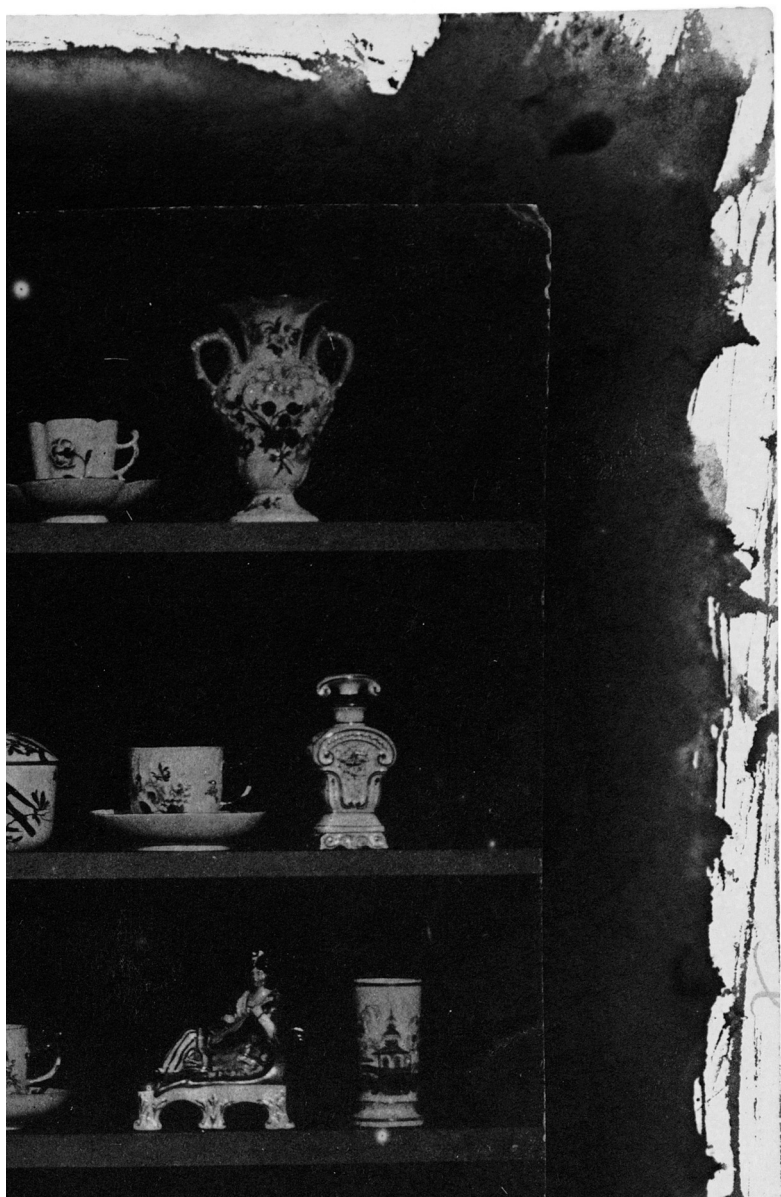
"a ghostly fingerprint just left of the china figurine on the bottom shelf."

This surface, traditionally invoked and then forgotten, has been there from the beginning. William Henry Fox Talbot's photogenic drawings were made by brushing or sponging silver chloride over paper soaked in salt. They were, in effect, paintings before they were photographs. Normally the margins, with their thoughtless brush-marks, were cut away, but in a few instances they remain. This detail of *Articles of China* shows the slightly irregular corner of the paper (Talbot cut his paper to shape), sponged or painted with his special coating. Between the image and the sponged margin is a corner of the original paper negative, slightly dog-eared from multiple printings. (My thanks to Larry Schaaf for explaining the dog-ears.) The paper is speckled with embedded dust, stray hairs, and, I think, a ghostly fingerprint just left of the china figurine on the bottom shelf. How easy it is to mention these things, and how easy to stop attending to them.

My eyes can touch the surface of a photograph. If it is a print made in a darkroom, I can see its surface as a *griffonage* (an illegible handwriting) of marks and scratches. If it's onscreen, I can just barely make out the fuzzy mosaic of RGB sub-pixels or, if it's an older monitor, the woolly RGB phosphor dots. (I also can't agree with writers who speak of the weightlessness of ones and zeros, when digital photographs are always overlays of pixels, hardware routines that manage them for display, and screen sub-pixels of entirely different shapes and sizes—not to mention the environmentally appalling objects that give us those images.)

But neither of these two kinds of touching, crucial as they are, interested Krauss or Barthes. The handling of photographs is a social act, and the optical feel of a photograph's surface is something that almost everyone who writes on photography ignores. (With some exceptions: Olin, *Touching Photographs*; Peter Geimer's wonderful book *Bilder aus Versehen: Eine Geschichte fotografischer Erscheinungen*.)

16 The photo of the black lake ice resembles an amateur nature snapshot of the sort that is so common on the internet. Turn the image upside-down, and the surface cracks become a tree. It is an indifferent photograph, taken by a scientist in Antarctica as part of a documentary project. The original is a deep neon blue: "natural" in the sense that the scientist didn't tinker with it, but also distractingly close to the color I associate with bottles of mouthwash. I was glad, when I found it on the internet, that the photograph itself had no particular aesthetic or artistic interest, because I thought that would help it work as a metaphor.

The picture of the Ácoma window caught my eye because it was nearly lost in the files of the American Museum of Natural History: its only annotation was "260769, Selenite window," written in script with a steel-nib pen. The images around it in the same file were prosaic ethnologists' documentations of the Ácoma mesa; they belonged irresistibly to their place and time ("Aug. '27"). I found the file by chance; that location in culture has no particular appeal to me.

Not that there is such a thing as a pure absence of aesthetic or anti-aesthetic value, or of historical context: but I needed the noise of aesthetics, fine art, and history to be minimal.

17 Things became more complicated when I began to attend to my two model metaphors *as photographs*, as two unique images, one on paper and the other on my computer.

I studied the photograph of the selenite window very carefully, and discovered I could not tell which side was up. If the window is recessed in the adobe wall, then one of the two shadowed edges should be on top. That choice of orientations is complicated by the frame: Is it wood? Paper, or perhaps canvas? On one side the frame appears to cast a shadow onto the wall, as if a box had been constructed and put in place in Ácoma to mask extraneous objects from appearing in the shot.

I noticed, too, that the framing edge and its shadow do not match. There is a notch in the frame, answered by a projection in the shadow. A chip in the adobe wall in one corner of the photograph makes it look as if the window was removed from the building along with a rectangular piece of the wall, and that the frame was a box. But that does not solve the problem of orientation. I reproduce the photograph here in two random orientations.

18 As an individual photograph, the selenite window is a good but imperfect model of imperfect visibility. Large sheets have split off the left and right like curtains— I am looking at the second reproduction, cropped and turned so the breaks look like curtains. A linear fracture (it looks like a pull cord for the curtains) runs down one side. In the middle there is a clear portion: perhaps an image could have been seen through the window after all. The file card at the museum has the line "Taken by＿＿＿." "Taken" is struck through and "cop." (copied) is written in its place. The copyist's name is given as J. Kirschner. My photograph—the one the museum produced in a darkroom and sold me so I could study it—is therefore a copy of a copy, at the least.

And my photograph, like the print in the museum, is tiny: the window itself is barely one and a quarter inches high. (The second reproduction is more or less life size.) To even begin to see its details I had to use a high-resolution scan, which resampled the photograph's fibers and grains and presented me with a uniformly blurred approximation. The only evidence of the surface of the original print are the black grains of dust that Kirschner carelessly preserved when he copied it. The museum imaging office reproduced them again when they copied their print for me, and I preserved them in my scan. The selenite window photograph is imperfect as a metaphor of the imperfection of photography, but its imperfection is exact.

19 The black ice photograph is also an intricate and specific model of imperfect representation. It records several layers within the ice: on top is the tree- or root-like network of cracks, and just underneath it is a diagonal fracture running from the top center to the bottom left. The diagonal fracture just touches the branching fractures, which shows that it is in a layer of ice just beneath the surface cracks. Lower still is a rough serrated ridge that crosses the field of view just above the dark opening. It touches the diagonal fracture without overlapping it. These three layers must represent stages in the freezing of the lake, from top to bottom. Beneath the three layers is another region where the ice has either partly melted or is still forming. That deepest and least perfect layer forms a curved opening onto the waters below.

   Only when I had seen all of that did I finally notice that the darkest area of the image has an irregular outline, with two hair-like marks protruding from its upper left corner. And then, at last, I realized that the photographer had wiped the surface of the lake with his mitten before he took the photograph. The invisible top surface of the ice must have been covered with a thin film of snow, and some buckle or snap on the photographer's mitten left a sawtooth pattern where that film was brushed away. Five layers, therefore, between invisible water and invisible air.

20 The odd shadows of the selenite window, the imbricated layers of the black lake ice: I looked at them, wondering if they were too obstinately particular to have meaning for photography in general. They said the right things about photography, but perhaps they said them too narrowly, with too many qualifications. And the closer I looked, the more I was prone to playing the eccentric connoisseur. I wasn't after the aesthetic qualities that some photographers and collectors admire in the distressed surfaces of photographs. I only wanted to say: This, or something like it, is what actually happens in photography, when we stop thinking in optimistic metaphors of

light, representation, and realism. Maybe, I thought, photographs do not work well as metaphors, because they keep splitting into layers, distracting me with inappropriate detail, with clutter. . .

Later I found a third photograph that seemed more general and abstract. I was happy at that discovery, because by allowing myself multiple models, I was following an famous precedent: Leon Battista Alberti, the first to describe the "perspective window" that in turn modeled the camera. Alberti did not put all his trust in one model. He elaborated two procedures for linear perspective, leading to different historical practices. Albrecht Dürer imagined four different perspective machines and several kinds of perspective diagrams. Later those models multiplied. Maybe, I hoped, I could catch several species of inadequacy by thinking about several slightly different metaphors.

(Thinking this way makes it odd that the camera obscura remains the principal historical model for the photographic camera. Under what conditions of relentless generalization are camera obscuras taken to have been a single thing, a unified phenomenon, or even a set of commensurate experiences? Some were room-sized; others had poorly made pinholes, or lenses with serious aberrations that would have cast rainbows, comas, and caustics on the wall. There were camera obscura boxes with cloth hoods, and others like cramped phone booths—a whole encyclopedia of metaphors was compressed into one supposedly rational, light-filled model.)

21 My third model was a photograph of a piece of rock salt about two inches wide. The rock originally condensed from salty water at the bottom of a desert lake about two hundred and fifty million years ago, and in the millennia since then it had been underground. The scientists who excavated it were looking for small cavities that formed inside the rock; the cavities are filled with salty water that never had a chance to evaporate. They drilled a tiny hole into the right-hand side of this stone; the hole is indicated with an arrow. Their drill penetrated the little chamber to the left of the arrow. Then they drilled a
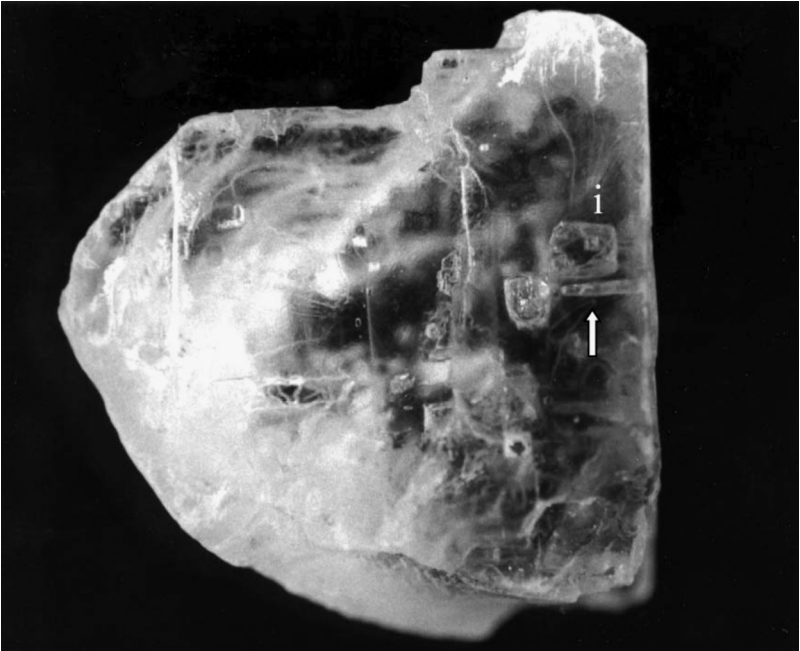
"In that small volume of salty water, just three millimeters on a side, the scientists found living bacteria."

Russell Vreeland, Halite Crystal (Rock Salt). 2000.

second drill hole just above it, which is not clearly visible in the photograph, and broke through into the little chamber below the letter i. In that small volume of salty water, just three millimeters on a side, the scientists found living bacteria.

Somehow, as the geologists put it in the dry manner customary in science, the bacteria had "survived within the crystal until the present." Once the bacteria were encased, they had no need to evolve ("evolutionary pressure" was relieved). They spent two hundred million years in their little dark droplet of water, while the other members of their species of bacteria became extinct. There must have been incremental melting and precipitation of salt to keep them alive, but the scientists have no idea how that happened ("at this point, we cannot address the mechanisms of survival"). As often happens in science, the discovery was cast into doubt soon afterward (at the 2002 annual meeting of the Geological Society of America), but the possibility remains.

