Appendix E - **UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM**
SENIOR PROJECT - APPROVAL

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PROJECT TITLE: MIRRORS, WINDOWS, AND HUMAN EMOTION: TRANSCENDING THE SUBJECT THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

Signed: Baldwin Lee, Faculty Mentor

Date: MAY 8, 2001

General Assessment - please provide a short paragraph that highlights the most significant features of the project.

Comments (Optional):

THE RESEARCH WAS THOROUGH AND THE CONCLUSIONS WERE FORCEFUL. CLEAR AND SENSITIVE. AN EXCELLENT EFFORT.

Mirrors, Windows, and Human Emotion:
Transcending the Subject through Photography

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Senior Honors Project
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Introduction:

Whether through old clichés, complex theoretical treatises, or simple journal entries, the picture has always inspired humans to talk. Emotions somehow lie dormant beneath the surface of the image, sitting deep and mysterious in some secret place, swirling to the top and urging hands to pick up pens and pencils, mouths and tongues to form sentences, eyes to dart, and brains to flash. There is something resting there in an image that makes us find something within us, experienced or understood; it is the essence of what happens when someone leans almost motionlessly over to his museum-going companion, eyes still rooted in the image on the white wall, and whispers, seemingly without sound: "Wow...that's fantastic."

Along with painted or sculpted images, photographic pieces strike through to the bone as well. The feeling radiating from a photographed scene is different, however; the image is snatched from reality, taken down and held at the chest, stripped of its color and perhaps of its sense—and somehow, someway, this mere moment taken from the physical world can pierce into the deepest of emotions and let them drain out. Within the following pages I hope to investigate the origin of this capacity of photography—the capability it has in creating feeling from a particular scene that might have never existed while the physical source of the scene was being photographed. In other words, I seek to find the way in which a photograph transcends its content. A lofty goal, admittedly, with perhaps no true conclusion, but explorable, nonetheless.

I have thus split this essay into two seemingly appropriate parts. The first is a somewhat academic and philosophical exploration of the nature of photography as compared to other artforms and three ways in which it creates transcendent emotion.

Here, the life story of photography is essential; the struggles it has encountered when in comparison with other types of art is incorporated into how it has garnered such a fanatical mass following. The psychology behind the picture making process, the photographic artist, and the viewer him or herself is discussed, thus creating a somewhat scientific attempt at discovering how and why a photograph moves us.

The second and concluding segment of the paper is a series of reactions to certain pieces located at the end of the composition. This component is like a series of journal entries, a collection of independent thoughts in first informal poetic and then more analytical prose forms that delve into particular images by means of deeply personal paths. Some responses are specific to the content of the image, while others are derived from indeterminate, unnamable feelings that the image inspires; both types, however, are genuine, and seek above all to explain just why the photograph is so privately and personally beautiful. After all, this is the reward of experiencing art and perhaps the most clear and precise way of conveying an almost inexplicable, conceptual idea: the reasons why one loves a piece of art...or anything, for that matter.

Part I:

The mid-1800's audience who received the new, novel technology encapsulated in the camera was extremely suspicious of it; habituated to the utilization of painting to capture reality, some decried it as the end of human art, and certainly the end of miniature portraiture (Leggat, Artists and Photography). Charles Baudelaire despised the discipline in particular, condemning those who chose to explore this "product of industry" and the images that followed from it, seeing them as copies of reality imbued with no real soul

(Leggat, Artists and Photography). Photography was simply to be a descendant of the ancient process of transcribing from one document to another, easily reproducing for posterity those images which had great societal value. It was, in Baudelaire's esteemed opinion, "the refuge of failed painters with too little talent;" society seemed to know that it would be used as the shortcut for those dastardly few who would wish art to be a factory-like process (Leggat, Artists and Photography).

Thus, the first camera-users saw and were forced to see the machine as simply that; their images were supposed to be strictly documentary, purely transplanting scenes from one place to another in order to convey information. The first photographers can be likened to the first explorers of the New World, investigating far-off places whose rumored beauty and exotic features were both widespread through gossip and physically unknown to that present moment's generation (Leggat, A History of Photography). Thus, the West, for instance, was an important photographic source, the artistic reservoir for photographers such as Carlton Watkins, and Mathew Brady's stark photojournalistic images of the Civil War finally showed the true circumstances of combat to those who would never see a battleline (Leggat, A History of Photography).

The documentary aspect continued and continues into the 20th century; however, with the discipline of photography garnering an increased number of followers, general skill improved and pushed it into a whole new place—the emotional realm of art. The change was profound; suddenly, governmentally assigned photographic projects (i.e., the Farm Security Administration) were assembling artistic masterpieces in the form of negatives, such as Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* (Szarkowski, 11—Figure 1). This image, among others by the FSA's impressive list of artists, represents a turning point in

the evolution of photography from societal tool to art. Here was the result of an assignment, documentation of circumstances its only proposed goal, and yet the image transcends itself, symbolic of motherhood, of despair, and of poverty, the heartbroken Madonna of our time.

