

In *The Book of Lost Light*, Ron Nyren tells the heartbreaking and fascinating story of a man who wants to stop time, and his son. These beautifully written pages follow father and son through several earthquakes—the large one that wrecks the city of San Francisco and the several smaller ones that wreck their tiny family. I love these wonderfully stubborn characters and I love how, despite everything, time carries them to a new place. A ravishing debut.

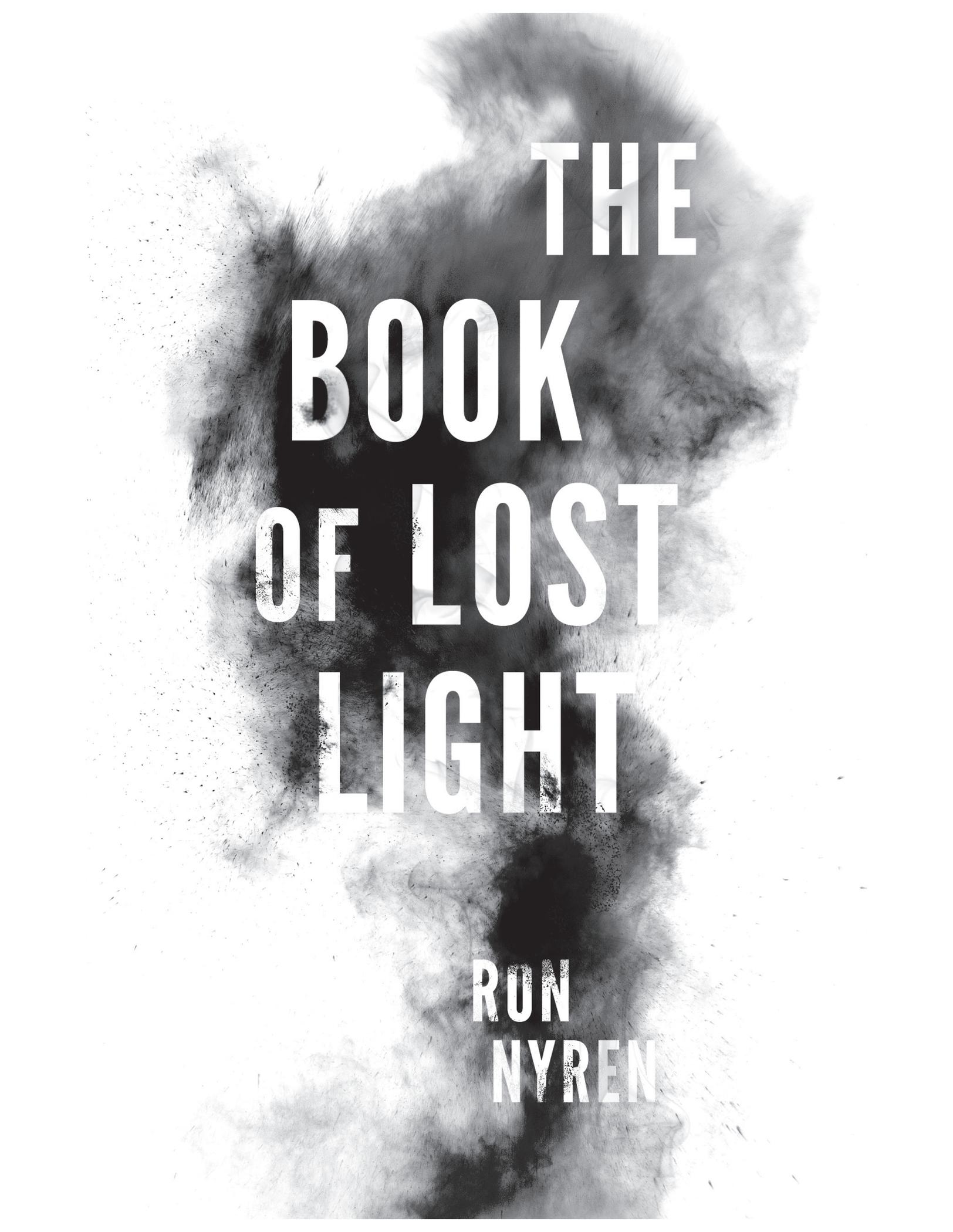
—MARGOT LIVESEY

As deep and luminous as a sequence of platinum prints, Ron Nyren's novel freezes time and sets it free, captures what was once, and what might be. A lovely and contemplative work of art.