The photograph is over-exposed on the left. It is focused not on the rock's front surface but on the first drill hole and the two tiny chambers, a few millimeters beneath the surface. The letter i and the arrow outlined in black were added in PowerPoint, marking the image as an informational object rather than an aesthetic one.

The rock has no visible support, no clamps or tweezers, and no intrusive wood grain tabletop or felt background. There is no unpleasant close-up of fingers, no outsized pencil tip or pen point poking at the object.

It is a truly lovely photograph. It asks me to see something I have never seen, which has not been seen at all, by any eyes, since the Permian age: and at the same time, I know that nothing here can be seen. The subject is unrepresentable using this kind of photography, and its invisibility is expressed, eloquently and inadequately, by the difficulty of peering into the fractured chunk of rock salt.
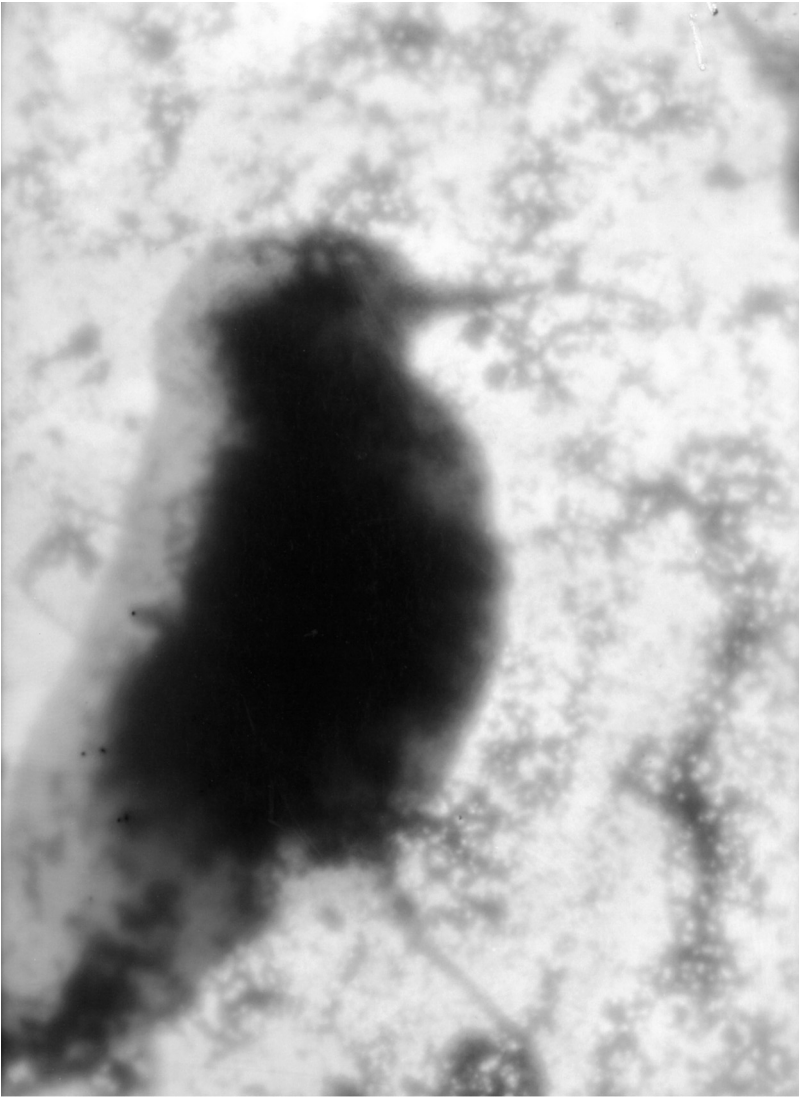
"the top few inches of dirt, silhouetted by gamma rays
emanating from underground"

Everett Lawson, *Untitled,*. 2008.

22 Through a selenite window, a sharp bright day will appear fractured and broken; in lake ice, everything beyond the surface sinks into night; in rock salt, the photograph is just a reminder that something cannot be seen.

Selenite, ice, salt: my trinity of failed photographic windows.

I could have gone on and chosen more photographs as emblems. If it hadn't been necessary to keep art to one side in order to think of photography as a whole, I could have chosen Marjaana Kella's *Attempt to Reproduce Light by Taking Pictures of the Sky*; Marco Breuer's wonderful *Obstructions*; P. Elaine Sharpe's series *Unanswered: Witness*; Thomas Demand's ice-cold photographs of paper constructions, which are so clearly not functional as ordinary images; Zoe Leonard's *You See I am Here After All*, in which several thousand picture postcards of Niagara Falls show us that we have no idea what the falls might actually look like. (*Six Stories from the End of Representation*; and for Kella, *Toisaalta tässää*/Here Then.) Some young artists, who have not yet exhibited widely, would also have joined the list: Aspen Mays's strange glowing green photographs, made by putting fireflies inside the camera (so much less burdened by nostalgia than Hiroshi Sugimoto's time-lapse photographs of movie theaters); or Everett Lawson's dim photograms made by painting gamma-ray sensitive emulsion inside a box, and then putting it down on a lawn at the University of Chicago, near where the first nuclear reaction took place: the resulting images show pop tops, dead birds, cigarette stubs, and coins in the top few inches of dirt, silhouetted by gamma rays emanating from underground.

But there was no need for more models, because I saw I was finding the same thing, over and over. These are all failed looks into or through something. In them, the world is fractured, folded, faint, undependable, invisible, more or less ruined. Photography doesn't work, the way it does for Barthes, diligently supplying memories, faces, love, and loss.

"He could be alive today, Barthes says:
'but where? how? What a novel!'"

Kertész's photograph of "Little Ernest," in *Camera Lucida*.

"In the lower right are several strange lines of impressed marks."

KERTÉSZ'S PHOTOGRAPH OF "LITTLE ERNEST," DETAIL OF ARCHIVAL PRINT.

23 If Roland Barthes were still alive, so that this book could be a long letter to him, I would propose this as an opening argument: photography sees most of the world as it sees selenite, ice, salt, fireflies, and gamma rays, and not as it sees gypsies, prisoners, ex-slaves, or Ernest, the schoolboy Kertész photographed in 1931. (He could be alive today, Barthes says: "but where? how? What a novel!") (p. 84; original edition, p. 131)

Of course Barthes is right again: photography can be used to produce soft-focus romance (Kertész), hard-grained reportage (Sander, another of Barthes's favorites), shallow-focus realism (Nadar), floodlit fashion (Avedon), poignant social portraiture (Van Der Zee), or virtuoso provocation (Mapplethorpe). But where, exactly, is the photograph itself in all this romance and novelization? Where is the visual incident, the detail, the light, shade, shadow, depth, anything at all that would convince me these had to be photographs, and not film stills, paintings, memories, or hallucinations? And where, for that matter, is the matter of photography, the ground-level proof they are photographs?

At ground level, photographs like the ones Barthes had of his own family are compacted layers of paper and chemical grains, with protective layers on top. Photographs like the ones he saw in magazines are hairy mats of paper fibers, caked with dried flakes of printer's ink. In Barthes this material, this substance of photography does not exist. If he had cared to look, he would have seen the sharp-edged dust and scratches on his old studio prints, or the smeared Bendé dots and scruffy paper fibers of his newspaper and magazine photos. My own copy of the *Little Ernest,*, provided by the Réunion des Musées Nationaux, and therefore an optimal, archival print, is a mess of dust and scratches. In the lower right are several strange sets of impressed marks, made with a round-pointed tool such as a blunt pencil. It looks as if the print was underneath some other page, and someone was bearing down hard, and accidentally made this pattern of hatchmarks. When I look closely at the print in the French and English editions of *Camera Lucida*, I see the same marks in both. The people who put that book together at Gallimard in Paris, and later at Farrar, Straus, and Giroux in New York City, must have used the same print. It's entirely possible that the reproduction

Barthes himself saw was made from the same print, but this isn't the kind of thing he noticed.

If I think just of photographs, their simple material, their surfaces, then I fail to find Barthes's Photography. Surfaces are not photographs—I am not reducing photographs to paper, glass, and chemicals—but once surfaces are forgotten, photographs are also forgotten. Barthes's view is normal, and that is why I keep saying he is right—we all use photographs to help us think of ourselves and our world—but there must be a cost, because selenite, ice, and salt are what we actually continuously see and scrupulously ignore.

24 Photography is domestic and domesticated in *Camera Lucida*, because it takes the form of a boy and his puppy, *Little Ernest*, *Little Italy*, *Idiot Children in an Institution*, or *Savorgnan de Brazza*. (pp. 46, 50, 52, 113) Ordinary photography is made strange—so Barthes implies—by the hunt for the punctum. He does not always look at faces: he also stares at shoes, necklaces, "incongruous" gestures, collars, bandages, "off-center detail." (pp. 51, 55) To him, those are the openings into the true nature of Photography, and it is clear he wants his readers to feel the frisson of discovery as they follow his wayward eye into the unnoticed and overlooked regions beyond photography's obvious faces and subjects.

I used to love the punctum, and why not? It is the very exemplar of romantic attachment, as Barthes himself knew so well: it is mine and only mine, it is unpredictable, outside the rule of reason, and always intensely personal. But it wears thin. In the end, it is not really adventurous: it's a kind of deliberate eccentricity, a self-consciously "aberrant" pensiveness. (p. 51) It's always in danger of being less affect than affectation. It's a tourism of the overlooked, spiced with little surprises and "shocks." Our eyes stray from the Queen to her "kilted groom," from "idiot children" to a "finger bandage," from "a family of American blacks" to "strapped pumps" and a "braided gold" necklace. (pp. 43, 50, 53 57) And from there, where do our eyes go? Well, back into our own memories, and

"He is looking at nothing;
he retains within himself
his love and his fear;
that is the Look . . ."

Kertész's *The Puppy in Camera Lucida*.

then on to the next *Little Ernest*, the next *Little Italy*, the next *Idiot Children in an Institution*. Back to the faces and their novelized lives.

Barthes's adventures were never much of an adventure, after all. We pretended to be looking in a new way, askew, astray, awry, to one side of ordinary meaning. We thought we were doing something "potentially crazy." (p. 113) We found a few things that were overlooked . . . but those things were all *attached* to figures. The things we discovered were domestic middle-class ornaments: *staffage*, in the old landscape painter's terms—objects used to embellish, not to disrupt, or objects that could be experienced as embellishments even if they were unnoticed by the photographers themselves. (Technically: they could be experienced as disruptive exactly because they had not been noticed by the photographers themselves: that is Fried's point about Barthes's point.) It wasn't such a long trip, after all, from the woman to her pumps to her necklace, or from the child to her bandage and back.

It's true these little journeys are slightly haunting. Barthes would say that's because they pick out the "private reading," they speak silently to the "burning, the wounded." (pp. 97, 98) I don't really think so: the little trips from faces to *staffage* and back again to faces haunt us because they are toy journeys. I think they remind us, just a little, of something else. They are like amusement park rides that scare us a bit and then console us: by mimicking genuine terror, they half-remind us of real terror, and by half-reminding us they confuse us, blurring our image of terror with a toy version of terror. Or they are like detective stories—to which Barthes owes so much—in which the sleuth discovers an overlooked detail, apparently far from human meaning, and instantly solves the murder, wrapping up the harmless story in a delightful flourish. Suffering, pain, anguish, and mourning play no part in detective stories, and that is famously why they are so palatable as amusements: they put us in mind, just a little, of the fact that people we love will die—but then they make it seem that if we are clever enough, those deaths can somehow be solved.

The punctum is thrilling, to a point, because it mimics in its harmless way something more unsettling that waits beyond it. It half-hides the continuous slight unconscious effort it requires to ignore

the photographs themselves and look beyond them for romance and memory. Without our suspecting, Barthes's toy journeys shadow other far more upsetting journeys that we could have taken, and still can take.

25 At the conference in Nottingham, the one in which every speaker mentioned Barthes, I suggested that scholars might be using the punctum to smuggle their personal responses into their academic writing. *Camera Lucida* provides the imprimatur, the seal of propriety on ideas that would otherwise seem without foundation. Such a use is demonstrably a misreading, because the punctum is the property of each viewer's response and cannot be communicated with any authority or persuasiveness. A common maneuver is the analogic citation: such-and-such is like the punctum—but that can't make any better sense than a direct citation, because Barthes's punctum is itself inaccessible to public understanding. ("Stigmata and Sense Memory," *Art History*, 2001, 1–16.) Nor does it help to immerse the punctum in the Freudian unconscious, because that is not part of Barthes's presentation. (This is correctly diagnosed, against Victor Burgin, in an essay called "Re-Reading *Camera Lucida*," *Afterimage*, 2007.) And if the punctum is to enable a sense of solidarity with other people's lives, as Kaja Silverman argues, then it is only at the expense of the punctum's point-like solipsism. The punctum cannot be expanded and shared unless it is diluted by quantities of *studium*. (Silverman, *Threshold of the Visual World*, 185.) Bridges have been built from these adulterated *puncta*—plural now, because they are dispersed—to writers and artists from W. G. Sebald to Jeff Wall. But that is all part of the punctum's inaccurate afterlife. (Stefanie Harris, in *The German Quarterly*, 2001.) The popularity of *Camera Lucida* may partly stem from abuses of the punctum, and those abuses might also account for the punctum's conflicted and under-theorized reception, because scholars interested in the punctum would not be in a rush to acknowledge their motives for misreading.

