The Wilderness of Ordinary Places

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Critic André Brazin wrote of photography that, unlike the other arts, only it "derives an advantage from [the photographer's] absence," and "affects us like a phenomenon in nature, like a flower or a snowflake whose vegetable or earthly origins are an inseparable part of their beauty."[1] If inseparable, origins are also invisible, despite their power to imbue presence into things in the world that are otherwise rote forms. In a photograph, we see both: the representation of forms or objects, transparent to the world almost as characters, and also their voices, real or imagined, that are laid bare in this transparency. This experience is no less true for the imaging, absent the photographer, of architectural and spatial experience. Though we often ascertain architecture in heroic terms, in the everydayness of the built world, there is profound presence in the mundane.

American photography of the built environment has long contemplated this mundanity by seeking the understated aura of its landscapes and interiors. When Dorothea Lange toured the South, recording disaffected, barely-born waysides to contour the social conscience of a still-young nation, she planted the saplings for William Eggleston's democratic forest and Diane Arbus's Christmas tree in Levittown. Countless others sought to convey the sensibility but underlying tension and melancholy that the everyday world sang of America's rife identities. Trees give way to signage in Denise Scott Brown's photographs of Las Vegas, at a time when the landscape gave way to a new countenance of optimism and capital, betraying an American ambivalence to longevity. And before long, that orange Gulf sign burning over the Strip yields, in the work of Todd Hido, to the hermetic, suspicious bedroom light of a postwar tract home in the dead of night. In all of them, there is an inscrutable sway between presence and absence that binds our gaze to a sense of lingering, marginal existence between future and past, modern and obsolete, urban and suburban, nuclear and atomic. Necessarily, the photographer hides.

These images of place are part of our broader discourse in architecture, and help explicate how place bears the effects of complex global forces. Images of the in-between are subtexts to deep tension; urban sites in particular have implicated many readings of modernity, most famously in Marc Augé's contemplation of transient "non-places,"[2] and by Ignasi de Solà-Morales Rubió, who defined residual urban places as *terrain vague*. "Empty, abandoned space in which a series of occurrences have taken place," he describes, are "the most solvent sign with which to indicate what cities are and what our experience

[1]
André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 4. (Summer, 1960), 4-9.

[2]
Augé writes in *Non-Places*: "If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place."

3
Ignasi de Solà-Morales Rubió, "Terrain Vague," *Anyplace*, ed. Cynthia C. Davidson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 199.

4
Ibid., 119.

5
An idea Solà-Morales references in "Terrain Vague" and attributes to Rosalind Krauss.

of them is."[3] Urban *terrains vagues* are outside of everyday experience, mostly due to their congruence with large-scale infrastructure, power, and, more broadly, modernity's manifold anxieties—themselves rooted in the practical and ontological estrangement to place that has animated much of architecture's critical project in the last century and this one. The difficulty of giving shape to this fraught urban experience is what makes *vague* a dynamic situatedness, traced across the blurry definitions of the word itself. Solà-Morales connects three distinct aspects of the French word to instability and fluctuation (as in a wave), vacancy (emptiness), and vagueness through indeterminacy. Because of these valences of site, for Solà-Morales, photography is critical to the apprehension of *terrain*, and for understanding *terrain vague* as such:

> Photography communicates not only the perceptions that we may accumulate of these kinds of spaces but also the affects, experiences that pass from the physical to the psychic, converting the vehicle of the photographic image into the medium through which we form value judgments about these seen or imagined places.[4]

A semiological indexing[5] underlies the generative propensity of photographs, and as a parallel to the sited, physical experience of place, allows for *terrain vague* to be understood through the place image.

