



LAY FLAT

01: REMAIN IN LIGHT

ONE CREDO AFTER ANOTHER

Tim Davis

There is one thing that separates us from animals. I know we have opposable thumbs and stock markets and hybrid SUVs. But the most essential line of demarcation between human beings and, say, squirrels, is the stories we can tell. Animals don't have narrative. They can't turn the arc of their experience into a re-occurring tale. They know the scent of danger, but can't describe it. The narrative is the ideal housing for significance and it is significance that makes meaning and meaning that makes us matter.

I once worked at a publishing company reading the slush pile of unsolicited manuscripts and it was tragic and awe-inspiring how many people felt they had important stories to tell. But that is because we are pathological narrative-makers. Put any two objects on your desk, choose two random words out of the dictionary, and a story will start to flow from them, the way any two musical notes form a third harmony. Some inspired cocktail of 3-D vision and powerful memory gets the ball rolling. "The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new," begins Samuel Beckett's *Murphy*. There is no more reluctant beginning to a novel, but human beings are so hardwired to discover signifi-

cance, that even this ornery opening growls like an MGM lion, and sends us on our way. The sun shone. Yes it did. And does. We want meaning, and we find it everywhere.

I am a photographer, and can't help noticing how potent the search for significance is. The absurd task of imposing a rectangle on the flow of the world, and calling that rectangle important, seems to have no end and no zenith. The world's things are only integers, with infinite other numbers between them, infinite narratives. If you put an orange on a table, and ask 15 college freshman to photograph it—as I do every year—you will end up with 15 different sets of significance, 15 meanings. The camera is mechanical and horny; it doesn't care what you put in front of it. But it loves everything thoroughly, from only one vantage point, so there are as many expressions of that camera's love as there are points in space to photograph from. The narrative flow appears to be bottomless.

I think what makes us tragic, as a species, is the inability to recognize that bottomlessness. We tend to privilege one narrative over another, declaring one religion's creation myth, one nation's constitution, the one true story, shutting our ears to the narratives leaking from every arc of the globe. Narrative can instantly calcify into dogma, and when it does, the natural resource that is our scent, our taste, our ear, our mind for narrative, starts to dry up. In a time when narratives of our failure to survive as a species are spreading from church to science journal, I believe the tolerance and openness we can gain from listening hard to as many sets of significance as possible, will help the sun keep shining, with endless alternative, on something new.