The ability of the camera, a once-suspicious machine, in conveying human emotion had now long been known; the movement of photography began to document private concerns among strictly public circumstances, signaling the decline of photojournalistic aims and the birth and childhood of seeking out emotion (Szarkowski, 11-14). Photography's disciples knew the capability they held in their hands along with their 35-mm. Yes, as the 19th century critics declared, photography can reproduce exactly what the human eye sees, but the important part of this avowal is that the eye is, above all, human, and subject to emotion in every blink. Random geometric assemblages of light and shadow, forming recognizable images of faces, bodies, and objects, can be imbued with passion; subjects transcend their banal positions and movements and cause us, the viewing audience, to change in some small way after seeing the images, impressing a part of ourselves onto them and taking a bit of them back with us as well. Thus, in searching for a possible source of this evanescent transcendence, photographs seem to fall into three categories (with an infinity of subjectivity between them, naturally): those taken from an expressionistic perspective, from an explorative or documentary viewpoint, or with an intellectual consciousness of the photograph's audience.

In conveying the artist's emotion, an expressive intent is perhaps the most obvious in creating an image meant to have emotional radiation. The ideas of Alfred Steiglitz, one of the grandfathers of artistic photography, are perhaps the most evolved proponents

of this capability of the camera and of photography as an artform. Steiglitz coined the term of "the equivalent," the idea of one photographed image describing another thing, feeling, or idea by virtue of the emotion it communicates to a certain viewer (White, 41). It is an idea rooted in subjectivity and intuition, with equivalents not necessarily capable of being named in any actual terms. Every equivalent is assuredly different for each pair of eyes that passes over the image's surface, and to capture it requires drawing on the most intensely understood yet verbally unexplainable sensibilities in life. " 'Have you ever been in love?' " Steiglitz once asked Minor White, one of photography's most expressionistic artists. " '...Then you can photograph' " (White, 41).

Thus, the expressive side of photography is much like knowing you are in love; it is highly intuitive, individualized, and personal. Images are often a translation of the artist's feeling, and the photographer is the creator of his or her world, vision, and frame; manipulation of the photograph through darkroom techniques in order to enhance a certain feeling (for instance, adding "too much" shadow or "too much" light) occurs often. Abstractions, nudes, landscapes, and right-brain concepts are more generally seen as fodder for an expressive artist. Pushing the shutter release and seizing an image is an act of insight, spontaneity, spirituality, or therapy. The moment is a taken gift—the photograph, a transmission of the artist's emotion, a mirror reflecting the artist him/herself (Szarkowski, 25).

The documentary aspect of transcending the subject, however, is more like a window, allowing the viewer to watch action and movement through the photographer's eyes, able to see the world and its corners of life that he or she may miss otherwise (Szarkowski, 25). The photojournalistic spirit still exists in these photographs, bringing

exotic scenes and pictures into the homes of millions who may have never seen it. Here, the audience and the artist become one entity, as the viewer not only sees the scene itself before the artist, but how the photographer interpreted it as well. Each moral, value, favorite food and color, the artist's middle name and place of birth—all of it is incorporated and transplanted to the viewer upon seeing the image.

Also, absolute precision of capturing reality, the very thing the 19th century critics feared, lends itself to a new level of transmitting emotion in photography. The photographs of Dr. Harold E. Edgerton of MIT are essential in explaining this concept. His photographs, taken with his invention of the flash, are defined by the fact that they purely document a moment and tabulate the inner-workings of science; they are portraits of bats' wings, movement of a ball against a racket, shattering glass, and smoke in the wind. At one point, Edgerton pleads his disassociation with art: " 'Don't make me out to be an artist. I am an engineer. I am after the facts. Only the facts' " (Jussim, 18). However, his "experiments" are incredibly beautiful experiences, aesthetic in what they reveal, but also in the fact that they reveal it; discovering the camera's capabilities is just as astonishing as perceiving the beauty within its outcomes.

Finally, the acknowledgement of recognizing the process of image making with a camera is extended further into a category of transcending the subject that I have named "projection." Knowing the nature of photography and the philosophy of its methods and operations, several artists, most of them working during the last few decades, have created images that are somewhat unremarkable in their content; however, by connection to a larger social consciousness, they have created highly striking and noteworthy works of art. For instance, photography is always linked to reality because the act of

photographing is the act of transferring the skin of an object onto film and then onto another medium (Arnheim, 115). The photograph originates in the visible world, a tangible environment that operates under laws of physics and math. The restrictions on painting, for example, are not the same as those for photography; while painting a canvas can never have the same speed of clicking a picture, the painter can create worlds that do not exist in physical reality, even changing the description of the surfaces of things with differing brushstrokes.

Also, because of the link to reality within photography, the artist must always be an intruder into his or her scene; he or she cannot be a faraway observer, creating an image of close proximity out of the imagination (Arnheim, 105). The photograph is then always laced with interference, the product of some momentary connection between artist and subject, whether taken surreptitiously or in the open.

Acknowledging this link, then, exposes a new realm of expression, one that may not exist in the mere image of the subject or of the scene. Artists may manipulate their situations, totally fabricating a moment of intense emotion in order to "trick" his or her audience. The fact that the audience may know the process behind the pictures can be exploited as well. For example, Sally Mann's series of photographs of children revealing images of nosebleeds, sibling bites, childhood accidents, and nudity are beautiful in description and somewhat stirring in content. However, upon learning that the children of the photographs are in fact Mann's children, the audience feels unsettled looking at the product of a mother unabashedly exploiting her own children. The work of Andres Serrano also provokes the viewer in this way; an immense print divided into two lovely squares of white and red is completely innocuous until reading its title: *Milk + Blood*

(Figure 2). Projection therefore allows the artist to create an image that surpasses its own content by never truly using the image itself at all.

