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The Gnat's Supremacy

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Abstract

The Gnat's Supremacy

By Jason Kraft

The camera boasts an inseparable link to death. This work explores a multitude of ways death can be seen photographically, drawing from a basis of research in photography and death historically, theoretically, and artistically. The project culminates in a physical photobook, featuring forty-one photographs, entitled *The Gnat's Supremacy*.

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Fragmented Writings on Death, Photography, and *The Gnat's Supremacy*

One

The idea for this project was born the night my cousin died. After a blizzard had knocked out the power in my area briefly, my mother and I had driven to my cousin's home to check in on her. Her friends texted notifying us that they hadn't heard from her and didn't know if she was safe or not. Murmurs of her imminent passing had been whispered around for months by that point; she had recently been put on oxygen via an at-home concentrator, and to my family's sensibilities the sight of those plastic tubes stemming from one's nose was an indication that the hourglass is running out of sand. Even my cousin herself engaged in the murmuring: she told me at my family's Christmas gathering that she suspects this will be the last one she'll ever celebrate. Knowing this—and already imagining the morbid scene that I could come across—I had slung my camera around my shoulder. I sensed that there existed a potential photograph that could be taken.

We entered the house to the incessant chirp of the concentrator, indicating that it had not been reset since the power went out. This was a tell-tale sign that she likely passed. I began to feel my camera weigh heavier on my shoulder.

The hallway light casted an incandescent rectangle into her bedroom, illuminating a pale, naked leg hung limp off a mattress with no sheets. It was lifeless. It now became clear that she had passed on. A potential photograph immediately sprang into my mind, and I quickly began to piece together the technical aspects necessary: setting my camera at chest-height, vertically oriented, creating enough distance to border the bedroom door on the outskirts of the frame and leaving the leg set right in the middle of the photograph to be. But I couldn't pick up my camera to capture it. I simply couldn't. My camera stayed fixed to my shoulder.

I stepped away from the hall, sat down at her dining room table, and waited for the paramedics to arrive. I did not take a single photograph that night, but I've since been unable to forget the one that I had made mentally.

Two

I returned to my cousin's home the next day. She was gone. Her body now laid cold in a nearby funeral home, but her possessions—dusty knickknacks, winter sweaters, the food she was saving for later—all remained.

I came across her old doll: a plastic baby in a tattered pink dress with grease stains across its forehead and touches of rosy paint still pooled on its cheeks. I laid the doll on what was my cousin's bed, closed its synthetic eyelids, and took its portrait.

Three

As days went on, I continued to think of that photograph that could've been. The frame was still as clear in my mind as when I first imagined it. My inability to photograph death the night I had found my deceased cousin revolutionized my thinking about my photography practice thus far and what I was interested in photographing in the future. It felt as if I had encountered a barrier that my camera couldn't push me through and in some sense this became a personal and aesthetic challenge for me: to not avert neither my eyes nor lens from death.

I've always been interested in notions of the in-between and peripheral, and I can see a clear and potent contrast residing within a living operator (that being me, the photographer) creating a project of photographs regarding death. My photography practice developed into an

exploration of an intermingling between life and death, representing the gray area of two universal facets of life that seem monolithic.

Unsurprisingly, this topic can be all encompassing and ever expansive. It admittedly feels like a project that could span a lifetime. In terms of my research, I focused primarily on historical accounts of postmortem photography, theoreticians' views on the relationship between death and photography, and, lastly, other artists' explorations of death seen through photography. In terms of my practice, I looked in many places for semblances of death seen both directly (as in a deer's severed foot) and obliquely (as in an abandoned church). I looked for qualities of the gothic to photograph, meaning death explicitly, but also ruination and decay. To me, death could be readily seen in corpses of animals, decaying abandoned buildings, discarded trash littered on the ground, etc. As I photographed further, it became increasingly clear that I was most interested in the way that death coinhabited with the living, and I began to photograph that which represented a middle ground between the two. The research and practice conducted for my thesis has culminated in a photobook featuring 41 photographs—arranged into a prelude, then three movements, then a postlude—entitled *The Gnat's Supremacy*.

