

## “THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF EXISTENCE”



On Stories, Photographs and Impermanence

By Kelsey Sucena



## **I: Accidents and Impermanence**

I can see them now. Portraits of friends before the Hudson, debris lining its shore, the stunning light of a sunset fog against a vision of the half wild/ half industrial valley beyond. Photographs which will never exist except for within my memory, lost in the insufficient visual catalogue. They were lost in a car accident shortly after my thesis exhibition. Seven rolls of film escaped the wreckage of the car but my camera was not so lucky. I was saddened by its loss but wholly disheartened when I realized the film it contained would be exposed and destroyed; the images it held dead in the truest sense that a photograph can be. What's funny is that I know, had they made it to development, the images would likely not have stood above the ones which had survived. They might have been unremarkable, even flawed, as so many others have been, but there remains within me the sad doubt that maybe they were something else. They could have been the photographs I have been searching for since the beginning of my career. They could have been those precious moments that changed the medium for me. They could have been truth. Probably not, but lost as they are I can never know. There is a cognitive dissonance where I stand with them now as I can only guess what exists between my vision of their appearance and the vanished reality. I am only left with a fading memory of their visage. I can see them but they are lost.

Roland Barthes claimed that the 'eidos' of photography is death, like the old myth of photographer as soul stealer Barthes asserted, "young photographers who are at work in the world, determined upon the capture of actuality, do not know they are agents of death." (Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pg.92) According to Barthes, to photograph, that is to trigger the shutter, is to draw a stark line between life and death, between a living moment and its silent preservation. When we peer at a photograph, be it is a parent's photograph of a child's first steps or Timothy O'Sullivan's photographs of America's first steps west, there is the idea that we are being given a glimpse into the past. Barthes believes that the viewing of a photograph provides an opportunity for the contemplation of death, especially when we realize that someday that child will have died

just as O'Sullivan's work has. Barthes might point towards the viewing of a photograph as being a way to cultivate mindfulness for the impermanence of life and living. One can argue that Barthes' claim still maintains some degree of truth as we have all had the experience of looking into the silver-salted eyes of a now deceased relative, but I think that society's relationship to photography since Barthes wrote has changed drastically.

Sogyal Rinpoche suggests in his The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying that man, specifically the western man, lives out his days in the refusal of death. Sogyal Rinpoche points towards a generalized fear/misunderstanding of death as the source of "western laziness". "It consists of cramming our lives with compulsive activity, so that there is no time at all to confront the real issues" (Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, pg.19). Conversely to Barthes argument Rinpoche might include photography as one activity falling into the category of death denial, along with rampant consumption and the 'accumulation of responsibilities'. Photographs, existing and persisting through digital mediums, have in some ways become tools of defiance in the face of death; every meal, every social interaction, every artistic event documented by the camera so as to live on through social media, intangible but perceptively permanent. In the face of this it is easy to see the ways in which photographs have taken on the life of talismans holding the promise of immortality. Like Ponce de Leon we cling to photographs as fountains of youth promising to sustain us through our aging and through our death.

Even as early as the 1970's people like Susan Sontag were tackling the question of photography's worth as a means of preservation. Back then it was becoming clear that photographs are an insufficient means of preservation as they could not speak and so often become lost without context to buttress their meaning. Sontag took it a step forward claiming that not only were photographs insufficient records of the past but now they had become a means of breaking past events apart and warping their meanings. "The photographer both loots and preserves, denounces and consecrates. Photography expresses the American impatience with reality...people wielded cameras as a way of taking possession of the places they visited." (Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, pg 65)



Sontag talks about the impulse to photograph as a means of possession, not of preservation.

Photographs in her mind become objects designed to catalogue and break up the world into desirable and understandable experiences, pulling away from the true scope of reality in favor of more digestible visions of it. “Through photographs the world becomes a series of unrelated, freestanding particles... It is a view of the world which denies interconnectedness, continuity, but which confers on each moment the character of a mystery... Photography implies that we know the world if we accept it as the camera records it. But this is the opposite of understanding, which starts from not accepting the world as it looks”

While Rinpoche might argue this point I wondered if photography and photographs today might be used as a means to contemplate and cultivate a relationship with death rather than to rebel against it. As a Buddhist and as an artist finding the connection between photography and death seemed imperative or else I would find myself caught in a place



of mutual exclusivity between them both. Can photographs translate the transient, or could they be used as a means of contemplation on the subject rather than as a reinforcement of the ego?