Thus, the downright fear of photography is laughable in today's times; instead of replacing and cheapening art, it has surpassed its own expectations, allowing its copying capability to open up new realms of possibility rather than sounding the death-toll of the art world. Twenty different artists behind a camera will make as varied images of the same unchanged subject as twenty different artists behind a canvas. " 'No Madam—photography can't flatter!' " was the assurance of Alfred Chalon to Queen Victoria on the uncertain demise of miniature portraiture (Leggat, Artists and Photography). Yet, Chalon's declaration is obviously false—photography can create emotion equal to that of any painting by giving us the certain knowledge that somehow, marvelously, it has transcended even reality.

Part II:

"Parade—Hoboken, New Jersey." Robert Frank. Figure 3.

My family has told me about my grandmother,
her birthdate, favorite foods, and middle name,
facts and percentages, how she was
the paternal matriarch in a dysfunctional house,
keeping bottles as ammunition and playing cards
for late nights.
Taught without a textbook, her fingers on the piano
and where I got all that ostensible talent,
"man I should have heard her play, it was just like me"
if she hadn't died before, leaving cassette tapes
of the sisters in harmony,

my grandmother knowing the tune
before anyone else could hum it.
But now when I think of her it's not the particulars,
or the family history pumped in by relation,
but images and snow: cracked Midwestern sidewalks,
fear and American breathing machines,
old baseballs and vomiting oranges on the freeway,
the perpetual state of being seven and stuck.
And the cover between us, maybe she wanted it there,
keeping her faceless, formless, slathered by shadow,
the street passer-by I should turn and follow.
Even with the overlap of only seven years of existence,
we're nothing but strangers, though continuously connected
in name, in descent, in the structure of our fingers,
but I still find the obligation
of being in love with her easy.

The hatred many felt when Robert Frank presented his impression of life in America during 1955 begins to become clearer when viewing Frank's beginning frame from his book, *The Americans*: "Parade—Hoboken, New Jersey." For a country with its chest puffed out, rolling on the dignity gained during the 40s from constant rationing, volunteering, and uniting in war, a detached, clearly uttered reminder of the continuing fissures within American society from no less than a foreigner—it was too much to take. After all, this was the time of car fins, television, and perfect housewives. Poverty, loneliness, despair, hunger, cold, isolation, separation: it was happening to the Germans, not the mighty Americans, and so be it...they deserved it.

However, within Frank's photograph, we see the breakdown of this illusion; a decade of sockhops and other stereotypical images fit for modern musicals—it matures and becomes a time when news *did* happen, when people *did* die, and not just of old age. Loneliness cracks the heart in this image—old people are not cared for, families do not visit each other, neighbors pass each other on the stairs without saying hello. The

mechanization of modern life, the separation and dissolution into partitions of a society, each citizen's complete dedication to self: Robert Frank's photographic seizure of a flag waving in the wind screams it all out.

We also see the hidden moments of American society here, the dirty corners no one wants to sweep out. The impression that the two women who occupy the photograph lead heavy lives is tangible; today is just another day, although a holiday to their country. Duties must be performed, problems must be solved, money must be found, people must be ignored. The appearance of an overcoat of the woman to the right suggests that, unlike her neighbor, the heat has been turned off, leaving the household with another problem, another obstacle. The flag briskly billowing and enveloping her head does not stand for the politician's empty dream, America, but for the motorized, robotic, unwitting government of the United States.

The women are thus tied together, both Americans, both struggling with the same system, the same set of rules and regulations, both turning their attention habitually to a parade that occurs every year, if only for a bit of reprieve from the day. Their flag is only a symbol, the excuse we use for dedicating a day off to something else. Or, it is the promise that a country declares is different than any other—it even writes it into its Constitution—but still, like all others, cannot deliver it.

In this photograph, Frank announces the essence of how things can be strapped together without ever really having a reason: how the grand scheme is sometimes never truly supported by its parts.

"Tar and Sandstone." Minor White. Figure 4.

he puts his hand on my arm, asking and asking again,
medical lights make spots in his eyes,
turning him Martian underneath the blue cap, beard sticking out on the left,
just like my father's. to tell the rip and tear, rip and tear of last night and two years ago,
to tell it
is to finish with lights and blue, to finish with nip and tuck of long-lost-term memory.
promises, poking, easy-peasy, it's all in the gouging, the wound laying gaped under your
leopard-print eyes.
scar-banks and color changes, already there and beginning again,
document, document, and put it in the album,
baby prints of what really goes on
in this southern town.
long trail of red blood cells, becoming ribbon tail to trousers,
i'm folded and flapped, thinking i might
just turn to stone

"Tar and Sandstone" is unmistakably expressionistic and unquestionably Minor White's; the image is simple, formed by layers upon layers of blacks and grays, creating, in the end, a congealed whole. However, the content of the image still remains, in its essence, a mystery, revealed only by its pragmatic title. Even after the realization and recognition of the material photographed and its inanimate nature, the viewer still leans forward and examines with nose against the glass, still plagued by the "but what is it?" factor. Most of White's photographs have this capability; indeed, it is almost obvious that he sought out this aspect in his work.

White's images strive for the final, assured snatching-up of Alfred Steiglitz's idea of "the equivalent" in photography—the ambivalent, ambiguous feeling, unnamable and named by every viewer, radiating from a certain image, usually abstract (White, 41). It is the silent hand that reaches out and wrenches its audience in two, a look of revelation on

their faces, if only for a split second. The feeling is intuitive, fleeting, personalized, and absolutely accurate.