Four

When researching the historical precedent of mortuary photography, Micheal Lesy's project *Wisconsin Death Trip*, published in 1973, was my first entryway into the subject. *Wisconsin Death Trip* is the discovery and reconstitution of the history of Black River Falls, Wisconsin, between 1885 and 1910 through the lens of a local commercial photographer Charles Van Schaick. Lesy supplements the photographs with hand-selected clippings from newspaper headlines and articles from the *Black River Falls Weekly* publication. Lesy came into possession

of 30,000 glass negatives from Van Schaick's studio archive, found decaying themselves from natural weathering in poor storage conditions and cracking under the weight of the glass plates stacked on top of each other. He funneled his findings into a portrait of a rural American town downtrodden by an economic downturn and teeming with instances of death, isolation, suicide, mania, and murder. The photographs range from portraits of deceased infants in their coffins to families posing outside of their homes. Some of the headlines included in the book read as: "Suicide—dynamite in a railway car" and "Smallpox—whole town quarantine" or "Treasurer shooting—drunk alderman" (Lesy Section 2). The book, to me, reads more so shocking and harrowing than it is informational and is of better use as a poetic exercise than it is a historical document. Lesy acknowledges this himself in writing that "[the book] has only as much to do with history as the heat and spectrum of the light that makes it visible, or the retina and optical nerve of your eye. It is as much an exercise of history as it is an experiment of alchemy" (Lesy Introduction).

Lesy himself is quite aware of the shock value that these visuals and texts would hold for his readership of the 1970s, writing in the very first lines of his introduction that "The pictures you're about to see are of people who were once actually alive… None of the accounts are fictitious. Neither the pictures nor the events were, when they were made or experienced, considered to be unique, extraordinary, or sensational" (Lesy Introduction). His introduction reminds me of a vapid carny attempting to entice his readers to step into his tent of oddities. And Lesy does certainly paint a picture of an odd—and despairing—rural town, but I question how much the taboo air that surrounds this project stems solely from the photographs being depictions of death. Lesy's readership of the time must be well acquainted with photographic depictions of the dead and dying through coverage of Vietnam and Cambodia (particularly Eddie Adams'

photograph of the execution of a Vietcong fighter in Saigon on February 1, 1968 comes to mind—which was published on many frontpages nationwide including The New York Times). Perhaps it's more accurate to say that Lesy suspects that the shock-value from these photographs and headlines are generated from their domestic quality; death photography particularly practiced in the home and seemingly without hesitation nor reservation is the more specific source of discomfort. This clearly illustrates the rapid development of photographic sensibilities in the United States between 1910 and 1973. Lesy assumes that images of posed cadavers aren't simply a sad sight for modern Americans, but rather completely alien and only explainable if they had instead been fictionally constructed.

Another quality of the taboo that lingers in *Wisconsin Death Trip* is the role played by Van Schaick as a photographer creating many postmortem photographs, not as an attempt to satisfy his morbid fascination, but rather as a paid, commissioned professional providing a service for willing customers. Through this, Lesy argues that the photography of Van Schaick's time had an inseparable link and purpose to the way Americans psychologically and emotionally confronted the death of their children, relatives, spouses, and friends. He writes that "commercial photography, as practiced in the 1890s, was not so much a form of applied technology as it was a semimagical act that symbolically dealt with time and mortality" (Lesy Introduction). Lesy is correct, at least when it pertains to his own curated project. *Wisconsin Death Trip* does possess within its pages a semimagical quality and presents the creation of an unreality (that is, something that isn't completely reflective of life) from the excising of reality (meaning that the photographs prove that those who were photographed and the photographer did once exist in time and space). This is why Roland Barthes—in his book-length essay *Camera Lucida*—calls

photography a temporal hallucination: a mad endeavor that is false on the level of perception yet true on the level of time.

Whether or not the Americans of the late nineteenth century saw commercial photography as more than an exploit of a machine and possessing a higher, spiritually enriching dimension is merely an assumption made by Lesy; the skeptic within me calls out that Lesy is simply trying to mystify his findings further and generate a greater allure to his project. What isn't assumed, however, is my own contemporaneous relationship with these photographs that have now aged over a century. To my sensibilities, each photograph, even the ones that don't capture the likeness of a cadaver, are steeped in death. I can see death in the men posing solemnly in studios, the children standing in rows, and the steam engines, too. Each photograph is a symbol of what has been and what will never be—can never be—again. For this reason, the project is extremely moving to me.