(Of course, abuse is use. Postmodern writing on the arts mines many texts in many ways: Beckett is strip mined for art theory; holes are drilled in Gide's *The Counterfeiters*; *Finnegans Wake* is dissolved to extract its postmodern philosophy. The Portuguese scholar Mariana Pinto dos Santos read a draft of these pages and reminded me that Barthes is all the more useful because he is so open and literary. But all miners, from Fried and Krauss to Silverman, have to ignore what they destroy to get at what is underneath. It is Barthes himself who says the punctum cannot be shared.)

26 And about Barthes's mother, the supposedly imaginary photograph, his intense roaming at the margins of despair: "Barthes" is near the edge of writing. His "little book" is dense with excrescences, rare orchids, "the burning, the wounded." ("le brûlant, le blessé," 155, 98 in the English.) But it is exactly there that I have to accuse him of remaining safe. It is just what the text presents to us as inviolate truth—the propulsive search, the disconsolate mourning that drives it—that is the last remaining cover, the safest defense, the best fiction.

Erin Mitchell has written an interesting comparison of lost mothers and grandmothers in writing: the grandmother in *Remembrance of Things Past*, the mother in *Camera Lucida*, and the mother in Marguerite Duras's *The Lover*. Mitchell calls written descriptions of lost relatives "virtual photography." "The actual image is rescued from the use and gaze of the public," she says, and so the image's meaning, and the love we can give the person it depicts, are controlled. (*Studies in 20th Century Literature*, 2000, 325.) Barthes's book is the riskiest of the three because it includes "actual photography." In the end "to write photography, to make photographic images virtual," is not a way of expanding representation, but a way "to contain and tame the excess of images." And therefore, I add, showing *other* photographs, and avoiding the Winter Garden photograph—which, as we now know, must have

been with him as he wrote—is a way of proposing that all strictures have been obeyed, all dangers met.

27 I prefer another photography, a broader and less controllable practice where we are not reliably given back what is familiar, and not reassured, by the giving, that it is familiar. That is mainly why I am not especially interested in the photography that Pierre Bourdieu so accurately conjures—the photography that provides us with evidence that we are reasonably successful middle-class subjects, confirming our place in the world and our apparent freedom, comforting us with what we take as proof that our lives, our families and marriages work and have meaning, freely giving what we take to be an incontrovertible validation of the truth of our beliefs about ourselves. I believe, but don't really care, that photography "is most frequently nothing but the reproduction of the image that a group produces of its own integration." (Bourdieu, *Un Art moyen*, 48.)

At the same time I recognize that by asserting my lack of interest in that understanding of photography, and by choosing things like rock, ice, and salt in place of family photos, I am wholly susceptible to Bourdieu's observation that asserting some "new" taste in photography is just a typical middle-class gesture of rebellion. For Bourdieu, photography is bourgeois to its bones, and it even includes its own futile anti-bourgeois gestures, like my own attraction to things that aren't family photographs.

Rosalind Krauss noted how Bourdieu's critique could engulf other understandings of photography, but she apparently did not want to notice how his critique could also swallow her own critical practice. Members of classes other than the one filled with "hicks and their Instamatics," she observes, can mark themselves as different either by abstaining from taking pictures altogether or by identifying "with a special kind of photographic practice, which is thought of as different." ("A Note on Photography and the Simulacral," in *Overexposed*, 175.) She does not say why Bourdieu's point does not pose a problem for her own project, which is also concerned with "a

special kind of photographic practice," namely minimalist and conceptual fine art photography and the philosophy of copies and simulacra. Bourdieu might have said all that was just as bourgeois as what she stringently refused. Barthes, too, knew Bourdieu's critique, and kept it out of his text without comment. Bourdieu's kind of critique is always available, and it always threatens to explain everyone's uses of photography, but it is not always in need of an answer because the practices themselves have meanings outside their significance for social relations.

I don't disagree that "we"—the billions who take family photos and vacation snapshots—need to find photographs touching, that we need to arrange them and share them, to preserve them and have them around to help us think about ourselves and our lives. (Olin, *Touching Photographs*.) But because we are distracted by faces and memories, because we do not notice, photography is released to do something wholly different. Or to invert the same thought: because photography does something wholly different, that has nothing at all to do with little Ernest, we need little Ernest in order not to see that other thing.

As I have read and re-read Barthes's book, I have accumulated a collection of photographs of my own. There are no well-known photographers in my collection, no portraits, and only a scattering of human figures. I still have my collections of family photographs, but when the subject is photography, I find it more rewarding to reflect on images that do not reflect a face in return.

Three

From the Green River to the Brunswick Peninsula

28 I admit from the beginning the *statistical* perversity of my search for this wider, less human, less geometric and lucid, less psychologically engaging photography. Most photographs, I suppose, are snapshots, and most of those are of people familiar to the people who took the pictures. There are also the millions of photographs that give us ideal versions of our own faces and families. That is what fashion and beauty photography propose to give us, from Penn to Avedon and Platon, and it is what Annie Liebovitz does with a dollop of unfelt eroticism and a sprinkle of ersatz surrealism. ("The *Vanity* Model," *Portrait32*, winter 2009.)

There are also the millions of photographs that give us "exotic" people and landscapes. "Exotic" deserves its scare quotes because there is little in *National Geographic*-style exoticism that is genuinely outside our experience. (*Exoticos*, "from the outside.") Little Ernest, the Queen's "kilted groom," "Savorgnan de Brazza," James Van Der Zee's Harlem portraits—these are just the slightly different images of Barthes himself, imagining his own alterity to himself, and for himself: even the more "exotic" photographs in *Camera Lucida* are just one safe, short step outside the image of himself that he had before he recognized it in the photographs. That is what *National Geographic* has been doing since the 1880s: its tired proposal is that even the most startlingly unfamiliar faces and breathtakingly strange locations are part of our shared world, provided they are shellacked with enough photographic beauty. I note, unhappily, the continuation into the twenty-first century of magazines like *Photography Today*, incessantly repeating instructions for making manageably poignant, predictably nostalgic, unthreateningly "exotic" pictures. Even serious magazines like *Aperture* aren't immune, running essays on photographers that make use of "exotic" locations. (My favorite is Pieter Hugo's portraits of Nigerian boys with their frightening, powerful pet hyenas and unsettlingly friendly baboons. The hyenas and their handlers are ferocious beyond what *National Geographic* permits itself, but Hugo's photographs are just as orientalizing.) The computer books sections of Borders and Barnes & Noble are stocked with Photoshop tutorials showing people how to create "exotic" scenes, and there are uncountable numbers of "exotic" art photographs on travelers'

blogs, on Flickr, and on eBay. The names of the books, magazines, software, and internet sites change, but it's the same swill. Photographs of the suddenly beautiful Other are the uncountable spawn of Exoticism and Nostalgia. (Mounira Khémir, in *Photography: Crisis of History*.)

The limitless worldwide production of family photos, the equally enormous production of idealized images of ourselves and our societies, and the perennially popular simulations of exotic subjects are the wholly normative functions of photography. So my starting point here has to be the admission that what I am trying to do is perverse.

29 I also admit there is *historical* and *critical* perversity in claiming that photography represents the world inadequately. Photography's link to the physical world and to a general sense of how the world looks—to naturalism, to realism—have not been seriously threatened even in academic criticism. The same theorists who say photography's realism is really a matter of what people want it to represent, still reserve the index as photography's physical link to the world. (Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Obtuse," in *Photography Theory*.) It is easy to agree that photography's apparent realism has been formed by the middle-class hope that photographs give us reality itself (as Bourdieu says), and it is hard to disagree that photographs are formed by a physical and mechanical interaction with the world (as a debased version of Peirce has it). By accepting both these ideas, photography has become an activity that is both the projection of our desires about the world and an accurate record of the world. Weirdly, but characteristically, the idea that photography's realism is wholly a matter of what we *want* to believe coexists with the observation that photography has a causal, physical link to reality.

The book *Photography Theory* showed me just how little these differences seem to matter for most people involved in the practice, history, or theory of photography. I am no longer sure there is

much argument about photography's nature, what it is "in itself." (In quotation marks, even in Barthes's opening section.) Some contributors to *Photography Theory* argue with each other, as they are expected to do in an academic book, and some misunderstand claims about photography's realism made by other contributors or have idiosyncratic positions that no one tries to address. But most contributors don't argue at all. They choose not to join the discussion except in passing, and a number do not say why they don't have a position on photography's realism or lack of it, nor do they say why they think it is *unimportant* that they do not have a position. (This curious opinionlessness about opinion is the subject of the "Envoi" in *Re-Enchantment*, 2008.) *Photography Theory* records an unaccountable insouciance about photography's realism.

All that is to say that either worrying about photography's inadequacy as a naturalistic tool, or exploring its conventionality, misses the strangeness of the carelessness of the people who decide to miss these points. Inquiring into conventionality or naturalism is more or less meaningless in relation to the common, unaccountable, intentional avoidance of any clear position about photography's nature. So it is off-key for me to worry the question of how photography represents the world.

30 And (my third perversion) I admit it is *phenomenologically* perverse to say that photographs of people are not central to what photography is. It is untrue to the normative understanding of photographs to prefer the photograph's flaws to what it depicts, to say, in the case of "Little Ernest," that a set of blunt depressions at the lower right of the image is more rewarding than Ernest's bold and confident expression. Possibly just as untrue as it is to see past him to the incidental shadows and unfocused depths that surround him, which meant so little to Barthes, but which I think are so important to what photography is.

If I choose to look at marks and shadows instead of a little schoolboy, it is not because I am hoping that the material of the

photograph, its matter, its grain, can somehow speak, that photographic substance is somehow more eloquent, more full of thought, than little Ernest himself. The idea that the material of an artwork is what really bears meaning runs through so much writing that it would be hard to count it all, from Tim Clark's intricate and cloistered *Farewell to an Idea* to Daniel Arasse's study of details in paintings. There is an old notion that the material of art is transfigured into meaning, and there are also inversions of that idea, such as Georges Didi-Huberman's conviction that materiality is a hypostasis of meaning into substance. (Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico*; Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, *Formless*; Jay Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies*.) The false companion to this book, *What Painting Is*, is spellbound by material and its alchemical transformations into embodied meaning. It would be possible to go down that road with photography, following essays like Kenneth Calhoon's "Personal Effects: Rilke, Barthes, and the Matter of Photography." (*MLN*, 1998; also Alexander Vasudevan in *Cultural Geographies*, 2007.) One of the most interesting contemporary fine art photographers, Marco Breuer, cuts, scratches, and burns his photographic paper, using hot frying pans, scouring pads, knives, and lit fuses. (*Six Stories from the End of Representation*, chapter 2.) An entire book could be written on this subject. At times I am as mesmerized by the eloquent meaninglessness, the meaningful muteness, of materiality as anyone who was brought up in modernism.

But I don't mean any of that here. For the duration of this book, I disallow the poetic hope that partial meaning can gleam out of paper, silver, grain, or pixels. When I mention the surface of a photograph, I mean surface and just surface, not eloquent surface: not hypostatic, fallen representation, crushed onto the sensitive layers of the photograph. The perversity of this position isn't that it is outside of modernist debates about meaning and materiality, but just that I want to keep coming back to what photographs actually are: what their surfaces and depths look like, what happens when I try to look into them, whether they have depth or weight, and how they feel—even if that feeling is a glassy computer screen or a weightless page from a newspaper.

31 When a photograph has no face in it, no immediate comfort for my eye, no instant pleasure in the seeing, then a strange kind of recognition begins to come into its own: not the troubled or happy discovery of another life ("What a novel!"), but a reminder of something outside personal and common memory. It might seem that any image without a person or a face would open up the different kind of seeing I am after. But in fact few do, because most images without faces or people are actually full of people: they are places where people can find themselves in imagination.

Someone gave me a glossy book produced by the image warehouse Corbis, hawking photographs that advertisers can use as generic backgrounds for their products. It seemed at first to be a commercial version of the depopulated photography I was after. There are relatively few people in the book, with the exception of a few happy young couples and the usual choice of a half-dozen obviously ethnic faces in *National Geographic* style close up. There is the wizened Asian, taken to be non-Han Mongolian or Tibetan; the northern European of impeccably unidentifiable nationality; the "exotic" flat-nosed Native American, presumably to be taken as a rare survivor in Amazonia. Mainly the photographs in the book are of temporarily empty airport lounges, dreamy depopulated suburban streets, undecorated apartments full of promise, breakfast niches bathed in sunlight, conference tables set with notepads and water glasses, and scrupulously clean maternity wards seen in shallow focus. Really none of the images in the Corbis book are empty of people, because they are portraits of people's potential lives. Advertisers are asked to buy Corbis's images as backdrops to their ads and catalogs, and then overlay people and products. The Corbis catalog, which seems so depopulated, is actually a family photo album.

The same may be said of the enormous swathes of contemporary photography that conjure people's lives with snapshots of kitchen pantries, clock radios on night stands, televisions turned off, leaning stacks of vinyl records, avalanches of books, or dust under the bed. ("Picturing the Art of Moyra Davey," *Border Crossings*, November 2008.) Daniel Boudinet's photograph of an unmade bed and Niépce's *Dinner Table*, the only two photographs in *Camera Lucida*

without people, are both intimate scenes that people have only just left.