What is seen and what is imagined? That depends on who is looking and how. In my own photographs, I look for remainders—vestigial indications of stories that are both largely emptied in the present but provocative of something yet to come. What, exactly, is contingent to viewing and inhabitation, and is constructed through acts of imagination deliberate or subliminal at the boundary between a discrete moment in time and the atemporality that so often seems to resound through the world in repose. Like other photographers, my photographs seek to capture the life hiding in the interstices of the built environment, where I am captivated by a certain objective immanence—a sense of place—that rings through sites that feel, more than anything, leftover. These sites are *unplaces*, present to us through a certain absence, and charged by having somehow become undone. Unplaces have a latent, lingering inbetweenness as no place in particular, and evade determinacy or even acknowledgment based on how they capture one's gaze—through ruination or decay, perhaps, or a blankness of common reference. They live through situational othering, seductive boredom, or setting the stage for something outside our expected and ordinary encounters with the world.

What gives unplaces their certain presence, whispering to our psychospatial situation in the world? This question is at the heart of Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology of place, which seeks to elucidate, as part of his immense project to ground being in environmental comportment, how the perception of space is traced against the horizon of our own being-there. Unplaces do not exist *a priori* to our involvement; rather, they rely on the projective poiesis of our imagination to enliven otherwise inscrutable boundaries. It is absence that gives unplaces their presence:

> Because the specific presence of the surrounding world lies precisely in the familiar referential whole, the lack—and *lack means always absence of what belongs within the closed referential*

whole—can precisely allow what is inconspicuously present to be encountered. The *absence* of something within the world of concern—absence as interruption of reference, as disturbance of familiarity—has thus a privileged function in the encounter of the surrounding world.[6]
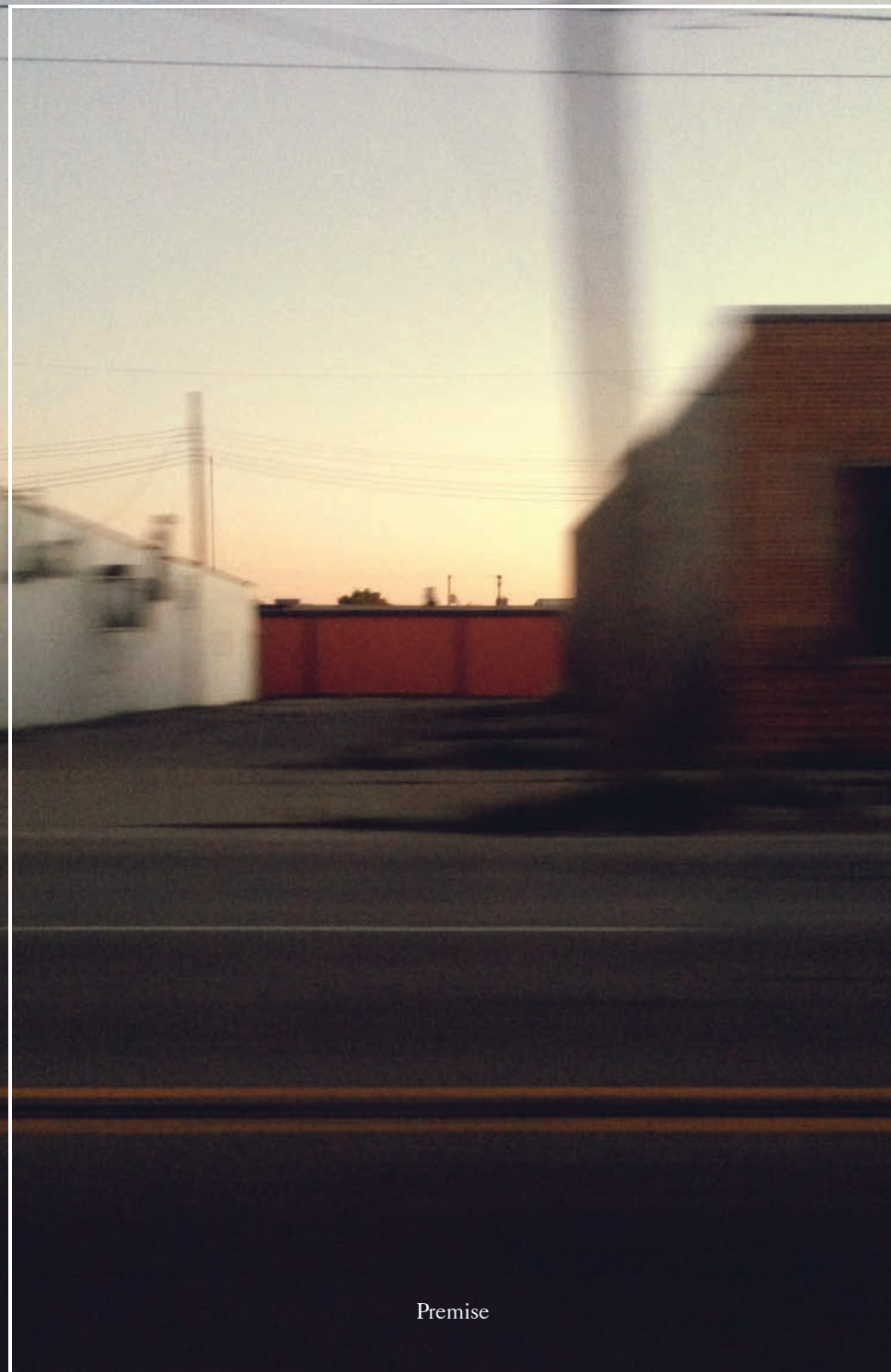
This iterative *presencing* is what makes Heidegger's framework hermeneutic, by which one[7] "exhibits itself as an entity which is in its world but at the same time is by virtue of the world in which it is."[8] Unplaces focus on ontological situatedness in the world through a spatial analog of the Bootstrap paradox. They are, in a certain sense, mirrors: just as they *presence* to us, we *presence* to them at the threshold of our bodies and minds. Like any continuous reciprocity of reflection, once you're in, it's hard to tell where the beginning is.