Five

I stood still in the Hollywood Forever Cemetery on grass much too green beneath a sun that shone much too bright. My camera rested within my hands.

I marveled at the headstones jumbled below advertisements for the latest movies and TV shows plastered against billboards that crested the horizon.

Dee Dee Ramone's grave was speckled in lip-shaped stains of many colors—blue, red, pink, orange, and purple.

Judy Garland's resting place was shared by many in her own separate section of the mausoleum. Her niche stood tall against the smaller ones surrounding hers in the columbarium. One ruby red slipper sat behind a cast-iron partition. A notebook waited patiently on a nearby

podium for Judy's visitors to write. One entry reads "Judy I love the way you performed in Wizerd of Oz. Now your are over the rainbow. Love, Sloane Walker."

As I continued to meander about, I was suddenly struck by the languid cries of a man on his knees in front of a gravestone; his head hung low, and his chin touched his chest. He wore his sweat dripping down his brow, dressed in dirty jeans and a dirtier T-shirt. I wanted to photograph him. I did not.

Six

My attention was soon directed to *Secure the Shadow: Death and Photography in America* by Jay Ruby, published in 1995, which stands as a more comprehensive and elaborate study on the practice of mortuary and death-related photography in America ranging from photography's beginnings in the nineteenth century to Ruby's present day. Ruby makes it a point that in-part his research was intended to dispel, complicate, and reposition the cryptic perspective on postmortem photography that works like *Wisconsin Death Trip* have created. For my practice, *Secure the Shadow* is an important document in establishing a more accurate, stronger historical basis for me to pull from.

Ruby's research begins in the tradition of postmortem painting, a practice that began in western Europe in the fifteenth century and continued well into the 1800s. The practice of capturing the recently deceased's likeness is not unique to photography and has deep roots in the pre-established pictorial tradition. Following this line of reasoning, Ruby argues that studio photographers, like Charles Van Schaick of Black River Falls, that openly and explicitly advertised the service of mortuary photography—like the advertisement that the book's name alludes to: "Secure the Shadow/ Ere the Substance Fade,/ Let Nature imitate what Nature made"

(Ruby 1)—were cornering an untapped market and not exploring the semimagical capabilities of the camera that Lesy argues for. Rather, the commercial photographer met the pre-existing demand for the documentation of one's likeness (either living or dead) for an American middle to lower class market that once could not afford to have a painting made but could certainly afford to have a photograph taken. Photography being the cheaper alternative to painting, coupled with the fact that it was much quicker and holds a much more realistic resemblance, eventually led to the decline of postmortem paintings in the mid-nineteenth century. Post-mortem photography quickly became a widely available commercial service, most often carried out by lesser experienced photographers who were new to the trade.

One style of mortuary photography that Ruby discovered to be commonplace in the nineteenth century is what he has denoted "The Last Sleep." In these photographs, mortuary photographers pose their subjects in bed or on couches seemingly at rest with their eyes closed. Of course, the subject is no longer living, but the photograph's intention is to blur this reality to the viewer, or as he puts it, it's "intended to create the illusion of people 'asleep' and not dead" (Ruby 65). Although Ruby attempts to demystify the semimagical relationship of photography and death that Lesy advocates for, positing that the rise of post-mortem photography were a result of economic reasons, "The Last Sleep" returns those semimagical qualities of postmortem photography back to the forefront. It demonstrates that some early studio photographers envisioned the camera as something that can create a vision of an intermediary alternative; the subject of these kinds of photographs are not living nor dead but sleeping instead.

In the time that Ruby writes this book, he still finds examples of postmortem photography being taken in America that illustrates both the continuance of this practice and the popular attitudes surrounding it. Ruby argues that the introduction of photography into the