—ANDREA BARRETT

This is a brilliant novel that shimmers with extraordinary beauty and power. It achieves one of the profoundest desires held by this band of memorable characters: to bring the soul to light in the surface of a work of art, to break through to something timeless, significant, transformative. A subtle, achingly gorgeous work of fiction that brings light and restoration to our human world.

—HARRIET SCOTT CHESSMAN



**THE
BOOK
OF LOST
LIGHT**

**RUN
NYREN**



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Lawrence
Press

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For Sarah,
for my mother, Lita Nyren,
and in memory of my father, Fred Nyren

CHAPTER ONE

From the time I was three months old until I was nearly fifteen, my father photographed me every afternoon at precisely three o'clock. When I was an infant, my cousin Karelia held me up for the camera. In later years, I walked on my own to my father's portrait studio, tossed my cap onto the hat rack, shook hands with customers, and waited for my father. In school, I was known as a strange fellow, daydreaming and bookish, terrible at throwing balls, overly theatrical. But in my father's studio, I was part of a grand scientific experiment. In one sense, standing at the eye of the Tetrscope was as commonplace for me as washing my face in the morning. In another sense, it was the most significant moment of each day—one more step in the staircase I believed my father would someday ascend to greatness.

When my father called me in, we might exchange a few words, but we would always fall silent as we waited for the clock to strike three. Karelia's voice drifted in from the reception area as she flirted with a customer to cajole him into buying extra prints or purchasing a more expensive frame. I felt the hour approach as distinctly as if the clock's hands brushed the nape of my neck.

A few minutes before three, I removed all my clothes and set them on a chair, taking care to avoid shifts of weight that could translate through the floorboards and misalign the mirrors in the Tetrscope's tubes. The noises of the street below faded—the shouts of paperboys touting news, the clop of horses' hooves, the infrequent bleat of an automobile horn. I savored my approach to the focal point, the point toward which the Tetrscope's four lenses bent their forces; it seemed to glow, like a dust fleck in sunlight. I cupped my heels in the white

semicircles painted on the floor, and the golden point floated right behind my breastbone.

When I remember my father in those days, I think longingly of his half-smile when Karelia or I said something that bemused him, or of him murmuring to a camera's broken shutter as he repaired it. He would concentrate as he held up a comparison print to make sure that I kept the same stance as always. "Raise your chin a quarter inch," he would say, or, "Flatten the left hand a little and bring the thumb in." I stifled the urge to fidget or make faces.

He finished adjusting the Tetrascope, and I felt myself come fully into alignment, edges sharply defined. It was as if yesterday's session had only just ended, as if tomorrow's would immediately follow, a long chain of photographs leading back to before I could remember and forward into all the years of glory to come. Finally, he lifted a finger in the air, and I held my breath until the shutter clicked.

One afternoon not long before we lost everything, when I was fourteen, he wondered aloud why time moved in only one direction. "If it reversed, would we notice?" he asked. "Or would we forget, second by second, until it began going forward again?"

I don't remember if I said anything in response. By then, I had grown self-conscious before the lens, doubtful of the value of his project, uncertain whether he was a genius or a madman. My mind was wandering, and I was restless to be off.

* * *

Eadweard Muybridge had fired my father a dozen years before I was born, but my father bore him no ill will. In fact, a photograph of Muybridge hung behind the reception desk in my father's portrait studio. It had been taken at Governor Leland Stanford's farm in Palo Alto in the summer of 1879. Muybridge stood at one end of a long shed. A long

row of assistants—photographers, jockeys, grooms—squatted along the shed’s whitewashed wall, from which protruded the lenses of twenty-four cameras. At the opposite end stood my father. At first glance, it could be difficult to tell him apart from his employer. Both he and Muybridge had beards reaching to their breastbones, both had their arms folded, their right foot slightly forward—even their hats were alike, though my father’s had a shorter crown, perhaps out of deference to his mentor, and his beard then was black, while Muybridge’s was gray. Like nearly all of my father’s photographs, this one was destroyed long ago.

More voluble in those days, my father told his customers about his work with Muybridge. “Photographing a pigeon in flight was one of our most difficult enterprises,” he would say, or, “Before Muybridge designed his electromagnetic shutters, it wasn’t possible to photograph a horse at a gallop.” If my father had no appointment scheduled, I could easily convince him to tell me more. We would sit in the reception area chairs, which creaked alarmingly with age, and I would listen and try to piece together the events that had led to our great secret enterprise.

