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► **To cite this version:**

Hugo Reinert. Face of a Dead Bird - Notes on grief, spectrality and wildlife photography. Rhizomes, 2012, 23, no pagination. <hprints-01094372>

HAL Id: hprints-01094372

<https://hal-hprints.archives-ouvertes.fr/hprints-01094372>

Submitted on 12 Dec 2014

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Face of a Dead Bird — Notes on grief, spectrality and wildlife photography

Hugo Reinert
Estonian Institute of Humanities
Tallinn University

[1] My concern in the present essay [1] lies with exploring the possibility of grief for the loss of a nonhuman animal beyond the cozy domestic assemblages where such grief is conventionally situated, some might say confined. Parallel to the entangled intimacy of pets, livestock and companion species, I am interested in developing (or recuperating) a notion of grief for the nonhuman stranger — for an unknown other, remote but specific. Situating this possibility within the visual economy of conservation, the essay begins with a specific photograph of one nonhuman individual — now dead — and ends with another. The first image is read against Roland Barthes' moving meditation on photography and the death of his mother, *Camera Lucida*. The links between haunting, photography and spectrality that this text throws up then form the coordinates for the remainder of the argument — which, through a combination of theoretical reflection and ethnography, addresses itself to one central question (perhaps two): does the nonhuman have a face? Did *this* nonhuman have a face? The essay closes on a hopeful note, identifying the disruptive potential of nonhuman photography to render manifest modes of perception that are not yet supported, that are still virtual — transforming, in other words, the spectrality of the nonhuman photograph into a promissory condition, foreshadowing new economies of being and, possibly, of loss.

1. Camera Lucida

[2] In *Camera Lucida* (1981), Barthes notes that photography operates a kind of multiplication: '[w]hat the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the Photograph reproduces to infinity what could never be repeated existentially' (4). In other words, the photograph crystallizes a singular event, a 'contingency' (20), and distributes it through time and space in a reproducible form. By means of the photograph, the instant and contingent takes on a quality of spectral duration. The copy outlasts the original: an image can and does persist long after its photographic referent has ceased to exist. Through this extension in time, the logical space between image and referent becomes abysmal, a sort of haunted fissure from which arises '[t]hat rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead' (9). This temporal structure of a photograph, the manner in which it fixes a present that has already ceased to exist the moment it is represented, renders it a spectral object: 'haunted by the inevitability of an impending death that has already occurred' (Brower 2009: 321). The other conceptual tension that drives Barthes's analysis is the relationship between two formal elements that together make up a photograph: the studium and the punctum. The former is the field of the expected, the 'average affect' carried by a photograph: 'the extension of a field which I perceive quite familiarly as a consequence of my knowledge, my culture' (Barthes 1981: 25). Within this field, the punctum is the 'element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me' (26); the poignant 'accident' that pricks, startles and bruises, animating the image and transfiguring the 'glum desert' of the studium (20). Barthes describes its effect as a rupture, comparing it to the explosive potency of haiku. In its piercing affect, the punctum demands to be explored 'not as a question... but as a wound' (21). Once it arises, once it is perceived, it irrevocably transforms its context: 'I am looking at a new photograph, marked in my eyes with a higher value' (42).

[3] Barthes's reading in *Camera Lucida* is generally taken as the exemplar of a particularly hermetic mode of analysis (Brower 2009). In no small part, the vocabulary and authorial voice he develops are constituted around a private and unspeakable grief, the loss of his mother. He refuses the reader access to the pivotal Winter Garden photograph of his mother as a child, on the grounds that the image would mean nothing to the reader,

possess no punctum. It is possible to disagree with Barthes here: contextualised by his discussion, the photograph of his mother might well be charged with a punctum capable of affecting the reader. More generally, the question is whether the line of analysis that Barthes develops can be articulated in a more general form: is the piercing affect of the punctum an irrevocably singular personal experience, impossible to share? Locked in his private grief, Barthes argues that it is. Others have pointed to the potential in his method for developing more generally applicable readings — somewhat obliquely, situated in the context of an ongoing engagement with nonhuman persons, my argument here follows along similar lines. For the moment, these are the points to bear in mind: photographs are haunted, and they wound; they also multiply the existentially singular. Somewhere between these coordinates lies the animal face I am interested in. The face of Imre.

