The Slide: Introduction

The classroom stages collisions between the unknowing and knowledge, forcing the "Ah-ha!" and "Eureka!" moments that lead to learning. A classroom encounter, like any confrontation with the unknown, has the potential to be scary... especially if, as the narrator whose lecture is the text of E.W.H. Thornton's "The Slide" reveals immediately, the class focuses on "Mortality and the Photographic Image." Studying images of death brings death into the realm of the living. Oddly, the images on this story's screen appear courtesy of an old celluloid slide projector, not data from software such as PowerPoint. The sounds of the analog, fixed in relation to time, signal how easily an image can allow you to slip in time, to connect with the life and the death of the past. An interesting point about "The Slide:" real images inspire much of it. People have been arguing about a special relationship between photography and death since photographic technology was invented. Maybe even an occult relationship. "The Slide" is gradual, but you might be surprised by how far it takes you. After the collision in the classroom, will your world ever be the same?

About E.W.H. Thornton

E.W.H. Thornton's work has appeared on *The NoSleep Podcast*, in the *BlazeVOX Journal*, *Dark Dead Things Magazine*, *Unorthodox Fiction*, and *After The Storm Magazine*. They maintain a blog presenting magazine content from pre-, mid-, and post-World War Two era America, with a focus on the golden age of pulp fiction. It can be found at https://thegildedcentury.tumblr.com.

They also occasionally write about the more bizarre, lurid, and tragic aspects of video game history at https://www.giantbomb.com/profile/lostsol/blog/.

The Slide

by E.W.H. Thornton

Hello class, welcome to Mortality and the Photographic Image in Popular Culture. I know that's a mouthful. I originally just wanted to call it Photography and Mortality, but one of my colleagues told me it sounded too much like I was trying to be clever, and I had to agree. I'll be your teacher for this semester, Professor Melinda Baines, spelled like it sounds.

Thank you for coming on this journey with me. Photography and videography are so ubiquitous these days it's possible taking a picture was one of the very first things you did as a child after developing fine motor skills. When I was your age, I was still trapped in an era of darkrooms: cramped enclosures of hideous, unnatural red light and vats of noxious chemicals, something that's probably as difficult for you to imagine as growing up without television is for me.

It always amazes me that students still want to study photography at a university level, and I appreciate all of you making the effort to learn more about the art of freezing a moment in time. Since cameras are so ubiquitous and easy to use now, this course will focus more on theory than practice.

To give you an idea of the sort of broad approach I intend to take, I'm going to begin by showing you a few photographs from history and discussing how they relate to one another, linking past and present.

low steady white noise of small fan spinning deep within complex of mechanical guts

Speaking of the past, that whirring sound you hear is the cooling fan of the ancient Leica slide projector I'm going to be using to display the photos. I hope you'll accept this bit of nostalgia on my part. Before slide projectors became commercially available, their primitive seventeenth century ancestors were called magic lanterns. There's a hint of the miraculous in that name that still appeals to me, a sense of romance I feel connected to by using this ancient thing, so I beg your indulgence in letting me cling to this sliver of a bygone era.

My T.A. will be our cameraman, manually changing the slides so I don't have to retreat to the back of the classroom every time I need to show a new photograph. Please give him your gratitude and consider it a foretaste of the glamorous intellectual life those of you contemplating grad school can look forward to.

It's time to view our first photo. If all the content warnings in the syllabus and the name of this course weren't indication enough, please be aware, I *will* be showing you disturbing real life images. Consider this your final warning, and feel free to remove yourself from the classroom if you think it'll be too much for you.

No one?

All right.

Let's proceed.

Darkness, please.

Slide.

dry click of slide moving in projector flooded by incandescent radiance

This photograph of Evelyn Francis McHale is popularly known as "Sleeping Beauty," and it's easy to see why. With her serene expression, posture of graceful repose, closed eyes, and the way she's gently enfolded by soft, pillowy fabric, she is beauty personified, a fairy tale come to life.

But she's not alive. On April 30, 1947, Evelyn McHale committed suicide by jumping from the observation deck of the Empire State Building. She fell 86 stories, a distance of 1050 feet. The material cushioning her in this photo isn't fabric, but the metal roof of a car caved in by her body's impact. Note the crystals of broken glass, scattered like diamonds on satin.