Drawing from personal intuition, I believe this idea of equivalence exists in "Tar and Sandstone." Perhaps on one level it is a mere record and description of an oddly shaped rock stained by human contact, but the photograph represents and reveals much more. Its image screams out violence, the memory of a brutal attack set on mute. The gray masses of solidified earth transform, become flesh—the folds and flaps of a human body, hiding complex systems, sustaining innumerable functions. However, this body is torn, ripped, gouged, split; the photograph reveals scars so deep that the material bubbles around them, wrinkled and deformed, but back to functioning level. Helplessly unaware, tar still dries on the victim's surface next to the wound, trickling down like blood.

The sandstone in the image also has an unmistakable feminine cast to it, an impression of vulnerability and guiltlessness that recalls a young girl rather than an ideal of masculine form. Therefore, there is a horrifying aspect of this specific equivalent, the fact that makes such a beautiful depiction of grays layered among blacks exude a slightly sick sensation. Could such an event have occurred in a young girl's life, leaving ferocious scars on the body and more abysmal ones in the mind? The photograph becomes a police report, a stark, unbiased record of the damage of one human upon the other. Tar and sandstone become rape and abuse, tapping into the oldest assemblage of emotions and chronicled in black and white.

Selection from *"The Card Players."* Ruth M. Gilbert. Figure 5.

day after day after day
old men discussing their wives and children, fruit crops, local politics
blood stirring still, just barely,
remnants of men who have chapters
in high school textbooks
how they saw their hands clutching the world, interlaced fingers
with reason and merit
as natural and overlooked as the blue of their veins...
eternal, roosted, the thoughts moving viscously,
swirling into final action—the lifting of a finger
and then down again, letting the dust fall back asleep
on the back of their palms,
as weary and worn-out from the centuries
as ancient Italian workers spending their retirement days
becoming the next layer of Sorrento's architecture.

Along with the other two images that consist of "The Card Players," the photograph chosen first expresses absolute beauty. The tonality ranges from the deepest of blacks to sheer white, creating a description of objects and people that is tremendously lovely, bathing them in a richness unseen in color. Here, this small corner of a porch of what "may have been a church" (Marx, 50) is photographed like a landscape, the people being the swells and undulations punctuating the panorama of quiet, rural Italian society, supported by the obligatory Renaissance-style painted scene. Form is also essential to the success of this image; the placement of the players offset by the columns behind them creates a formally agreeable composition, worthy of a painting deliberately arranged by an artist.

Moreover, though, it is the craggy old face of a pensive Italian man that arrests all action. The folds of his skin and the line of his mouth impart a feeling, the concrete

knowledge that of all the people in all the picturesque, rural, too-beautiful-to-be-true Italian villages in this world, this man is the most important of them all, the most symbolic of Italy's pervasively antique character. One can see how effortless it would be to compare this man with stone; the features of his face could be found in rock anywhere, if sought out resolutely. In this one image, the entire romantic idea of Europe and history pricking the brain of every American collides with reality. The impressive nature of Europe is its permanence, rooted in stubborn existence through war, famine, and hatred, changing lines and borders always, but tradition—seemingly never. Yes, the heaviness in Gilbert's piece plays upon our sense of the romantic, but the scene is quietly beautiful, suggesting eternity, and, most importantly, undisturbed by white sneakers, fanny packs, snapping point-and-shoot cameras, and the sugarcoated exclamations of overexcited Americans.

Untitled. Larry Clark. Figure 6.

Last day he saw Ricky, he was thinking of things,
told me of two days that happened last month,
why Rick's a strange fellow,
gonna lead a life stranger still:

At first it's just nothing but childhood fun, a day too hot to sit and sweat, so you take out your rifle and decide to go hunting. Ricky talks the whole way up to Codger's Wood about how he's gonna get a hundred squirrels, just watch and see how he skins them, gonna feed it to his baby sister and tell her it's just steak or something, and when he laughs like that, you can see every rib, the spine of his back reptilian from bending over. So we're shooting and laughing, we talk about what school will be like next year, Rick's new stepfather, maybe he'll last a year this time, and get drunk like the last one, let us steal his beer when he's asleep. Oh hell, Ricky says, and runs to the blond pile over to the left. Truman's dog, and he's shot it down while we've been talking, foolishly, wasting time. Silence for three minutes, we both know how much that old man loves that mutt, old as him, blinder. Rick finally opens his mouth, curses that dog, wasted his shot,

and now he's gotta deal with Truman, gotta listen to the blubbering. Stupid dog. I say it, too. Ricky kicks it, kicks again, the dog bloody in the face, and tugs me home, swearing me to secrecy, cursing the whole way.

Next day, going to the store for my mother, I see Rick across the street with old Truman, out in front of the old man's house, right in front of the porch. Shovels and flowers, Ricky's wearing that shirt he wears to church and making a little pile of dirt by his right foot, the dead dog lying on the other side. Passing in slow motion, Rick turns and sees me, too, wiping the snot and the tears from his face with his arm.

