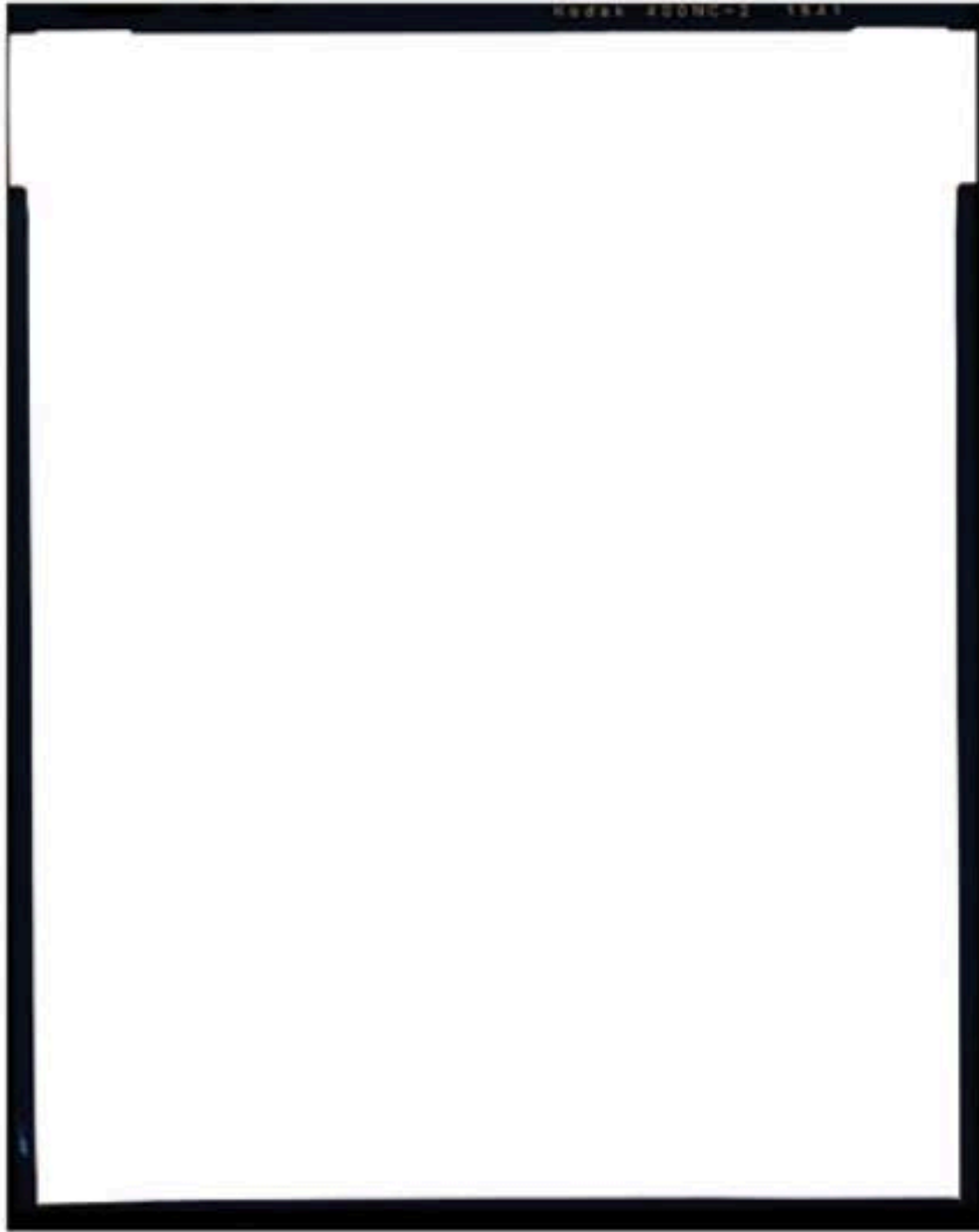


PHOTOGRAPHS NOT TAKEN

A COLLECTION OF PHOTOGRAPHERS' ESSAYS | EDITED BY WILL STEACY



Daylight

TIM DAVIS

When you look at masterpieces, you see weather. Annunciations, depositions, expulsions, visitations, these feel unreadably legal. So many great paintings, so much greatness, seems just a tangle of body parts, ever more skillfully arranged. The Renaissance is people standing around. By the Baroque they're writhing around, like a movie reel switched from an art film to a thriller. When you stood in Santa Maria Novella, in front of the restored Ghirlandaios, you stared right past all the martyrdom and wailing and attending—cheat sheets for churchgoers who couldn't read and couldn't understand the Latin mass—and took in the background clouds. Odd clouds. Clouds that look like the balled-up packaging of a cheap cloud toy, discarded behind a dumpster. Maybe set on fire. But no matter how strange a cloud gets, it's still a cloud.