Inherent to the medium is the thought that photography exists distinctly as a means of documentation or preservation. Being the medium most associated with the reproduction of reality, photographs act as doors or windows into the past. It is therefore the common impulse of the photographer to seek the transient so as to capture it forever. It is a campaign against death marked by the optimistic hope that death might be forestalled.

For “The Circumstances of Existence” I was interested in coastal places as locations wherein I have spent a majority of my life and as places at immediate peril of disappearing with the rising of tides. I have

long trained my camera here thinking that I, like Atget, could hold this place still forever. The initial investigations seemed successful in capturing a sense of place but insufficient in expressing its transience. Despite my best efforts the photographs could not speak, their stories were silent, still and without time.

In the wake of the accident I found myself wondering if those photographs which were lost somehow managed to translate the sense of impermanence I sought. While they probably did not do so when they were taken they have done so by their destruction, for how else can a photograph alone act as an expression of the impermanent but by its own death?







## II: Stories and Epitaphs

I have lived most of my life in other places. I recall as a child finding myself lost for hours amongst friends within the realms of elaborate fantasies which played themselves out in the few abandoned patches of wood remaining around the neighborhood. As an adult I sometimes catch myself lost in other worlds. I have thought of myself as a sort of Walter Mitty, seeking escape from mundane existence with a camera in hand. Walter Mitty, the mindless daydreamer, is pitied by the reader for his fantasies. I think however that he is in some ways the most human among us. I remember reading once that humans are inherently story tellers and that this quality is one which sets us apart most abruptly from the animals. The development of narratives through histories both personal and cultural has ingrained in us the sense of identity which gives weight to our existence, validation for our being.

I had a story to tell about a woman who struck me as peculiar and fascinating whom I had met far out at Montauk Point. Montauk is a place which easily falls prey to the seasons and so photographing it in the winter seemed to be an opportunity to visually express the transience of the shore. While photographing the town I



encountered Allie Moxie, a quiet resident whose loneliness had me fascinated. I remember thinking, or rather fantasizing, that she was running from something; an unsatisfying though financially rewarding career perhaps? An uncertain sort of death? Whatever it was compelled me to capture her visage in a photograph for posterity. It was a quiet image which did not speak of our conversation, or of Montauk or the vanishing shore. At most it might have captured our silence, her longing, the emptiness of the space and the loneliness on her face; perhaps not even this. In my investigations I found that the photographs were too subjective to speak the volumes we (as photographers) read in them, but I found myself hoping that perhaps this



photograph was audible if only as a sort of epitaph; marked by what Barthes might refer to as a “specter” potentially embalmed by the act of photographing.

The conclusion I drew from interactions like this was that in order to tell a fuller story I ought to pursue its description through writing as well as through photographs. Writing and photography have long gone hand in hand, when even early on journalism had absorbed the medium into its realm. I didn’t want to be blunt about the photographs however, to describe them plainly as in a piece of journalism, nor did I want to describe the transience of the coasts purely in writing. I found myself early on encouraged by artists such as Nicholas Muellner and Ron Jude who were working in tandem on projects which explored the intersection of photography and writing. As part of his book “Lick Creek Line”, for example, Jude includes the essay “No Such Place” by Muellner. The photographs are ethereal descriptions of a massive, cold and mountainous landscape, an apparently quiet community on the peculiar borders of the natural and constructed landscape. When paired with the essay, Jude’s landscape becomes alive with characters placed within it, characters who are made to contend with the sheer size and emptiness of those photographs therein. There is an essence in the photographs of a sort of mysticism permeating the mountains, the land is foreboding and mysterious and as Muellner describes Oracles and the peculiarities of this place that essence is further fleshed out.



(Photograph by Ron Jude, Lick Creek Line)



(Cover of No Such Place, an Essay by Nicholas Muellner)

Before places like Montauk I thought to myself that this is what I wanted to do. To tell stories which involved these places, which involved death and transience without necessarily illustrating it in finite terms. I wanted to write stories which could flesh out the meaning within the images and find ways in which to organize the images to create narratives. I felt, as Alec Soth, “The only hope for me is storytelling-is narrative... I have to find some way to connect these pictures through storytelling. Because stories have this power, and the connective tissues of stories for me is so necessary.”

(Alec Soth, ‘the democratic jungle’, lecture, flash forward festival 2010)

So I began to write stories, musings, epitaphs for the photographs. I wrote descriptions of the places I was photographing for the sake of preservation (City Island, Co-Op City, Coney Island, Staten Island, Long



Island, Fire Island, Montauk, ect.), I wrote accounts of folks I photographed, I wrote about the events which took place when photographing too and eventually I began to write a fictional narrative culled from these and other life experiences, a sort of amalgamated story to reinforce all of the things I had been considering when photographing. **Bones Become Sand** was the final accumulation of these stories to accompany the photographs.