There are many aspects of Larry Clark's photograph that make it absolutely shocking; the effect of the picture is also, I suspect, exactly what Clark was seeking when trying to find an image for an AIDS benefit show (Marx, 94). Everything about the photograph is essential to its purpose: the posters in the background dedicated to heavy-metal, the way the entire wall is plastered in them, without an inch of space in between. One can imagine that the chair has been pulled randomly from the boy's mother's living room, never to be sat upon again if the boy achieves his goal. The insistence on near-nakedness somehow gives a precise, perfect description of the situation as well; the absence of his clothing is probably just a state of undress the boy felt somehow necessary without truly knowing why. But his self-consciousness and expectation of who will find him will not allow him to undress completely, leaving him only in his underwear. Finally, the horribly asinine brand on the underwear, "Le Brief," clinches the picture; this is clothing bought at a K-mart, discounted for a week to get it off the shelves, and a good deal for a lower-income family. The boy is probably poor, a troubled student, perhaps living in a crumbling home or apartment with a non-nuclear family, dedicated to venting his anger through his fierce, furious music.

Of course, then, there is the action that the photograph describes. The tension of the gun in the mouth, the knowledge that this is the just-before moment, and the wondering of who is taking the picture...is this a self-portrait? Is the camera on a timer, sitting in front of him, ticking off the seconds, or could another person possibly be in the room at such a personal moment?

Also haunting is the jumble of emotions in the boys eyes, directed perhaps on the ceiling on the other side of his room. The defiance is obvious; the days when this boy insulted his teachers, fought with his classmates, yelled at his mother, pretended he had no care for anything—it is all reflected in the determined upward stare of his eyes. However, there is also a softness in the image as well, a definite faltering in his body, a weak rigidity in his arms and shoulders, perhaps, that discloses his fear and apprehension. The image is a study in contradictions and exposures; it is the testament of exasperated revolt piled up against the moving attempt at recording oneself as an equal, baring a soul just as capable of being pierced through and wrung out as anyone else's.

"Cookie at Tin Pan Alley, NYC 1983." Nan Goldin. Figure 7.

Friday morning, 7:30 AM. 34 degrees. Sunny.
We've decided to meet at the bakery, but I've shown up late, of course,
300 miles to Atlanta and I'm already regretting it,
burning my tongue with the coffee in defiance.
(maybe I can't talk that way).
Slipping and unfolding into her car, sliding the key to its ignition,
Madonna circa '86 blasts—and she's off and grinning, sheepish:
"I had to do something to wake myself up,
you know,
everyone needs a little Madonna in the morning."
Glancing over with a bit lip, seeing my forehead
has buckled into itself,

we both know it's another gone-wrong.
Statements I can judge her with 20 years from now,
the way her skirt grasps her thighs, shines for the boys,
but fearing sex and how it's all too easy,
at one o'clock, at four o'clock, at seven-thirty in the morning.
Silent in the passenger seat
and rolling the grudge over my teeth with the coffee,
maybe today I'll swallow it down, finally, entirely,
shamed at the fascination flooding in freely,
smoothing the burn and draining out
what's had me leaning all of my days.
It's just the done-with is too obvious, seeping from her eyes.

When talking about her subject in this photograph, one from a series of "Cookie" pictures, Nan Goldin speaks as candidly as her work about her range of feelings for a woman so obviously complicated, so unmistakably sexual, and so heartbreakingly sad. In Marx's *Right Brain/Left Brain Photography*, Goldin includes commentary with the photograph, describing and explaining her relationship with this "cross between a Tobacco Road and a Hollywood B-girl, the most fabulous woman I'd ever seen" (Marx, 90). It reveals the expected story: the glimpse of Cookie across the yard sale, the consequent mesmerized friendship, the introduction of a photographer/subject relationship, the road trips, the talks, the always-there next-door-forever presence.

And then there is the real part of it, the part that grounds the tale in concrete space and time—Cookie gets sick, the complications from HIV turned AIDS depriving her even of her ability to speak. Photographs evolve from mere experiments in pinning down seduction to poignant, piercing documentation of slow wilting; similarly, the glamour queen acquires new symbolic identities.

The most important element of this image, however, is not the story; it is the fact that the story is revealed to the viewer, every last piece of it, in the first ten seconds of

laying the eyes across the surface of the photograph. Cookie's entire life is recounted, explained, and foretold in one reflected moment. The weight emanating from her eyes is almost palpable, suggesting that in ten minutes it will crush her drink glass; it, a tiny, trustworthy bar companion, sits as meditatively in front of her body as her arms. Her skin gleams chalkily, ghostly white in the swirls of reds and browns around her and revealing her age, making her another surreal statuette ready for the wall. In a slight hunch of the shoulders and the pressing of one jaw upon another, Goldin has framed an instant that strips to the bone and reveals a chronology too painful to expect.

"Sunlight on Drying Mud." Minor White. Figure 8.

i remember you by pears and sun-shafts,
like ancient ribbon browned on the edges
weaving stories in cloth
of short men with long glories,
formidable and sitting without breathing
for hundreds of years
lacking yarn noses and mouths,
rooted forever with mohair knives
through each other's hemorrhage-free hearts.

with your arms threaded like string through me
i've watched without falling and now take a dive
through streaks of nova lights, pillows of haze,
down into earthly mortar and tar that once
on a Sunday
slipped off my hand like rain off a tarp,
slinking down onto my shoes
and washing away with the sea.

and now, as soft as light holy,
i roll and und-u-late,
growing kind eyes and fevers among the moss and stone,
tender for the giving of my wings
to maggie mae, angelic.

