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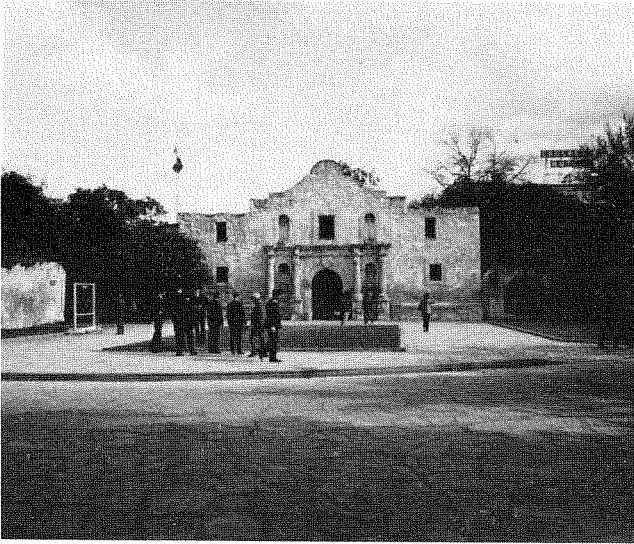
A photograph is a frame of mind. The space contained within its boundaries harbors a place we choose to imagine in, to explore with the mind's eye as if it were the body. The vertical and horizontal edges are like a real architectural structure, a seemingly small opening through which we view objects and spaces chosen to be juxtaposed within another space. Looking at a photograph, we seem to enter the space as we would a room. The effect is rather like looking into the rooms of a dollhouse from the open side—looking at a world much smaller than our physical selves. Through a window we see a space that we imagine ourselves to be placed in and stimulated, even protected, by.

The frame of the still photograph makes it a powerful architectural structure. The boundaries, like the walls and ceiling of a room, indicate certain limits, and reveal decisions about what is contained and about what is left outside. The relationships that are constructed, that are designed, indicate what we choose to include, what we consider important. “Outside the walls” is an appropriate description of the area and objects not chosen for inclusion. In Rome the locational relationship was so critical that the term “fuori le mure” was used with the name of a building to indicate its placement outside the walls beyond the inner city. “Inside the walls” aptly describes the space given power by the frame of the photograph. The photographer creates a space we wish to enter, to investigate. Photographs are like rooms.



I Uxmal, Yucatan
The Nunnery

All photographs are by Alice Wingwall unless otherwise credited.



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- 2 **The Alamo**, San Antonio, TX
- 3 **San Francisco de la Espada**,
near San Antonio, TX (anonymous)
- 4 **Sonentheil House**,
Galveston, TX
Boy photographing his parents.
- 5 **Mission San Antonio of Padua**,
near Jolon, CA
- 6 **Mission San Juan Batista**,
CA
- 7 **San Trovaso**,
Venice, Italy (family photograph)
- 8 **San Trovaso**,
Venice, Italy

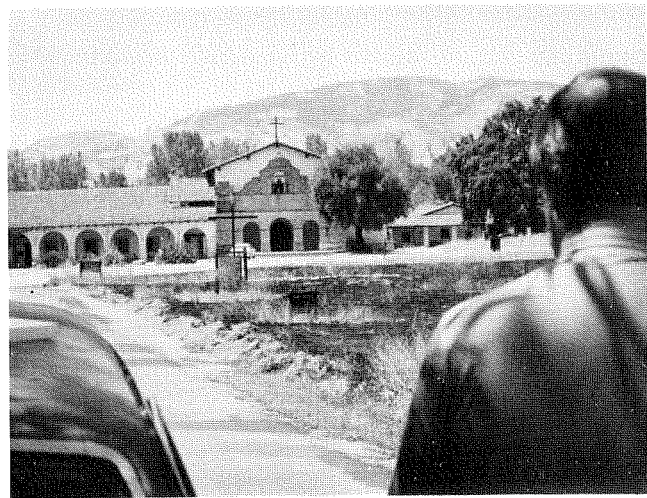
Architectural elements are pervasive in certain kinds of snapshot photography. Snapshots are now ubiquitous, and in snapshots, many choices of place are made. Hordes of tourists congregate in front of the Alamo in Texas and in front of the Pantheon in Rome. After viewing the building for a time—long or short—groups or individuals position themselves in front of the columns in large groups, or shelter between columns in individual poses. Near other missions in Texas, in front of presidential memorials in Washington, DC, in the great Bernini colonnades and the square of St. Peter's in Rome, or next to the fragments of the Roman Forum, similar scenes are enacted nervously or buoyantly. One group replaces another, Polaroid™ cameras stick out their tongues of images, Instamatics are advanced as smiles are cajoled. The Polaroid™ owners can decide then if they have been appropriately placed and recorded; the Instamatic carriers must wonder until they return home if they are correctly positioned in front of the monuments they have collectively visited. Another very large number of snapshots have entered the

world, have toured the world. Even a segment of a photograph sold at the Texas missions notes the presence of the visitor.