This photo of her fresh corpse, published worldwide, has left us with two enduring mysteries: Why did she take her own life, and how did a human body traveling at 177 miles per hour collide with steel and remain perfectly intact, not a hair out of place?

The question of "how" has been largely dismissed, the perfect beauty resulting from her violent death written off as a remarkable coincidence.

The question of "why" is less easily ignored. Evelyn McHale left a suicide note, the first sentence of which reads:

"I don't want anyone in or out of my family to see any part of me."

The mass publication of this photo can seem to add an additional note of tragic irony to her death—however, if we look at it from another perspective, it's possible to interpret it as Evelyn getting what she wanted, all her pain and despair eclipsed by an immortal image of sublime beauty.

Beauty can be a mask.

Even in death.

We'll return to this image—in the end, we always will—but for now we'll be venturing further back into the past; 93 years, to be precise.

Slide.

shift as carousel twitches with rise of one slide and fall of another in choreographed unison twin sounds mingling into one isolated shudder

This photo of a landscape riddled with dozens of cannonballs is largely agreed to be the very first instance of war photography. Popularly known as "Valley of the Shadow of Death," it was taken by the British photographer Roger Phenton in 1855 during the Crimean War.

It is also fake. It has been indisputably proven to be staged, with the cannonballs added after the battle was over.

When the era of modern photography first began, there was great hope it would make for a more just and honest world since photographs could only capture exactly what happened. By removing the human element from recording events, mistakes and lies would be eliminated, leaving only truth.

Needless to say, the opposite happened, and people immediately began using the new technology to lie.

Slide.

dry twist of interlocking plastic and metal snap up through whirling fan's placid hum

This photo, taken by William H. Mumler in the early 1860s, is widely believed to be the first example of Spirit Photography, which purported to capture ghosts on film. The appearance of this pale, transparent silhouette was the result of a simple error in the development process. There is no possible way William Mumler wasn't aware of his mistake, but he didn't let that stop him from claiming to be able to photograph people's departed loved ones. The practice of spirit photography flourished in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when enterprising frauds used double exposures to insert ghostly figures into normal portraits. In retrospect, putting that much effort into deluding mourners wasn't necessary, not when people wracked by grief were just as willing to see those they once loved in blobs of light and clouds of dust, so many airy nothings.

Slide.

cracking jolt of components realigning

This is one of the so-called "Cottingley Fairy" pictures taken in 1917, purporting to show real faeries captured on film, later revealed to be nothing more than cardboard cutouts from a popular children's book. A famous defender of the photo's veracity was the author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, something that still baffles people today because he created Sherlock Holmes, a character who epitomized skepticism and reason.

People like to think intelligence can reveal truth.

They're afraid to believe otherwise.

Slide.

louder uneasy shift of images forced apart

This, taken by Paul Trent on May 11, 1950, is the "McMinnville UFO Photograph." It is, of course, a pie tin suspended on fishing line, but people believed in it so strongly it established the flying saucer trope that's still with us today.

We assume we're less gullible now, which, of course, only proves we're not.

In a way these counterfeit images are more honest than real, unstaged

pictures because they give us what we really want. Even when it comes to true images of real-world horror, we want to be torn, to feel the screaming nothing between truth and lies.

The following photo illustrates this point.

Please brace yourself. Seeing this image *will* hurt.

Cameraman.

Slide.

collapse of displaced tumblers driven through absent space

This photograph is known as "The Vulture and the Little Girl," taken by photojournalist Kevin Carter in 1993 during a famine in Southern Sudan.

Note how the vulture perched on the ground just two feet away from the collapsed child seems to have no eyes, its face appearing as a mask of bleached bone, its beak narrowing to a hooked point as it peers down at its victim with savage indifference. It could be death itself, captured an instant before it swoops forward to steal the life of a child already ravaged by hunger and neglect. The image cuts us to the bone, so much that our first instinct is to reach into the photo and save the little girl.

The subject was eventually revealed to in fact be a boy named Kong Nyong, who survived the famine only to perish in 2007. Though the photo would go on to win the Pulitzer Prize, Carter faced criticism for stopping to photograph the starving child instead of immediately helping him.

Carter was even accused of waiting for the vulture to shift position so he could capture a perfectly framed shot.