Which is the chicken and which is the egg? Once you look, you've already constructed the world as such. Unplaces capture our gaze and hold sway over the imagination because they are the quotidian territories that attend our routine presence in the world—residual spaces at the margin of everydayness, waysides to daily chores and habits, pathways, and procedures through the human environments that mediate every aspect of our lives. *Terrain vague*, therefore, is not at all necessarily metropolitan, and extends well beyond cities into blurry transition zones, the countryside, the wilderness, and even into the interiors thickly hidden within the sweeping tableau of the city. Rather than the charged sublimity of urban spaces rife with contingency, far more prosaic gaps in the built environment, where estrangement is not the predominant effect, are everywhere. Maybe it's the place where you leave your shopping cart, or the curb where you sit to drink a Big Gulp. Maybe it's when you hear what sounds like a thousand birds but the nearest trees are on the other site of an empty lot. It's the smell of earth arising from concrete, or the sheltering shadow of the adjacent face of the building where the fire exit that nobody uses opens to. Water's gathered there also, but you only ever notice this place when you're staying late for work, and at dusk you step outside for some air.

Everything that comprises daily life—mentionable and unmentionable—is involved, for Heidegger, in a synthesis of presence that forms a referential whole which we are always parsing, measuring, constructing again, and re-encountering again. Daily life loops are always and everywhere based on physical proximity, memory, wanton physical impulse, surging emotion, dumbfounded curiosity, and kinetic constraint alike. Sometimes this way of being isn't apparent until we encounter something like an unplace. Despite their everydayness, you must look to find unplaces. Most activity in the course of routine and average existence preoccupies us with certain needful concerns that sustain our attention. Everything else more or less falls away into the background; there, outside our concern, is an unplace. Unplaces are blips in the code, flashes in the corner of the eye—conspiracy theories, palimpsests, déja-vu, boundary-less waiting rooms of place, void of apparent resistance. The place image captures these moments in the blink of a shutter—with its click, the world echoes in the unplace just as in our own imaginations. *Did you hear that?* Like a deep photograph in the pinprick of the night sky reveals a recessing infinity of time and space, the uncanniness of unplaces is not from estrangement but from a wonderfully strange familiarity: as though form and material had a voice and it was telling you, somewhere in the encounter, that your life could change right here and now, even if you didn't notice.