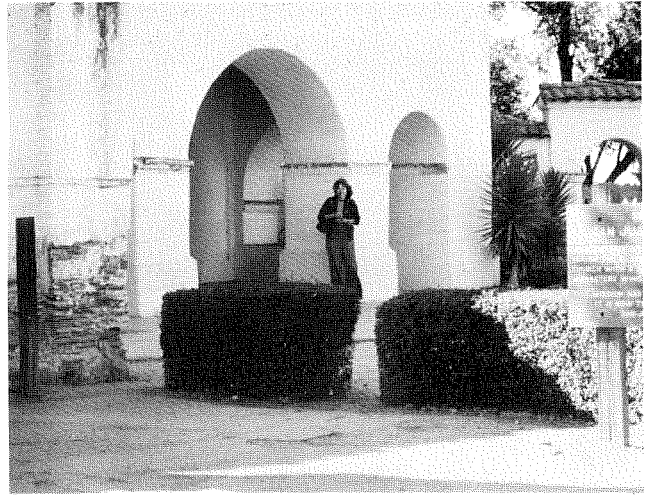
Susan Sontag in *On Photography* describes these snapshots as consumerism, as a taking of pieces away. Is this so? What is taken, in addition to the photograph itself? People deliberately travel to famous buildings and monuments. They not only view the monuments, but also fabricate their own postcards; that is, they deliberately photograph themselves near the monuments, showing their presence in near and far places, at local and international buildings. In Galveston, TX, a young man photographs his parents in front of the city's most beautiful houses. In California, a man photographing Spanish missions also records the presence of his wife in front of one. In front of a lesser-known church in Venice, Italy, a man assumes a possessive stance to be photographed by a friend. Another family is recorded viewing the same church. Three generations of a family have been placed at different times in a photographic room with the same sculpture on the corner of St. Mark's, Venice.



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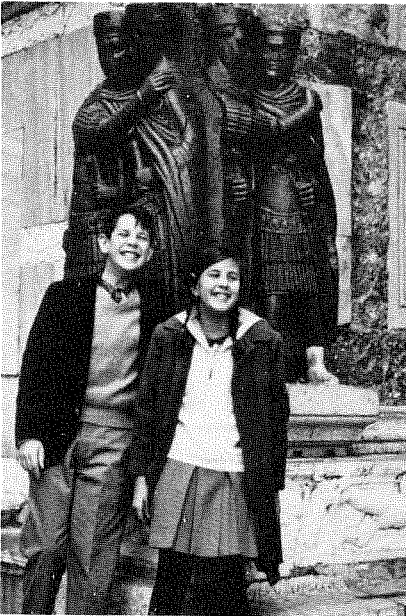
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9, 10, 11 Three generations in St. Mark's,
Venice, Italy
(Photographs courtesy of Lucian and Jane
Marquis)

12 Einstein House,
from Nova documentary

13 Temple of Castor and Pollux,
Roman Forum,
Rome, Italy

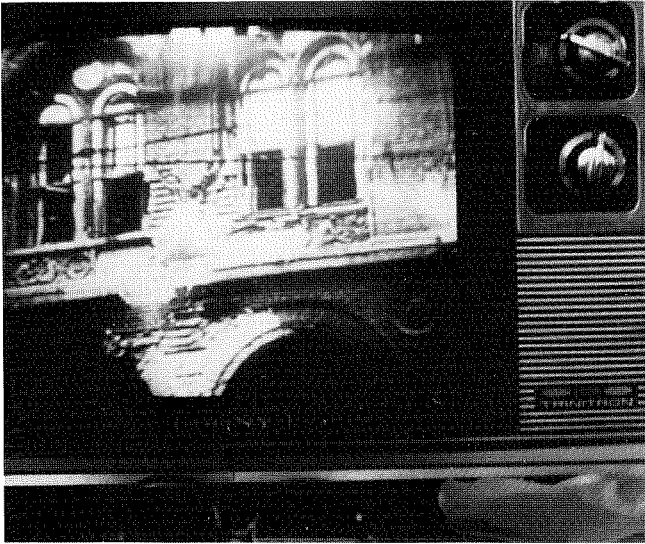
The first sits demurely by the sculpture's side, the second spoofs the gestures of the sculpture, and the third (and youngest pair) smiles obligingly. All these records are collected for home review.