On July 12, 1878, thirteen years before my birth, my father met Muybridge in the chambers of the San Francisco Art Association. My father was in his thirties, working as a mechanical engineer, but already a skilled amateur photographer; a self-portrait from that time showed him with a long oval face, round cheekbones, thin light-colored hair combed from a side part, and a short beard trailing from his chin, his mouth a grave line. He read in the morning *Chronicle* that Eadweard Muybridge—well-known for the 360-degree panorama of San Francisco he’d taken from the turret of the Hopkins Mansion on Nob Hill—would lecture that evening on “The Stride of a Trotting Horse.” Though my father had no particular interest in horses, the phrase “instantaneous photography” piqued his interest.

I imagine a warm evening, the men in the audience shrugging off their jackets, the women waving their fans, Muybridge’s assistant open-

ing windows to let out the stale air as he drew the shades to darken the room. Muybridge strode to the lectern, gazing out from beneath the fierce shelf of his brow. He cleared his throat, and the room fell silent.

Although artists were the first to attempt to depict the attitudes of animals in motion, he said, throughout the ages they all adopted the same conventions in rendering those attitudes. His aim was to show that their notions were inaccurate.

Muybridge's assistant dropped slides one by one into the projection lantern. A series of life-size photographs of a horse appeared, first standing straight, its rider erect; then both leaning forward as the horse began its run, only one foreleg on the ground; then trotting at full clip, legs folded beneath the body, none of them touching earth. Until these experiments were made, Muybridge said, it was a question among even very experienced horse drivers as to whether a horse was ever clear of the ground during a trot or always had at least one foot touching down. The slides advanced as Muybridge showed the audience what no human eye had ever detected. His photographs proved conclusively that at a moderate trot, the weight of the body is entirely unsupported.

Even eminent painters depicted horses striking the ground with a bent leg. "False!" he said. In other cases, they had the poor beast looking like a hobbyhorse. On the screen next to the projected photograph, a slide of a painting appeared: a horse with forelegs stretched out before and hind legs stretched out behind. I imagine a nervous laugh broke out among many of the audience members; what had looked so familiar all their lives now revealed itself as absurd.

My father seldom laughed; he would have leaned forward instead, pressing his tongue to his upper lip as he often did when concentrating. Muybridge's photograph was so precise, even the tip of the rider's whip was visible.

Muybridge explained how he had sent a horse trotting past a row

of twelve cameras fitted with a double-acting slide frame shutter of his own devising, each camera attached to a thread stretched across the track. The horse broke each thread with his breast as he ran, triggering each shutter in succession.

When the lecture was over, Muybridge remained talking with a pair of well-dressed men while his assistant packed up the lantern slides and projectors. My father lingered nearby, eager to approach. Apparently mistaking my father for someone else, Muybridge said, “Here’s a young man so interested he has attended two of my lectures in a row. Or are you one of my skeptics?”

“I believe you’re a genius,” my father answered.

Muybridge nodded, pleased, before turning back and resuming his conversation. One of the men asked Muybridge if he planned to extend his experiments to the locomotion of other animals. Muybridge answered that this was difficult—it was easy to send a horse running down a trackway strung with threads, but this would not work with goats or deer or hogs.

“Have you considered connecting the camera shutters to a clockwork mechanism instead?” my father said.

The two men, who had politely stood still during the first interruption, shifted on their feet. My father’s clothes were likely shabby, and though I’ve heard that Muybridge too was careless in his dress, my father lacked the dignity of age or accomplishment to compensate for the fade of his shirt or the fray of his cuffs.

“Are you a clockmaker?” Muybridge asked.

“I was a mechanical engineer. Now I’m a photographer.” In saying this, my father decided it was true: he would quit his job the next day and devote himself solely to the art of fixing images. “You could easily design a mechanism that would automatically take a rapid succession of exposures, rendering threads unnecessary.”

Muybridge seemed amused. "Have you experience in the darkroom?"

"Yes."

Here came my favorite part of the story, Muybridge's three questions.

"In a collodion negative, transparent spots may be caused by undissolved particles of iodides in the ether and alcohol; what would you add to prevent this?"

"A drop or two of water, or bromide of ammonium, or diluted alcohol."

"An albumen print suffers from mealiness. What's the remedy?"

"Submerge it for about ten minutes in two ounces of water mixed with eighteen grains of acetate of soda."

"Can I see your hands?" Muybridge examined the silver nitrate stains on my father's fingers. "I don't have any use for you now. Write to me at this address." And he gave my father his business card, along the top of which were printed the words "HELIOS, the Flying Studio."

My father had bought his first camera years ago, intending only to disassemble it and discover how it functioned. He had taken a few photographs, but didn't pay it much attention until, the year before he met Muybridge, the steamship Pacific had sunk off the coast of San Francisco, drowning my father's parents.

