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TOUCHING IMAGES: TOWARDS A VISUAL/MATERIAL CULTURAL STUDY OF ROADSIDE SHRINES

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Touching Images:

Towards a Visual/Material Cultural Study of Roadside Shrines[1]

Preface:

This paper is part of a larger book project I am working on called Making Space on the Side of the Road, where I critically engage the cultural phenomenon of roadside car crash shrines simultaneously as an embodied photographer, ethnographer, theorist, and storyteller. My approach to the project as a whole represents my move towards creating a methodology that is always something more than neither/nor and both/and theory, practice, word, photograph, object, critique, and creative work. Elsewhere, I have presented my work on the spatial organization of shrines, on the way that the shrines function as portals between the living and the dead and between private and public space, on the translocal nature of the assemblages of objects and identities performed at shrine sites, and on the space of home and the space of fieldwork involved in performing this project. Here, I will focus primarily on the photographs that people use within roadside shrines, working towards an approach to theorizing photographs as signs and objects at the same time—as visually and tactilely signifying objects that are more than visual, more than material, and thus visual/material.

Last summer, at the end of a long day of driving around the Mojave Desert northeast of LA, I spotted a collection of objects woven into a chain link fence at the side of the road. From a distance I could make out flattened balloons, photographs, laminated messages, flowers, beads, and a hockey stick. Parking and getting out of my car, I went to work doing what I have been doing across the American Southwest for the last three years: photographing roadside car crash shrines and thinking about how they work as forms of visual and material culture.

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[1] This paper was presented at TRANS: A Visual Culture Conference held at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, October 19-22, 2006. Words and photographs © 2006 by Bob Bednar. Original photographs are in color and in higher definition than represented here.



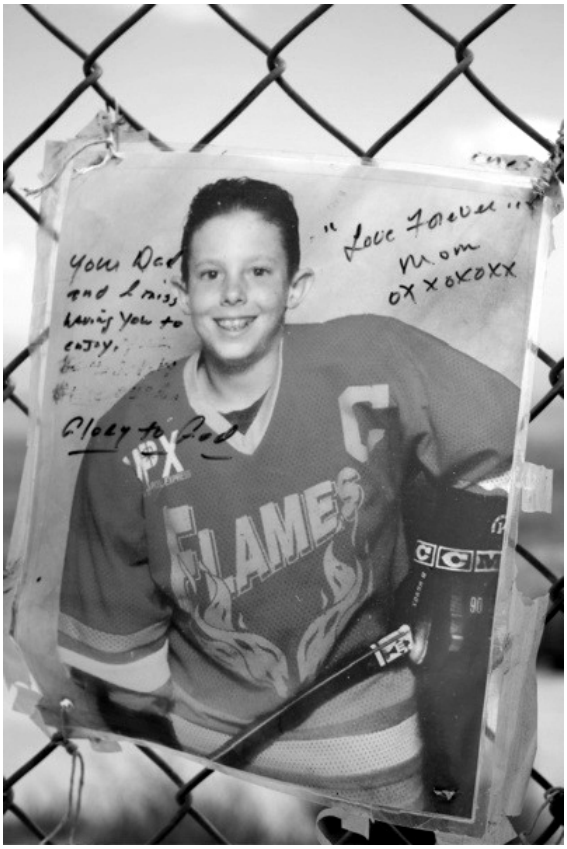


As I moved around the site looking for different angles to photograph, I found myself continually drawn to a photograph hanging at the upper left edge of the assemblage, a laminated photograph of a young adolescent boy dressed in a hockey uniform and smiling widely, revealing his braces. The photograph is attached to the chain link fence with string. Just underneath the picture is a hockey stick that looks just like the one in the photograph.



On the left side of the photo is text that reads “Your Dad and I miss having you to enjoy. Glory to God.” In between these two sentences is some writing that has been partially erased—illegible, but still visible. On the other side of the frame, the same person has written “Love Forever” in quotes and signed it “Mom” with “OXXOXOXX” underneath.

About a foot away from this photograph is another photograph. This one is clearly coded as a high school graduation picture. While the hockey picture is laminated, this one is set into a frame. There are signs that water has gotten in between the frame and the picture.