There is zero evidence that happened, and the fact that the photo raised public awareness of the ongoing disaster and led to increased foreign aid is beyond doubt. Carter's personal feelings regarding the public reaction to the photo are not known. His suicide one year after the photo's publication would seem to speak for itself, but we should not jump to conclusions.

The average shutter speed of an analog camera in 1993 was one sixtieth of a second, which means, in viewing this image, we're experiencing about one thirteen millionth of what Kevin Carter saw within the span of a single hour that day.

In chronicling war and famine, Carter bore witness to nightmares we can't

imagine, things no single image, no matter how moving, can convey.

Photographs do not just capture the image they represent, but the mind of the person who took them. They do not just capture light, but also darkness, casting a shadow we step into only to find it deeper than anything in our most sinister imaginings.

We sink.

We drown.

Try not to look too hard at this next image.

Slide.

shift of edge carving up through haze of noise as whispers emerge through dull fan drone

This photograph of Kevin Carter dead in the driver's seat of his car was never released to the public, and you can thank our cameraman for obtaining it for us.

The beauty is piercing. Intoxicating.

As was the case with Evelyn Francis McHale, it's easy to mistake death for sleep, sleep so profound and serene we envy whatever perfect dream flows beneath it. The way he's draped across the driver's seat in a state of such profound comfort—he is a dream himself, an exile from a different place where timeless beauty is as natural as rot and ruin is in ours. He is vital and real, a sigh of pure grace, yet he is, indeed, dead. The hose running from the car's exhaust pipe and in through the driver's side window makes that abundantly clear.

It also means that what we're looking at should not be physically possible.

Carbon monoxide poisoning ravages the body of the person it kills. It turns the skin a hideous, unnatural red. Kevin Carter was not found until days after he died, during which time his corpse was rotting in a hot car.

He should not look like a statue carved by a Renaissance master.

He, just like our Sleeping Beauty, left a suicide note.

Four words.

"Don't look."

"He's inside."

Have you ever wondered why, when a character dies in film or television,

the hero so gently and tenderly closes their eyes? If the eyes are really windows to the soul, we may think once the soul has departed the eyes have become empty and so must be hidden to preserve the corpse's dignity.

This is a lie.

The reason looking at a dead person's eyes is unbearable is because nothing changes in them after life ends. Looking at their eyes only makes us realize there was nothing there to begin with, that everything we imagined we saw was a projection on a blank screen, us seeing what we wanted to see. This is why morticians provide the invaluable service of sealing the eyes of our deceased loved ones shut with super glue. Our mind naturally revolts at the truth and subconsciously knows it must shield itself at all costs. The alternative of staring death in the face only to see our own empty reflection is too hideous to imagine.

I'm sorry if you're getting uncomfortable. The slide projector runs hot, and the air in here doesn't circulate.

The windows don't open.

I've tried.

Cameraman.

Everyone.

Slide.

opposed segments grind amidst dry leaf rustle of remote formless murmurings

These are examples of photographer Kiyoshi Hagiwara's *Landscapes with a Corpse* series from the year 2008.

The project was a collaboration between Hagiwara and different female models who personally designed their own perfect deaths. The models were asked to choose the location they wanted to be found in, their position, their method of death, the clothes they wanted to wear, their makeup and facial expression and accessories. Once the moment was staged, Kiyoshi Hagiwara would take hundreds of pictures, then collaborate with the model to determine which single photo was the most beautiful, the most perfect.

The results are breathtaking, to say the least. The tragedy only enhancing the beauty, the empathy, and we can feel our own mor-

I'm sorry, give me a moment...

Sli-

Slide.

sob cut off forced down as springs punch gears contort whispers ascend

As you can tell from my reaction, the passage of time has done nothing to diminish their impact.

I didn't know that part of me was still there.

As I was saying, we can feel our own sense of mortality sing in harmony with theirs.

Naturally, the *Landscapes with a Corpse* series was a sensation, with praise lavished on Kiyoshi Hagiwara and the models.

This only made our Cameraman's revenge more cruel.

After viewing her portrait, the model Yuki Shirakawa remarked that a part of her regretted not really dying, since she would have to live out the rest of her life knowing her real death would have no such beauty, that it would be graceless and ugly and totally beyond her control.

She was right.