Then there is the entire domain of photographs of deserted places that are wrecked, threadbare, or impoverished. From Atget to Lynne Cohen, Daniel and Geo Fuchs to Takashi Yasumura, there are photographs of crime scenes, sinister interiors, operating theaters, shooting ranges, rest homes, asylums, desolate back lots, dilapidated alleys, empty police stations, and creepy suburban living rooms. When the subject is communities, as in Robert Adams's *The New West*, depopulated photographs can be sober, anti-romantic, depressing, and poetic. One of the roots of that practice is surrealism, as in Jindrich Styrsky's *Na jehlách t_chto d_i*, a book of deserted streets. A whole industry of photographic projects, beginning with Stephen Shore and books like Lewis Baltz's *The New Industrial Parks Near Irvine, California*, finds beauty and nostalgia in postindustrial landscapes. More recently, there are depopulated landscapes by Jeff Wall, Andreas Gursky, and Jean-Marc Bustamante.

All those images are about people, and it's fair to say that the majority of fine art photography, from Stieglitz to Boltanski, is also about people. (*The Book of 101 Books*; *Photoart: Photography in the Twentieth Century*.) I don't mean to say all these practices are interchangeable, just that there is a vantage point from which they are similar than different. The principal exceptions are the icons of postmodernism, like Bernhard and Hilla Becher's *Anonyme Skupturen* (the book of water tower photographs, still revered by young artists) and Ed Ruscha's *Every Building on the Sunset Strip*. But my interest here is not art, so I won't need to try to draw lines between the Beckers or Ruscha and things that concern me.

From the distant point of view I'm taking up here, there is little escape from the photography of people—from little Ernest—in the photo industry, in fine art, or in commerce. I first found the kinds of images I was looking for in a peculiar kind of landscape photography called "rephotography."

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32 Mark Klett's "rephotographic project" involves finding places that had been photographed in the nineteenth century by pioneer photographers of the American desert, and rephotographing them from the exact same spot and at the same time of day. They are the first exhibits in my gallery of depopulated photographs.

In some of Klett's pairings, a wilderness captured in the nineteenth-century photograph is replaced by a highway in the rephotograph, or a hill is reshaped to support a housing development. In a few of the pairs, the earth returns to its natural state: the nineteenth-century photograph shows a shanty town, but in the twentieth-century rephotograph the town has disappeared. In another pair, a nineteenth-century mine is abandoned in the late twentieth century, and scrub brush has begun to heal the land. But surprisingly, given the billions of new people that now crowd the world, most of Klett's rephotographs show that the landscape has not changed very much. Trees appear and disappear, and vegetation shifts, but the contours of the land generally remain the same.

In a few pictures, it seems that nothing has changed in the hundred-odd years since the first photograph. The earth seems static, and I imagine Klett standing with his camera, superimposed, at a hundred years' distance, over the figure of the nineteenth-century photographer, both studying the exact same landscape.

33 One pair of photographs, taken 107 years apart, looks at first like two copies of the same photograph. It seems nothing has moved. The bright cliff faces at the right match shadow for shadow, because the rephotograph was made at the same time of day, on the same day of the year. The serrated edges of the shadowed escarpment in the distance correspond angle by angle with apparently perfect precision. On the horizon of the bright slope, I note that the minuscule black shadows of rocks have not shifted: dark smudge, comma-like projection, dark smudge—each shape in the nineteenth-century photograph has its exact copy in the rephotograph.

The earlier photographer, Timothy O'Sullivan, used a different photographic process than Klett did. In the newer photograph the large rock in the foreground is more contrasty, and its lower edge is unclear. Yet the visible portions of the rock are in precisely the same positions in the two photographs. During the century between the two, "desert varnish," a mineral patina, darkened the top of the stone, and lightened one patch near the top.

And if I look even more closely? A rock cuts the lower-right corner of both photographs. Beyond it is a corrugated stone at a forty-five degree angle. It is brighter in O'Sullivan's picture, but it has not moved. The scree slope at the lower left has changed, and so has the stream bed, but I would expect that after 107 years of infrequent flash floods. Naturally the small tufts of grass that pepper the scree slope are different in the two photographs. Nearly everything else— every cleft, every bedding plane, every outcropping—has been utterly immobile for the full 107 years. (There is a website, thirdview.org, that juxtaposes the old and new photographs from Klett's project, but the registration is never perfect because of the optics of the cameras: the images themselves shift slightly as one fades into another. I find it more compelling to compare without mechanical aids.)

34 The Green River valley, where these photographs were taken, can be very quiet, especially when there are no insects and the creeks are dry. Often there is no wind. That stillness has a hollow sound, as if you could hear the volume of air shifting in the canyon walls.

These two photographs are even more quiet. They have a deadening silence, which deepens each time I compare a stone in one image to the same stone in the other image. The slight mist in the shadows of O'Sullivan's photograph is my only relief from the tense airless reverberation of identical shapes.

"the tense airless reverberation of identical shapes"

Timothy O'Sullivan, Vermillion Creek Cañon. 1872.

"the tense airless reverberation of identical shapes"

<small>Mark Klett, Scene in the Green River. 1979.</small>

35 This, I think, is the photographic imprint: the nearly hallucinatory record of uncountable numbers of unnameable forms, impressed on my eyes with a senseless insistence. In the Photograph, Barthes says, time is immobilized, "engorged," frozen in "an excessive, monstrous mode," in "a strange stasis, the stasis of an arrest." And here he interpolates a story about the Spanish village of Montiel, where people were fixed in the past: it's a strange reference, blending psychiatry and E. T. A. Hoffmann. (p. 91) Time is locked, he says, incapable of the slightest movement. Barthes is right, but as usual he is thinking of people—the princess in *Sleeping Beauty*, and the people in the village of Montiel who imagine they are living in the past. But Sleeping Beauty breathed, and the people of Montiel still read newspapers and listen to the radio. These rocks have no comforting pathos, they are literally pitiless.

The insistent sameness of these immobile photographed rocks is the analogue of the insistence with which the world, especially this part of it, shocks my eyes with its hard-edged endless inhuman architecture. What I recognize is not Ernest, not the Look. In the enforced and unpleasant stillness, I recognize myself seeing—and that is exactly because I do not register what I am seeing.

36 "For the first time in history," Siegfried Kracauer says, "photography brings to light the entire natural cocoon; for the first time, the inert world presents itself in its independence from human beings." It does seem these rocks are "the last elements of nature, alienated from meaning," and they do claim my attention in an inhuman way. ("Photography," in *Mass Ornament*, 1927, 59.) Kracauer's position is more radical than most writers on photography, who prefer figures in their photographs. Serge Tisseron, reconsidering Barthes, adds only a few photos to his book that aren't ones Barthes would have liked. One is an image of leeks, with their roots out of focus in the foreground. It is immediately rescued for psychoanalytic purposes: "Est-ce l'image d'une fellation?" he wonders, and quickly returns

to ordinary pictures of people. (Tisseron, *Le mystère de la chambre claire*, 100.)

Meir Wigoder, contrasting Barthes and Kracauer, says the latter thought of photography as "a stockpile," "a heap of garbage," incapable of resurrecting the dead. Yet Kracauer did think photographs were useful as evidence of the dead, and in that there's a link to Barthes's more humanist claims. The rocks I have been considering are neither a euphemism nor a veneer, nor even—as Kracauer hoped—a sheath of reality polished and preserved for historical work. (Wigoder, in *History and Memory*, 2001.)

Kracauer's despondent materialism, like Barthes's despondent phenomenology, was a safe practice. Cameras do much more than provide aerial photographs of our lives, as Kracauer said, or fetch "crockets and figures down from Gothic cathedrals." (p. 62) These rocks, this photography, are stranger than that, less reliable: really, they are not reliable at all.

37 And so I keep looking, even more closely, obscurely impelled, perhaps, by a need to find some sign of life. Or perhaps I am after a remnant of the reassuring sense of the passage of time, an escape from the "arrest" that Barthes found so disturbing.

I enlarge a portion of both images to examine the silhouette of the far canyon wall, thinking that the hard edge will be the most sensitive to incremental change. I find a tiny stone, perched on a slope at the upper left of O'Sullivan's image, that rolled off sometime during those 107 years. I put an arrow to mark it. Looking back and forth between the two photographs, I watch the little rock blink in and out of existence.

The sunlit ridge also has a few rocks that have moved, and so does the scree slope. I mark them with arrows. They are like little gasps of air in the locked-down vacuum.

(Joel Snyder tells me that the skies in O'Sullivan's landscapes were painted white, but I can find no sign of that, no matter how closely I look. What I am seeing on the horizon line might be undependable, but if a brush went near these rocks, it left no trace.)
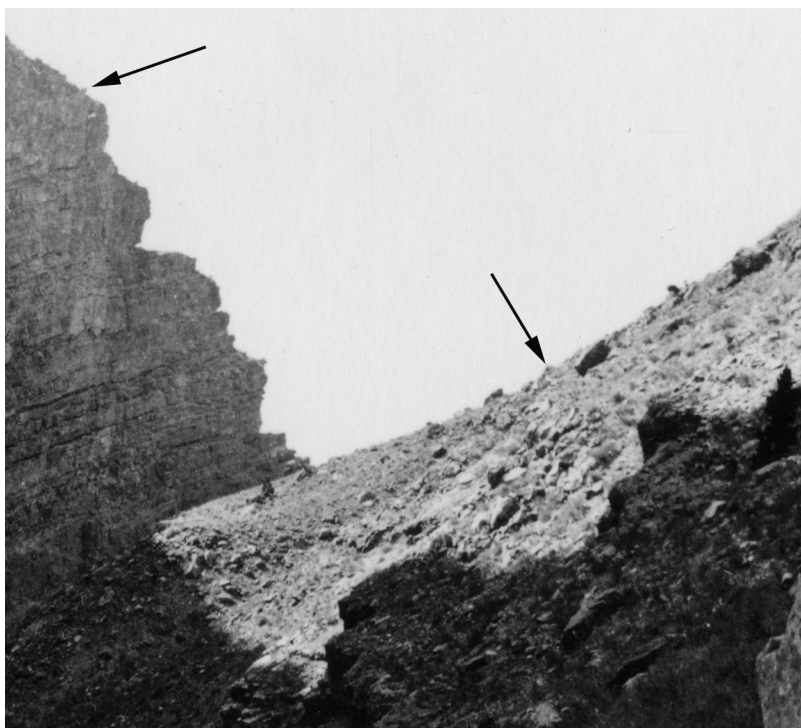
"I enlarge a portion of both images . . . I find a tiny stone"

TIMOTHY O'SULLIVAN, VERMILLION CREEK CAÑON, DETAIL. 1872.

"I enlarge a portion of both images . . . I find a tiny stone"

"I find a tiny stone, perched on a slope at the upper left"

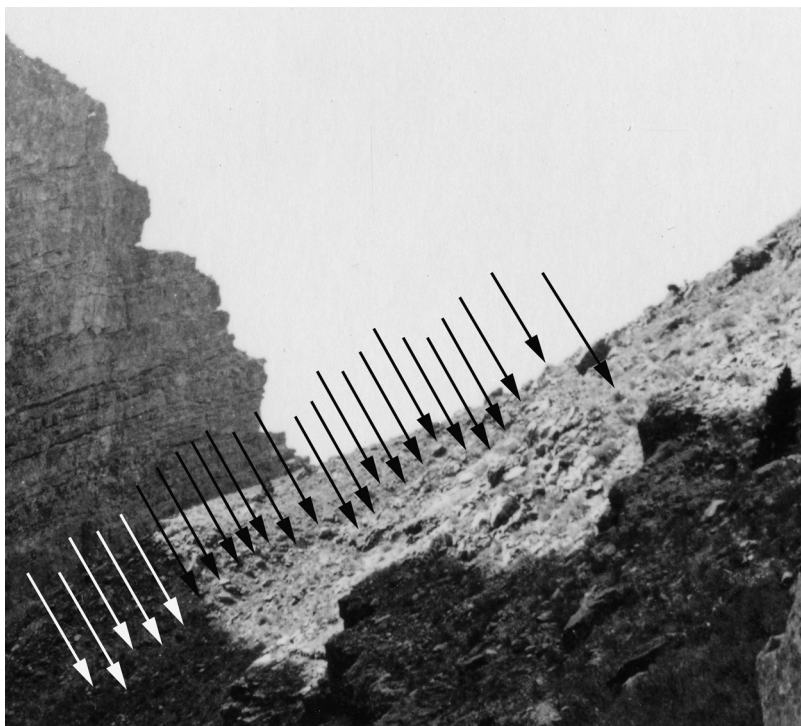TIMOTHY O'SULLIVAN, VERMILLION CREEK CAÑON, DETAIL. 1872.

38 Still looking, more closely, more desperately. It is hard to focus on the little stones: they waver and blur even without moving. It is hard to see the shape of the larger stones: some seem to be changed, but it depends on cloudy nuances of gray and black. In Klett's rephotograph the largest stones look deformed, blurred, or stained. I thought I had identified every stone that moved between the time of the two photographs. But now I am surprised to find that is impossible, because many stones have moved. I start finding dozens of minuscule changes. Many of the pebble shapes are hard to correlate. My arrows multiply. And now I cannot find even a single rock-solid point that is unequivocally unchanged. Things are "fundamentally unclassifiable"; the world has become "an array of casual fragments." (Sontag, *On Photography*, 80; and Michael Finnissy, *Musical Times*, summer 2002, 32.)