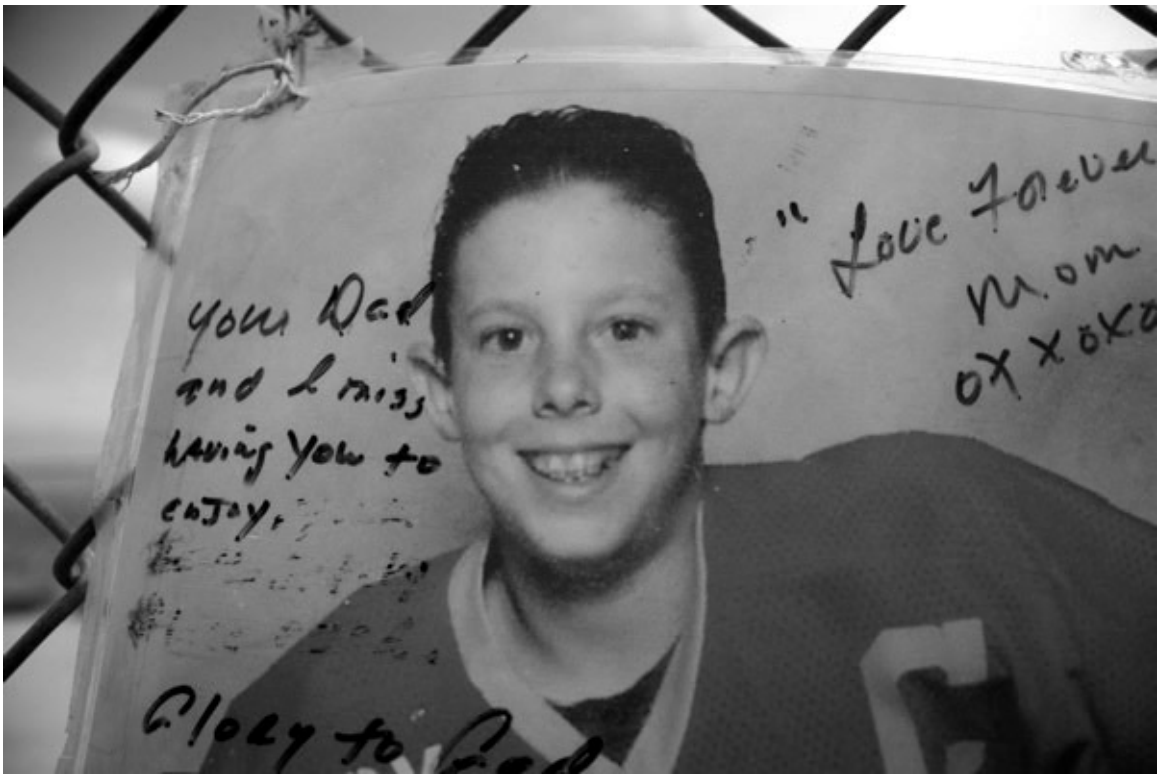




Looking at the hockey portrait and the graduation portrait together, I concluded that the two pictures move forward in time from left to right and represent two moments in the life of a single person. Thinking of them this way, I noticed a significant difference: in the later picture, the boy’s braces are gone, and they have succeeding in straightening his teeth.

Thinking about braces and what they represent to me as a cultural form of body work, I felt myself swept into an intense connection with the boy in the picture and the “Mom” and “Dad,” who are barely off screen. Suddenly, I was no longer looking *at* a photograph but *through* a photograph--transported to all sorts of spaces and times in my mind: the portrait studio, the hockey rink, the orthodontist, the graduation ceremony, the cemetery. Before long, my feeling of moving outwards into different times and spaces

reversed and I started to feel all of these different spaces and times converging on me to connect the present moment in time, July 24, 2006, to July 12, 2005, the date of the accident.



It was the braces that clinched it for me. People who do braces are not fatalists. To sublimate your feelings of shame and discomfort with the braces in the present, you (and the people who pay for them) must project a benefit in the future. In short, doing braces "takes time," and to do them, you must *believe in the future*. Looking at the hockey and graduation photographs together again, I saw the tragedy clearly taking shape as a narrative for the first time: The first photograph is a picture of a boy who believed in the future, and the later picture shows that his projection of "good teeth" into the future has come true, but ultimately, the structure of the shrine also shows me that *now*, he no longer has a future at all.