domestic sphere by way of personal cameras beginning in 1900 with the introduction of the Brownie lessened the frequency of professional postmortem photography, but did not lessen the frequency of postmortem photography being taken in general. The practice simply moved away from the public sphere and into the private. His collected accounts on personal postmortem photography are fascinating. Ruby claims that many funeral directors have admitted to finding the wrappers of disposable cameras or film rolls left behind by families who ask for private visitations with the deceased. The funeral directors admitted to purposefully not speaking with their clients about the clear signs that they'd taken the deceased's picture for fear of causing shame. He also claims that many of the photos featured in this book were collected from families who were eager to have them exit their family collections because of how twisted or perverse they felt they were. Ruby also discusses one official practice of postmortem photography in the 1980s and 1990s, that being the documentation of stillborn infants by neonatal hospices in hospitals around America. In some hospice centers, the post-mortem photographs are taken first without the parents' knowledge and then offered later free of charge. These practices stand as proof of the continuing belief that a postmortem image holds some sense of therapeutic value to the bereaved. Ruby proves that the practice of death photography that I'm interested in still holds a place in popular photography and isn't a practice lost by time, yet it's a practice that is unspoken of.

Seven

In the introduction to his landmark book *In The American West*, Richard Avedon delineates his stance on the relationship between the portrait photographer and his subject. Avedon writes "A portrait is not a likeness. The moment an emotion or fact is transformed into a

photograph it is no longer a fact but an opinion. There is no such thing as inaccuracy in a photograph. All photographs are accurate. None of them is truth" (Avedon Foreword). The numerous faces that reside within this book form, to Avedon's belief, a half-truth tailored to his own subjective thoughts and feelings.

Not every photograph in Avedon's series is of human subjects. During this project, Avedon visited a slaughterhouse is Ennis, Montana, and took a portrait of three sheep, hung with their heads faced downwards, with their wool splotched black, and blood dripping at the ends of their noses. He also photographs the head of a skinned steer, with its tongue stuck out, and its eyes wide with no lids to close upon them. Avedon's imagined subject, that he claims "in a sense is me" (Avedon Foreword), is not a living, breathing participant that he engages with to create the photograph out of their mutual struggle for control. When photographing a deceased subject, the typical exchange of the photographer and the photographed cannot exist. The subject has already submitted to a greater controlling force than that which the camera or photographer could ever create in tandem: death.

Eight

"The Ontology of the Photographic Image" by Andre Bazin, first published in 1960, is an essay that is truthfully primarily concerned with championing a realist approach to filmmaking rather than formalism. Bazin, however, reaches that main point by first expounding his perspective on the history of art and its inevitable culmination in photography/cinema. From Bazin's point of view, the functionality of the plastic arts in human history is to, in effect, cheat death by preserving the likeness of a human being in a form that outlives themselves. He defines this innate human desire to live beyond our bodies through the creation of art as the "Mummy

Complex," citing the mummy as the very first Egyptian statue (whether this is chronologically accurate or not). But, being as such, Bazin theorizes that the photographic image is the closest humanity has gotten to fulfilling its mummy complex because of the mechanical qualities of the camera that produce a near perfect replicant of its subject matter akin to a fingerprint. It's the closest reproduction of someone's likeness to their actual likeness.

Bazin's cinematic basis limits his scope in what the camera can "mummify," as he focuses on the human likeness being photographed. Of course, the camera isn't necessarily always pointing at a person. It may be more accurate to say that the camera fulfills the mummy complex in that it has the power to embalm the instances of a singular vision. This is all to say that the mummy, whatever it may be a mummy of, requires someone to mummify it.

Although Bazin concerns himself more with cinema, this is still a crucial, foundational text that inspires further theorists who write on photography. As it pertains to my own practice, Bazin inspires interesting theoretical ideas that I can apply to my own work—but only from a distance. I don't believe that the replicant, that being the photographer's subject, is as easily defined as a "fingerprint" as Bazin puts it here, although admittedly it is effective to his point. The particularity of the metaphor raises some concern within me as it implies that the impression given by the subject onto the photograph stems from the physicality of the person (as if they're pressing their face onto photopaper as a police officer would jam a perp's fingers into a book). When, truthfully, it is the shadows and light that create the "mark" or "replicant." This is still something physical within the world but not something that stems from the subject, but rather it's a creation due to the sun (or some other light source). A photograph records the lighting's fingerprint, not the subject's. This facet of photography complicates the idea of "capturing" the likeness of the dead or dying, because the light that shines on the subject and that my camera

records them with is still very much living. If we adhere to this line of thinking, every single photograph, even those of the cadavers that Lesy and Ruby study, sign life to its viewer by the mere necessity of the energy of light in its creation. This of course makes it hard to truly claim that anything I photograph can solely represent death because I cannot take a photograph without light.