2. The Promise of a Face

[4] Imre was one of three Lesser White-fronted Geese (*Anser erythropus*) that were captured and equipped with satellite transmitters on the Valdak marshes in Finnmark, northern Norway, in May 2006. His species is highly endangered, having suffered a massive decline in recent decades: from an estimated head-count of thousands only half a century ago, the Scandinavian population he belonged to is currently — as of the 2010 autumn census — reduced to approximately 15 breeding pairs. In their annual migration these birds cross vast distances, from the Norwegian Arctic through Siberia to the Black Sea area and on to their wintering grounds in Greece (Tolvanen et al 2009). A key factor in their decline has been poaching along the eastern parts of this migration route, particularly in Russia. The satellite transmitters were to help clarify the exact trajectories of the geese through Siberia and the high-risk areas in western Russia and Kazakhstan. For several months, nothing went wrong. Imre left Valdak at the end of June and crossed the border into Siberia, arriving on the Taimyr peninsula about a week later, in early July — 2800 kilometers to the east. Near the end of August, after moulting, he turned west and south to begin his long autumn migration to Greece, through Western Russia and Kazakhstan. Things did not go smoothly, however. Having stopped over on the Yamal Peninsula and in the Ob River valley, Imre arrived at Lake Koybagar in Kazakhstan on October 1. From there — somewhat surprisingly — he did not continue south, as previous satellite tracking of Siberian geese had led the team to expect; instead he headed west, passing far north of the Caspian sea and reentering Russian territory, where he arrived at Tsimlyansk reservoir in the Volgograd region on October 18. Here, the signals from his transmitter became erratic and his trajectory began to spiral. His final transmission was registered on October 30: satellite imaging confirmed it came from the backyard of a house in the local village of Bolshoy (Øien et al 2009). Imre had almost certainly been poached. The forensic investigation and media campaign that followed warrants an analysis in its own right; here, however, I am concerned primarily with one particular image, a photograph of Imre that was taken at his release, then disseminated by the research team and widely reproduced in newspapers, journal articles, reports and internet sites — the image that helped turn him into an 'international celebrity' (Øien et al 2007: 26) and endowed him with the somewhat peculiar charisma that the present text attempts, in part, to delineate.

[5] This is the image:



Copyright Ingar Jostein Øien (Øien & Aarvak 2007)

[6] The image presents Imre in the mode of human portraiture: one might say it effects a transposition — however provisional — of a nonhuman into the order of human faciality, as this is organised through and within the coordinates of the portrait. In *Portraits and Persons*, Cynthia Freeland argues that three criteria define the portrait: a recognizable body; an inferred internal state, captured in the likeness; and finally, an assumption of self-awareness, of a conscious 'pose', on the part of the subject (Freeland 2010). Initially at least, it is the first of these — recognizability — that interests me here. By semiotic convention, the relationship between a photograph and the human face it represents is both iconic and indexical: the image resembles the face, and it also emerges on the surface of the developing film through a quasi-physical optic contact — 'an emanation from the referent', as Barthes puts it, 'like the delayed rays from a star' (1981: 80-81). Four decades before Barthes, in an essay on Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin developed his theory of the aura by linking it to the possibility of a reciprocal encounter, mediated precisely through the photographic image: 'Inherent in the gaze... is the expectation that it will be returned by that on which it is bestowed. Where this expectation is met... there is an experience of the aura in all its fullness' (Benjamin 2003 [1939]: 338). The image of a human face supports this expectation, both in its indexical and iconic functions, enabling something like an 'auratic' encounter with the photograph itself as the promise (and surrogate) of a face (Duttlinger 2008). Confronted with the image of an unfamiliar face, this promise articulates (among other things) as an assumption of *recognizability*: the truthful image permits the viewer to recognize, in the flesh, the face it represents. This is the exact juncture where the face of Imre — the nonhuman face — disarticulates the epistemology of the portrait.