Susan Sontag views such snapshots, such photographs, as both objects and duplicates of other objects, and she disapproves of them as image systems whose knowledge she "sees" as being neither ethical nor political. She understands well enough the appeal of photographs to interpretation and to fantasy, and she agrees that they can be a defense against anxiety (loss of place, in my view), can be a piece of space, and can be mysterious. However, her biases do not seem to allow her to appreciate the photograph's power as a projective, poetic, or imagining medium. Jerzy Koszinski connects photographs to spatial anxiety. A main protagonist of his novel, *Pinball*, is an aging composer. As he speeds down the freeway he muses that the more people lose a sense of control over space and place, the more they turn to images of places, to photographs.

Tourist photography includes an act of taking possession, to be sure—

rather than a taking away, or a subtracting from, there is a taking with, a joining to. The fabrication of "postcards" at important monuments lets the former visitor look again, lets the visitor reenter the architectural space, by thinking *toward* it to construct a place memory. This taking and reviewing of photographs occurs without physical destruction of the buildings. Dismantling monuments to obtain pieces to take home was a common practice in the past. We have only to see the Elgin marbles in the British Museum to realize how widespread was the practice of grabbing off chunks of a structure; so often it was accomplished in the name of virtuous culture. Tourist snapshots are a way of monumentalizing the self and the building by an architectural projection, by a proximity to built places. A claim is made upon the building, so that a particular place is amplified both in private and in collective memory. The photograph, rather than being simply the duplicate of an object, is both an object itself (a paper with an image of a building and the person) and a recollection of a building visited.

It is important to notice that the



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information in these photographs is not just about architecture, but is also about the viewer at the building. Often, half of the building is not even in the photograph, and the still figure, captured in a setting, is equivalent to the setting as part of a place in a way that the active moving figure is not. “Presence-in-a-place” rather than the architecture itself is the subject of the photograph. The photograph enumerates the building-as-visited; the people shown in it become a part of the building, much as the columns, windows, or sculpture are. Because the people are visually equal to the other parts of the structure, their presence assumes the massiveness and the timelessness of the building. In the photograph, at least, the visitor may be a more weighty part of the monument than he was able to be during the actual visit—hence the importance of the tourist snapshot in the life of the traveler. The building might have overwhelmed the visitor when he visited it, but in the photograph he is able to balance himself and the building.

The still photograph is more important as a frame to look into than a film is, particularly in

television screening. At first, the edge of the television screen is visible and encompassing, but soon, because of our attention to constantly changing narrative images, the frame disappears. We pass through a sort of looking glass (Lewis Carroll *was* a visionary). The movement of the narrative’s images not only makes us feel that we have crossed some threshold or boundary, but also seems to construct a space of continuous layers. The suggested space is just as continually dispersed by the narrative movement, and there is little chance to position oneself, to find a place. The same thing tends to happen when we look at journalistic photographs. We often pass through or ignore the frame. This is because such photographs often show movement and intend to narrate an event. We are told that movement occurs and will continue to occur. It is movement, not place, that is described.

Paying attention to the frame and to the space it encapsulates is a type of contemplation that gives photographs a semblance of architectural shelter. Photographing oneself against a building is an act of taking place, an act of using the



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printed image to replace the self in a beloved space. Roland Barthes, in *Camera Lucida*, speaks of certain photographs of houses as “*there that I should like to live.*”¹ These projections through photographs are a subconscious yet restless searching, perhaps not for real physical shelter, but for the memory of all shelter, all houses, all that community of rooms and walls which makes our image of dwelling.