Nine

My photography project's title is a line borrowed from the poem "A toad can die of light!" written by the nineteenth century American poet Emily Dickinson. I admire the deliberate, concise quality of her writing. Her poetry is typically curt to the extent that reading her lines feels like punches of photographs to my imagination. This particular poem of interest reads as follows:

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A toad can die of light!

Death is the common right

Of toads and men,—

Of earl and midge

The privilege.

Why swagger then?

The gnat's supremacy

Is large as thine.

Dickinson strings together simple images of different animals in comparison to man, culminating in a poetic memento mori that "The gnat's supremacy/ is as large as thine"

(Dickinson lines 7-8). The poem feels akin to my practice in the way that it reflects on human mortality through instances of death seen in other symbols; part of my practice included finding dead animals, and photographs of dead deer, a moth, an opossum, etc., ended up in my final photobook.

Removing the penultimate line from the poem in its entirety, as I have done to entitle my photobook, redefines the meaning of the line. Now the line doesn't stand among poetical text but rather it stands in front of poetical photographs.

Poetry and photography share similar artistic capacities and characteristics, despite the prior being expressed textually/verbally while the latter is purely visual. A photograph cannot speak as a poem does, but a sequence of photographs certainly builds meaning just as the succession of lines in a poem does. Each new photograph along the sequence communicates with the photograph that it succeeds and precedes, creating new meaning in the spaces between. In a sense this frees my vision to include photographs that are purely for intermingling and doesn't necessarily require it to represent death explicitly (the photograph of a tongue licking an ice cream cone in the second movement comes to mind). This principle drove my construction of the sequence of photographs in this photobook, as I sought to place the photographs that welded together the strongest poetic synapses when presented in tandem as a diptych or sequentially.

Ten

On Photography, written by Susan Sontag and published in 1977, is a collection of essays in which the theorist delves into a variety of ethical and aesthetic issues regarding photography. In some sections of the book, Sontag takes a more critical stance on photography as means of information/communication. Additionally, Sontag is one of the first writers to describe

photography as a certain kind of violation or abuse that is typically perpetrated by the operator of the camera onto their subject. Her writings are pertinent to death photography.

In the first essay entitled "In Plato's Cave," Sontag argues that photography has created a new way in which we view the world. From her perspective, the photograph is merely a representation of reality and not reality itself—much like Barthes view on the photograph as a temporal hallucination—though the photograph is often presented as reality. And so, a photograph is an illusion to most viewers just like the shadows in Plato's allegory of the cave. Sontag continues to argue that resulting from this shift in how people perceive reality—that being humanity now sees the world broadly through photographs which are only a shadow of reality—is the normalization and democratization of all events; Sontag writes that "through photographs, the world becomes a series of unrelated, freestanding particles; and history, past and present, a set of anecdotes and *faits divers.* The camera makes reality atomic, manageable, and opaque" (Sontag 22-23). As it relates to seeing the world, I'm not entirely sure I agree with Sontag. I don't believe that the camera can completely make each photographed event alike, and the existence of certain famous, renowned photographs (like *Migrant Mother* by Dorothea Lange) is a testament to that. This seems to be something that Sontag rehashes herself when writing on the attacks of September 11th in *Regarding the Pain of Others.* However, I do prescribe to the idea that the camera can atomize subjects like an organizational tool. The democratizing nature of the camera can work on a smaller scale and according to a singular photographer's vision and intentions in how they organize and sequence their photographs. Photographs of death or whatever else that I include in my photobook are atomized and made alike just by the nature of being grouped together by me, regardless of their content. In a way, my thesis hinges on this facet of photography if my work is to be seen poetically. The

photographs I choose to include are democratized, that is, made alike to one another, by nature of being bound in the same book. It's my intention that this theoretical facet of photography works to my advantage in exploring death obliquely, that two photos arranged in a diptych can share qualities between the frames and pages that divide them.