[7] Despite the powerful photographic effect of a face, Imre would have been impossible to recognize in person. To the untrained human eye, members of his species are functionally indistinguishable from any other goose of the same species — or even of other species. Even the handful of trained researchers who worked most closely with Imre and others of his species, who have done so for twenty years or more, still depend on technologically augmented identification to distinguish individuals: colour-coded leg-rings, satellite tagging and off-site digital analysis of belly markings permit verification of otherwise indistinguishable individuals as they move from site to site. Even learning to recognize the species itself, for example to distinguish it physically from the closely related Greater White-fronted Goose (*Anser albifrons*), is difficult — requiring a laborious and time-consuming training of eyes and mind, of 'tuning in' to minute and subtle specificities: the shape of a head, the position of a beak, the

rhythm of wings beating in flight (Øien et al 1999; Lorimer 2007). This morphological indistinction is a major factor in the decline of the species, despite the implementation of protection plans, and an obstacle to effective conservation: hunters may not even realise what they have shot, and to meet their international obligations some countries in the flightpath of the species — such as Estonia — must rely on importing seasonal ornithological labor, with the skills necessary to identify and monitor the species. In short, in the encounter with an unaugmented human perspective, members of the species do not present themselves as individually recognizable. The visual presentation of Imre as *if* he were recognizable is thus — effectively — a sort of illusion.

3. Captures

[8] Another snapshot. A year or so into this project, and I am in Trondheim talking to Ingar — one of the principal actors in *Prosjekt Dverggås*, the long-standing Lesser White-fronted Goose initiative of BirdLife Norway, formerly the Norwegian Ornithological Association (NOF). Along with two or three other people, he is one of the key figures involved with the species at the national level. For more than two decades, these men have played an instrumental role in conducting research and coordinating conservation efforts for the species, both in Norway and internationally: scattered through the literature on the species, spanning two decades of work and field missives, pictures place them in Greece, Finland, Russia, Hungary, Kazakhstan and Syria. I mention to him that I am interested in Imre, particularly how the story has been used to draw attention to and mobilise support for the ongoing work with the species. In passing, I also comment on the sheer proliferation of images, how the captioned photograph of Imre seems ubiquitous: nearly everywhere the Lesser White-fronted Goose is mentioned, there appears also the face of dead Imre. He laughs. 'Oh, if the caption says it is Imre, it definitely is' he replies wryly — and winks. Just one instant, one joke extracted from a conversation that lasted several hours. Here, the slippage points to how animal photography mediates one of the central issues in human engagements with 'the animal': the relationship (often blurred, often ruled by obfuscations and slippage) between individual and aggregate.

[9] Taking the Imre photograph was anything but a straightforward process. First, the probable window of opportunity for catching him had to be calculated; then, the bird that was to become Imre had to be located within the visual field of the marshes, using telescopes and binoculars. Once visual contact was established, he had to be physically secured. This was accomplished by means of an enormous net, fired by explosive charges and carried across half a kilometre of Arctic marshlands by half a dozen two-foot metal stakes. Caught in the net, along with his nameless mate, he was then disentangled, carefully but unceremoniously, stuffed into a sack and driven to a nearby museum, where blood samples and physical measurements were taken. While there, he was also outfitted with colour-coded leg-rings and a telemetric transmitter, attached to a harness like a rucksack, and bestowed his human name — chosen by the readers of a Finnish newspaper, after a competition organised by WWF Finland. Finally, the bird now known as Imre was put back into the bag and taken back to the marshes, where his photograph was taken and where he was finally released to return to the wild. In the interval between release and the moment of his death, Imre functioned as a kind of mobile inscription device (Latour 1987). The transmitter on his back transformed his location in the world into coordinates, calculated relative to the flightpath of satellites overhead. Bounced between space and the surface of the earth, over time these signals mapped out his migration path and rendered it as a visible representation: lines, drawn across the flat surface of maps. Reprinted, projected and disseminated across the internet, these maps in turn made the bodies and movements of Imre and the others accessible, intimately knowable in novel and previously impossible ways. Day by day, they revealed flightpaths that no human could follow — flightpaths that became data, that were enlisted in arguments and permitted inferences: about the migration system of his population, its relationship to the flightpaths of related species and its position in the Western Eurasian flyway; illuminating both the choices of other birds, and the conditions that might influence them.

[10] In other words, different modes of capture were at work here: physical, symbolic, biopolitical and informational, one after the other, until Imre himself became an apparatus of capture — a cybernetic assemblage, reporting on the trajectories of his species to human observers. Entering the human world in this way, Imre came to life as the effect of an intersection between different modes of individuation. There was a scientific surveillance machine, which rendered him as a legible, singular body moving through space — giving account of itself through signals, emitted across a vast heterogeneous network of scientists, satellites, activists,

funding bodies and internet forum participants. A biopolitical machine extracted his blood samples, genetic material and measurements and collated them into an informational bundle, a distinctive individual defined by biophysical parameters. Parallel to this, his new name effected a symbolic capture, incorporating him — albeit partially — into a machine of human sociality, individuation and personhood: through the name, he could become a celebrity. The capture of the camera shutter, finally, framed him in the visual coordinates of the very portrait we are discussing — giving him a face, or something like a face, and the associated charisma that arises through the machine of faciality. Perhaps one might say that what took place, at this opaque but productive intersection of forces, was the multiple capture of life, or of a life — equally perhaps, the *production* of a life, of a sort of life, of a subject of a life.