I imagine that if I saw the picture of the boy in his hockey uniform and his braces on the wall in a home or an album, I would simply laugh in recognition—seeing the picture as a representation of the awkwardness of early adolescence in the contemporary US, with its strange brew of generalized pride, shame, hope and dread. I would also probably assume that the person pictured in the photograph is still alive, either the same age as he is in the photograph or at most fifteen years older, walking around among us now negotiating his twenties and posing for more photographs. In short: the picture itself is nothing special and has no special appeal to me other than to satisfy a distracted curiosity as a student of culture. Seeing it there, though--next to the hockey stick and the graduation picture, and with the mom's message written across it—it broke my heart.

The question I have been asking myself since that day is: Why? Why do photographs at roadside shrines seem to have these effects? More precisely, how is it

that, when I am looking at and touching a photograph of a person I have never met and never will meet, I feel things in my body that I attribute to the photograph instead of to my own imagination? Where are these effects "located"—both functionally and culturally?

To explore these questions, I first will discuss how photographs carry material traces of the things they represent. Then I will consider how photographs, which are often conceived of as visual media, are also material objects situated within a wide range of material practices. Once I have established that photographs are objects that represent other objects in particular ways, I will return again to the question of what happens to a photograph when it is displayed in a roadside shrine. Finally, I will bring my own presence and practices as a photographer and academic into focus as well, which will help to further situate but also complicate the understanding of visual/material effects I am developing here. Along the way, I hope you will see how my approach to roadside shrines would also be useful to other trans-scholars seeking to resolve similar problems in theorizing and practicing the intersection of visual culture and material culture more generally.

Before I move on, though, I first need to further locate my project. Roadside shrines are examples of what folklorist Jack Santino calls "spontaneous shrines" (Santino, 1992, 2006)—commemorative, performative sites where private individuals that make public sense of "unanticipated violent deaths of people who do not fit into categories of those we expect to die, who may be engaging in routine activities in which there is a reasonable expectation of safety" (Haney, Leimer, & Lowry 161). With roots reaching deeply and widely through many different cultural traditions, spontaneous shrines to people who die suddenly in car accidents, murders, and political violence have proliferated in recent years. Think of Oklahoma City, Princess Diana, JFK, Jr., Lockerbie, the Space Shuttle Columbia, Columbine, September 11th...

My work on roadside shrines engages the current move in material culture, visual culture, and cultural studies more generally towards what Victor Buchli calls a "renewed engagement with the nondiscursive"—with "the phenomenological and somatic effects of material culture beyond textuality" (9). I am interested in the material embodied pragmatics of affect—and effects—not only "what the shrines mean." Partially, this is because after doing extensive fieldwork on the shrines for the last three years I do not believe that "reading" the particular meanings of the collections of objects and photographs at the sites I have documented yields the most insight into how the shrines function and communicate. It is also because I believe that, as W. J. T. Mitchell puts it in the title to a recent essay, "there are no visual media"—no cultural forms that function only visually. Like Christopher Pinney, I seek to theorize and embody a study of visual culture that is itself engaged "with embodied culture or performative culture (i.e. culture considered through its fundamental materiality) that recognizes the unified nature of the human sensorium" (Pinney, 85). Thus, in the title of my talk today, "Touching Images," the word "touching" works as an adjective as well as a verb: I feel the images with and within my body; touching photographs touches me. The sites are touching in the sense that they are tactile in nature and also because they are emotionally affective.

As I have been working on the edge of visual and material culture, I have re-discovered Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*. Looking at a photograph, you are faced with an iconic and indexical undeniability—what Barthes calls the photograph's

"intractable" quality. Photographs not only *resemble* the subjects they picture but also *have some material connection to* them: Photographs look like the objects, places and people they represent because those things were materially present in front of the camera at the time the photograph was made. As Barthes says, "Photography never lies: or rather, it can lie as to the meaning of the thing, being by nature *tendentious*, never as to its existence"; as such, "Every photograph is a certificate of presence" (87). At the same time as it certifies presence, it always also certifies that that presence is perishable. Barthes: "in Photography, I can never deny that *the thing has been there*. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past" (76).