I see that the shadow has moved, and because the cliff that cast the shadow is more or less intact, that means the rock slope has slumped—it has a different shape, and everything in it, and on it, is differently arranged. And then at last it dawns on me that *nothing* is the same, *everything* has moved. There is no duration, nothing remains. (Derrida, "The Photographs of Jean-François Bonhomme.")

So I begin an inverted search, looking for anything at all that has *not* changed. The entire landscape begins to seethe, engorged in a stasis so intense that it cannot hold still.

39 I turn away, not because I am bored, but because I know there is no end to this searching. I don't want to say there is no point in going on, because I don't know if there needs to be a point to seeing. Why should I always mine images for meaning? Why should there be a solution, a significance? Yet it's a strange feeling: I know that looking in this way is indulgent and maybe just idle, but it is the photographs themselves that seem to have been leading me. And what do these photographs have other than rocks? If I were to start talking in the

"at last it dawns on me that nothing is the same"

usual way about the virtues of O'Sullivan's art or Klett's project, I would be leaving the exactitude of these images behind, in favor of their histories—and there are many to choose from. (Joel Snyder, *American Frontiers*; Mark Klett, *Third Views*; Rebecca Solnit, *Yosemite in Time*.)

Counting pebbles, I have become *catascopic*: I see from above, but I see only tiny things, and now, thinking only of grainy images of pebbles, I have become anascopic, seeing from below, from the tiny details, and struggling to come back up to the light and air of normal seeing. (Barthes did not use these words, but he wouldn't have needed them anyway because he remained in the open, floating above the photographs. The tidal pull he felt took him safely through the photographs and into memory. There was no stopping for pebbles.)

Embarrassing, self-indulgent, pointless. But also hypnotic, riveting, compulsive. Evidently this is part of what photography is.

40 I turn to another rephotographic project, less celebrated than Klett's. It began with nineteenth-century photographs of concrete obelisks that mark the border between the United States and Mexico. The obelisks were built and photographed between 1892 and 1893, and then found again in 1983 and 1984 by a plant ecologist named Robert Humphrey. Because he did not need to duplicate the exact viewpoint in order to study plant distribution, Humphrey's rephoto-graphs lack the fetishistic precision of Klett's. In Humphrey's project it is as if the nineteenth-century photographer had just shifted a few feet and taken another snapshot.

Marker 104, for example, is west of the Huachua Mountains in southeastern Arizona. Humphrey notes that Emory oak and Mexican Blue oak had become more widespread when he visited. The grass and mesquite cover was thicker at the time of the earlier photograph, he says, even though that might be due to a drought in the years just before 1893. Looking back and forth from one of these photographs to the other produces a blink-microscope effect: the man turns into

"In place of the incremental ratcheting displacements of the Klett and O'Sullivan, a soft and unmeasurable movement and growth."

ANONYMOUS PHOTOGRAPHER, MILE MARKER 104, SOUTHEASTERN ARIZONA. 1892.

"In place of the incremental ratcheting displacements of the Klett and O'Sullivan, a soft and unmeasurable movement and growth."

Robert Humphrey, Mile Marker 104, Southeastern Arizona. 1983.

an oak tree, and then back into himself again. (Blink microscope: an optical device used by Clyde Tombaugh in the discovery of Pluto. It switches rapidly between two different images of a star field, so that anything that has moved between the two exposures will seem to blink. Tombaugh spent thousands of hours over a period of years looking into his blink microscope, flashing between pictures of identical star fields until he spotted Pluto, the star that moved slightly between two frames. I have visited the observatory, and tried the blink microscope: it is immediately exhausting.)

Man, tree: a placid and harmless illusion, not like the hysterical hallucination conjured by Klett's and O'Sullivan's photographs. In place of the incremental ratcheting displacements of their photographs, Humphrey's pairs produce a soft and unmeasurable movement and growth. In the newer photograph plants proliferate, the land seems to have undulated a little; the stones may have rolled and settled. Perhaps stones were moved when the border fence was built, or they were kicked out of place, one by one, by generations of cattle. I can see a row of three or four stones just in front of the left side of the obelisk that have more or less remained in their places. But my eye has no reason to linger. I look again at the man who blinks into a tree, and the agave flower that appears on the left, like a second obelisk. And then I am done, ready to move on to another image.

41 The continuous millennial movement of rocks and shrubs is somehow a relief. Klett's and O'Sullivan's photographs felt like some kind of trap, they had the sour taste of something mindless. Leafing through Humphrey's book, it's as if I have been released. But released from what? From a strange interminable analysis of rocks? From any close looking, from the obligation to look closely? From the awareness that close looking is itself pathological? Perhaps I have been released, but released into what? Into a dependable pleasure in harmless flux, a vague complacency about things that refuse to remain in place? A license to stop looking after a cursory glance or two? If I'm happy with that, what does it mean for photography?

"The earlier picture has a subject, but it is invisible.
The later picture has a subject, and it is the earlier picture."

ANONYMOUS PHOTOGRAPHER, MILE MARKER 189, SOUTHWESTERN ARIZONA. 1892.

ROBERT HUMPHREY, MILE MARKER 189, SOUTHWESTERN ARIZONA. 1983.

Photography has this capacity, often noted and sometimes criticized, to put its viewers into a trance. Klett's project sinks me into an especially deep and troubling kind of trance. Humphrey's project feels more normal, less like a trance than a daydream. In clinical hypnosis, low-level trances are used to relax patients, but deep trances, at levels 8, 9, and 10 on the hypnotist's scale, can make people believe they are infants, crumpling them into abject terror, atrophying their adult coordination. In that state, hypnosis reaches very deep into what a person is: patients in oral surgery can voluntarily stop the bleeding in their own mouths. Rephotographic projects make me wonder about what counts as normal seeing, and how photographs can lead us from faint musings to deeper compulsive trances.

42 Occasionally Humphrey failed to locate one of the old obelisks. The law governing the construction and documentation of the obelisks had stipulated that they be built at the border, which sometimes meant hauling concrete mix up the mountains. Each obelisk also had to be photographed, but the contract did not explicitly require the workers to carry their heavy camera up to the tops of the mountains. So they sometimes just photographed the obelisks from the valleys, even though the pictures they produced were worthless. Mile Marker 189, on top of the Lechuguilla Mountains in the Sonoran desert, is not visible in the original photograph. When Humphrey tried to find the obelisk, he couldn't, nor could he locate the peaks that are documented in the original photograph. He says he knew he was within a few miles of the correct position, and so he made his rephotograph, documenting a place near the original location. The original and the rephotograph give us two stretches of desert mountains, one with a marker somewhere in it. It is possible that the same peaks are visible in each photograph, and it may even be that the obelisk is present in both visual fields. Humphrey remarks that the viewpoint of the original photograph was so distant that he could not even be sure of the species of vegetation. It "appears to have been foothill paloverde and ironwood," he writes, and other

species that appear in the newer photograph "may be assumed to have been present but unidentifiable in the 1893 picture." (*90 Years and 535 Miles*, 392.)

These two photographs produce a third form of hypnosis. It is not the mechanical, driving hypnosis of the Green River pair, or the loose, directionless wandering hypnosis of the Mile Marker 104 pair. This time I find myself feeling lost twice over, in two different places, or in two places that may be different, or may be slightly or partly different. In the earlier picture my eyes are lost up on the mountain-tops, in the fruitless search for the obelisk that must be there but is not visible. In the newer picture my eyes are lost in the mountains, searching for common points, wondering if one picture is contained within the other as a detail, or whether the two views share a part of the same landscape seen from different angles. The earlier picture has a subject, but it is invisible. The later picture also has a subject, and it is the earlier picture. So the later picture may, or may not, contain a photograph within itself, which in turn may, or may not, contain the image of an obelisk. It is a hypnosis about hypnosis, a search within a search. And as in the pair of images by Klett and O'Sullivan, I know nothing can be solved, but I am caught.

Looking back and forth at the Green River images reminds me of the shaking metal grids that are used to separate sizes of gravel: they are motorized, and they move very quickly. Watching them is dizzying and rebarbative. Looking at the Mile Marker 104 pair reminds me of something quite different, perhaps time-lapse photography of growing plants: I contemplate those images calmly, and they are almost pleasant to compare. Looking at the Mile Marker 189 pair reminds me of waking, as I have sometimes done, from one dream into another dream: it is entrancing but unsettling.

43 There are a number of other such projects: rephotographs of Madison, Wisconsin; of the Grand Canyon; Lake Tahoe; San Francisco; Alabama; and desert geology. Each one magnetizes me into pointless searches. (Zane Williams, *Double Take*; Peter Goin, *Stopping Time*; Robert Webb,

Grand Canyon; William Christenberry, [Alabama]; Klett, *After the Ruins*; and most beautifully, Don Baars, *Geology of Canyonlands and Cataract Canyon*.)

Non-photographic comparisons, for example a popular book that pairs Piranesi's prints of Rome with modern photographs, don't have the force of these rephotographic projects. (Herschel Levit, *Views of Rome Then and Now*.) New photographs that repeat old photographs set up a strange machinery of attention, as if I need to prove to myself that photography actually possesses the accuracy that I have always thought it has.

Rephotography like Humphrey's or Klett's is also different from postmodern experiments such as Sherrie Levine's rephotographs of Walker Evans's photographs or John Grech's restaging of the Graeme Thorne kidnapping. (Grech, *Rephotographing History*.) Of those it can be said that their "now fully familiar strategies of appropriation," their "systematic assault on modernist orthodoxies of immanence, autonomy, presence, originality, and authorship," their "engagement with the simulacral," and their "interrogation of the problematics of photographic mass media representation" are characteristic of "the concerns of a critical postmodernism." (Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Living with Contradictions," in *Overexposed*, 247–68.) In the 1970s and 1980s it was often noted that photographs can be mechanically reproduced, and it was then claimed that reproducibility is photography's intrinsic property, one that serious photography therefore has to pursue. I've become familiar with that claim and the way it looks in Levine and others. Photographic projects that involve replication or appropriation do not necessarily set me looking: I can believe their claims without needing to see them. Something different happens when I see a new pairing by Klett: I am returned to some infantile stage of gazing, or plunged into some insatiable St. Thomas-style skepticism.

When I see a face in a photograph, my attention is at once narrowed and blurred. I tend to focus on the face, and my sense of the rest of the photograph goes out of focus. I'm apt to be distracted into musings on history, society, art, portraiture, empathy, and presence, or time, death, memory, and mortality. I'm likely to ponder what it means to look at portraits in general. After the first half-minute, the more I look the less I see. It's the same with

"a man suddenly appears, half-hidden by the brush."

MARY TARBOX, UNIDENTIFIED SUBJECT. C. 1958.

appropriated photographs: I get the idea and I turn away, at least in my mind, to consider it. When there is no face to mollify my gaze and straighten my meandering meditations, my seeing is hurt, and put to work on useless tasks, until I come to recognize my helplessness in the face of the endless irrelevant details of the world that photography impertinently and obstinately keeps giving me.

44 By some strange luck a magical machine from my childhood has survived, and I still own it. It is a metal and Bakelite Stereo Realist camera from the 1950s, which takes three-dimensional slides—two slides mounted side by side in an elongated cardboard frame. The slides have to be dropped one by one into a Red Dot viewer, named after the oversized red button that has to be held down to keep the light on.

It is not possible to express how astonishing Realist pictures can be. Some people who haven't seen them expect ViewMaster slides, miniature color slides that were sold pre-mounted on cardboard wheels. Others think of the amusement-park effects of old 3-D movies, or the IMAX-style immersion of films like Avatar. The Stereo Realist system produces pictures so amazingly like the actual objects that I have often imagined I was walking along a Caribbean beach in blazing sunlight, or standing in the chill twilight on a damp boardwalk in San Francisco, or crouching at the edge of a sulfurous mud spring in Yellowstone. With the lights in the room turned down, the glow from the Red Dot viewer is as forceful as daylight, and the illusion so strong I can smell the sulfur of the thermal spring, or the sour humid odor of the kelp on the boardwalk, or the slightly burnt Caribbean air.

I have owned the viewer and the camera since my grandmother, Mary Tarbox, gave them to me along with several thousand of her own slides. She died thirty-five years ago, and she only labeled some of her slides, so in many cases I don't know where they were taken. One stereo pair shows mountains on a sunny afternoon. Because books are helpless to communicate the astonishing magic of this kind

of image, I reproduce the left-hand photo from the pair as an echo of the original. The soil is reddish, and the mountains are covered in dry brush and pine. Lenticular clouds hover like halos over unseen mountains. A bank of cumulus drifts above a distant valley. There is a paved road. A house can be glimpsed off to the right. The scene looks a little cold, and I imagine the empty mountain air, dry, pine-scented, leached of oxygen. By the side of the road is an illegible sign, washed out by the sunlight. The date would be around 1958, and the place could be Australia, New Zealand, or California, all places my grandmother visited in the 1950s.