[11] Let me return to that wink, however — 'Oh, if the caption *said* it was Imre...' Here, I take it as the measure of a hidden unintelligibility, the something-like-a-secret concealed in the very structure of the photograph. Along with the remark, it points to how the Imre image operated, not one, but two multiplications of singularity, implicated in two distinct forms of circulation. First, along the lines of Barthes's argument, the image effected the material multiplication of a singular likeness, through its reproduction and distribution in space. The face of Imre was reproducible (even more so, being digital) and could be disseminated indefinitely across a range of contexts: reports, journal articles, newspaper copy and internet sites. Secondly and rather less obviously, the remark points us towards an oblique multiplication of *the referent*, through the diffusion of a supposedly singular identity across multiple bodies, to the point where 'Imre' began to coincide with his own species body — standing in for other geese, and vice versa, in a sort of nonhuman Spartacus effect. Supported by an inherent morphological indistinction, the photograph could produce Imre as a singular identity, in the very act of dissolving that identity across places, bodies, times and contexts: a double movement, gesture of simultaneous concentration and dispersal, multiplication and singularisation.

4. Encryption

[12] In his work on the technological representation of animals, Akira Lippit suggests that 'modernity sustains... the disappearance of animals as a constant state' (2000: 1). Along with the near-simultaneous emergence of phantasmagoric new technologies of presence (photography, phonographs, cinema), the hygienic elimination of animals from the lifeworlds of modernity instituted a 'new economy of [animal] being... that is no longer sacrificial in the traditional sense of the term' (Lippit 2000: 1). No longer present in the flesh, animals can no longer be sacrificed: instead they are recorded, captured on film, enshrined in loops of movement, neither dead nor alive but spectral, phantomatic, undead. Modern technology, in this reading, appears as 'a massive mourning apparatus, summoned to incorporate a disappearing animal presence that could not be properly mourned' (188). Drawing on Derrida, Lippit extends this further, to develop the idea that technology in this mode operates as a crypt, whose structure 'preserves the presence of an absent other that has never been present' (189); in this case, the presence of an animal that cannot properly die — oblivious (supposedly) to its own death, impossible to mourn and dislocated from its own materiality: transformed into flickering loops, circuits of light and motion.

[13] The crypt that Lippit invokes is a complex and obscure trope, not without contradictions. In its original psychoanalytic formulation, in the work of Abraham and Torok (1986; 1994), it denotes the splintering or fissure of Ego through a radical failure (or refusal) to mourn. Faced with an unassimilable loss, the psyche undertakes a complete but oblivious incorporation of the lost Other, a gesture of 'swallowing whole' that seals them in 'a secret tomb inside the subject' (Abraham and Torok 1994: 130) — a 'place of articulation no longer accessible to the individual that carries it' (Lippit 2000: 152). Swallowed and preserved, imperceptible to its carrier, the inhabitant of the crypt continues to exist as an unassimilable foreign body inside the psyche — 'a dead entity we are perfectly willing to keep alive, but as dead... intact in any way save as living' (Derrida 1986: xxi). Entombed, it retains the capacity to act — to preserve its concealed existence through ventriloquism and misdirection, obliterating all signs of itself. Within a psychoanalytic context, this notion of the crypt — along with related concepts such as 'phantom', 'transphenomenology', 'transgenerational haunting' or 'anasemia' — is deployed for primarily therapeutic purposes. The crypt here is a pathology, concealing failure and denial: as a diagnostic tool, it announces hauntology in an emancipatory mode, as a practice of revelation, exorcism and liberation. The undead fantasy must be acknowledged, so the dead can be properly mourned. Whether it safeguards an unassimilable loss or a shameful alien secret, the inhabitant of the crypt can only lie — it exists only to mislead,

to protect through misdirection. To Derrida, on the other hand, the analogous figure of the spectre demands that the question of its veracity be suspended — rather than truth, the spectre draws into question how 'to live with ghosts' (Derrida 2006 [1994]: xviii). With the crypt of Abraham and Torok buried at its root (Dragon 2005; Davis 2007), the hauntology of Derrida presents the undead quasi-presence not for exorcism, but as an invitation to live 'more justly', in the 'commerce without commerce' of ghosts — opening, in other words, on a conversation about justice, recognition, hospitality to the stranger (Derrida 2006 [1994]: xviii). Despite superficial resemblances, the two genealogies that converge on the crypt and its inhabitant are thus strikingly at odds. Between them, the crypt oscillates — structure of denial, or revelation: nefarious residue, or opening to the unknown.