Slide.

misaligned objects dashed against one another voices dissolving into seething boil

Yuki Shirakawa suffered a fatal aneurysm in her apartment. Her husband, who was traveling for work, returned five days later. In his statement to the coroner, he said he saw what appeared to be a foaming liquid in her eye sockets. It was only when he looked closer that he realized what appeared at first glance to be liquid was in fact maggots, writhing pools of idiot hunger.

By now, class, you'll be finding it difficult to move. You're beginning to feel that the hot, stagnant air has developed a physical weight that presses in on all sides, leeching away your strength as it threatens to seep within.

Slide.

savage break something vital gives way amid deep churn of black waters

Hiromi Fukuda attended a party on a yacht. It was only after it returned to port that people realized she'd fallen overboard. A massive search and rescue operation was undertaken, but she wasn't found until four days later, when a fisherman hauled her up in a net along with his daily catch. By then

ocean scavengers had gnawed away her body's soft tissue, devouring her ears and lips and nose. You can see what little remains no longer resembles a face, appearing more like a skull that was dipped in putrid gray wax.

We have our Cameraman to thank for these images.

If you look at the syllabus I passed out earlier, you'll find it's blank.

If you have a map of the university campus, you'll notice this classroom isn't on it.

You can try to reach the doors if you want to, but it would be a wasted effort.

They no longer lead anywhere.

Slide.

agonized cry rising through pitched drone of air churned through whirling blades

Kaneko Masuyo's plane flight was forty thousand feet over the Pacific, halfway between Tokyo and Buenos Aires, when her appendix burst. There was no doctor on board, but, with her life in the balance, crude surgery was attempted. It did not work. The first-class cabin was abandoned by the other passengers when her screams became too much to bear. When the plane finally landed, emergency medical technicians found her soaked in blood and bile, her abdomen ripped open, the nail file she'd attempted to finally end her life with still lodged in her neck where it had snapped in half.

In creating *Landscapes with a Corpse*, Kiyoshi Hagiwara and his collaborators provoked someone they didn't understand.

He was born in the gaps between what really is and what we're willing to show, the dark recesses where the lies we tell ourselves fester. He was there when cavemen first painted on walls, images that showed them bravely attacking giant predators instead of fleeing for their lives.

Photography changed everything. Every forced smile, every staged display of affection, every flaw hidden and pain obscured. We nourish him with what we hide. The more we starve ourselves, the more we feed him. For those who can no longer endure how broken they are, for those willing to give him everything he wants...

An arrangement can be made.

Cameraman is just what I call him. The instant he's inside you'll know

there is no real word for what he is and what he does.

By now, you're beginning to feel him behind you, sensing him in the same dim way you sense every lie you invent to survive.

Don't look yet.

If he takes from you, there will be nothing left.

Only look when you're ready to give.

The creators of *Landscapes with a Corpse* stole his blessing. Presumed to use it as their own.

They were punished.

Slide.

the scream of metal slicing into metal the chitinous rustle of swarming insects

Kiyoshi Hagiwara's next exhibition was called *The Slide*. *Landscapes with a Corpse* had been such a success he was able to dictate that there be no preview viewing. Instead, *The Slide* was immediately opened to the public.

When the gallery owner was asked why he consented to display such photographs, he said the frames were empty when they were hanged. He said he thought it was some kind of artistic statement.

All the models from *Landscapes with a Corpse* were there, their true deaths on full display, bodies incinerated and dismembered and gutted and flayed.

You're beginning to wonder why our Cameraman chose you.

He didn't.

If you're here it means there's already a void inside you, a place where the burden of lies has torn you apart, carving an opening.

That's where you slid through the lacuna between what's shown and what's hidden.

That's where he got in.

You could never have found this place otherwise.

Slide.

tear of ripping skin dry hiss of thousand scuttling vermin

The centerpiece of *The Slide* exhibition was the photographer Kiyoshi Hagiwara himself, in the flesh.

All of it, every drop of blood and scrap of tissue on display.

One attendee said it appeared as if Hagiwara had been peeled apart from

the inside.

Naturally this single, still image can't do the piece justice. We can't see his lungs inflating and deflating. His heart pumping. His tendons twitching, his intestines contracting, his lidless eyes quivering and alive and empty.

Note his vocal cords, exposed and taut like strings on a violin.

It managed to articulate a single phrase. All the attendees heard and understood, despite many speaking different languages.

"The Slide."