Again, in this photograph, Minor White attempts to seek out the equivalent, creating an image that bubbles and crests like water, but flows thickly, like adhesive. The question always springs—"what is it?" Yet, before one learns that it is, as the once-again straightforward title dictates, sunlight reflected brightly on drying earth, the image conjures intense emotion, the kind that one feels when viewing something beautifully constructed, a work of art. The surface heaves and surges, suggesting the movement of some lumbering, sluggish animal; light diffuses across the skin of the mud, highlighting its brilliance, just enough.

For me, however, it is the feeling that I equate with the image that is most important. The photograph contains a primordial sight—the capturing of lava, of blood, or of swamp water and earth. They are elements directly connected with the beginnings of life, whether tearing down the old for the new or simply building the existing into a new form. The image is essentially anthropological, the quintessential picture of what came first, containing all of the antiquity and mystery trapped within it. It recalls times when medicine, technology and science did not exist, when events occurred because they had been observed and had been feared, the most inexplicable enigmas in a confusing world. These mysteries still exist, of course; they are the questions we seek out but are still unanswerable by science or philosophy. The nature of life, the purpose of existence—it is implicit within White's photograph, with the answers teasing us just below his pictured primordial ooze, begging us to pop the surface and escape below.

"Shooting the Apple." Dr. Harold Edgerton. Figure 9.

picture-perfect postcards on the beach
youngish women with foreign tongues
selling the beauty to the tourists
to send it back home, wishing they stay right where they are,
keep all the sunshine for yourself.
laminated cardboard, three lines on the back
prairies, seashores, mountains, rivers
sold vertically and five for a dollar,
i turn the rack, squeaking of the wires
and discover the art museums right there
on the street.
miniature Picassos, DaVincis,
the David stretched out four-by-six,
Klimts and kisses, old Einsteadt pictures,
fashion photography and Byzantine tile.
turning the rack once more, hear it groan,
and glimpse a mushroom cloud in the corner of your eye,
lit up and beautiful, stuck in the middle
of the Renaissance.

Chemical engineer Dr. Harold E. Edgerton subtitled this piece "How to Make Applesauce at MIT," indicating his view of the non-gravity of his photography—it reveals the playful way he viewed his picture making. On a certain level, yes, this is the exquisite result of an incredible invention, the Edgerton flash; the ability to stop action as extraordinarily fast as a bullet through an apple is an awe-inspiring feat over science. An achievement of research, knowledge, technology, and discipline—just another day in the scholarly halls of MIT—is held up affectionately to his students, showing the renewed superiority of science, even upstaging art when it needs to. Scientists cried out, falling over themselves at the information revealed, the discoveries made in such a sight: "what

is so surprising is that the entry of the supersonic bullet is as visually explosive as the exit" (Jussim, 126).

This is not what is so surprising.

The Edgerton image is a striking example of the emotions conveyed in a juxtaposition of contradictions. Violence overwhelms the piece; that is the picture's purpose, its duty, the nature of its existence. At cold, hard, scientific core, the image is a description of the action a bullet takes when piercing and destroying something. It explodes on entry, it explodes on exit, it rips and shreds, shatters and disintegrates. However, the pervasive serenity and beauty flowing through the piece is undeniable. Perfect ninety-degree angles, apple fragments like ocean water, meticulously peeled-back skin, the shadow lurking to the left, the solemn and tranquil bullet sitting silently in mid-air, the resonance of primary colors—the image challenges and surpasses the most revered masterpieces of painted still life, because it *is* still life. The documentary aspect of the photograph is its strength, showing not only the possibility of science's triumph over art, but the superiority of what we do not see over what sits before us as well.

"*The Wet Bed.*" Sally Mann. Figure 10.

how i've rubbed against your grain,
dying lady,
how i've seeped into the very tissue of you
until the same sat beneath my skin
and i couldn't help but let it sit
and multiply and grow old and hard
and oh god how i was stone-blind and happy.

seeing your limbs so weak now,
so scant and brittle, i

can only find stilts for my own
and hope they steady yours
by virtue of association;
the veins rustling through leaf-thin tunnels,
and one day, i realize,
mine are making
the same sound.

so, sweet face, cold like marble,
your round head is trying hard to be lighter than it is
but i lay you down among the dogwoods and
tiptoe away, hoping like granite you don't
follow me back.

The way in which a memory haunts you in the middle of the night, still glimmering in your head after waking restlessly, still hazy, eerie, seemingly communicative and refusing to speak at the same time—Sally Mann's photograph speaks to this sensation. The image appears like a phantom, floating in shadow and highlighted by that kind of natural light that occasionally seeps into one's field of vision and seems too perfect to capture. The description of cloth, skin and hair is as elegant as if carved from marble; the movement of the small body against the larger mattress is serene and ethereal. Upon first inspection, the photograph has an almost religiously angelic quality to it, completely calming and sedate, speaking to ideals of purity and grace. The image is eminently beautiful—however, there is a profoundly disturbing feel within it, the reason unknown until the photograph is examined closely.