[14] Working in his register of textual deconstruction, Lippit straddles this ambivalence: more often than not, he walks a thin line between diagnosing the spectralisation of animals and enacting it. The animal bodies he discusses are technologically enshrined, encrypted, in rather more material (and less benign) ways than he accounts for: until well into the last century, for example, photography depended on the properties of gelatin, a substance rendered from animal bodies (Shukin 2009). More generally, in an age where the destruction of nonhuman lives for human benefit continues to escalate beyond reason or measure, without apparent end in sight, the argument that animals have passed out of a sacrificial economy seems, at least at first sight, somewhat dubious. Perhaps, eliding the persistent materiality of the victim, Lippit's line of analysis does make itself the accomplice of the rapacious industrial systems it describes. Perhaps, equally, it is also precisely in this complicity that it captures some crucial aspect in the operation of carnivorous modernity. Let us say that at some point, dispersed through recent centuries and in the network of factory farms and animal laboratories, nonhumans have ceased to be properly subject to death — or perhaps, rather, subject to a proper death (Reinert 2007). Industrial meat exemplifies this perfectly: its animal origins infuse it with potency, as long as the foundational act of violence and bloodshed remains unarticulated (Fiddes 1991; Vialles 1994). At the same time, the circulation of its commodity form often depends on imagery of living animals: cows, pigs and sheep adorn the outside walls of abattoirs, and dance happily through the worlds of advertising (Adams 1990). Killed and killed again, industrial loops on the slaughterhouse floor — yet also ever returning, impossible to kill, infinitely subject to an infinite violence (Butler 2004). Industrial meat is a paradoxical substance, in other words, brought to exist through a cognitive dissociation that foregrounds a variant structure of the crypt: a representation that somehow evacuates its own referent, concealing from sight precisely as it presents for view — rendering the referent as its own invisible double, guilty secret, entombed (and absent) in plain sight.

[15] In the most straightforward sense, then, we could say the photograph *encrypted* Imre in the very gesture of presenting him for view — rendering him as a paradoxically undying figure, infinitely circulating, perpetual, undead and impossible to mourn. Unrecognizable in the flesh, the bird known as Imre somehow disappears in the very gesture of representation, in his own becoming-Imre: the wink, 'oh if the caption says it is Imre....' Equally however, the photograph also operates as a necessary condition for Imre to exist as anything like a recognizable social person in the first place. Without the image and its accompanying machinery — the machines of individuation that tracked Imre, named and followed him, rendered him a recognizable individual and circulated his likeness through the media — no human would even have been aware of his death, except perhaps the hunter who shot him, and the hypothetical participants of the meal that resulted. If there was an encryption at work here, it did not merely conceal and subtract from view — it also rendered something visible. It might seem as if the photograph simultaneously made mourning impossible, by transforming its referent into an enduring undead state, *and* possible — by bringing into view an anonymous wild animal, transforming it into something like a person that enabled some form of relationship, that was capable of death. By the image, in the image, through the image: simultaneously captured and produced, encrypted and dispersed, evacuated in the moment of its appearance. We may still be talking about the biopolitical capture of life, or of a life — but we are also talking about a transformative dispersion of that life, its rendering-undead, its rise into new and dimly discerned coordinates of containment.