Sensing writing as an opportunity to look inwards as much as to look outwards I set the narrative within the boundaries of the photographs and cast myself as every character. Elements of my experiences in these places made their way into the stories but instead of focusing on the impermanence of the shoreline (which I was sure to mention) I wanted to focus on impermanence as we experience it in life through romance, aging and death. The stories became a form of introspection as well as fuel towards photographic meaning. The photographs along with the stories were becoming meditations rather than assertions.

As the stories took shape around a narrative of lost love, escape and death so too did the photographs. They developed together in relative symbiosis. I became more introspective in considering my current love life and my relationships with others as well as my relationship with the shoreline where all of this was set. The photographs began to speak of people like Allie Moxie, lonely and lost, their words echoing in the stories which were to accompany them. Though there was distance between the stories and reality, the photographs would align with both, drawing from their sense of realism but also developing into 'truthful fictions' as the stories had become. Story-telling and mystery became the photographs' salvation, a way of fleshing out what they were meant to say.







### III: Photographic Satori

There is a wildlife refuge not far from the tip of Long Island where folks have flocked for generations to feed wild chickadees, blue jays, and titmouses. Long before it was handed over to the Fish and Wildlife Service it was tended to carefully by a kind woman, Elizabeth Morton, who was patient and generous enough to train the wild birds to come take seeds from her very palm. Today they continue to cautiously approach the hands of visitor's content to snatch seed in return for the joy of connection the act provides. They're testy though and will not come when food is otherwise plentiful or when it appears as though their guests have come for something more than connection. For this reason it can be quite difficult to photograph the fleeting birds, as the presence of the camera is more than enough to send them away. I visited this refuge with my lover late in the winter so that the birds would have every reason to come feed. With her hands outstretched and filled with seeds chickadees appeared quickly in the brush all around. My lover is a tremendously calm and composed woman and so in her the birds saw no threat, they came quickly and stayed for long enough to select their favorite seeds before rushing off to dine. As I watched the miracle I reached for my camera to capture it all, but with my lens ready to bare they suddenly refused. It was frustrating to think that a photograph was all I had asked for and yet what I offered was life.

I am afraid that photographs can sometimes act as egoistic attempts to divert death. Resistance to the idea of impermanence (rooted in the false belief that the photograph can forever hold a moment still) can mark them with the power to claim a hold on reality and on truth. I found wisdom in the writings of Shunryu Suzuki who said "This is also the real secret of the arts, always be a beginner." (Suzuki, Zen Mind Beginners Mind, The Buddha and His Teachings, p.229) Zen mind, beginners mind, "we die and we do not die." I realized that work need not reflect my spiritual practice and that my practice need not encompass my art but that I should approach both as a beginner forever learning. Neither a Buddha nor star artist I began to find compromise between both identities. There were artists like Mark Steinmetz who was able to approach both photography and mindfulness without sacrificing his identification with either, seeming to dance and to

wonder with the world. Steinmetz especially operated in response to a transient world and though his photographs held it still one could sense that the man himself was never stationary.



(Mark Steinmetz, South Central)

We tried for an hour or so to coax the birds into landing long enough to capture their visage but they refused. They did not trust my camera and did not trust me. As I grew more irritated by their absurdity I found myself surrendering, tired of the unrewarding task. I put the camera away and they returned happily to

take the seed. It may be that sometimes we try too hard to grasp the fleeting, that in our effort to remember our baby steps or to hold onto a lover we force them through our very fingers. How tragic the photograph of a lost love than when it only serves to remind us that 'this too has passed' and that 'this too (the present) shall pass'. When I gained the birds trust they no longer fled. So long as I was still and fed



them between shots they would tolerate the clap of the shutter and stay just long enough for me to capture their image.



I now think of the difficulties of impermanence and the suffering it presents to us in life and I pause, neither horrified by death nor ignorant of its reality. There is something to be said about a photograph's ability to capture this in our consciousness, to prompt a feeling of life's fleeting nature and to kindly offer us a glimpse into the past and into a coming future. To force this is only to scare it away like the chickadees and so the photographer must reserve themselves to telling stories, either literally or through photographs, which suggest or draw attention to life's transience. In the face of impermanence it is easy to become fearful, "But let the mind beware, that though the flesh be bugged, the circumstances of existence are pretty glorious." (Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*, p.238)



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