NEAL SNIDOW

Apartment Hall and Flag, Pitosporum and Dumpster, 2014
Silver gelatin prints, 16 x 24 in

wing-tipped shoes, toes slightly upturned, fitting snugly into the soffit below the storage. One floor below was the small music department where I'd often wait with Mother for his shift to end, mesmerized by the jazz albums and their bold mid-century covers: Francis Wolff's portrait of a young Coltrane listening with an unfathomable attention to playback at the *Blue Train* sessions; or later, that photographer's warm color photo of Horace Silver's handsome father, immaculately dressed and Panama-hatted, bathed in a park's autumnal light the same tobacco-hued tone of Joe Henderson's wreathing tenor-sax solo in "Song for My Father"—the title track in F-minor, as Leonard Feather's liner notes have it, "plaintive rather than mournful."

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I wanted to be on the street early with my camera, before too many people were up. The hour between six and seven was best. I'd have scouted the day before, walking in offhand alertness, not thinking too much, and waiting for something in the passing scene to tug or catch at me in some inner way—like a rough surface snagging cloth. Spaces were what I was looking for, the feel of a slight concavity that was more memory than physical presence, remembering—as a kid, perhaps—*where I glanced, where we were walking.*

Freud, so I learned, felt that memory was a stratum in the mind where our pasts lay perfectly preserved, funerary objects in the burial chambers of recall. However, as my pictures accumulated, I saw that this was clearly an overly optimistic theory of the mind's ability to stabilize the past. Poring over contact prints or making enlargements, I knew that each revisiting of memory was as much creation as re-creation. Though the photos might make a sort of language for re-speaking the past, this was a tongue in which metaphor held priority over name.

I was already well acquainted with tropes of loneliness from childhood—the compulsive blank gaze at window boxes, sea light, and the desert pleasure of empty sights and sounds. These spaces began to show up in the photos from the beginning. I felt drawn to surfaces that, like the suburbs themselves, seemed "blank" at first glance but on which could be seen a subtle patina of history as well, a trace of lost time within which some sort of answer to the present might wait.

I found I took many pictures of blind windows, pulled to these voyeurs' locales where the desire to see within was suspended in the surface interest of the window's texture itself: glass, muntins, frame, sashes, cracked putty, salt-corroded aluminum, the flawed stucco at the window's edge—I began to imagine all these as figuring the ways we have of looking within and back. I felt drawn to doors and fences subject to the same decay against which they defended, as well as architectural details, walls touched with the circular rub of an absent plant, or the patina of repainting. There were plants as well—succulents, bamboos, grasses, palms, and pittosporums in subdivisions and vacant lots, once the subject of an orderly agenda but now vestigial, a scrim between past and present. There could also be images of power and understanding sent underground, ordering systems grown into crude networks, textured with time; I made pictures of taps, utilities, electric meters, wires, fixtures, and other traces of life's galvanic body rising into the light—perhaps like the dreams we recall and reconstruct, now condensed into daylight systems of value, of what we need to have been, and what instead seems to be.

It was important that these images be unpopulated. It was objects I wanted, and the "tears of things." Church icons, their historical roots in Egyptian funerary portraits, radiated a stillness that was a sign of their subjects having passed over, and the sacred nature of the image was a quality of that unreachable stillness. Now when I opened the shutter to let the morning's gray light settle over the film emulsion, the shards and surfaces of my neighborhood seemed to take on a similar poise.

On my photography expeditions, I'd stay with Mother. As always, I did a lot of listening. Everyone told stories in our family, and many were delightful. However, no one was quite the tale-teller mother had become over the years. Mother's stories were never improvisatory or searching; in the theology of narrative, she was a firm predestinarian. Once a story had been heard, at the appearance of its first words one knew one's fate ineluctably for the next few minutes, for, once relaunched, the tales never varied in incident, detail, point of view, or conclusion. And it would have taken a bolder Lollard than Father or me to interrupt this ritual; the fixed brightness in Mother's eye and the tiny but unmistakable tremor of emotion in her voice gave