In addition to deliberate design and to an interpretive sense of the photograph as a room or as an architectural shelter, conventional devices establish or emphasize the three-dimensional quality of the photograph. One has to do with the contrast range of black and white photography. Depending upon the composition, the deepest blacks make deep tunnel spaces while total whites flatten or eradicate space. The Roman columns are boxed by their frames, but the white flattens behind them so that there is no sense of spatial depth and the sculptural columns are emphasized. With a wide range of contrast, there is a strong diminution of perspective. Smaller areas appear in the far distance—the back of the room. Some color relationships do



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not allow this sense of “reading to the back of the room.” If the colors are closely relational and the forms are tightly locked by the close colors, the color and design are isotropic. There is no great range of contrast and little spatial depth—the patterns flatten to the surface of the photograph. The effect is similar to that of a photograph with an all-white background. The isotropic color phenomenon enhances the flatness and the insubstantial quality of the paper that holds the photograph.

The seeming uselessness of these collected papers that have little physical or political substance bothers Susan Sontag. Since we cannot get a sense of “fine-art” description of color or an effective sense of spatial composition or building information, but only a sense of particular people at all the same monuments, most of these snapshots leave us without adequate information. Their room quality is most cogent to the individual or group who took the photographs. The taking home of the “taking place” image increases the practice of privatism that is already well-established by the hegemony of the television set

and the car. Instead of spending time with other people at a monument, sharing the space and view, the tourist takes his building recollections in private. So we have a simultaneity of individual thoughts on building and place, rather than a community of thought at the real building. But we should not forget that these images do maintain their presence in the memory. As rooms they guard the memories of places. In all likelihood, the image after a time actually becomes the building or monument, in the mind of its look-again observer.

The idea that the photographic image has become the monument, or at least replaces the experience of the real monument, is not new—it is just more difficult to accept when such a plethora of images exists. We have only to look at the power of the 19th-century photographs of Egypt by Francis Frith. For several generations before travel became widespread, his pyramids, sands, and views of colossal statues were what the world knew of Egypt. The photographic room/monument engaged the notion of monumentality without scale and with images of fixed, noble immobility of both

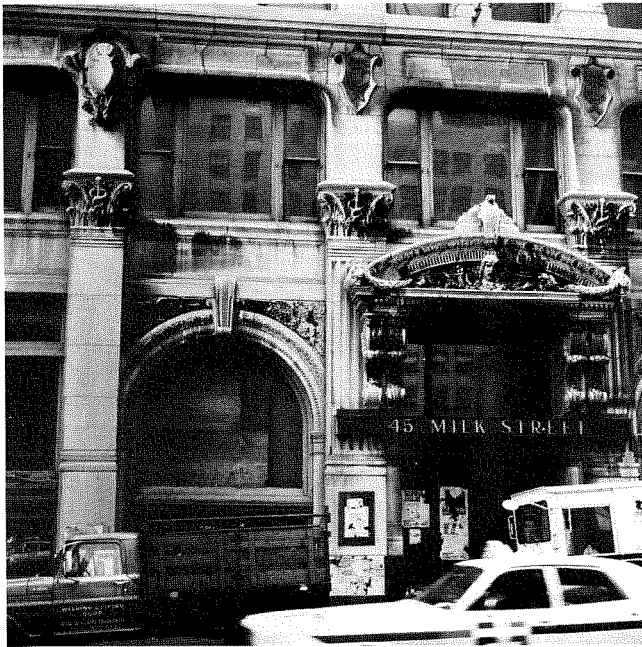
space and time, conflicted with the notion of infinite flux brought by the image of shifting and blowing sands—all still somehow contained in a photographic box.

Some 40 years later, the work of Eugène Atget more immediately conveyed the photograph as a room. All his architectural photographs have an intimate scale, even when they are vistas down streets. His many entries, shop windows, courtyards, reflections in windows, and street views seem like specific rooms. Each photograph make us feel that we are in a special place, that we have been able to decipher the secrets of the city itself because we have gained this intimate knowledge, have been given access to these rooms all across the great city. The architectural shelter of the photographs gives us a knowledge of the quartier, the *arrondissement*, makes us actual dwellers of the city. Then and now, these photographs are like a series of rooms juxtaposed, by which we know the house that is Paris.

Some of my photographs for *The City Observed: Boston* show intimate detail in a manner that has roots in Atget’s selective views.



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14 The Sphinx and Great Pyramid at Giza, Egypt

(Photograph by Francis Frith, 1857.

© the New York Public Library. Courtesy of the General Research Division, the New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.)