When the stereo pair is placed into the Red Dot viewer, a man suddenly appears, half-hidden by the brush. He is walking on the road, just to the left of the picture's midline. The stereo brings him out: when either photograph is seen on its own, his legs—he is in full stride, walking toward the sign—are confused with the pine branches. It reminds me of a photograph by Alec Soth, showing a hermit half-hidden in a thicket: once the walking man appears, it seems the picture must be about him. But I know it probably wasn't, because my grandmother took mainly landscapes. (Soth: "Trolling for Strangers to Befriend," *New York Times*, August 2, 2009.)

The Stereo Realist slides are poor little windows onto my grandmother's life. But there is something more here than the residual attraction I feel toward her and the places she may have visited. (To be truthful about it, I would hardly think of her if it were not for these photographs: I wonder if Barthes thought about the way photographs subtly redirect our emotion, making us care about people more than we might have. Photography's power to reorient our interest is something Sontag knew better than Barthes. The Winter Garden photograph, Barthes says, revealed a memory of his mother, but that memory, and his mourning, are also produced and sustained by photography.) It matters to me that many of my grandmother's slides cannot be identified. Those empty landscapes, photographed for no apparent reason, are among the most compelling images I know. Having people in them would ruin them, because people would become their labels: "Uncle Joseph hiking up the road to Palomar" (if it were California) or "Frank walking to Rotorua" (if it were New Zealand). And the labels would make me think, again, of my grandmother. If I were to identify the slides, my

life and hers would be artificially bound. If I were in mourning, perhaps I would want to press these photographs to just that use, but I am not, and I feel only photography's invasive coercion.

I do not want to figure out where the pictures were taken, or why. Partly that is because I do not want to be drawn into reveries about my grandmother's life, and what it might have been. Partly it is because I do not want to explain the slides, to somehow solve them, as if they were crime dramas. But at the same time I am not after mystery, and I don't love these pictures because they are enigmatic. A visual object is mysterious enough without also being a puzzle. (*Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles?*.)

I desire neither explanation nor enigma. I only want to be able to see these slides as photographs.

45 It is not photography but the uses we find for it that give us the universe so nicely labeled: "The Grand Canyon at Sunset," "A Field of Tulips in Holland," "A Villager from Sükhbaatar." Landscape photography "itself," photography without families, without romance, without labels, gives me places that have no immediate use for my life, no voice that I can hear. Some uninhabited landscapes are like smooth surface to which memory cannot adhere. I love the feeling of memory trying to attach itself, starting to stick to an image, and then losing grip and falling away. I love the blank emotionless surface.

I have in my collection other stereo photographs that possess that same quality, entrancing my memory, tempting me to feel something, and then stepping back. The Keystone Stereoscopic Service produced a series of test cards, intended to test the eyesight of schoolchildren. These were cliché sorts of tourist views, overlaid with geometric shapes elaborately and skillfully hand-painted in ink or thick Chinese white. In those pictures random landscapes are overlaid with strange test objects. In one, a tourist photograph of a woman and child in Tyrolean costumes is overpainted, on the stereo card itself, with three india ink circles. When the slide is put in the viewer, those circles hover menacingly close to my eye,

*"like some seventeenth-century alchemical emblem,
in which bizarre symbols congregate in ordinary German forests"*

TEST SLIDE, KEYSTONE VIEW COMPANY. UNDATED.

as if the ink circles themselves were round knives that could slice into my cornea. The floating Tyrolean ink circles are an annoying and apparently pointless apparition. The surrealists would have loved them.

On another Keystone card, an indifferent picture of a pine forest is overlaid with an openwork sphere delicately drawn in Chinese white ink. The sphere is slightly different in the two images, and when the card is put in the viewer it produces an apparition of a shining metal globe suspended in the branches of a tree. The left-hand image also has a horizontal white line segment painted at eye level as if it were a zinc bar nailed into a tree trunk. The right-hand image has a vertical segment, which looks like a second bar planted in the earth. In the viewer they come together, with some effort (the effort makes me a little dizzy) into a white cross floating unsteadily in midair. These ordinary pine woods are haunted by an armillary sphere and a gleaming cross, like some seventeenth-century alchemical emblem in which bizarre symbols congregate in the landscape, producing arcane meanings.

In images like this I again recognize myself seeing. I can feel the muscles of my eye accommodate with difficulty to the new information, trying to put the two white bars together. As I force them into a cross shape—and I have no power, it seems, to do otherwise: that is clearly what they are for, and they ask to be united—I can sense a slight strangulation of meaning. Why would this spherical sculpture hang just here, in these branches? It doesn't help to know that the sphere and the dismembered cross were once useful for someone, that there was once a person in the Keystone Stereoscopic Service who could have explained them. Nor does it really matter that the purpose of these photographs was to calibrate stereoscopes so that consumers could see dull views of Tyrolean tourists or picturesque log cabins nestled in pine forests.

It does matter that the world given to me in these photographs is demanding, and its demands are inexplicable: in that dilemma I glimpse photography at work, insisting how hard is it to see the world, and insisting that I find that difficulty, which has always been there for me to discover, in photographs.

46 In contemporary fine art photography, when the camera is not pointed at a person, the word that does the most work in describing what happens is "sublime." The work of the superstar photographers of the turn of the millennium is replete with attempts at sublimity: Thomas Ruff's startling dark fields of stars, printed six feet high and frighteningly sharp, with pinpricks of stars and pink cotton dustings of galaxies; Andreas Gursky's airport-lounge size photographs looking down onto Asian archipelagos, where the viewer looks up at the enormous scene, but also plummets in imagination into the ocean like the falling Icarus; Thomas Struth's colossal interiors of churches and synagogues, filled with portentous emptiness and glowing from ethereal stained glass windows; Hiroshi Sugimoto's foggy becalmed oceanscapes, where you can almost hear the little waves lapping at the dismal gray shore; Tacita Dean's heartbreaking photos of the *Teignmouth Electron*, the boat once piloted by Donald Crowhurst, the sailor who became psychotic and drowned himself during an around-the-world race, the boat decaying and forgotten on a beach in the Cayman Islands. The sublime is one of the principal things that ambitious fine art photography attempts when it does not depict people. (*Six Stories from the End of Representation*, 2008.)

I have three exhibits here, and I want to use them to argue against the sublime. It's not that Ruff, Gursky, Sugimoto, Dean, and so many others aren't sometimes sublime: it's that the sublime is sublimely distracting, preventing me from noticing so many other things. I want to be able to concentrate on the imperfect selenite window, and I need to remove distractions. (I won't be using fine art photography to argue against the sublime, because it's easier to see the issues when the art volume is turned down.)

The sublime is a pitch-perfect concept for academic art criticism: it has intellectual glamour, it is notoriously difficult, it comes packaged in a treacherous and complex history, it is both frighteningly austere and impossibly dreamy. The postmodern sublime is not the trumpeting sublime of the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, with its belching volcanoes, its thunderclouds and rainbows, its snowy peaks and dizzying abysses. Sugimoto and others explore a nearly static and silent postmodern sublime, one that has been

smoothed and quieted until it is nearly inaudible. I am becalmed by Sugimoto's faceless oceans. I am pithed by Gursky's colossal prints. I can hardly think of anything except infinity, silence, and time, and that, at least in this context, is the problem.

The measured chill and reverberating emptiness of the postmodern sublime is an insidious sweet addiction. It is an opiate, and yet I can feel misgivings prickling through my anesthesia. These empty churches and oceans are soothing me, helping me to forget something, something that might cause me real pain. ("Gegen das Erhabene," in *Das Erhabene in Wissenschaft und Kunst*, 2010.)

47 First example: noctilucent clouds. These are not ordinary cirrus clouds, or even the opalescent nacreous clouds that sometime shine at twilight, but a nocturnal phenomenon. They appear around the time of the summer solstice, in the night sky, a half-hour after sunset. They are deep pearly blue, with faint streaks of burnt brown, pink, and yellow. Some look like thin strands of raw silk. (www.kersland. plus.com) In this photograph, taken by a German photographer, noctilucent clouds encircle the earth in a diaphanous web. It's as if the earth were an egg cradled in an enormous bird's nest.

When I was young noctilucent clouds were considered to be very rare, because they were mostly seen in the Arctic. Now people see them in places like Colorado, New England, Scotland, and northern Europe. It is possible that they are migrating south because the ozone in the air is getting thinner. In that case they would be a genuine portent, a sign that the Earth is falling apart. Another theory has it that some noctilucent clouds are frozen water vapor expelled from the US Space Shuttle. Either way their origins are obscure. They are far higher than other clouds, so they glow long after sunset; they are a last remnant of the day in the night: impeccably sublime whatever they mean and wherever they come from.

"as if the earth were an egg cradled in an enormous bird's nest"

Wolfgang Hamburg, Noctilucent Clouds, Bernitt, Germany. 2001.

*"I can't keep my mind on what the photograph is giving me"*

WOLFGANG HAMBURG, NOCTILUCENT CLOUDS, BERNITT, GERMANY, DETAIL. 2001.

48 Noctilucent clouds have a frail, threaded appearance, like a thin fabric waving in the breeze, and in videos they flutter and ripple. This photograph has hundreds of these threads or skeins, flowing and weaving together. It is a high resolution panoramic image, and there is an endlessness about it.

I would like to call this the world's on-and-on, following Thomas Weiskel, the best theorist of the sublime. (*The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence*.) For him, the image of this endlessness is the wasteland, a place that continues forever, at least in imagination, and has no features, boundary, or orientation. T. S. Eliot has a wonderful phrase for this: in *The Waste Land*, he uses the German phrase *Öd und Leer das Meer*, meaning, more or less, "the sea is bleak, desolate and empty," although the English lacks the hollow reverberation of the German words. This photograph of clouds is another wasteland, a look far up into frozen space. Clouds have always been sublime, and noctilucent clouds raise that romanticism to a very high power. (www.cloudappreciationsociety.org)

Yet this talk of sublimity and the wasteland is moving me away from the photograph. What is actually in this photograph? Just the on-and-on, not the poetry or theory that it conjures. Just these faintly bluish or rosy threads—hundreds, maybe thousands of them, too many to see. I take in the silhouettes of trees in their full summer foliage, and I notice how the threads gather and rise into waves, especially on the right of the picture. But I can't keep my mind on what the photograph is giving me, because it's giving me too much—too many frail woven waves, too much senseless detail. I find myself sailing listlessly on this frozen ocean of dark peach-colored threads. It is easy, a relief really, to gather the threads into a story about the ozone layer, or bundle them into the usual basket of the sublime. It is easier to think in metaphors, analogies, and stories. There are many of these images on the internet, as for the people who collect them it is easy and fun to study the technical requirements of high-resolution panoramic night photography. Anything, I'd say, rather than pay attention to those faint braided threads. All they do is go on, and on.
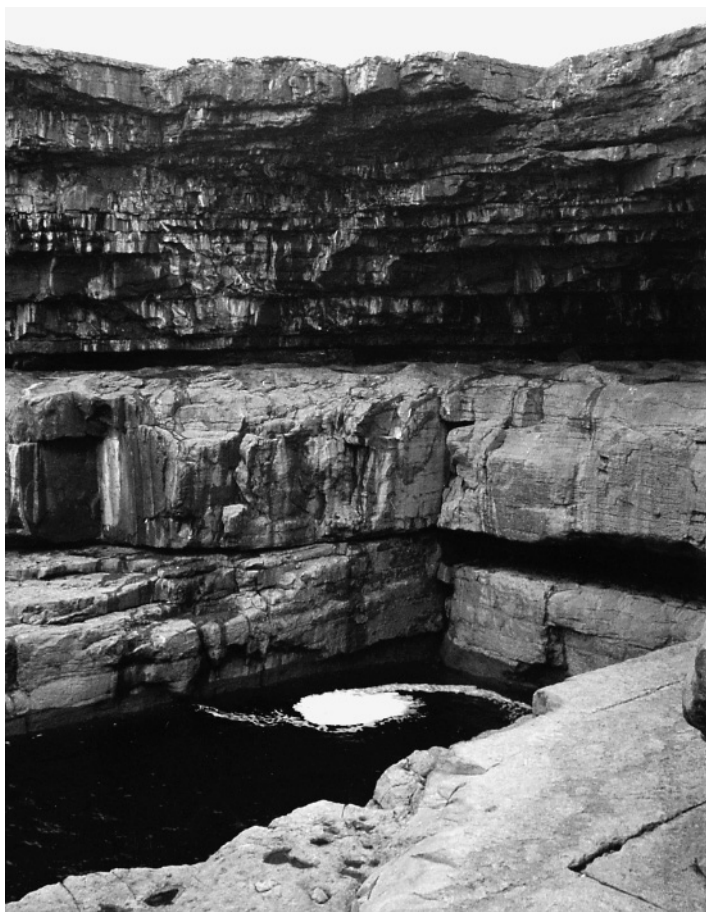
*"the water in the Worm Hole is being sucked slowly down into the cave and
out to the ocean"*

LINDY ELKINS, THE WORM HOLE, INISHMORE, IRELAND. 1994.