5. The Haunting Wild

[16] In large part, perhaps increasingly, biodiversity conservation functions within a 'global economy of appearances' (Tsing 2005: 57), within which success is dependent on the mobilisation of affect through visual

narratives and spectacular effects. At the same time, conservation is also becoming more and more enmeshed in the circuits of the money economy: the remarkable recent growth of corporate involvement with the sector (MacDonald 2010; Brockington and Duffy 2010) attends to the financial and imaginative transformation of nonhuman 'nature' into tradable assets for the production of surplus value in novel forms (Sullivan 2010). In this context, charismatic nonhumans are more valuable than ever: readily commoditised, attracting attention, sympathy, commitment and funds, they function as key nodes of conversion between different orders of capital — symbolic, social, moral, monetary. This is how the Imre image functioned: by collapsing scale and lending concrete, photogenic individuality to an abstract problem, it gave journalists a story to sell and the public a story to buy. Researchers involved with Imre were astonished by the attention he elicited, but they learned quickly: when a nameless Lesser White-front was poached in Greece the next year, he received an immediate (and posthumous) baptism — before the news was broken to the media, and before images were circulated. Not only did his in-valuable charismatic efficacy establish Imre as a precedent: it also amplified his involvement in another, rather less tangible circuit of value transformation — namely, the apocalyptic symbolic economy of extinction.

[17] Certainly in its more dramatic modalities, the 'crisis discipline' of conservation biology operates with a concept of nature, of wildness, as perpetually in crisis: jeopardised, in the process of a catastrophic disappearance that is simultaneously always already ongoing and always on the brink of happening (Jay 1994; Swyngedouw 2010; Heise 2010). As the crisis unfolds and deepens, the zero point of disappearance keeps shifting forward in time: logically, as the ultimate disappearance of 'nature' would entail also the disappearance of an observing subject (Morton 2007). Framed by this indefinitely deferred vanishing, conservation biology comes to operate as a catastrophic negative mirror of promissory capitalism: driven not by the prospect of growth but of averting the grand extinction — an extinction that is always inherent and immanent, deferral coded into its very structure. Let me reframe this: discussing the new economies of marine bioprospecting, Stefan Helmreich contrasts biocapital, as the harnessing of the reproductive power of living beings, with its 'negative image' in necrocapital — 'dead matter, like fossil fuel, put to unregenerative, zombie-like work' (2009: 126). Zombie-like: in other words, dead yet animate, and, as we know from elsewhere, productively put to work by occult and inscrutable masters (Comaroff & Comaroff 2002). Analogously, from this concept of a nature in perpetual crisis unfolds the economy of an alternative 'negative image': an economy in which value is harnessed not from the bizarrely animated bodies of the dead, but from death itself, from the suspension of death in a paradoxical, indefinitely deferred instant of its own already-happening. The threatening promissory quality of this not-quite-future vanishing transforms the ecological crisis into a productive locus, a sort of generative ideological engine driven by the tensions arrested in the suspended instant of that vanishing. Its productivity is considerable: the urgency of the constant, ongoing, ever-immanent crisis attracts resources, mobilises effort, generates sympathy, coordinates action, permits all sorts of conversions and exchanges. In other words, conservation action is, in this view, mobilised and organised precisely by (and through) an image of nature in its productively undead modality. In an age of extinctions nature becomes, ironically, a sort of zombie.

[18] Within this 'permanent crisis', nonhuman death occurs constantly and simultaneously, at multiple scales: from the individual via populations and species to the biosphere itself, to the death of nature and the possibility of total ecological collapse. The scales are interlinked, with death at aggregate scales continuously reproduced, as social fact and measure of the crisis, through the instance and representation of individual deaths. Something strange happens, however, in the junctures: at every scale (individual, group, population, species and so on), specific death is constantly subsumed and rendered meaningful in terms of a higher-order disappearance that is still in process, and that can therefore still be averted. The hopeful character of this transformative erasure is perfectly encapsulated, in the case of Imre, by an article headline penned the year after his death by three of the principal actors involved with the species: 'Imre is dead — Long live the Lesser White-fronted Goose' (Øien et al 2007). Through such shifts, the concept of nature itself comes to resemble nothing so much as a structure of nested transformations. Translating death between scales, it folds in on itself — becoming both spectre and crypt: simultaneously an absent presence, haunting the human world, and a structure of containment that absorbs nonhuman deaths in their specificity, subsuming each individual event. Contained by the permanent ongoing event-state of the disappearance of nature, already incorporated within the wave-like motion of a global mass extinction that has been happening forever and is always already happening, individuals disappear and become, in a sense, impossible to mourn — one more death, one more confirmation, one more slippage

between part and whole. Perhaps, at that point, a sort of second-order spectrality comes into play — through which the spectre is haunted, in turn, by what it spectralises. Like Hobbes's Leviathan, the towering figure of the disappearing wild is made up of those it has encompassed: the faceless faces of the dead — some of them made faceless, like Imre, in the very possession of a face. In other words, the value of the Imre quasi-portrait hangs in a complex oscillation between scales, between specific and fungible — figuring both a dematerialisation of the referent, and a materialisation of something absent, something that becomes visible only through an encryption that hides it in plain sight. Icon, memory, floating signifier: spectrality is, if not necessarily a step up, at least a step sideways from non-existence.