6
Ibid., 188.

7
Heidegger uses *Dasein* rather than common personal pronouns. If you're wondering what Dasein is, it's a long story. For now, think of it as you. Your mind, heart, soul, and/or any combination of those things, and also sense of self and sensibility of everything else, your internal deep web, big data, etc.
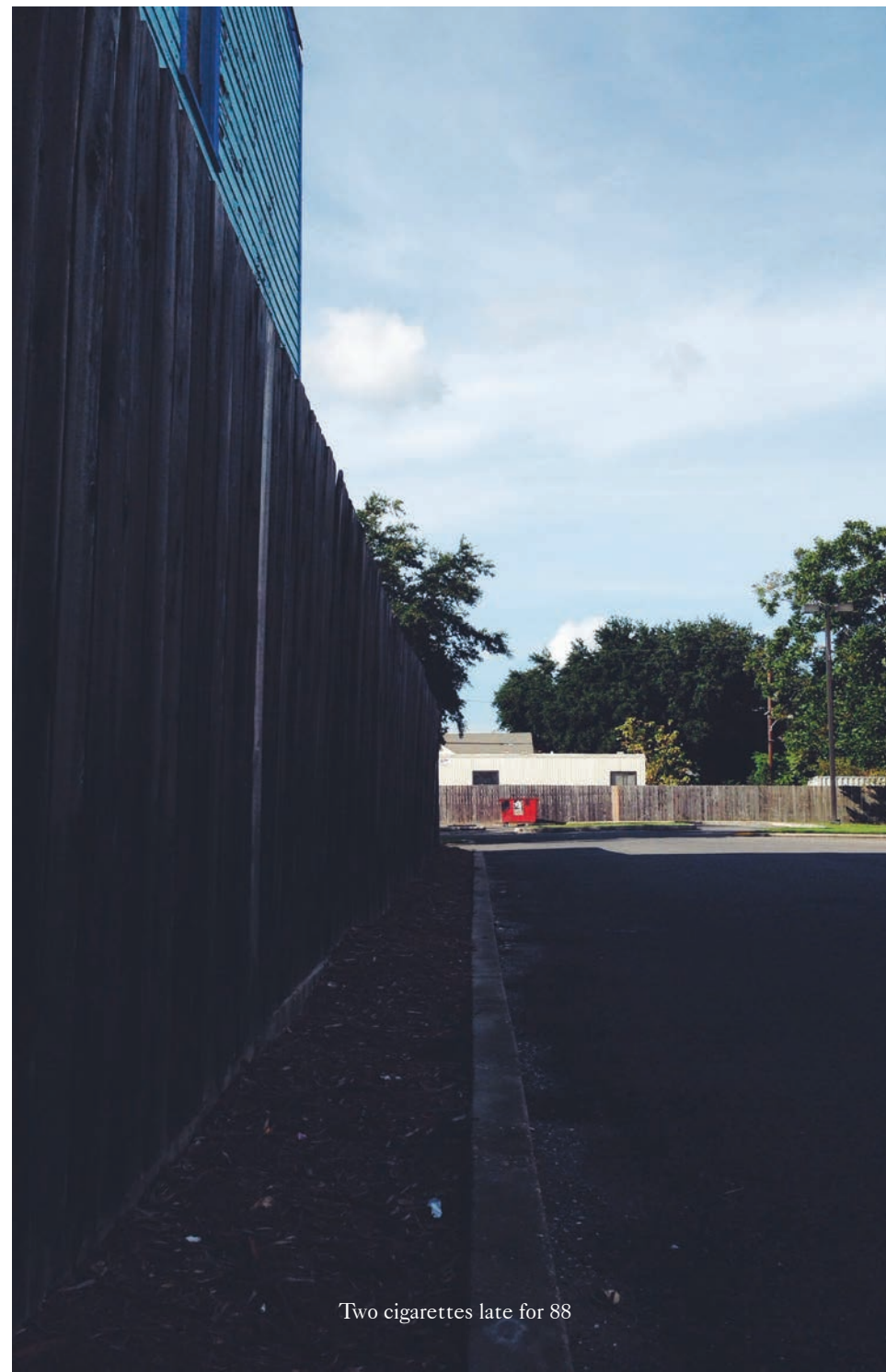
8
Martin Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1985), 202.