49 Second example: on the seacoast of Inishmore, an island off the Irish coast, there is a place where the rocky seacoast has eroded, naturally but inexplicably, into a perfectly rectangular pool. It is called in the Irish language the "Pol na bPeist," meaning Worm Hole. Tourism overwhelms the island in the summer months, and the Worm Hole is a bit out of the way: it is a place where visitors can escape from the usual itinerary of Neolithic ruins, pubs, and Aran Island sweater shops. It is a bit of a mystery how the Worm Hole happened. It is a hundred feet from the sea, and a submerged cave at the bottom of the Worm Hole connects it with the ocean, letting water in and out with the tides. The rock-cut rectangle with its hidden drain are uncanny, and people have said the Worm Hole must have been fabricated.

My sister took this photo; on the afternoon she visited, sea foam was forming a textbook image of a galaxy on the water's surface. The tide was going out, and the water in the Worm Hole was being sucked slowly down into the cave and out to the ocean. I once swam in the Worm Hole, and saw a glow underwater, where light filtered in from the ocean through the submerged cave. The Worm Hole is more like a tomb than a swimming pool. My only companions on that swim were two globe-shaped purple jellyfish.

The Worm Hole can be a sublime place to visit. I could say the photograph is sublime on account of the beautiful spiral of foam, silently spinning in the perfect rectangular pool. But I have visited the Worm Hole three times, and I have seen many photographs and videos of it, so I am a bit tired of obvious and melodramatic things like vortices and crashing waves.

The Worm Hole itself is mysterious and deep, and its surface is never wholly still. Perhaps a bottomless depth and an inexplicable geometry are enough for a photograph to express the sublime. In thinking that way I am following in the path of contemporary photographers from Roni Horn to Alan Cohen and Hiroshi Sugimoto: I am refusing the dramatic and theatrical (the booming old-fashioned sublime), and opting for the ordinary and unremark-able, in search of meanings that can still speak to me. Horn's photographs called *Some Thames* show nothing but swirling currents of water. Cohen's photographs of the rippling ocean surface at the

Equator may capture currents colliding, or they may show nothing but meaningless waves. Sugimoto's ocean views are excerpts from vast oceanscapes. His pictures avoid anything dramatic, including even contrasts of sky and ocean. (That rigorous quiet escapes some of his admirers, as you can see by looking at the more theatrical photos in the Flickr group called "Seascapes After Sugimoto.")

50

Tired of the dramatic sublime, I look at the photograph again, in search of quieter things. I notice a rectilinear fracture at the lower right, which looks decidedly man-made. I see the small pools of water nearby. These fractures and pools might be the simple beginnings of the next Pol na bPeist. The original print is in color, but it is mainly sandy gray, with one spot of brighter color: a small pool of mixed salt and rainwater at the lip of the Worm Hole, at the lower left, where the greenish black water is ringed by bright green algae.

I am tempted to say this little pool with its liminal stain, together with the right-angle fracture, are the most affecting parts of the image. They are overlooked details, miniatures of the thundering profundity of the Pol na bPeist. The evaporating pool and the drawn-looking crack could be signs of the "re-enchantment of the world," a phrase that has been used since Max Weber to name the way transcendence seems to exist quietly and tentatively, far from the trumpets of religion or the heavy machinery of symbolism. The art world has long been attuned to this subtle re-enchantment. (*The Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*.) If I crop my sister's photograph, and print only the little pool and the depths of the Worm Hole beyond it, then my image resembles any number of fine art photographs. It has echoes of Sugimoto's blurred photos, R. H. Quaytman's silkscreened out-of-focus images, Roni Horne's blurred faces, P. Elaine Sharpe's blurred records of famous places, and many other intentionally unfocused images. Focus itself, along with defocus, blur, unsharpness, smearing, and Gaussian filtering, have become themes in the history and criticism of photography, and the blur of this detail brings it into that pool of ideas. (*Six Stories*

"an overlooked pool, transitory, never to be seen again"

LINDY ELKINS, THE WORM HOLE, INISHMORE, IRELAND, DETAIL. 1994.

from the End of Representation, chapter 2; Mirjam Brusius, "Impreciseness in Julia Margaret Cameron's Portrait Photographs," *History of Photography*.) The little pool becomes, suddenly, much more interesting: at first I had overlooked it, and now it rescues an image that had become too familiar.

Barthes's punctum is not far away here, because the punctum is also about the intense and personal wonder of overlooked details. *Camera Lucida* itself is suffused with half-hidden religious meaning. The original French edition had a passage on the back cover taken from the Tibetan Buddhist Chögyam Trungpa."Marpa was very upset when his son was killed," we read, "and one of his disciples said, 'You used to tell us that everything is an illusion. How about the death of your son? Isn't it an illusion?' And Marpa replied, 'True, but my son's death is a super-illusion.'" Jay Prosser calls this "Buddha Barthes." (*Literature and Theology*, 2004; *Photography Degree Zero*.) Barthes keeps silent about his reasons for choosing this passage, and in the book he speaks of the punctum in exclusively secular terms. But I suspect the punctum itself comes from the medieval Christian doctrine of "compunctive tears," which are tears that pierce you: they come from Jesus's suffering, and you owe them to him in return. They puncture you when you receive them, and again when you let them return to their source. I wonder if Barthes didn't have compunctive tears in mind as he wrote about his apparently secular punctum. Both the punctum and the Buddhist story move through the transcendental air that the book wants to breathe.

Camera Lucida is soaked in theological meanings, to paraphrase a comment Walter Benjamin made about his own work, but tacit religion is not the key to the book precisely because it is tacit. I am no longer attracted, as I once was, by photographs that show me overlooked details: they do not seem to re-enchant the world, and they don't prick me with their poignance. They are just the dregs of the sublime, the last feeble hopes that something in the stuff we see has meaning.

In black and white, my sister's photograph is a collection of eroded rock shapes, and it is mainly about staining, spills and "varnish," as in O'Sullivan's and Klett's photographs. I am almost unable to look at the dark rocks on the top half of the cliff face. They are too intricate, too ordinary. They fail to reward me with a story

or a subject that can help my eye escape. And that is why I want to look at them more than at the fabulous Worm Hole with its resident galaxy, or even at the enchanting but unconvincing little tide pool and its companion cracks in the rock.

51 Third example: on the day I discovered the selenite window, I also looked through the Natural History Museum's files of an expedition to South America, led by the ornithologist Frank Chapman. He wrote a book and several articles about his findings, and deposited the remaining photographs in the archives of the museum, where he was Curator of Ornithology. There are several hundred pictures in the file that are not labeled, presumably because Chapman didn't think they were important. Most are pictures of unidentified ports and market towns in Chile. There are also photographs of local weaving and pottery. Leafing through those, not sure what I might find, I came across a picture of a bare hillside.

It seemed deserted except for a small tree near the top. I was attracted by the emptiness, which I thought must be a good reflection of the ordinary landscape in that part of southern Chile, just west of Tierra del Fuego. When I turned the photograph over, I was surprised to read the following, written in a neat florid script: "Darwin's Rhea, near Punta Arenas." I flipped the photograph over and looked again, and saw what I had taken to be a minuscule tree was actually a rhea, a large flightless bird. I suppose that was as close as Chapman ever got to one, and it was rare enough to warrant a photograph even though the photo had almost no value. Darwin had seen small rheas on his famous voyage; they are different from the better-known larger rhea that lives throughout Argentina. From Darwin's time to Chapman's, few Europeans had observed the smaller species of rhea. People must have wondered if they were going to become extinct, like the bluish-gray dodo in Mauritius, or the eleven species of moa in New Zealand. Today Darwin's rhea is not quite on the endangered list; it is currently classified as NT, "near threatened."

*"the unnamed frozen foothills of the Brunswick Peninsula,
just across the windy Magellan Strait from Tierra del Fuego"*

ANONYMOUS PHOTOGRAPHER, DARWIN'S RHEA, NEAR PUNTA ARENAS, CHILE. C. 1924.

What a lovely picture, I thought: Darwin's rhea, *Pterocnemia pennata pennata*, on its bare hill, giving the far-off photographer a last look before it makes one it its typical "sail-turns," raising one wing to catch the wind, whirling suddenly and running out of sight down the far slope and into the unnamed frozen foothills of the Brunswick Peninsula, just across the windy Magellan Strait from Tierra del Fuego. So sublime, especially because the rare bird is vanishing into an Antarctic desert (another trope of the sublime, as Weiskel notes).

52 But then again, the picture only exists because the rhea is in it, and the rhea isn't in it enough to make the picture important, either for Chapman or for the curators of the Museum of Natural History. When I look more closely, the bird's body is like an eye, floating above the horizon, and there is only the faintest blur of neck, head, and legs.

When the subject vanishes, what is left? Grains of striated rock, a featureless sky, five or six careless ink marks, some mottled white UFOs caused by chemical bleaching, fading around the edges from inadequate fixing of the print, a hail of dark grains superimposed on the rocks, the photogram of a stray hair. Some photographers are entranced by such things. They certainly enrich the surface, making the photograph more aesthetic, precious, old, and even sublime. But scratches and dirt don't hold my attention for long. After a while I just don't want to see any more fading, bleaching, fingerprints, or grains. (I no longer enjoy the intentional antiquing in photographs by Joel-Peter Witkin, Sally Mann, Doug and Mike Starn. They signal preciousness too stridently.)

This is photography at its most empty, its subject nearly vanished, its inventory reduced to blurred rubble and the transient interest of unintentional flaws.

"When the subject vanishes, what is left?"

53 Around the edges of every photograph, on each side of the thing that is named in the photograph's title, that thing at which the camera was putatively pointed, is a seeping cessation of meaning.

If I picture Barthes's Winter Garden photograph—as good an exemplar of vernacular photography as any, especially since it now may exist only in the collective imagination of Barthes's readers—I can see his mother's face. At first, her face has "distinctness," and an expression of innocence, but later in the book he says it is "vague, faded." (pp. 69, 99) If I take my eyes off that face, and look instead at the things crowded around it, then I see almost nothing, because Barthes doesn't give me anything to imagine. A bit of railing on a wooden bridge; his mother "holding one finger in the other hand, as children often do"; a plant or two. (Barthes says just "the palms.") There is little else in *Camera Lucida* to help me see that photograph. That is not strange, because for Barthes the Winter Garden photograph cannot be shared: but at a deeper level, it's not strange because for Barthes photographs conjure people's lives and little more. He did not need to tell us anything about the shapes of the leaves of the plants in the conservatory, or the dust and droplets on the glass-house windows, or the dirt on the raised plank floor.

If I perform this same exercise with a family snapshot, one I actually hold in my hands, then I become aware of the stains that photography wants me to see. At once I notice that half-occluded piece of furniture, that mess of foliage outside the window, that overexposed glare on a high-gloss wall, that dirty switch plate, that bit of baseboard. Things like those are the scrap heap that signify "home." Outdoor versions of them signify "vacation." They are parts of the environment, the setting, the place—they are the particulate matter of the world that sustained the people whom the photographer cared enough to photograph.

The photograph was intended to pluck its subject out of the distracting matrix in which we are all, in fact, embedded. There is no name for those nearly unseeable pieces and forms, shapes and parts. They are things to which my thought will not adhere. They are the on-and-on of the world, its apparently unending supply of often dull and sometimes uninterpretable stuff. All photographs are packed with this stuff, and it is obdurate and indifferent to the

interests of popular and commercial photography. Professional photographers have only weak tools to cut the clutter and clean away the unending uninteresting fragments of the world: they can place their subjects in photography studios, against texture-free backdrops; or they can use alpha filters to delete everything around the subject, returning their people to the imaginative vacuum in which they prefer to be remembered. Irving Penn was good at blank backdrops, and so was Richard Avedon. The photographer Platon Antoniou, heir apparent to Avedon in US media such as *Time* and *The New Yorker*, uses gradient filters to put a bright halo around his subjects' heads. The effect is sanitizing and sanctifying, as if to say: Even a flat matte background is not enough to show how important this person is. Alternately, photographers can ramp up the clutter, building the marginal objects into an entire inventory of a place or a way of life. That route leads to journalism and to the packaged armchair tourism of *National Geographic*.

54

The half-visible stuff that surrounds the objects of photography is often cut by the frame, or by the person being photographed. Truncated objects, forever incomplete, can thrive in our peripheral vision like an infestation. They can be distracting, ill-behaved, even unsettling. At the extreme they can even be labile, obscene, and hallucinatory, as if they have lives of their own. They then become what the surrealist Georges Bataille called part-objects. A large literature, infused with psychoanalysis, has grow up around surrealism and photography. It can be interesting, but I won't be pursuing it here. Surrealism is, for me, as exhausted as the ordinary bourgeois life that seemed to call it into existence in the first place. (I can't agree with Susan Sontag that surrealism lies "at the heart of the photographic.") It's important not to forget that most of the things that fill my peripheral vision as I look at the person who centers the photograph are not that interesting. They resist interpretation not only because they are hard to make out, or because they aren't the point of the photograph, or because they have no stories to go with them, or because they are

oddly hallucinatory or provocative, but mainly and simply because they are boring: they are only available to be seen because photography has placed them there. That is why this isn't a surrealist reading. (Perhaps some surrealists needed the world to be something jarring "like a spider, or spit," as Bataille said, because it so often is less than that.)

Every once in a while a cluttered corner will start to seethe with meaning, a shadow will seem to move slyly across the floor, or some strange illegible thing will catch my eye and make me jump: but much more often it is a strain just to keep looking at the utterly unpromising and unrewarding things that dumbly inhabit photographs. Boredom interests me, and interest bores me, because boredom is what the camera continuously threatens.