6. In the Space of Indistinction

[19] Back to Barthes then, and 'that rather terrible thing': the dead return, in the photograph, but always and precisely in the moment of their vanishing. In this sense the photograph exists in the double articulation of two simultaneous but mutually excluding movements, of appearing and vanishing: both cannot fully occur at the same time, so each is haunted by the other. This, more than the simple return of the dead, is what produces the spectral surplus of the photograph. As with the photograph, so also with the concept of nature, caught in the suspended moment of its own perpetual vanishing. The ever-vanishing wild, and the phantomatic temporality of the photograph: in the space between image and referent, in the figure of Imre, the two spectral economies converge and overlap. Each haunts the other, each brings the other into view and renders it incomplete: looking back at the picture I can no longer even be sure exactly what it is that is vanishing, what is brought forward or already gone, what it is that remains present before me — watching me, askance, from the screen. Earlier, I suggested that the face of Imre was a photographic effect: a tactical illusion of recognizability, summoned up by strategic fiat against the backdrop of a basic, ecologically given indistinction. To Levinas, the face is the mortal, corporeal vulnerability of the Other — an Other identified, through an uneasy exclusion, as human (Levinas 1990; Calarco 2008). The digital photograph of a face is the counterpoint to this, simultaneously the mimic and the indestructible spectral double of that corporeality: conceptual negative of a face, multiplying the existential singularity of an individual. The nonhuman face, in turn, unsettles the link further, deepening the already problematic fissure between image and referent: introducing further uncertainties, blurring the distinction between individual and aggregate, part and whole. Is this the goose that died? Is it dead? Is it the right species? Is it Imre? Is it his face? Did he even have a face? Does he have one now?

[20] Thankfully there are also other, less hallucinatory ways to talk about this. In his essay on photography (2008 [1929]), Walter Benjamin argued that the lens gives access to a world of magnifications and frozen time, made of imperceptible details that remain hidden to the naked eye but visible to the camera: 'it is another nature that speaks to the camera compared to the eye' (2008 [1929]: 277). The photograph 'reveals the secret' of this world and through this, 'a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious' (277-278). The camera exposes the 'optical unconscious', rendering visible the structures that shape the world but remain invisible to the unaugmented human eye. Perhaps, in this light, the face of Imre is not so much an illusion, as an artefact of this space beyond consciousness — less a sleight of hand than the revelation of an invisible real, brought about through a technological magnification of the visual field. The camera might then show the face of Imre as it exists, in the optical unconscious, but as no human yet sees it in person: detailed, magnified, individual. Perhaps, rather than illusions, the camera offers a utopian window, foreshadowing the promise of a future moment where nonhumans such as Imre acquire, on a par with the human, a recognizable face — a face that they already possess, in the optical unconscious. Oriented towards the possibility of this future moment, this line of flight, the act of unpacking the spectral indistinctions that converge in Imre becomes an effort to deconstruct the potent but invisible structures, still largely unconscious, that yet delineate and produce the nonhuman as a category of exclusion, dispossessed of individuality, unrecognizable: an attempt, in short, 'to invent new possibilities of life' (Deleuze 2001: 69) — and also, perhaps, new possibilities of loss.

[21] Captured and presented, represented, subsumed, blurred and crystallised, encompassed, distributed, dispersed and concentrated: through the image, Imre became simultaneously himself and not himself, face and not-face, person and category, individual and aggregate, part and whole — a sort-of-person, reducible neither to a single body nor to a multiplicity. More than one, less than many. Mourning him, then, is a complex act: encompassing an individual, a species, a population, wildness and nature, a disappearing world, an irretrievable

and anonymous past — uncertainty brings out peculiar and multiple sorrows. For all this, however, Imre is also a perfect stranger: never met, never known, anonymous and impossible to recognize. He presents himself, comes to the viewer as already-dead, known only through the circumstances of an end — and a context — that made him worthy of human attention. Ubiquitous, his face is as unrecognizable, in its own way, as the unseen face of Barthes' mother. Reverse mirrors of each other — one unseen, one hiding in plain view, faces withheld precisely in the gesture that encodes them — both present the unrecognizable stranger as the figure of an opaque grief, a node binding complex and obscure sorrows.