15 Maison du Prince de Conde, rue Monsieur-le-Prince, 4 (1899–1900)

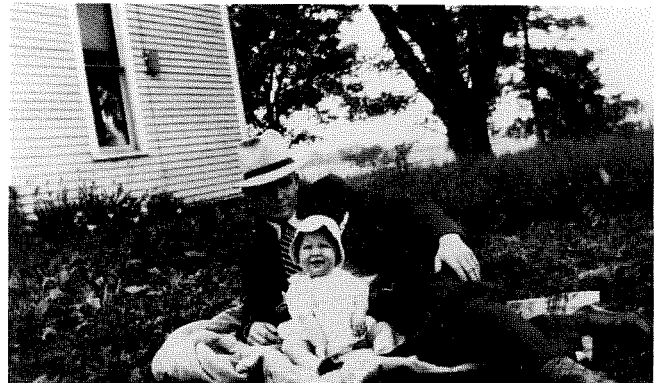
from *The Work of Atget, The Art of Old Paris*, by John Szarkowski and Maria Morris Hambourg (Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, New York)

16 45 Milk Street, Boston, MA

(Previously published in *The City Observed: Boston*, Random House, New York, 1982.)



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Similarly, the familiarity that is suggested by snapshots of tourists at monuments has roots in the idea of intimate places described in Atget's photographs. The tourist has made the monument his, has partaken of parts of the building, has made him/herself equal to some part of the monument. The visit and the revisit through the photograph are a way of gaining personal knowledge about something larger than the self in the way that Atget first demonstrated with his photographs of Paris.

There is another kind of snapshot photography that is not tourist photography, but consists of snapshots taken at home. Family-album snapshots generally include an important architectural element, such as the family house, although many times the inclusion of the house is subconscious. A farm family gathers against the back wall of its house or the mother of the family is placed on her porch, but she and the porch are not centered in the photograph. The subject of the latter photograph seems to be the relationship of the house to the barn or outbuilding. In both photographs the houses are slipped

in from the side; the family is centered in the first and appears in the second, but the complex gets as much attention as they do.

In a photograph from the 1930s of a baby on its porch, the baby is the subject of the snapshot, but the visible porch has become a powerful framing element. It is important that the house across the street has also been included. I suspect that the photographer was almost entirely unaware of the architectural elements. In a contemporary color snapshot more babies are chronicled at their vacation cottage. Both family and house are centered and have an equivalent balance and meaning. In this photograph it is unclear whether the house was intentionally recorded because it was only temporarily available, or whether it simply was the best place to photograph the family because of its centered steps. In yet another snapshot of father and daughter it seems that the photograph was intended to be out in the landscape. However, a house has appeared on the left side of the photograph. This house is more like a subtle intruder that has crept into the photograph

17 Baby on porch,
Indianapolis, IN
(family snapshot, circa 1937)

18 Father with baby,
Indiana
(family snapshot, circa 1936)



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as an unintended, but necessary, witness.

Since the photographers did not intend, I suspect, to have the houses “in the picture,” I call this kind of architectural photography *inadvertent*. The poser and the recorder draw on a building to set the context, to indicate the necessity to be “placed.” The architectural element makes an informed and occupiable space by its *mere appearance*. Whether or not some of the photographs mean to show or to stake a claim on the house, or whether the desire to indicate a house positioning is inarticulate, all the photographs reveal the seductive power of the image of the house. These photographs forcefully frame the house or dwelling as primal place. They do so by conjoining person and building in one photographic space. Remembering my Italian, I am moved by the poignant realization that, holding a room (camera) in my hand, I fabricate another (photographic) room.

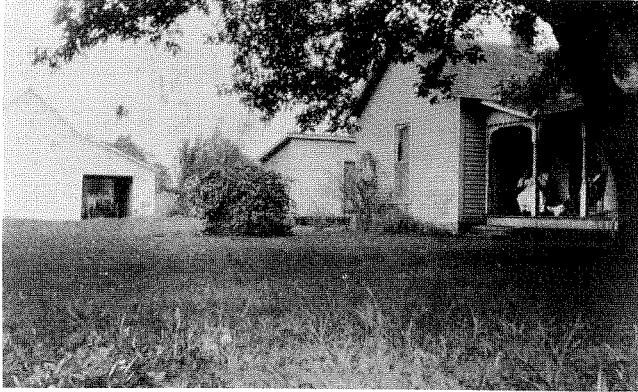
To add a thought of mine to one from Roland Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*, these tiny suggested rooms

cause repeated “tiny jubilations.”²

Susan Sontag worries that (possibly inferior) visual systems will replace verbal systems. Much evidence supports her fears. However, the two systems are often interrelated. (Here we are, writing about photographs.) The photograph is a dreaming medium—philosophically and poetically we learned extensions of the photograph from Roland Barthes. Inspired by his notion of the “punctum”—what seizes the heart—I have taken two photographs and dreamed a house from them.