I recall Maxim Gorky's reaction to a screening of one of the first motion pictures, a film by the Lumière brothers:

> This mute, grey life finally begins to disturb and depress you. It seems as though it carries a warning, fraught with a vague but sinister meaning that makes your heart grow faint. You are forgetting where you are. Strange imaginings invade your mind and your consciousness begins to wane and grow dim.

Walter Benjamin also pondered the numbing effect of film, and identified another kind of threat: film, he said, creates a percussive shock to the consciousness by continuously changing scenes: "I can no longer think what I want to think," he writes.

> My thoughts have been replaced by moving images. The spectator's process of association in view of these images is indeed interrupted by their constant, sudden change. This constitutes the shock effect of film, which, like all shocks, should be cushioned by heightened presence of mind.
>
> ("The Work of Art," in *Illuminations*, 238)

The theorist Melinda Szakoly, who reminded me of this passage, also tells me that Gilles Deleuze, Georges Duhamel, and Antonin Artaud had similar thoughts. In the overwhelming popular victory of film

over other media, this strain of anxious resistance has been lost. I want to recall it, and note that the same applies to photography, but in a more sinister form. Because the "frame" never changes, and the photograph remains compliantly in front of my eyes, I feel I am still in control of my gaze and my thought. I don't sense the "powerlessness at the heart of thought," as Deleuze puts it. (*Cinema, 2, 166.) And yet I am also hypnotized: my consciousness has waned without my noticing. I am unaware of the masses of things, the on-and-on of things, that I am permitting myself not to see. They are loud in my eye but inaudible to my ear, insistent but meaningless, rebarbatively present and yet numbly absent. I do not remember how to see (*amnesia). I refuse to remember to see (*amnesis) until afterward, when I am no longer looking—perhaps when I am writing about looking—because it is only then that I remember I have once again failed to see (*ecmnesia). (That last word is one of Barthes's, meaning a lapse in the memory of recent events, and a recovery of more distant ones. It seems I must always have been able to see photographs, but when? Sometime in the past.) My sense of my power to see, my conviction that I am seeing the photograph, depends on my obliviousness to what the photograph continuously insists on presenting to me.*

55 The concepts I am developing here—the on-and-on, boredom, amnesis—work outside the closed system of punctum and studium. For any given viewer, they can be either. But it doesn't matter. What matters is the usual state of photography, which means those many photographs that don't particularly work, that fail to sting our inner thoughts, that don't help us preserve our treasured memories, don't offer any useful information, and aren't especially edifying, noteworthy, curious, disturbing, cute, awe-inspiring, kitschy, skillful, delightful, or entertaining.

The famous photographs that we use to mark our passage through the social and political world we live in (such as the two photographs known as *James Watson and Francis Crick with their DNA Model at*

the Cavendish Laboratories in 1953, Joe Rosenthal's *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima*, or Kevin Carter's untitled photo of the starving child in the Sudan) are the tiniest minority of all photographs. (*The Photography Book*, Phaidon.) Photography also fills the family albums, magazines, and art galleries of the world, but even those pictures are the rare exceptions in relation to the total number of photographs. It is important not to forget the billions of photographs that aren't saved or printed. They are the population of photography, just as a count of living things shows bacteria are incomprehensibly more numerous than the kind of life we end up noticing. (William Whitman, "Prokaryotes: The Unseen Majority," *PNAS*, 1998.)

Four

A Drop of Water,
World Trade Center Dust

56 I propose to pay attention to some things that photography shows us. We show photography what to show us, we feel we see what photography shows us in the faces and things that it shows us. But photography also always shows us things we would have preferred not to see, or don't want to see, don't know how to see, or don't know how to acknowledge seeing.

In this book the quality of my attention and the languages in which I can articulate my responses vary, but they will not cross into regions ruled by the sublime, affect, "the pangs of love" or pity, "madness," or—this was Barthes's final thought in *Camera Lucida*, faintly echoing Bataille—"photographic *ecstasy*." (pp. 116, 119) Photographs that concern me do not usually harbor any particular punctum: no local, "intense mutation of my interest"; no "fulguration"; no "tiny shock"; no "*satori*"; no "explosion" that "makes a little star" on the image. (p. 49) That is all just so romantic, or more accurately late romantic, leftover romantic. It's stale stuff. Romanticism was once an ocean of metaphors of excess; in *Camera Lucida* the ocean has dwindled to rivulets. Barthes's little ecstasy, the punctum, is like the last remaining pinhole of access to the light within photography. He knows it is small: it is a tiny satori, sparkling like a "little star." Yet nothing matters except that pinprick, that last little death.

The images I want to look at are not as absorptive, dramatic, or theatrical. Mainly, they are just hard to see. Some are violent or unpleasant, and they repel my attempts to look at them. Others are hard in the sense of obdurate: they resist my intention to look, and even my interest in trying. They are "merely" informational, "simply" not beautiful, "wholly" uninteresting. With such images it can be hard just to pay attention, to keep my eyes on the photograph, to focus my faltering interest on the unpromising image.

These hardnesses I am after are neither precious nor rare. Most any photograph has some hardness, something that turns the eye away, and if we choose not to notice, it is because we are looking so intently for the last plangent signs of "love" or "madness." ("Plangent": a word Nabokov knew was both rare and excessive; it is the name of a "fundamentally hysterical" chord played on a piano at the end of *Lolita*, to point up the player's exquisitely desperate,

pitiful and kitschy dying speech.) Little punctures and shocks of all sorts help distract us from photography's routine hardnesses. If you take the punctum away, or if you take away the desire for it, you can see most photographs for what they also are: things that are flat and hard, and don't promise much pleasure at all.

57 So here I am, at the boundary of what photographs are too often taken to be, looking outward, in the direction away from all these things—ecstasy, the sublime, the punctum, memory, history, race, gender, identity, death, nostalgia. This is a good time to say goodbye to photographs of people.

What would it be like, I wonder, to go through the photographs I own—the ones I have framed, the ones in my photo books and cabinets and the ones on my computer, the ones in the books and magazines in my home and my office—discarding all the images that have people in them? Which would be easiest to relinquish? Which ones would be so close to me that I couldn't bear to give them up? I imagine this as a series of farewells, and I am curious to see what will be left of photography when all the people are finally gone.

58 First farewell: unlabeled family photographs. Maybe it is prudent to start with images of unidentified people, the kind that are so easy to find in any antique store or box of old photographs. They can be quite striking and poignant. ("Poignant": meaning something that prickles, from *poindre*, "to prick or sting," from *pungere*, to prick." So like the punctum.)

It's strange that so many photographs of people I have never known can be poignant. In an antique store I come across an old photograph of a man wearing a box-back shirt and a stetson hat. He looks at the camera (at me) with a smirk, overconfident and

standoffish. Did he suspect that generations later his unlabeled photograph would become the object of a sudden and intense but transient fascination? That his real life, which he owned, would become poignant when all its details were long forgotten? *He is already dead*, she is already dead, he is going to die, we say over and over to ourselves as we shuffle through old photographs in the back of an antique store, vaguely searching for one that has more than the usual background radiation of poignance. Yet the curious man was not unknown to himself, any more or less than any of us are unknown to ourselves, and his image was presumably not much of a mystery to his relatives, so the affecting *he-is-going-to-die* reaction is not only indulgent solipsism but adventitious voyeurism. That did not bother Barthes, but as I join him in peering at little Ernest I feel a little pang of guilt: I am peeping through a keyhole little Ernest could never have seen.

It is not a hardship to say goodbye to unlabeled family photographs, with their low-level pathos. When I encounter them in antique stores or flea markets, I find them only marginally more interesting than the endless tightly packed cardboard boxes of old postcards, or the glass-top table displays of heirloom watches, war medals, election campaign pins, lost buttons, and multipurpose folding knives. When I catch myself shuffling through a tray of tintypes, it is usually because I am in the mood for a very weak, homeopathic dose of poignant nostalgia, or because I have nothing better to do than look around for some hidden gem that I never quite seem to find.

59

Second farewell: "found photography."

(There are so many kinds of photographs of people. "Found photography" is subtly different from "vernacular photography, or "everyday photography," meaning the whole worldwide practice of family picture-taking, mainly of people, but also of the places they have been. "Travel and vacation photos, family snapshots, photos of friends, class portraits, identification photographs, and photo-booth images," is

how Wikipedia succinctly defines vernacular photography. [At least as of August, 2010.] By that definition, the man in the stetson would be a vernacular photograph, although it could also be counted as an example of professional portrait photography. "Found photography" usually means vernacular photos that have been discovered and reconsidered as art. Vernacular photography practiced in the past hundred years or so, mainly in cities, is also called "street photography." All of these overlapping categories are distinct from the monumentally scaled "fine art photography" that stormed the art market in the 1990s, although the artists themselves refer to vernacular, street, everyday, family, portrait, and found photography. I am only listing things this way to help me with my farewells.)

To help me give up found photography, I bought a packet of unidentified snapshots from eBay. Because I selected them, and brought them into this book, they are "found photography": they aren't quite art, but they are also no longer what they once were. They chronicle a family, whose name has been lost, through two or three generations of lower-middle-class life in what appears to be a cold part of North America. Before I bought them, when they were languishing alongside the 60,000 other photographs then on eBay, they were the very stuff of vernacular photography. They draw me, with an infirm but nearly irresistible force, into a imagined world.

Here is a diffident-looking woman, standing in a small patch of sunlight at the back of her bungalow.

Here is a middle-aged couple, photographed June 4, 1944, at the side of their house. (The date is written rather carelessly on the back.) He has told a joke, or said something endearing, and she is smiling, and pulling back slightly. The summer awnings are out.

Here is a young man leaning against a tree. He may be smoking. He is jaunty and a little aggressive: the photographer has stood well back. An iron rod has been driven into the ground in front of him.

Here is a young woman, in a lovely gesture of happiness or embarrassment. She stands stiffly at the corner of a manicured lawn, across from a school or factory. It is the 1940s, as I can tell from the cars in the far background. It's hard to see much, because the print is so small. (I am reproducing these about the size of the originals. They were mementos, and size matters.)

Here is what was probably their town, several storefronts around a cold lake scattered with ducks. A low winter sun casts the long shadow of a power line across a patch of bare ground.

Here is a tiny photograph (the original is one inch in height) of two men walking away from us, down a sidewalk. One has his hands clasped behind his back. Again the long shadows of the winter afternoon. The image was made with the cheapest of box cameras, and it is blurred around the edges. It must have been very precious: I imagine it as the only image of one of the men, the only picture of their life back then.
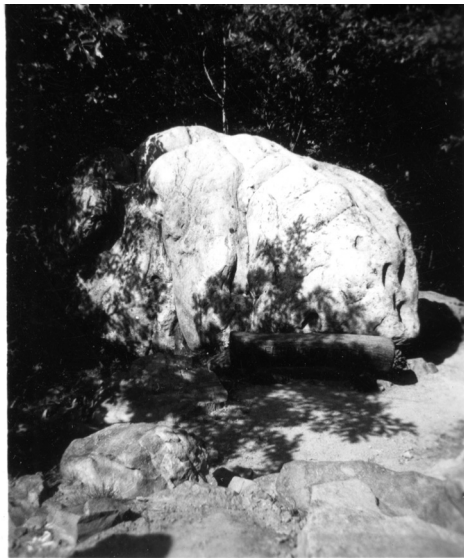

And here is a rock. It is in a well-traveled place, as I can tell from the tamped-down earth. But now there is no way to know why it was worth a photograph. I only know that it must have been meaningful to someone in the other photographs, or someone who owned them.

These, and a dozen more, came from one person's collection, as I know because people and places recur in several images. The photos have lost the contexts that gave them value. And yet they have a pull on my imagination: the weak, persistent tug that comes from any picture of any person, made ever so slightly stronger by the knowledge that these people have been forgotten. Pictures like these don't always sell on eBay, but many do, because there is a sizable market for other images of other people's lives.

There is no easy way to stop this kind of reverie, no patch to staunch the floods of false nostalgia for people and places I don't even know. Sympathy and curiosity well up in me. I want to reproduce all thirty-odd pictures in the packet, and begin to piece these people's lives together. If I were a novelist I might work the pictures into a story. The same thing happens with fabricated collections, like Zoe Leonard's *Fae Richards Photo Archive*. *It hardly seems to matter what's real and what isn't. My interest is nothing more than an illness, a voyeurism, an apparently idle but adhesive concern with other people's lives: a specific sickness brought on by photography.*

I see these people's lives as if they are covered with an old veil: they feel dank. Nostalgia itself is stale, and this is second-hand nostalgia. A breath of someone else's life, breathed out into my mouth.
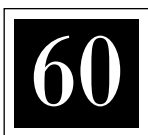
60 Third farewell: street photography. Farewell to all the photographs of street life, from Daguerre to Alfred Eisenstadt, Brassaï to Beat Streuli. From the more-or-less spontaneous, like Robert Frank's *The Americans*, to the somewhat staged, like Ruth Orkin's *American Girl in Italy*, to the completely contrived, like Robert Doisneau's *Kiss by the Hôtel de Ville*.

This is two farewells, really. One is to the cliché that a street photographer can find the perfect instant. (Always the example is Henri Cartier-Bresson.) The other is to the cliché that a street photographer can find a type—a person, place or institution—and capture it once and for all.