

“The soul never thinks without an image.”
Aristotle

As we soon realize when using a camera and a pen, photography and writing are each challenge enough for a lifetime of exploration and expression. In this poetic and powerful collection of photographs and short stories, Richard Snodgrass reveals his mastery of these two forms of “telling.” Both image and text are narratives, yet neither yields nor explains the other; the photographs are not illustrations just as the words are not captions. Each remains independent, as siblings in the same family might tell a story from different vantage points, or the way lyrics intertwine with musical notes to create a song larger than the sum of its parts.

Each story is introduced by a single photograph, gravity-bound in its silent, wordless existence. The scenes portrayed are imbued with a heaviness, laden with the weight of human life and time— time before, during and after the lives of the characters who live and work upon its soil. Lives that will someday be lowered into the earth, joined and forever one with the land. The pictures are beautifully composed, containing subtle textures and intricate tonalities mirroring the shading of the lives described in the stories. The somber earth tones of the photographs are the perfect monochromatic color to represent the measure of hope in the characters’ lives— not resplendent or radiantly colored with opportunity. At times, the images feel like open windows that could be viewed and contemplated by the characters in the stories, carrying and recalling memories from their lives.

The text is visual as well, presenting the wrinkled skin under tired eyes, the folded handkerchief in a farmer’s back pocket, the dirt under fingernails, the patting of a small boy’s head against his will, the eyes of husbands & wives meeting, then quietly looking away. Richly layered with life’s unfolding events, the stories also capture the spaces in between events, words, and conversations. These are the life-changing pauses, quiet and imperceptible, containing unspoken understandings and misunderstandings that profoundly influence and set in motion the remaining course of a lifetime. Snodgrass is a master of such quiet awareness, exploring the silent, liminal spaces between us, moments of waiting, pause and contemplation. As in the beautifully piercing moment of realization in the space within two men’s conversation, “... about this time it must have occurred to Charlie that a smile had a bite to it, like a wolf or a bear about to attack might be thought to smile because it’s teeth were showing.” Or capturing a stunned father’s silent, uncertain thoughts after his son tells him, “Seems to me you always let a lot of things slip through your fingers.”

These short stories reveal the diaphanous interactions between family, friends and neighbors through their challenges of daily existence in this fictional small town of Furnass, PA. These are stories about work and romance, yearning and

hope, sadness and endurance, coping and escaping, forbidden yet often consummated temptations. The characters are often restless in their lives, yet lack the awareness or opportunity to change their plight. At times we enter into lives and conversations in an exhilarating midstream journey. We witness the introspection of the characters looking backwards in time and then forward, trying to make sense of an unyielding, often merciless world. There are the somber realizations of a young wife seeing her life laid out before her, knowing that: "... her marriage was never going to be different. That they were going to be just like everybody else." We are witness to people trapped in the stillness of their rooms: "the house settled around her like a familiar shawl." These are moments of quiet resignation we can all relate to: "We are watching our lives play out in front of us." And later: "... thinking, so this is how it happens. This is when you start to know."

In stories that unfold indoors, the words and pictures become still lifes of still lives. Snodgrass intricately records the characters' homes in a powerful documentary style. The photographs are intimate collections of sweaters, bed sheets, pillboxes, recliners, windows and drapes— the actual fabric of people's lives. These interiors are biographies in plain sight, containing the confessional patina of our valued objects. Snodgrass astutely realizes that still photographs can actually show the passage of time in quiet depictions of teetering piles of newspapers and magazines that reached their heights by slowly rising over weeks, months and years. In a conversation with the author, Snodgrass explained: "If you really want to know somebody, look at the things they think are important and surround themselves with. The things really tell you who they are, what they value. And are immutable testaments of the life they live."

All of life's lessons are here clear and sharp as a surgeon's knife, the inhalations and realizations between our words and actions. The power of these stories arises from our uneasy recognition that such moments inhabit every day of our own waking lives. In the end, Snodgrass offers us a universality in the fates of these isolated characters, revealing the temptations and possibilities we recognize in our own lives, inviting us to consider the consequences of the yearnings and desires we carry with us on our own journey. And for these considerations let us lead better lives, through a greater awareness of: " the movement of the planet in its daily round, the lowering of the sunlight at the end of the day setting the late afternoon in deep relief."

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Brian taught as a Professor of Photography at California State University, San Jose for 40 years, served as the Chair of the Department of Art and Art

History, and retired as a Professor Emeritus in 2017. Brian also served as the Executive Director of the Center for Photographic Art in Carmel, California from 2015-2019, retiring as Director Emeritus to return to his studio practice.