He kept his father's medical bag as a memento on the dresser in his bedroom. The only medical instrument remaining was a stethoscope, which, once I grew old enough, my father sometimes allowed me to handle. The bag also held a few Finnish coins, *markka*, from my grandparents' homeland; a brooch of my grandmother's; a newspaper clipping describing the steamship accident; and an envelope with the sole photograph he had taken of them.

"After they died, it struck me how remarkable it was to have an image of them as they were when they were alive," he told me. My grandparents stand stiffly side by side, not touching but quite close, in

front of the small white house in Sacramento where my father and his brother William grew up. Slight overexposure blurred their features in the sunlight. I suppose that when my father had gazed at the photograph in the wake of their deaths, their faces must have been still fresh enough in his mind that memory could fill in what was lost.

Some months after the lecture, my father wrote to Muybridge offering his assistance again. He received no reply. By now my father was working as a photographer for the South Pacific Coast Railroad, documenting construction work and supplying publicity photos of depots and trains. He wrote Muybridge again a month later, sending him his own experiments in capturing time: photographs of an apple decaying over the course of a week; a grove of trees viewed at morning, noon, and afternoon, slashed by three different slants of shadow.

In May 1879, nearly a year after the lecture, the newspaper reported that Muybridge was resuming his work with motion on a grander scale. The next day, my father rode the train to the peninsula and walked to the farm of the former governor and immensely wealthy railroad tycoon Leland Stanford, the project's sponsor, who had initiated the original experiments by hiring Muybridge to determine whether a horse was ever entirely clear of the ground during a trot.

At last my father reached a long white shed alongside Stanford's training track. On the opposite side of the track, a high wooden fence had been draped with white sheets marked with equally spaced, numbered vertical lines. A jockey cantered at the far side of the field while two men stretched fresh threads across the track.

Muybridge came out of the shed, calling back sharply to someone.

"My name is Arthur Kylander," my father said. "We met in San Francisco some time ago, and I offered you my services—I've fifteen years of experience as a mechanical engineer and nearly a year as a professional photographer. I wrote you letters, but I assumed you were too

busy to reply, and so I thought I would visit the farm myself—”

“Yes, take up cameras nineteen and twenty,” Muybridge said irritably, gesturing to the shed entrance, and stalked on to examine the readiness of the track.

As he learned later, Muybridge had fired one of his photographic assistants for botching a print that morning. He had recently doubled the number of cameras he used for his experiments, but had trouble rounding up enough capable men to operate them.

My father quit the railway company. He found the work at Palo Alto Farm exhilarating: inside the shed, he and the other assistants each coated a glass plate in viscous acid, then slid it into a camera. The horse ran past, the shutters clicked in sequence, and all along the length of the shed, each assistant snatched plates and developed them in the dark-room behind them before the plates dried and the image was lost.

Depending on the day’s needs, my father would supervise the operating of the cameras, or repair touchy shutters, or correct short circuits. Together, he and Muybridge perfected the clockwork mechanism that made possible the photography of dogs and goats in motion.

Governor Stanford himself visited during one of their first trials of the device, and afterward, Muybridge told Stanford that my father had been essential to the work, that he possessed “exceedingly fine skills with all things mechanical.” Stanford shook my father’s hand and said, “I expect great things from my you.” My father felt honored, galvanized, even, not only by the compliment but also by the electricity of the governor’s physical presence. With the backing of someone as influential and wealthy as Leland Stanford, what great visions might they not all realize?

One September evening not long after, my father was returning from Palo Alto Farm to his boardinghouse on the California Avenue streetcar, standing in a crowd of men wearing the same kind of hat—members of some club, no doubt. I’ve always pictured the hat

as a short-brimmed affair with a flat crown and red stripes, but likely this was my own invention—my father didn't tend to notice or remember clothes.

Preoccupied with his own thoughts, he almost missed his stop. As he rushed toward the door before it closed, he collided with one of the club members. The red-striped hat flew off and landed in a young woman's lap.

She picked it up with delight, as if it had landed from the sky, and put it on her head. "Thank you," she said. "I felt so left out until now." The club members laughed. She looked up at my father and, mistaking him for the hat's owner, stretched it out to him.

In confusion, he took it. "Thank you," he said, and their fingers touched. The man he had collided with beckoned impatiently. My father returned the hat, blushing at the thought that he might be perceived as a thief. The door closed, and the streetcar resumed its journey, so my father grasped a pole and stared straight ahead until the next stop, where he disembarked without a word. Yet he followed the streetcar with his eyes as it continued on. At the next stop the young woman disembarked and walked up a staircase into a house.