19 Family photograph,

Chilmark, MA
(family snapshot, circa 1968)



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Dark Room, Dream Rooms

A new room came to Nancy Hall
sooner than she expected.
A different kind of room,
a diminutive room,
a room-in-a-box,
the Italians called a *camera oscura*
a dark room.

Mr. Eastman, among others,
made it popular,
that is, affordable,
even for small farmers.
We need light to use this chamber
it's our room for light writing,
our graphing of ourselves
to make our memories visible.
This room allowed a new kind of lining up
for marking yesterday as tomorrow.

She came onto her porch
from the left frame
of the photograph,
sat in one chair
and put her feet up on another chair.
Thin wooden piers extended a roof
over her simply pictured porch.
The light was not strong enough
to see into her house.
Her camera stayed outside
it did not show her kitchen or parlor.
These rooms remain hidden from me
in a framed silence.



21

Ancient Addresses

Short shadows advance from each eave of a barn.
Is it mid-morning or early afternoon,
late spring or early fall?
From the photograph we cannot tell
which is east, west or south.
We can only say "left" or "right"
not ten o'clock, or two.
Those times of day could make this light.
Light that strikes a suspended dance,
a staged symmetry, some hope
for orderly formation in life.

On this day, the actors are already,
or still, in their summer whites.
All of the whites differ, causing layers
to move as if wings
across our eyes.
There is no sound
except for the rustle of neighboring whites.
Off-whites.

Two women leave their doors.
Enter the protagonists.
(In white. Come center
in front of white barn.)
A mother's dress is almond white
the palest of beiges, barely seen.

The barn was painted white
a few years earlier.
Its weathered paint
gone very slightly yellow.

If the sun's rays were more angled they
might hide the difference between the barn
and the almond white dress before it.

The sun has bleached both whites
almost as white
as the edge of the photograph,
the border not touched with salts of silver,
not meant to play the game
of white on white.
An inadvertent player all the same
in the slow stately meeting
of mother and daughter
around a horse of a different color.

Have these two white figures just burst
from the doors of a giant clock,
coming forward on railed paths,
to tell us whether it's ten, or two?
Judging from the age of my aunt,
held still in her father's arms,
the women's white figures
will function for another dozen years.
Until, colliding, between ten and two,
at the center, in death,
they stopped the works.
They died in the same year,
the daughter first,
the mother following, dramatically soon.
Fiddling with the counterweights
of horses, men and children
did nothing to make them work again.

White shades, then, left and right,
foreshadowing their exeunt,
clearly, whitely
confusedly, in off-white signals
kept in place by a photographer,
who, watching their white connection,
strangely, did not group them
at the center of the barn,
but watched their separate movements
their separate stillnesses
as I watch them now.
As I see their play now,
I know, and ponder,
the strangeness of this framing
and distancing.
Instead of, "A little closer together, please,"
the photographer has let the barn
tell the figures where to stand.
As well as any clock,
the barn directs their work.
It dictates their paths
and gives them their distances
before the watchful eye of a lens,
against the black page of a photo album,
against the black edge of time,
near the middle of one day.

20, 21 Indiana Farm in photographs,
Hendricks County, IN
(family snapshot circa 1916)



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A photograph is indeed a special kind of room—a stage designed by its photographer—that demands our *active* participation at each view. In this stage the photographer sets a drama in motion (albeit in stillness). The viewer, in turn, must cue present acts and decisions and make imaginative insertions. Looking again at Atget's Paris entrances and the three farm photographs, we see many choices of entry, exit, passage, repose; an area of shadow in which we reflect upon what happened here yesterday and what alternative acts are possible tomorrow. In addition to the transmission of intimacy and detail in the houses they show, such photographs (by master or amateur) are unusually evocative. Their architectural existence compels us to partake in the design of photographic mysteries, to participate in replacing the drama everytime we look at them. That is, after all, the very grandness of their simple design.

NOTES

- 1 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 38.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

22 **Indiana Farm** in photograph, Hendricks County, IN (family snapshot circa 1916)