You are nowhere near a masterpiece now. You are on a golf course, just down a long graded drive and up a hill from a landscape of American services. A corner with four different fill-up stations, two of which now belong to the same company. Herringbone parking lots, like the one at Mister Steak, where you watched with a group of beatified dinnergoers as a U.F.O. descended. It was a white dot that got bigger and bigger in the evening sky, and as it did your sense of "this is it" ratcheted into your thyroids. This is it. Well "it" turned out to be a stray advertising banner fallen from the back of a small plane. The ad was for a competitor, Sizzler, and the long vinyl strip landed on a bank of Mister Steak's halide-ballast parking lights and dangled there, like the big dirty angel at the top of Caravaggio's St. Matthew.

You're not sure why you are on this golf course. You have no clubs and don't play anyway. Golf is the stupidest sport you can imagine: no exercise, too much equipment to carry, worse for the environment than a speedway. Not knowing why you're there is disturbing for only a few orienting blinks. You are a photographer, and have spent much of every day drifting into the unfamiliar. When you're waiting for a train, you find yourself waking up into the same station you didn't know you were asleep in. Suddenly everything warrants at least a hmmm...The camera is an amnesiac constantly, comically and tragically, looking at a new world, and its amnesia is contagious.

On the golf course, all you see is weather. The sky is dark, a darker tone than the very green fairways if this were printed in black and white. There

has been an afternoon storm and the sky looks bruised. *When the Sky Goes Dark in the Day* should be the title of some bestseller about the pagan pantomime of a group of rich executives who make love with stable boys and flee to Mexico to dream. In this story, the sky is uncooked beef, more corpse than cloud form, hanging there recently relieved of life. And below it, down at the bottom of the hill and over the 17th green, a crowd begins climbing toward you. They are a scrambling mass, as far from a Sunday foursome as you can figure, all following some fellow, a tour guide, a point person, a celebrity, who is charging up the fairway. They hike up awkwardly, smaller in stature and gravitationally drawn to his huge suit and elephantine stride. With every assured step of his you come a little more unmoored. Who is this? Why are they here? Is this a media event?

The Sizzler incident taught you that "The Media" is an amniotic membrane you can push through, on one side fed through a tube, on the other screaming for your own air. When you are walking in the city and the cameras come on, the correspondents deep-breathe, the boom men raise their arms like Attic bronzes, you feel so grateful to be on the secular side of the camera, with no one reporting from anywhere.

They get closer. They are people following someone up a hill on a dark summer day. As they trudge up the wet grass, breathing harder, their urgency slackens and, with it, the incandescence of their leader. He's just as willful, his gait unchanged, but his followers' lungs ache. Soon you see him better than they do. On one side of the membrane he's a large, light-skinned black man in a sharkskin suit and no hat and damp loafers. On the other, he's Charlie Mingus. Blue-black sky stretches away to the distant commerce strip and Charlie Mingus walks toward you, his face a set of sags with a cigarette stuck in it.

For all our succor and scorn, celebrity is nothing but the plain and the familiar. Your mother is no one special, you just recognize her in the crowd above the bassinette. In those Renaissance paintings, celebrity virgins with their entourages standing around. Charles Mingus is here, familiar from album covers and store displays, and all else is wilderness. As he reaches you, he takes a hard left and lies down on his back on the ladies' tee.

You don't like the word "then." When you read you scribble little null sets over all the thens, embarrassed at how simple the formulas are for describing time passing. But as the sun comes down below the slab of

sky, gilding all you can see, you realize you've been saving all your thens for now. Mingus laid out on the manicured grass, just now backlit with alloyed haloes, and the wet course glinting and the sky all wrong. Here's what they mean by "Figure/Ground." A picture, readymade, as easy as peristalsis. This is the corpse you're always fantasizing finding in the weeds when you're out shooting and the world doesn't show up, the abandoned Warhol in an alley, the K-Mart bursting into flames. Photographers dream in content.

The camera is a metal roll film reflex hanging from your neck with enough real weight to remind you you have a skeleton. You raise it to your eye. And are immediately punished for it. You can't find the f/stops. The meter's broken. The focus ring feels unaligned and makes a gritty noise when it twists: when you force it, you can get infinity in, but not the foreground. You press the shutter and it responds with the saddest sound any mechanical thing can make: silence. You let it drop. A broken camera is nothing but a cobblestone, mightier than a sword but only because it can strike from a distance.

Before you, a Maxfield Parrish has been rolled in on flats. Mingus is still on his back, smoking, and when he takes a drag, the tip of the cigarette is the exact orange of the sunset tinge. What a picture. Pulitzers, Guggenheims, Prix de Rome, NYFAs, N.E.A.s, Louis Comfort Tiffanys, Turners, Nobels, MacArthurs pile up before you, the picture is that good, a masterpiece maybe. All you've suffered for, that badly-weighted backpack of failure you keep trying to force into the overhead, the unfinanced expeditioning, the sense that art has become the hare-lipped cousin of the entertainment industry, the endless envy and disdain, all this appears banishable by one click of one shutter. And then the light goes.