[22] What might this grief be, then, if not a function of recognition and proximity, not reducible to topography? Haraway has argued that individuals and kinds 'at whatever scale' are not 'autopoietic wholes', but 'sticky dynamic openings and closures in finite, mortal, world-making, ontological play' (2008: 88). Grief, as the recognition of being helplessly given over to the loss of a constitutive other, is perhaps the clearest mark of such stickiness — the stickiness of a loss that precedes reason or analysis, of a helpless mortal struckness that renders the grieving subject mysterious to itself, in its own responses (Butler 2004). Denied, unmourned and unacknowledged, this stickiness in turn gives rise to ghosts. Perhaps it is also here, in the recognition of certain griefs as legitimate (or absurd), that we can trace the markings of human exceptionalism most vividly — in the silent but axiomatic condemnation of animals as less worthy of grief than humans, their exception from the sphere of legitimate mourning. Through the image of a dead goose, I have tried to illustrate and clarify some of the threads that feed into this, producing a particular nonhuman mourning as simultaneously possible and impossible. In the end, perhaps it comes down to this: that as long as the nonhuman stranger remains ungrievable, as long as the structures that preempt its mourning are preserved, we remain bound in a perpetual deferral; concurrently, unrecognised in death, the stranger continues to haunt us. Much as Imre has haunted me, since the moment I first saw his face.

7. Contrapunctum

[23] What I have outlined here is only one mechanism, one particular economy of the sign; like all economies, it is partial and invites disruption. For all that animal photography is haunted by death, it also mediates relations to life and the living (Burt 2002). Let me close, consequently, with a vignette that operates like the animal image itself, as 'a rupture in the field of representations' — in this case, my own.

[24] March 2010: I am on the coast of North Holland, driving around a nature reserve with the manager, Erik, looking for Lesser White-fronts. A flock of some twenty or so from the Swedish population is supposedly still lingering in the area after the winter, late migrants on the cusp of taking flight back to the Arctic for the summer. After a few hours of cranes and spoonbills, greylags, barnacles and Canada geese, our quarry remains elusive. Erik checks the Dutch observations database over his iPhone: the website confirms that the flock was sighted there that morning but as Erik says, 'you never know with these birds'. Suddenly, there they are. Erik gestures silence and brings the car to a halt by the side of the road, we move out cautiously so as not to startle them. I have no telescope and even if I did I travel lightly, only a small rucksack. Instead, Erik lends me his. Still new to this habitus of augmented vision, it takes me time to find the birds, even with the telescope pointed in the right direction. While I do this, tinkering with the focal adjustments and trying not to look like a complete fool, Erik is quietly telling me about public attention and media coverage of the species in the Netherlands. When I look up from the telescope, he has brought out some photocopies of Dutch newspaper articles. One of them features a striking profile of a Lesser, with the distinctive yellow eye-ring clearly visible: Erik tells me the Dutch call the bird 'golden-eyes'. The picture resembles Imre, but by now I tell myself I have learned to see the subtle differences: the shape of the head, the angle of the beak, perhaps even that intangible something, the air that transforms likeness into face. This is when it happens. Reading over his shoulder as he speaks, the fleeting detail suddenly comes to me, the punctum, crystal clear: the piercing key that unlocks the situation.

[25] I notice that all the while, as he talks, Erik has been gently, ever so gently stroking the face of the goose in the image with his left thumb. Erik is a large stocky man, built for the outdoors, with thick fingers and strong callused hands — and yet, this is such a delicate gesture. Startled, I look up at his face: through his eyes, an unguarded tenderness transfigures his entire frame, betrays every impression I had formed. Caught off guard, witnessing this private intimacy, I raise my eyes to the flats. Around us, broken only by the calling birds, lies the

vast silence of the marshlands: teeming with life, bathed in light to the end of the world. And there, entirely beyond reach but not a hundred yards away, in the shelter of a rundown old fence, grazes the live flock. Grooming, eating, resting; a couple of them look asleep. Oblivious, for all the world, to the two human figures standing over there, next to that parked car, on that long stretch of road that cuts through the middle of nowhere.

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Notes

[1] I acknowledge the support of the Estonian Science Foundation (ETF), whose grant MJD3 enables the ongoing research that informs the present piece. I also acknowledge suggestions made on an earlier version of the text by editorial staff and reviewers at the journal *Humanimalia*.