Eleven

Camera Lucida, written by French theoretician Roland Barthes and published in 1980, is a diverse and widespread book-length essay regarding his views on and assessment of photography. It's a highly personal and anecdotal text in which Barthes speaks freely about the photography that interests him, and conversely the photography that doesn't interest him, free from any popular opinion that may influence his own. In fact, the photograph that he references the most is one that he refuses to present to his readership: a photo of his now deceased mother standing inside a winter garden when she was a child. I'm aware that this photo has since leaked online, but for the sake of Barthes, his argument, and his theoretics, I've stayed away from looking at it. Barthes imbues his writing with an intensive death consciousness (as exhibited in his obsession with the photo of his dead mother). This death consciousness guides his theoretics of photography as he details the numerous ways that he sees the camera as an instrument of death.

Barthes states that all young photographers (yes, he emphasizes young as if there's a sense of naivety he suspects) are agents of death unknowingly. He claims that if death is no longer found in religion, then it is certainly within the photograph. And while all these young people are out gallivanting and photographing what they believe to be life unfolding, to Barthes' view, they're actually instilling their living subjects in photographic coffins like busy grim

reapers. This idea dovetails with his writing on the temporal hallucination integral to photography. The photograph demarcates “what-has-been” by it being a representation of something caught in a mere fraction of time. The opening and closing of the shutter is a killing of the moment, and to Barthes’ view, akin to the swinging of Death’s scythe.

One must follow through with Barthes’ analysis of photography through photography’s entire process and functionality and not just the capturing of a photograph. As any photographer knows, the work doesn’t simply end at the push of the shutter button. If the taking of a photograph is the murder of a moment in time, an excising of reality, then the presentation of what the photographer captured, whether that be as a post online, an exhibition in a gallery space, or the publication of a photobook, must be considered as an act of resurrection (and perhaps a photographer works out the rigor mortis of a photograph when editing in the darkroom). The young photographer must be more like Dr. Caligari than the grim reaper, as when he shares his photographs, he is reconstituting the corpse of a moment in time and space to parade around a temporal hallucination of “what-has-been.”

This quality of photography, seen as a Lazarus act, is what drove my interest in photographs that showed a strong contrast between life and death. The severed hoof of a deer is dead and gone, but the grass in which it rests upon glows green with life. A beached fish suffocated in the dirt long ago, but two hornets sustain their lives by eating its flesh. Life and death are constants in flux with one another; the same is true with the photographic practice. Pressing the shutter kills a moment in time; Printing that very photo revives that moment in time.

Twelve

I stepped out of my car to the sight of an impressive, gothic style church. Its door was knocked loose off its hinges, each window bore broken panes, and only tiny specks of white paint indicated that it had once been painted whatsoever.

The interior of the church was dusty and nostalgic. The walls held fast its muted blue coat of paint. The pews staid still in place, just as they must have been fifty years ago. The same was true of the altar and the piano beside it. I was whipped into a frenzy of photographs.

The table that sat before the altar held a golden collection dish; it held enough dollar bills to overflow slightly onto the red tablecloth it stood upon.

Thirteen

It was winter once again. Clouds hung low and frost lingered about the trees. From a friend's car I spotted a golden eagle perched atop a deer carcass left by the roadside. He hadn't noticed it, but I did. It occurred to me as a potential photograph. The eagle's talons dug into the remnant, giving its beak leverage to pick apart the corpse. The carcass itself was shaped into a blob of rotting flesh—no eyes, no ears, no head of any discernable kind nor any legs laid from under its body—it was solely flesh. I felt an urge to photograph it.

I returned in the evening to find that this particular side of the road was not a singular resting place—not solely one fleshy gravestone for passerby drivers—but a cemetery's worth of dead deer all laden across the edge of the woods. Spines and jawbones intermingled with the thorny, hoary underbrush, creating a scene of frozen fixation. One deer's head had no eyes nor teeth, but laid with a twisted, up-curled lip. Others had their legs still attached but picked clean to

the bone totally naked against the cold. Most had completely lost any sense of corpus; their scattered pieces read to me as metonyms of what once was.

I photographed a deer scarce half made up. It was headless. It was missing most of its hide with its legs splayed through the dirt. The ribcage stood in the open air, with what little bits of red frozen flesh clung to it.