Later he would try to recall the color of her eyes, he told me: green, he thought, and her hair was black. He wished he had been able to study her face until he'd memorized it. From then on, whenever he returned from work, he hoped to glimpse her, to talk to her, though he didn't know what he would say. He calculated that she had gone into one of three houses. Once he saw a hand adjust a curtain on the second floor of one of the houses, and several times he saw children running to or from a house, but he never saw her.

I believe it was not long afterward that my father's relationship with Muybridge began to deteriorate. One evening, my father was alone in the shed repairing a camera. Muybridge came in carrying a heavy object,

which he placed at one end of the long room. He began to assemble it—it consisted of a magic-lantern slide projector and an apparatus with a hand crank and two vertical disks. Muybridge extinguished the room's lamps, lit the device's lantern, and began turning the crank, rotating the disks. Against the opposite wall, the silhouette of a phantom horse began trotting in place.

Tonight, Stanford was holding a party, he said, hosting the wealthy of San Francisco—owners of banks and railroads and mining enterprises and shipping concerns. “I’ve decided it’s time for the Zoogyroscope to make its debut.”

Jerky and stiff, composed of a sequence of twelve images of a horse that repeated themselves, the gleaming square of light nevertheless gave a convincing illusion of motion.

“Astounding,” my father said. Muybridge had made a few references to his latest invention, but this was the first my father had seen of it. “They’ll talk of nothing else for days.”

Muybridge must have heard reluctance in my father’s voice. “I suppose you have a mechanical improvement to suggest?”

My father circled the device, examining it, but said nothing.

I imagine Muybridge letting go of the crank and the horse slowing, becoming twelve horses again, drifting to a halt between two slides, the front half of one regarding the tail of another.

“If you have a concern, you must tell me,” Muybridge said.

“Your design is impeccable,” my father said. “My only hesitation is that the value of the work we’ve been doing is that it shows what the eye cannot see on its own. To reconstitute these images into an apparently moving picture reproduces what we see in everyday life. Will it advance everything you’ve worked so hard to document, or overshadow it? Will people still be interested in the insights we gain from capturing and studying a sequence of moments, or will they only clamor for the illusion of motion?”

“One project doesn’t preclude the other.”

“Of course,” my father said. He bent to look closely at the projected image.

“You’re right, that is not a photograph,” Muybridge admitted, though my father hadn’t spoken. “I hired an artist to draw elongated versions of the horse based on each image in the sequence. I tried using photographs, but the images weren’t distinct enough to make out from a distance, and they appeared compressed because of the swift rotation of the disc.”

My father chose his next words carefully. Muybridge had murdered a man only five years earlier—his wife’s lover—and been acquitted by the jury on grounds of justifiable homicide. Muybridge estimated him highly, but had a temper. “They’re very skillfully drawn. My only fear is that this device might lead susceptible people away from a true understanding of time.”

Muybridge extinguished the Zoogyroscope’s lantern, plunging the room into darkness. He opened the door and stood, silhouetted in the fading light of evening, gazing across the field. At last he turned back to the Zoogyroscope. The discs he slid into cloth sleeves. The rest he lowered into a canvas bag, which he hoisted. Without a word, he left my father alone in the room and walked toward Stanford’s mansion.

My father was correct in predicting the success of the Zoogyroscope—it was received with excitement at Stanford’s party, and when Muybridge demonstrated it in subsequent lectures in San Francisco, the size of his audiences more than tripled. Muybridge suspended the photographic work at Palo Alto Farm whenever he traveled outside the area to give a lecture, often letting weeks elapse. For my father, these interruptions were a lost opportunity.

Hoping to reignite Muybridge’s interest in their original work, my father suggested doubling the number of cameras from twenty-four to

forty-eight and lengthening the shed so that more of the animals' transit could be recorded, thus permitting a comparison of changes in gait over time. Or else keep the shed the same length, but pack forty-eight cameras into the space of twenty-four, and in this way they could study every muscle movement an animal made. "Ideally, of course, we'd take both measures at once, but the challenge of operating ninety-six cameras simultaneously and developing the film would be significant," my father said.

Muybridge shook his head. My father changed tactics. "Another possible improvement, which Stanford might find of great interest, would be to photograph the same horse running the same pace on days of different weather conditions, to see if temperature affects the gait."

"I have plenty of ideas of my own," Muybridge said, and walked away.

