



Transitions

by Frances Billes



Published in *LensWork* and *LensWork Extended* #60

Commentary

A quick scan through the history books of photography or even the Internet will find countless still life photographs of wilting flowers. Certainly one of the most famous is *Melancholy Tulip* by André Kertész that we featured on the cover of *LensWork* #23. I don't intend to disparage the work of this master, but there are elements in this photograph by Francis Billis that I like even more than Kertész' masterpiece. Where Kertész' drooping flowers capture an *emotion*, Billes' composition captures *a way of life*.

Billes titles her project *Transitions*, and we can only speculate how this particular image fits in the project: Is it the transition of the dying flowers? Or, is she referring to the passage of time in a disappearing way of life? Perhaps she intends us to focus on the momentary movement of time in the transitioning sunlight that will move across the sky in a very short period of time. Perhaps there is something else . . .

My world-view is filled with recollections that are encapsulated in this photograph. I was born in Laramie, Wyoming, where window screens, canning jars, and old colander's filled with beans or peas were a common scene. I look at this photograph and here my grandmother's voice from the other room, the sound of the push-mower being pulled and pushed, pulled and pushed by my Uncle Lee, a cricket, a distant crow, the buzz of a fly whizzing by on some urgent errand of fly business. I feel the warmth of the sun, the energy of youth, and the beckoning call of

adventures to be had beyond the window screen, in that field beyond the tree in the yard. Perhaps the transition Billes refers to in this image is not in the place or the time, but rather *in us*.

This is also an example of the rewards of spending time with the photograph. Elsewhere, I've written about our quick-cut culture in which the content of a photograph is supposed to be fully comprehended as fast as we can flip the page—supposed to be, but rarely is.

This is a photograph that reveals itself—that is to say, reveals *ourselves*—only once we slow down long enough to allow the flood of memories to ease back into consciousness. It is Faulkner rather than Hemingway. It is not a photograph that rewards the page-flipper. The payoff comes not when we recognize the structure of its photographic composition or the delicacy of its photographic exposure, but rather when we allow it to bring forth what we can best experience by closing our eyes and remembering. For me, this is a wonderful photograph because it accomplishes that so well.