The meaning of the photograph pivots off into a different direction upon noticing the large pool of dried urine stretching across the mattress, a common occurrence, a part of childhood, but here, almost shocking in being described so beautifully. The angelic movement of the child becomes uncomfortable squirming, and it begins to generate a

feeling of embarrassment for the viewer and the subject at the same time, recalling personal, physically trivial but emotionally traumatic childhood events in the back of each viewer's mind. The knowledge that the photographer actively chose this image from her subject is somewhat disturbing as well; discovering that the photographer is the child's mother furthers the agitation and uneasiness. It is the truth that flusters us, the recognition that every mother and child experiences the wetting-the-bed-days and even worse, but that it still remains allotted to the private zones of society. The objectivity of common content matched with such a lovely depiction of detail leaves us unsettled but vowing to seek out the beauty in all things, in secret or in plain view.

"Self-Portrait, 1980." Robert Mapplethorpe. Figure 11.

late june, waiting on a train, leaving from the first time i actually got away...rennes, france about to slip by modernized train windows, 275 km per hour...my town, my town, the place where i grew a spine and walked around on two strong feet. cobblestones bouncing my too-heavy suitcase, swirling each moment around my teeth and understanding why new parents have camcorders, every instant a piece of rock i should bring with me in my backpack, wanting to put it all down, engrave it into my brain tissue to take it out later, relive it again.

the last train before me, perched at its station, my mother and father only double-digit hours away, and i board, am boarding, am pulling the last five months up the stairs. suddenly, people part, and the man standing at the bottom, bréton features and stubble on his chin, wearing a torn dress like it's sunday best, femininely smoking some french cigarette. without even looking, he's self-conscious and knowing, slurping up the attention, smiling and glittering, stars in the eyes, pulled like taffy in a mix of bliss and self-horror, gratefully hanging on the man who's assuredly grinning, nails dug into the newness of it. my last sight in rennes. last fleeting moment. and the strangest story, the one with the most blood and tissue.

I first saw Mapplethorpe's self-portrait in an issue of *Time*, one published during my sophomore or junior year in high school. Without knowing why, I cut it out carefully, created a white border with the magazine paper, and glued it in the middle of my art journal for painting class. I have been wondering ever since what possessed me to do it.

In the following years, my eyes enlarged slightly when I read his name, I learned more and more about him, added it mentally to the glued reproduction of his self-portrait...a crazy man, hated by politicians and their constituents, admired by everyone else, finally dying a 1980s death of AIDS, but most importantly, always essentially, he tore open envelopes before he pushed them. But all of that did not exist in that picture in my journal, and never will, really.

What I saw in that photograph is perhaps why I seek to find the transcendence of subject in every other striking image before me. It is the perfection of conveying an exact emotion without truly meaning to, the purity of feeling drawn line after line by reality. The image is documentary, frozen because of the importance of it in the subject's life—the act of wearing make-up: reasonable and nutritious in private studios, sinful and unforgivable when it steps out on the sidewalk. What Mapplethorpe *should* feel is different than what his camera tells us; exposed, bare-chested, his self-exhibition should be an outlet, but the insecurity in his eyes disputes the freedom of it. Barely smiling, the subject's expression seems to waver back and forth between shame and bashfulness, revealing that he himself might consider his present state as much a flaw in human form as the chip in the middle of his left shoulder.

All of this is captured with machine and light, stealing a moment from reality, so perfect in its authenticity.

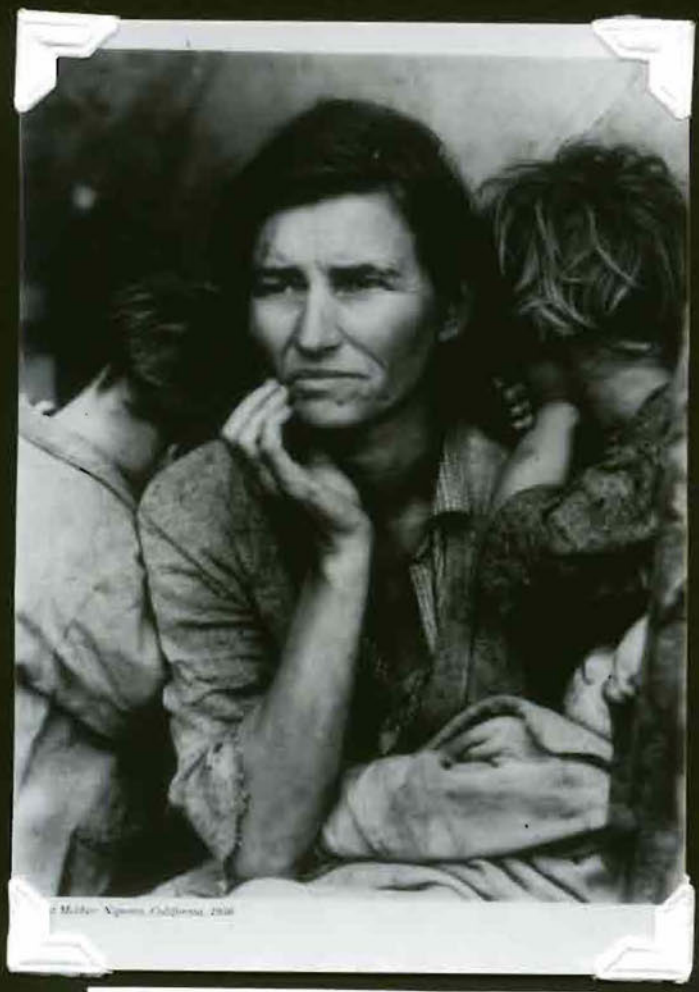

Figure 1. *"Migrant Mother."* Dorothea Lange.