From time to time, Stanford would visit the track to see how the project was going. One evening, when my father was walking back to the train to San Francisco, Stanford rode up on Mahomet, a horse they had photographed many times, and stopped to chat.

"You're Muybridge's mechanical engineer, aren't you?" Stanford asked, perched on his saddle, his new leather boots gleaming despite the dust covering them. "The operation has expanded considerably in recent years."

"He runs everything with great efficiency," my father said. Stanford continued to ask more questions, probing ones, which my father answered as best he could.

"Tell me," Stanford said abruptly, "how long until this enterprise has discovered all that it can discover?"

My father hesitated. He worried that Stanford had grown bored of the project and would shut down the operation. So he said that plenty of possibilities lay ahead and described with enthusiasm the ideas that he'd suggested to Muybridge. Then he stopped himself. "Of course, he has ideas of his own, and if you ask him, I'm sure he'll tell you."

Stanford turned his horse toward a figure riding in the distance from the farm—Mrs. Stanford. “He’s more of a showman than I suspected,” Stanford said. “Will we lose him to the lecture circuit?”

My father had the same concern, but he said only, “He may spend more time on the road, but he’s shown every sign of devotion to the work you’ve hired him to carry out. And he has, in me and in his team, men fully capable of carrying on his vision if he is not present, should you deem it necessary.”

“I appreciate your honesty.” Stanford spurred his horse and rode off to join his wife.

Two mornings later, when my father’s train pulled up at Mayfield Station, one of the other photographers met him on the platform. “Arthur,” he said. “Muybridge sent me to say that you need not come anymore.”

“Need not come?”

“He said that you were no longer welcome.”

My father stood silently for a moment. “There must be a misunderstanding.”

The man looked abashed. “He and Stanford got into one of their arguments again last night. Apparently you spoke ill of him to the governor?”

“Then the governor has misconstrued my words. I’ll go to Muybridge and straighten this out.”

“I was told to make sure you do not.”

My father walked toward Palo Alto Farm anyway, leaving his colleague to follow behind fretfully. He rehearsed what he might say, trying to check his anger, knowing that Muybridge’s temper was swift and prodigious. He would appeal with rational arguments, he decided.

Muybridge was at the track, giving directions to the owner of the pair of oxen they were scheduled to photograph that morning. Muybridge ignored his approach and finished the conversation. When the man

walked back to his animals, Muybridge turned and glared at my father.

“Eadweard,” my father said. “If Stanford believed I criticized you in any way, he’s mistaken. Why would you send me away? I’m your most useful pair of hands, you’ve acknowledged this—I understand your work and your thinking completely, I can do any task as well as you can.”

Muybridge spat in the dirt by my father’s feet. “The world doesn’t need a second Muybridge,” he said. He stalked toward the camera shed, pausing only to turn and shout, “Nor do I!”

* * *

“It was a terrible blow to me, to be fired in front of so many of my colleagues, to be exiled from the great enterprise we had been working on so long,” my father told me. “For a week, I could hardly do anything, I was so miserable and angry. But I came to see that Muybridge and I were too much alike, after all, to work together for long. And Stanford was really the one at fault, I believe. A great man, a visionary, yet he didn’t trust Muybridge enough, and that made him a poor patron in the end. He would later go on to betray Muybridge.”

When Muybridge was giving lectures in Europe, Stanford published a book about the horse in motion with drawings based on Muybridge’s photographs; on the title page, Stanford credited a physiologist friend of his as the book’s author, and mentioned Muybridge only once, in the preface, as a “very skilful photographer” he had employed. When this came to light, Muybridge was humiliated in front of the council of the London Royal Society for appearing to claim greater credit than he was due, and his remaining invitations to lecture overseas were revoked.

In exile from Palo Alto Farm, my father was out of a job. He knew two things: he didn’t want to go back to photographing for a railway company, and he wanted to see again the woman he’d met on the street-

car. Even though her face remained elusive, he hadn't forgotten her, the graceful way she'd put the hat on her head and then extended it to him. Now that he didn't have work to consume him, he thought of her more and more often. Of course, he knew she might have been only visiting on the day he'd seen her—she might live somewhere else entirely.

He had business cards printed with the words "portrait photographer" below his name. He showed me one once—the a's stood slightly higher than the other letters, as if jumping into the air, a typographical error he hoped no one would notice. "I didn't want to wait for the printer to correct it," he told me.

He had never taken any portraits, so he persuaded the widow who owned his boardinghouse to let her two daughters sit for him. When he'd printed portraits to his satisfaction, he slung his portable darkroom over one shoulder and set out for California Avenue.