Fourteen

On This Site is a project that Sternfeld dedicates to those "*who will not forget.*" In the book's afterword, Sternfeld writes that he realized that within him is "a list of places that I cannot forget because of the tragedies that identify them, and I began to wonder if each of us has such a list. I set out to photograph sites that were marked during my lifetime," (Sternfeld *On This Site*). And, so, the photobook is just that: landscapes taken from Sternfeld's own biased proclivities. Many of the places that Sternfeld photographs, however, do not automatically sign as tragic. In fact, many look ordinary and mundane. The project, then, equally becomes an exploration of memory (or photography as a means of memory), the failings of photography to remember, and how our understanding of photography is often fraught with misreading. To express this quality of photography, Sternfeld organized his book deliberately: the photo is first shown with neither title nor context, both of which are withheld from the reader until the next page. Many times when reading through the book, the images weren't clear on what was being depicted whatsoever until the text provided gave context to the gruesome occurrence the location of the image once witnessed. For example, the photo *Gandy's Restaurant, 8 Uvalde Avenue, Canelview, Texas, January 1995* depicts an unassuming street with an equally unassuming restaurant. There are some pick-up trucks around, but absolutely no human figures. Sternfeld's included text, however,

clues the reader into the story of Wanda Holloway who hired a contract killer to murder the mother of her daughter's cheerleading rival in that very parking lot depicted in the photograph. She had hoped the loss of her mother would force the rival to quit cheerleading, allowing her own daughter to advance competitively. The mother was caught before the killing was conducted, and she was convicted of soliciting murder and sentenced to fifteen years in prison. That kind of information could never have been understood from the image alone unless the reader had some kind of personal tie or prior knowledge of the story. Sternfeld plays with memory and photography, showing time passing through the image while still holding on to the initial event in prose.

On This Site serves as an exemplar for a certain kind of post-mortem photography. Sternfeld's practice is memorializing to an extent. He creates images out of a desire for remembrance, and many of the images he makes are places in which tragedy ended in the death of either one or multiple people. But the image alone isn't enough to memorialize the tragedy; it only memorializes the place in which it occurred specifically at the time that Sternfeld took the photo (undoubtedly Sternfeld is aware of this distinction in meticulously dating when his photograph was taken). The prose that's included alongside each photo is what truly memorializes the tragedy. Of course, this means that many of these images don't automatically sign death, as opposed to the photos that Lesy or Ruby studies that are distinct portraits of cadavers. Thus, Sternfeld operates at a non-literal level in photographing death. In his case, death is evoked in his work by the way in which his photos are always pointing to an event that occurred in the past and that time has already moved on from that event. Sometimes that passage of time itself is evident in the photograph, like grass growing tall over what used to be a baseball

diamond, but the photograph typically doesn't impart any sense of what exactly is being grown over.

Fifteen

I drove my car up and around a gravel path. The trees around me carried on their trunks blue marks, designating them to be chopped down. No other person nor car was around.

I had read online about an abandoned nuclear lab deep in Georgia's woods, not too far out of Atlanta. It used to be an elaborate testing facility and sported its own reactor. I was determined to find where the core was buried, thinking it could be a great addition to my photography project.

The tires of my car crunched to a stop along the small rocks beneath its rubber. When I stepped out of my car, I saw nothing but a concrete slab laid atop the earth and the trees that have since encircled it.

Sixteen

The Gnat's Supremacy is not a final artistic statement on exploring death, ruination, and decay through photography. It is a vein of inquiry and exploration that is, as mentioned before, all-encompassing and forever expanding. How does one make an ultimate statement against the ultimate?

I imagine that it can only develop in different ways as I age, too, but for now *The Gnat's Supremacy* is a statement of death and photography in my youth.

Seventeen

About a week after I had my photobooks printed and delivered, I sat on a bench near a stream. The return of the sun and heat has brought upon a blanket of pollen, and the green particles ushered in the buzz of spring.

I watched mosquitos and wasps rush about new-born grass. Ducks and geese swam by along the stream.

Then the sun shone in such particularity that an incandescence radiated from one pocket of air above the riverbank. Within it teemed a swarm of gnats, shining bright white, flying in circles around one another.

I pulled out my camera, and I photographed them in flight, setting my camera to a high shutter speed and fixing them to a frame, so that for once they would stop moving as rapidly as they do. The photograph turned out angelic. The gnats all look like cherubim, extending their little white wings amidst the birth of spring. The photograph is perfect for the project, but, the photobooks have already been printed.

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