Before I go further with Barthes here, I would first like to bring in an example from feminist geographer Gillian Rose's recent work on family photographs, which also engages Barthes. I turn to Rose here because she has done ethnographic research with middle class British women to study how the women display and talk about family photographs in their homes. My work builds on hers in the sense that most of the photographs I see in shrines were once family photographs displayed in the home, and I am studying what happens when they are taken out on the road.

Rose emphasizes two important material dimensions of vernacular photographs. The first is the fact that photographs are themselves objects, and the second is that photographs carry with them a connection back to the materiality they represent in object form. Rose says that "What photographs show is vitally important to their effects, but so too is what happens to the photographs as material objects . . . precisely because objects are things to which things are done"(7). Rose: "There is a tactility to looking at pictures which is also about enacting a corporeal closeness between the viewer and the person pictured. . . . For photographs are, literally, felt, when they are audienced" (557).

As the women discussed their photographs with Rose or with their children in the home, they pointed to the photographs and said things like "this *is* X" instead of "this *shows* X." Rose concluded that among the women she studied, "photography is seen as an imprint of a scene, just as a handprint marks the form of an actual hand" (Rose, 2003: 10). This "sense that photographs are a material extension of bodies that are, very often, distant or changed, is central to how photographs are seen" in the home (Rose, 2004: 557). Photographs "bring near those far away," but they only need to do this because they referents *are* far away, either in time or in space. Thus while family photographs "are in some ways very full of what they show, they also produce an effect of emptiness" when the person encountering them knows that the person *there in the photograph* is *not there in the house (*spatially or temporally) at the moment of viewing (Rose, 2003: 11).

To theorize the effects of photography's dialectic of material absence and presence further, it helps to turn more directly to Barthes, who in *Camera Lucida* seeks to understand how certain photographs seem to affect him deeply while other photographs either only casually interest him or are utterly banal for him. He identifies two different elements contained by photographs: the *studium* and the *punctum*. The *studium* carries the cultural meanings circulating in the image, while the *punctum* punctures these meaning structures and processes to interrupt a distanced/distancing mode of interpretation with a moment of intense feeling that feels/is beyond representation, whose "effect is certain but unlocatable" (and is thus difficult to discuss using words and established cultural codes, which are the tools of the *studium*) (Barthes 51). Barthes: "a photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant

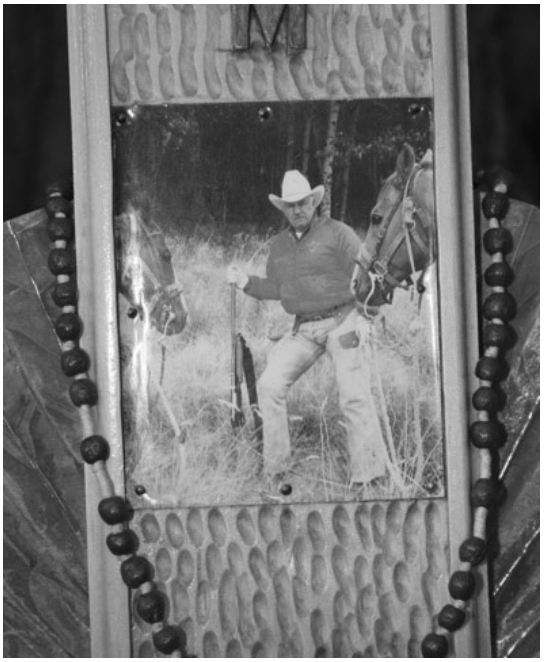
to me)" (Barthes 27). Barthes is careful to say the processes of viewing that he is describing are not free-floating, generalizable, or essential: not all photographs have a *punctum*, and even ones that do do not work that way for all viewers. He clarifies his distinction between the *studium* and the *punctum* by comparing a photograph of his dead mother as a child and a photograph of a criminal taken just before his execution:

> The photograph is handsome, as is the boy: that is the *studium*. But the *punctum* is: *he is going to die*. I read at the same time: *This will be* and *this has been*; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake. By giving me the absolute past of the pose, the photograph tells me death in the future. What *pricks* me is the discovery of this equivalence. In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder . . . *over a catastrophe which has already occurred*. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe. This *punctum*, more or less blurred beneath the abundance and the disparity of contemporary photographs, is vividly legible in historical photographs: there is always a defeat of Time in them: *that* is dead and *that* is going to die. . . . They have their whole lives ahead of them; but also they are dead (today), they are then *already* dead (yesterday). (Barthes 96).