No one was home at the first house. He tried the second, where an elderly man gladly sat for his portrait. I picture him talking the whole time about his parakeet, who had died early in the year, and who, whenever the man was sad, would fly up and rest its head against his cheek—but I believe I'm importing this detail from one of the customers who buttonholed me at my father's studio once. By now, I've thought of this story so often, it's as if it's one of my own memories, and I no longer remember which parts my father told me and which I imagined.

As my father approached the third house, he could hear a piano playing, which stopped when he rang the bell. He waited. The house needed a good coat of paint. I imagine his nervously wobbling a loose brick in the step.

An older woman opened the door. "We had our portraits done at Symes not two months ago. Are you going up and down the street? I've told all of our neighbors to go to Symes. They do fine work and they don't mark up their prices like some others do."

My father was about to turn away when he heard someone coming down the staircase. A young woman's voice said, "Mother, I hate that portrait of me. I look like a statue of Dignity."

She had black hair and green eyes, and my father found her lovely, with high cheekbones, a small chin, and a birthmark he hadn't noticed before on the line of her jaw. She was taller than he recalled. She said, "I've been telling all our neighbors to go to anyone but Symes." Did she recognize him? She gave no sign. "Let me see your samples," she said. "Symes had samples, of course, but I let my mother delude me into believing that it was the people in them who were ill favored, rather than his style of photography."

She leafed through the samples he had brought. "These resemble real women," she told her mother. "I like them."

"Do you have references?" the mother asked.

"Your neighbor," my father said, "Mr. Vignola."

"I can't bear him. How much do you charge?"

He told her the fees he had worked out in advance, this much for this many portraits, that much for these kinds of prints, and an awkward silence fell—he suspected his rates were much lower than Symes's.

"Please, mother, you know I've been unhappy about that horrible image of me. I'll pay for this myself, out of the gift Aunt Helen gave me."

The mother shrugged, and the young woman clapped her hands. They agreed he would return the following afternoon for the sitting. "You have my card," my father said, "but I don't know your name."

"Emily," she said.

The next day, in the back parlor, my father unfolded the legs of his portable darkroom and started to work. Beneath its cloak, he coated a number of glass plates with collodion and silver nitrate solution while Emily's mother brushed her daughter's hair. He still had little experience with portraits, so he allowed Emily to sit as she pleased, her mother standing by

the window watching. First Emily sat stiffly, looking directly at the camera.

“Don’t make my birthmark disappear,” Emily said, touching it lightly with her fingertip. “I won’t recognize myself.”

“Of course not,” he said. He pretended to adjust the camera; gradually she relaxed, and he photographed her unawares.

“Have you been a photographer long?”

He began telling them about his work under Muybridge. She had read about Muybridge’s work in the newspapers. “I’ve never ridden a horse,” she said, “but now that I know that they barely touch the ground when they run, I want to.”

“We’ve also photographed athletes,” he said. “Fencing, boxing. An extraordinary series of a man turning a back somersault—each stage is astonishing. First he’s standing straight, ordinary in every way. Then you see him slumped forward with his knees bent. Then he’s tilted at an impossible diagonal, with his toes lifted right above the ground. The next plate shows him perfectly horizontal in the air, as if a magician has levitated him. Next his legs are drawn up as if he’s sitting in a chair, with his hands beneath his knees, except that there is no chair and he’s upside down. And in the final image, he stands safely on his feet again, as if he has never moved.”

“I would love to see that,” she said.

“Are you photographing a circus?” put in her mother. She still held the hairbrush, turning it around in her hands as if she were ready to rush in at any point and smooth straying locks.

“Athletes from the Olympic Club,” my father answered.

“I plan to be an actress,” Emily said. “Will you take me as Antigone?” she said, draping the end of a sheer white curtain about her head.

“Antigone’s veil would be black,” her mother said.

“If my art is good enough,” she answered, adopting a grief-stricken expression, “then it will look black.”

She insisted that he photograph her in motion “à la Muybridge,” and when he said he lacked the equipment for that, she had him take three pictures of her, posed as if she were at different stages of her stride. When he developed the negatives and showed them to her, she said she had never liked her image better. “See,” she told her mother, pointing at the Antigone negative, “my veil is black, and my hair is white with grief.”

He promised to bring her prints by the end of the week. As the two women showed him to the door, Emily asked, “Do you photograph weddings?”

“Symes—” her mother began.

“Weddings?” asked my father.

“The date hasn’t been set precisely yet, I’m afraid.”

“Symes is—”

“Symes could be disinvited,” Emily said.