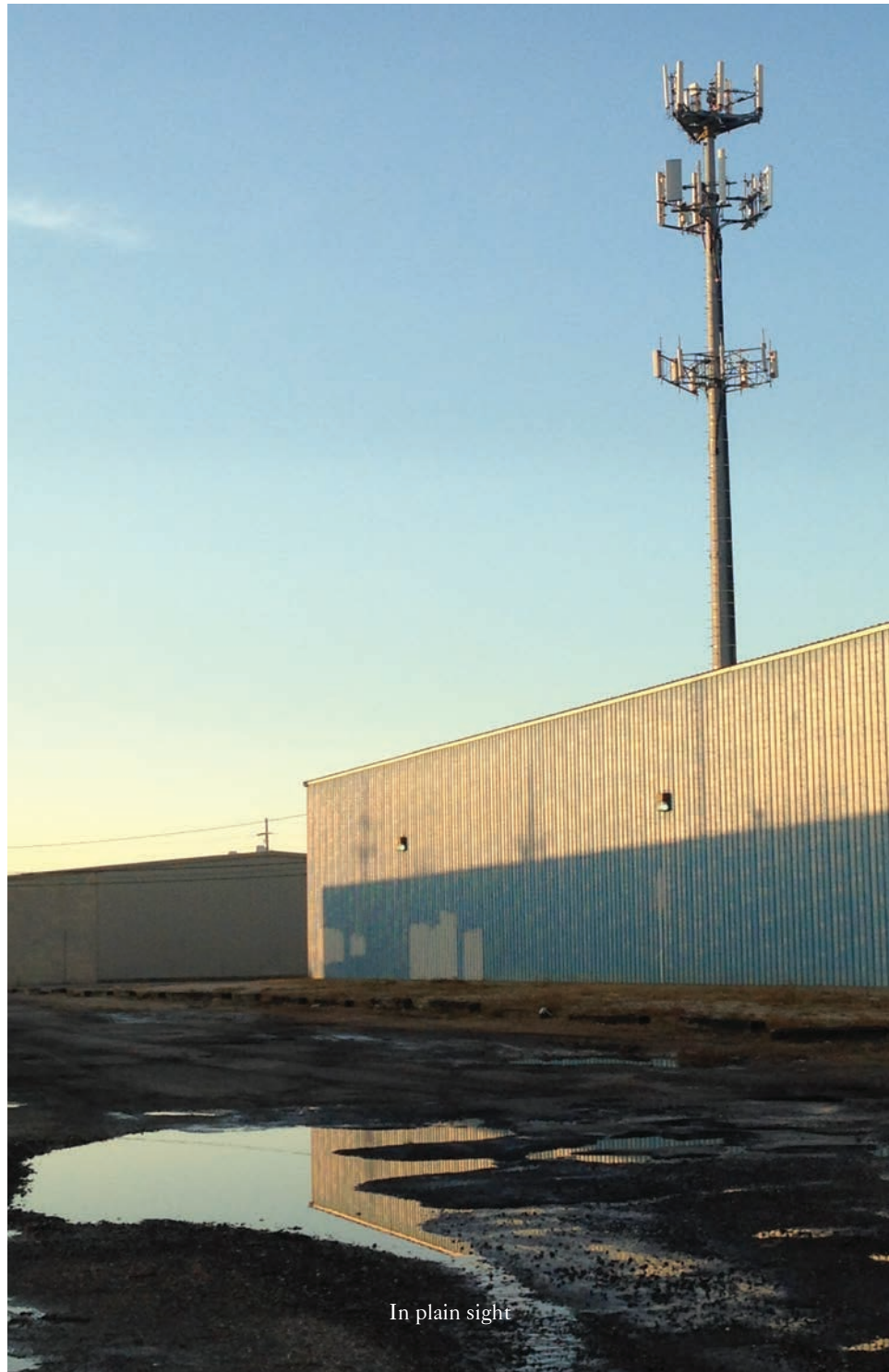Premise

Two cigarettes late for 88

Sunday's chemical rain

Contour of the kingdom

In plain sight

Finally your home has changed

Empty and then overflowinng