It's a descent you're all familiar with, the downward pull on your lives and yourselves, dragging you under as you silently plead for someone, anyone, to reach out.

To see how you're coming apart.

To see you at all.

It was what I asked for a long time ago, though I didn't understand the arrangement I'd made until I began to fall.

I don't know her name anymore. Our Cameraman took that.

I know I loved her. With every fiber of my being, I loved her.

And I could never be what she needed.

I couldn't pretend anymore.

I watched Manhattan's skyscrapers shoot up around me, a vast range of concrete teeth clamping shut.

Everything instantly stopping, the raw fact of metal and glass shattering everything I was.

Cameraman.

Everyone.

Slide.

door slamming closed forever immersed in pure silence

We return to Evelyn McHale, to our Sleeping Beauty. We now know what she dreams of.

What I dream of.

I'm sorry I wasn't honest with you about who I am, sorry I forced another lie on you. I do it because I want to give you the introduction to him I never had.

I know it's difficult to see the resemblance between the woman in the photograph and me, to believe I was ever capable of becoming this perfect vision of porcelain skin and crumpled steel.

We call dead bodies remains, but it is her, our Sleeping Beauty, who endures, while I am the remainder. What is left.

The fact that you're here means you've been falling. Falling for what feels like forever.

Our Cameraman is here to catch you.

And to feed.

I can't say what will be left of you when he's finished.

It will not be painless. You will break in places you did not know existed.

Fighting only makes it worse.

Trust me. I know.

Doubts grow fangs that plunge deep.

Lies sprout claws that pierce clean through.

Peeled apart, from the inside out.

sound without form rising and encompassing

Please.

I swear.

Whatever happens.

Whatever he does to you.

Remember.

Now and forever.

You.

Are.

Seen.

rises to crescendo and falls, taking everything as it fades to cold refuge in ancient nowhere, the dry final act, shedding time like so much dead skin while ideas crumple to ashen shards, the return to alien home of pitched contorted slumber, picked apart and at last spilled open and held

Slippers from Hell: Introduction

The slippers in this tale's title involve a Christmas curse, which, from a certain point of view, makes Christmas an occult holiday. The story therefore occupies a distinctive, dual position. Christmas is and was once an even more fervently religious occasion, which gives it roots in ritualized belief and therefore—technically—a major commonality with the occult. However, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Christmas celebrations began to lean toward the secular. Added traditions such as tree decorating, gift giving, and of course Saint Nick aided in transforming the holiday into something global and commercial. Considering this history, "Slippers from Hell" both returns Christmas to its ritualized beginnings and reflects on post-commercialization values through problems kickstarted when adult children receive presents from a deceased relative. From both historical perspectives, in this story, the first holiday tale in this collection, Christmas is a horror with traditions that have the potential to become deadly.

About Lene MacLeod

Lene MacLeod (she/her) is a Canadian author of quiet horror and poetry. Her short story collection *Fringes of Grey* was published in 2024 by DarkWinter Press. Work has appeared in various venues including *Chthonic Matter Quarterly*, *Schlock! Webzine*, and *Polar Borealis Magazine*. She edits and publishes a biannual litmag/anthology series featuring other authors.

Slippers from Hell

by Lene MacLeod

There was nothing like the arrival of Aunt Belinda's gift each December to bring an overwhelming sense of nostalgia, but not the good kind. Her offerings were reminiscent of the presents we received from her as children: gawdy fashion jewelry, frumpy beige house coats, over-sized pyjamas, and huge bottles of bath salts, often along with stale candy found in the bargain basement of some obscure department store in her neck of the woods.

But now, this package, arriving on December twenty-second, was a mystery. The handwriting was hers all right, like the crumpled brown paper sack used to wrap the parcel, the string, even though the postal service advised against using it, and the Christmas Seals plastered all over.

The thing was, Aunt Belinda had passed away even before *last* Christmas. Sure, I received a gift from her last year, a cow-shaped coffee mug, but it had been posted before her sudden death.

I rang up my brother, Kyle.

"Yeah, Lucy, it came today. I'll open it on Christmas I guess," Kyle said.

"I might as well wait, too, but *how*?"

"How what?"

"How did we get gifts from Aunt Belinda when she died last year?"

"Hmmm, didn't think of that. Maybe a friend sent them for her? You know she always shops well in advance. Whenever she finds one of her bargains."