Following Barthes, we could say that whether they are casual snapshots or formal portraits, the photographs at roadside shrines were always already pictures concerned with conjuring and speaking back to death—because, like other photographs, their split-second nature always already represents the *once was* and *someday will not be*. However, once they are structured in a shrine, they complete the story—carrying the materially self-evident sense that *this person, who is alive in this photograph, is now dead*. Indeed, in roadside shrines, where it is structurally implicit that the person in the portrait is dead, the difference between the intractably present presence of referent in the photograph and the intractably absent absence of the photograph's referent in the world is one of the primary processes that shrines seek to mediate.

The original context of the photograph carries with it only the *potential* to be read in terms of Barthes' future catastrophe, but the context of the shrine *brings it materially to fruition*. In each of the following pictures, the subjects look into the camera, posing and showing themselves to the camera to be seen and photographed by or for the people who know them well. I do not recall ever seeing anything resembling a candid or furtive photograph of a person represented at a site.



I visualize each of these photographs being first displayed in the home of a person who took the picture in the case of snapshots or in the home of someone somehow intimately connected to the person, who would have a graduation picture or a sports team portrait or even a hunting picture up on the wall or in a photo album or in a desktop slideshow where the person used to live, work, etc.

Once they are structured into a roadside shrine, though, these pictures that had much different lives before are now forever frozen--chained to the wheel of the eternal present (or at least "tenselessness")— the *once was* that will *always be* smiling out at us but *never again* walking among us, much less posing for a photograph. The photographs gain emotive power because of their context. As with a newspaper obituary picture that used to be a mundane picture of a person' everyday life, all manner of pictures look ghostly when put to their new purpose in a roadside shrine.





Although objects work on people (and are worked on by people) in different ways, the way an object signifies and functions is inseparable from its material form, just as its material form is inseparable from its signification. In his recent book, *Thinking*

Through Material Culture, archaeologist Carl Knappett argues that "the meaning of an object arises in the articulation of both its pragmatic and significative dimensions; in other words, in the coming together of the material and the mental, the functional and the symbolic," and the real and the imaginary (110, 131). To make sense of photographs as objects, we must think of them as more than visual and more than material—as things that we see and touch at the same time, and that touch us as well.



This point is perhaps most clear at sites like these where similar images are repeated several times in a different material form—from framed image to laminated snapshot to color copy to desktop published tribute to commemorative button.



Others repeat the same image in the same form, but bring in another variable: the differential effects of sunlight and weather over time. This site near Tucson features three pictures structured into a triptych, where the two more faded sides face the sun to the east and west and the less faded one faces south.