My father took off his hat and held it tightly. He hadn’t noticed an engagement ring on her finger—the possibility hadn’t even occurred to him. He had spent the whole time concentrating on her face, which he could look at without stint through the viewfinder. He felt he couldn’t look now. “I offer my congratulations, but I’m not a wedding photographer.” He turned and walked down the street, lugging his camera on one shoulder and the darkroom on the other.

Although my father was deeply disappointed, he nevertheless developed the images and returned to her house with the prints later that week. She exclaimed over them and insisted that she would introduce him to her friend, that Symes must not be allowed to tarnish her friend’s memories of her happiest day. The wedding Emily had mentioned was not her own, then.

And so my father was invited back to the house to meet the friend, and again to go over the arrangements once the day had been set. As he was departing after this last meeting, my father said that he planned to

take his camera to Woodward's Garden soon, and he would be honored if Emily and her friend would be willing to come along and enliven his photographs. She said yes.

Emily told him she did have a suitor, a law school student, whom her mother favored as a prospect, but she found him wanting: listless at his studies, always complaining about the dryness of lectures. She loved to hear my father describe his work with Muybridge. She said my father was a genius.

My mother and father eloped in 1880. My father joined a large portrait photography studio on Market Street. For a long time, they lived in a tiny one-room apartment on Steiner Street in San Francisco, behind a German restaurant; my mother came to hate the smell of sausage.

In the first seven years of the marriage, my mother gave birth to two children, neither of whom survived past the first month. Her own mother died during this time, and my father preferred not to describe those sad years.

I was born August 1, 1891. When I made my entrance into the world, my mother said, "This one will live. I can tell from the expression on his face." My father was skeptical, as I was a scrawny thing.

Or perhaps it was Karelia who told me those were my mother's words.

What everyone agrees on is that toward nightfall my mother began hemorrhaging, and before dawn she died.

* * *

My father would never say much about what happened in the weeks following, except that he drew the curtains and spent nearly all of his time in bed. After a few days, he managed to write two letters. One he sent to the portrait studio where he worked, to notify the owners of

his wife's death and to say that he would not be able to carry out his duties until further notice. The other he mailed to Paul Whitaker, who had been a friend of his and his brother's when they were young and living in Sacramento. He hadn't seen Whitaker or his brother since the two had traveled north together to settle in Canada not long after the sinking of the steamship Pacific. He wished he could have written to his brother, but William had died.

A Hungarian family in the flat above, the Hajdus, looked after him. Two of the Hajdu daughters had recently given birth, and they wet-nursed me. In the evenings, Mrs. Hajdu brought my father paprika chicken, potato soup, pork gulyas, and cabbage noodle dishes. He ate little.

One morning in early September, a knock came on the door, at first so hesitant he thought it was only footsteps on the stairs. Too heavy with grief to rise, he dozed off.

A loud pounding woke him. He climbed out of bed, opened the door, and was nearly hit by a shoe. A skinny girl in canvas overalls and a heavy coat stood in the hall, her pale hair blown about, in one hand the shoe with which she had been banging, in the other hand an envelope with his name on it.

He took it, mystified, and scanned the letter inside. *We offer our deepest condolences.... We are sending you your niece Karelia.... She is very capable and knows how to look after infants. She is not happy at home, and we believe she will be of great help to you during this difficult time.*

Quickly she slipped inside and set down the sack she carried, as if to establish a claim. Her gaze quickly fixed on something behind him: the loaf of bread the Hajdus had left the night before.

"I'll cut you a slice if you wash your hands," he said. When she did not move, he clarified: "You'll have to wash your hands first." They looked filthy. Also, she stank. He led her to the sink and turned it on for her—he wondered if she'd seen running water before. She spent

nearly five minutes scrubbing her fingers. He buttered a slice of bread and watched her devour it. He cut her another slice, gave her a drink of water, and reread the letter from Paul Whitaker.

“Did anyone travel with you?” he asked.

Having eaten the second slice of bread, she sat, unmoving, at the kitchen table.

“Can you speak?” said my father.

“Yes.”

“How old are you?”

She gripped the table.

“Fifteen.”

He judged her to be no more than twelve or thirteen.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I wasn’t expecting anyone. He might at least have sent the letter beforehand.” How this scrawny untalking girl could be of any use was beyond him. “Are you tired?”

She gave him a glazed, imploring look. He rose, stripped the sheets from his bed—which hadn’t been washed in weeks—and remade it clumsily with fresh ones. She crawled on top of it fully clothed and fell asleep.