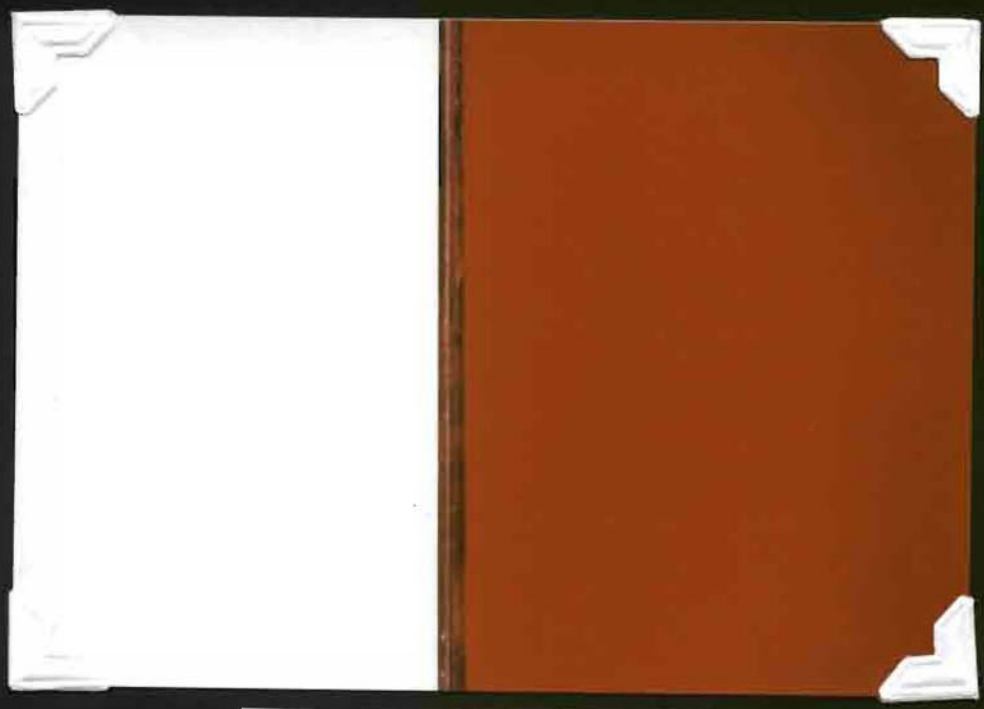

Figure 2. *"Milk + Blood."* Andres Serrano.

Figure 3. *"Parade—Hoboken, New Jersey."* Robert Frank.

Figure 4. *"Tar and Sandstone."* Minor White.

Figure 5. Selection from *"The Card Players."* Ruth M. Gilbert.

Figure 6. Untitled. Larry Clark.

Figure 7. *"Cookie at Tin Pan Alley, NYC 1983."* Nan Goldin.

Figure 8. *"Sunlight on Drying Mud."* Minor White.

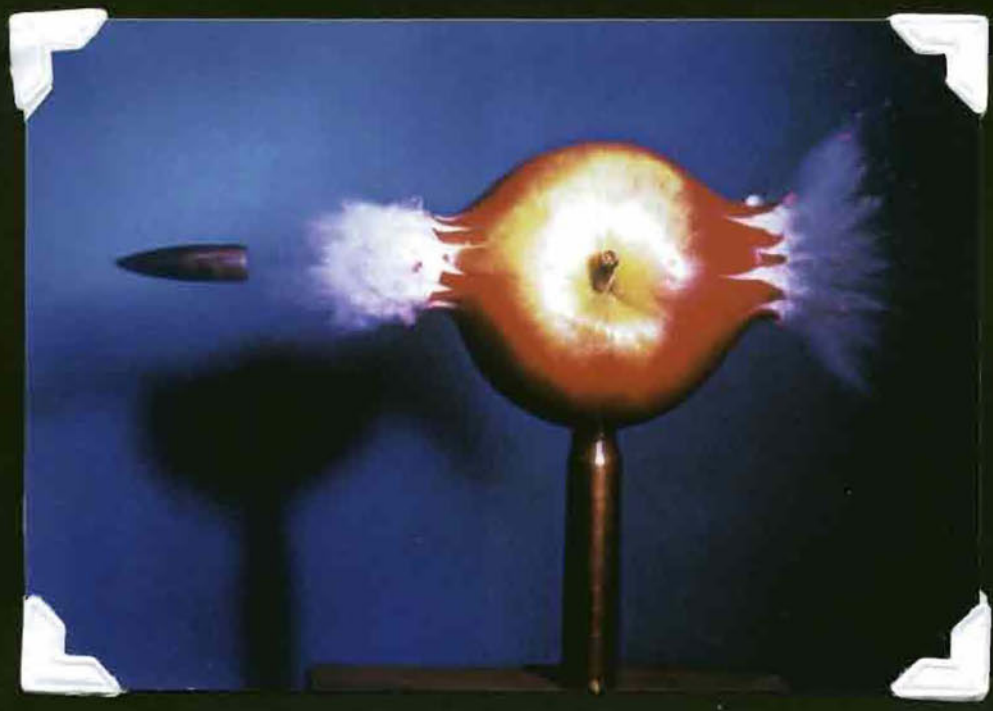

Figure 9. *"Shooting the Apple."* Dr. Harold Edgerton.

Figure 10. *"The Wet Bed."* Sally Mann.

Figure 11. *"Self-Portrait, 1980."* Robert Mapplethorpe.

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