The kind of place where you could fall in love

Midsummer for elderly aunts

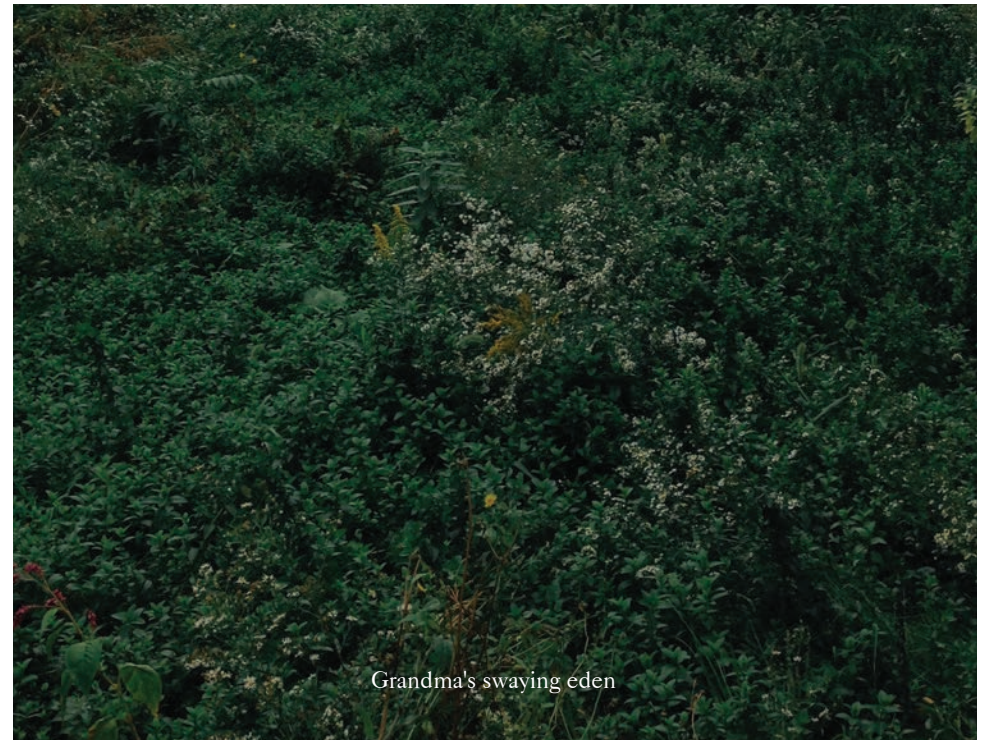
Mothballs for the melancholy

Fall Line

Hope/Hysteria

Safe harbor

