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*The Stasis of the  
Picture / The Death  
of the Moth*



*Picture: a moth flying this way and that, up to the top of a window pane, rushing side to side against the jambs, until it eventually lands at the bottom, on the edge of the sill.<sup>1</sup>*

It begins with time: the pinprick of a camera's shutter opening to reveal a single frame of film behind, and the instant becomes past, as mid-September touches summer. The image was already setting onto the film opposite the lens, and there, where the aphotic blank had been, the light pressed flat to the silver, salt, gelatin and gleamed with a new, soft absence. Such humming vigor came rolling in from the advancing of the wound roll of unexposed film. Beyond that noise, it was difficult to keep in mind the image that came just before.

Outside the dark of the little camera, in the light-filled room, the printed pictures were also accumulating; shuffled piles scattered around the concrete floor until it looked as if a vast net with thousands of pictorial knots in it had been cast onto the ground. With each addition of new material, the older pictures sank slowly down to the bottom of the loose stacks. Then, suddenly, the accumulated pictures would be thrown, from the bottom up, into the air again. They were thrown in a wider circle this time, with the utmost clamor and deranged motion, as though to be cast upward and left to settle slowly down again was a tremendously exciting experience.

The same energy that moved and rearranged the piles of prints, and the same energy that propelled the mechanics of the camera's release, it seemed, sent a rare type of picture<sup>2</sup> fluttering from side to side in the right squareness of its frame. I was, indeed, conscious of a feeling of restraint. Seeing the possibility of movement as so undeniable and so various that to then see the picture momentarily set still, in a single orientation, being one of many orientations, appeared a hard fate. Still, eventually, the picture turned to one corner of its container, and after waiting there a second, flew across to the other. What remained but to leap over to a third corner and then to a fourth? That was all it could do, in spite of the expanse of the surrounding room, the far-off light coming in from the windows, and the romantic voice, now and then, of the wind that leaked into the room from an open window.

Watching the picture move, it seemed as if a string, very thin but tightly wound, of the world's enormous energy had been thrust into its frame. As the picture circled the perimeter, the thread of vital light became visible, turning the engine. It was an electric movement. There was something strange as well as expected about this living picture. The energy was regular and direct, rolling at set intervals clockwise or folding vertically within the open frame, running its way into so many narrow and intricate corridors of my own brain, and into those of other human beings. It was as if someone had taken a tiny capsule of some energizing chemical compound and wrapped it as lightly as possible in aluminum and glass, setting it off to dance and ricochet in order to demonstrate time's movement and the layered possibilities of duration.

After a time, tired by dancing apparently, the picture settled in place, with the sun coming into the windows, onto it from a sharp angle. The shivering slowed; I looked away. As displayed, I could not get over the strangeness of it. I thought I might forget all about its movement, seeing the picture temporarily tied and cumbered by stillness, so that if it moved, it had to move with the greatest circumspection. Then, looking up again, my eye was caught.

1. It moves rapidly: zig-zagging and thrashing wildly in the moments before it slows to a stop.

2. Photographic images that can be turned, or flipped, remaining unfixated and yet legible from multiple orientations should not be called images as just any image might be. These pictures are hybrids. They neither function as pure photographic capture, nor are they totally built constructions as a painting or

sculpture. Unlike common images, they do not bind to a sense of gravity—pulled centrally down by natural force to Earth, with base to floor, set in linear frames, never slipping askew. Though these multi-pictures deny fixity—each made with light touched to fringed subject and rimmed around four edges by floor and ceiling simultaneously—they also have the capacity for long periods of stasis between movements.

The picture was trying to resume its jittery hinge to the right, but seemed either so stiff or so awkward that it could only flutter in place; and when it tried to roll to its left, it failed. I watched these futile attempts for a while without thinking, unconsciously waiting for the picture to resume its movement, as one waits for a machine that has stopped momentarily to start again without considering the reason for its failure. After perhaps a seventh attempt, the picture slipped out of position by its fluttering edges, hanging inverted with the previously bottom edge as its top.

It flashed upon me that the picture was now having difficulties. Its new dependency roused me. No longer able to turn itself around, its edges shivered vainly. But as I stretched out my arm, meaning to help the picture move, the thought came over me that this failure and awkwardness were the approach of a longer stasis. I lowered my hand. The edges agitated once more. I looked around the room as if for the enemy against which it struggled. I looked on the floor at the piles, and out of the window at the sun, almost set.

Placidity blanketed the previous animation. The sun was replaced by overhead fluorescents. The wind had stopped. The stacks of printed papers, impressed with images, gave way to their cumulative weight and stood still. The energy was there all the same, but at rest, indifferent and unaffected. I could only watch the extraordinary efforts made by this agitated picture against an oncoming stall which could, had it no intervention, have lasted indeterminately. Not many pictures I knew had any chance against their innate tendency to stay put. Nevertheless, after a marked pause, the frame shook again. It was superb, this spasm, and so frantic that the picture succeeded at last in overturning itself once more.

What happened when there was nobody else around to see this gigantic effort on the part of an otherwise stationary picture, working against a force of such magnitude, to continue to do what no one else might see or notice? Again, somehow, I saw movement, an electric spark. I lifted my arm again, even though it was futile. But even as I did so, the unmistakable signs of stillness showed themselves. The frame relaxed, and instantly grew stiff. The jolt was over. The turned picture sat, unmoving. Just as the movement had been strange, a few minutes before, so stasis was now as strange.<sup>3</sup> The picture, having rotated itself, remained idle. Oh yes, it seemed to say, Stillness is stronger than I am.

3. "Two strangers who loved but remain strange."