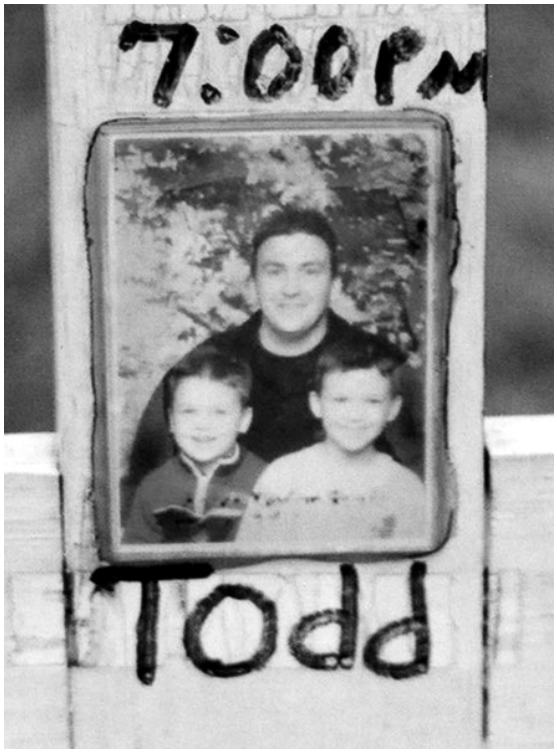



Like other objects, photographs take up space, are moved through space, and do both over time. When they are fixed into the structure of a roadside shrine, the photographs themselves now "age"—serving as material substitutes for the interrupted aging of the now dead person, transposing the life of the person to the life of the photograph in space and time. Consider these photographs of photographs built into the structures of roadside shrines—many of them fading, curled, erased, and otherwise weathered, showing them to be objects in and of themselves and not just screens containing visual information. They are tactile surfaces that not only "take up space" but also "show time." Photographs incorporated in shrines show that Barthes' "defeat of Time" also takes place *over time* in a process which itself leaves a material trace...

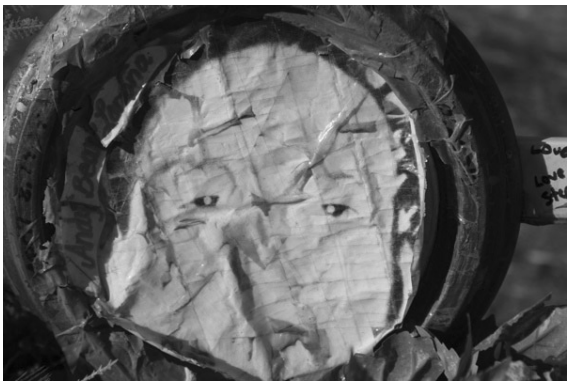


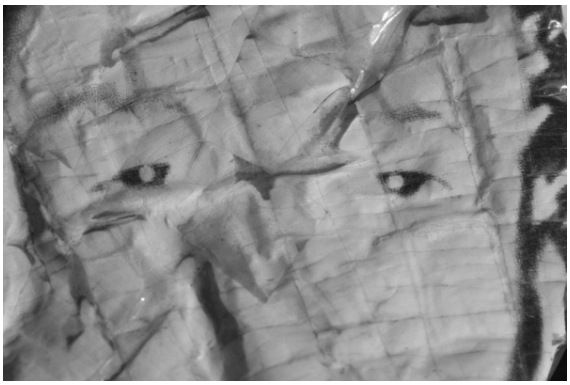





7:00PM
Todd







The final dimension of this I would like to explore today is my own material, embodied presence in the process I have been theorizing. Roadside shrines are constructed to mediate the experience of unexpected deaths. The poignancy of photographs at shrines comes from the interaction of the material dimensions of photography with the particularity of the cultural form of the shrine and its location on the roadside. When, as at the sites we've been looking at, all of these elements collaborate, the photographs in shrines seem to carry a complex ontology that they wouldn't carry elsewhere: this person *has been*, this person *was in the process of being* alive when the picture was taken--his "whole life in front of him"--full of hope and full of assumptions about the inevitability of the future. *Now*, however, he *is* dead, and *right here* is the particular space where he was transformed from someone who *is* to someone who *was*. Like the photographs within them, roadside shrines themselves make absence materially present, but they therefore also make presence materially absent: we know their bodies *definitely once were here*, but their bodies *are not here now*.

And it is exactly this material dialectic of presence and absence that I respond to most when I stop to photograph roadside shrines, because while the people memorialized are not there, *I am*.









When I look, the material reality of their presence and absence touches me, but I also physically touch the elements of the site: I handle things, I feel their surfaces and textures. When I look at photographs in other contexts, I find it easy to ignore how insistently they assert that the future exists—how they mask what Barthes calls their intractable anterior catastrophe. Faced with a photograph at a shrine, however, I am stopped in my tracks, forced to acknowledge that this abstract potential catastrophe has actually come to pass.



From there, I find it impossible not to also imagine a similar fate for myself, particularly when my photographs of shrines also represent some part of my own body in the frame. And thus not only do I connect to the people memorialized at the sites as people who once were and now are not, but also I project myself into the photographs and shrines to see that the kind of "anterior catastrophe" Barthes describes being implicit in all photographs is *also present in my own photographs*. And finally I recognize that any photograph I take projects a future for myself as an academic "doing a study" and sharing my work as I am doing here. It's a future that may at any time be erased--just as it has been for the people pictured at the shrines I have shown here--in the blink of an eye.

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