Grandma's swaying eden
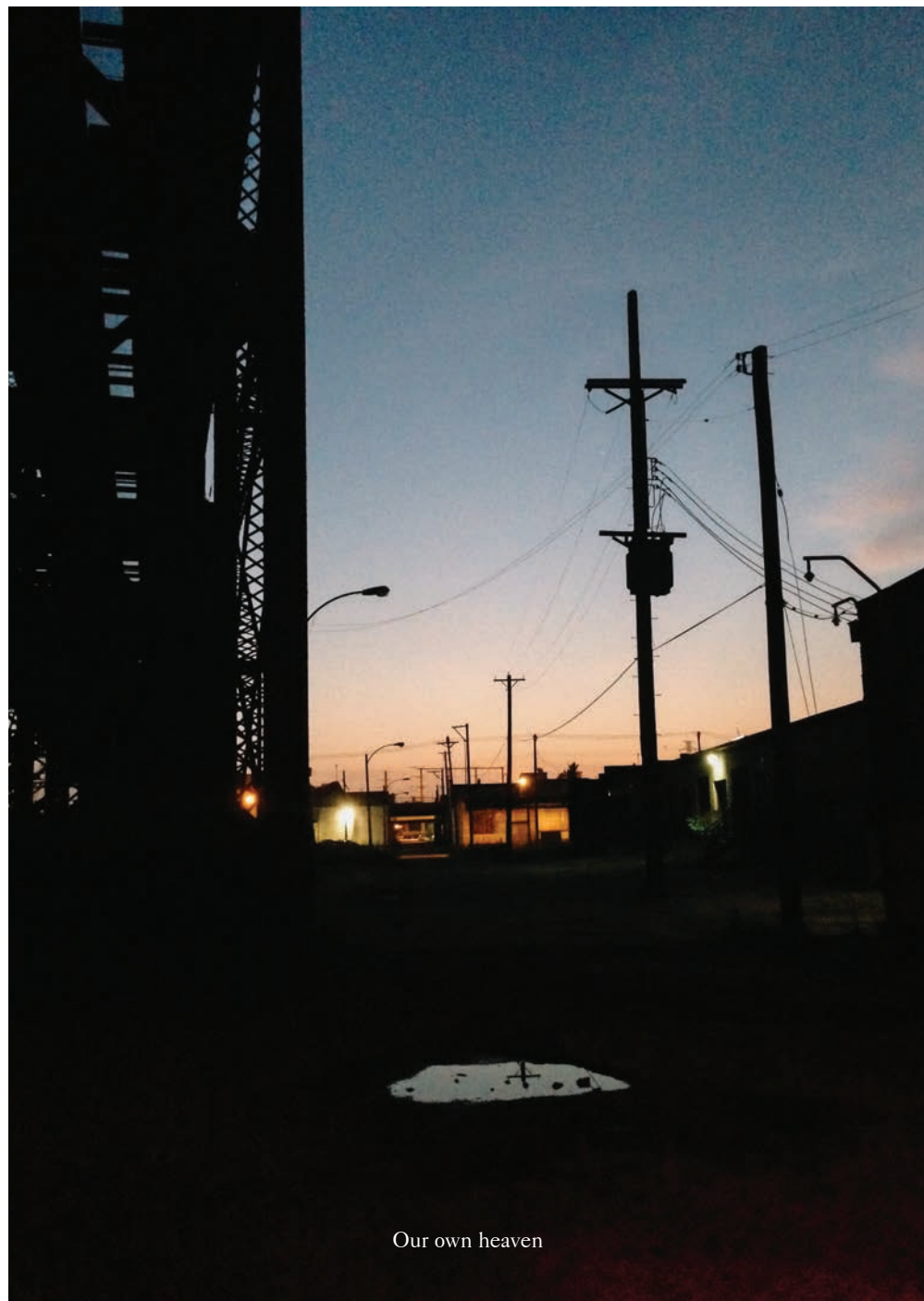
Beginning again

Geologic time

A thousand birds

Our own heaven

An unconditioned air

Be with me

Goodbye (beers for XTina)