



There Was a Forest

by Loli Kantor



Published in *LensWork* and *LensWork Extended* #87

Commentary

By conventional standards, this is a failed photograph. Too light, too soft, too indistinguishable. But in the realm of *personal expression* (and, I would propose, *fine art photography*), this is an extraordinary image. It points out the real difference between the normal use of a camera as a recording device to make snapshots, and as an art-making tool in the hands of a photographic artist. Loli Kantor is an artist.

The subject of this project is a lost people — in particular, Kantor's search for distant family relatives in Ukraine whom she discovered had disappeared a generation ago. This ghosted image does a superb job of rendering that emotion. Only a hint of her relatives remain in the form of wispy remembrances and old stories. Nothing could have rendered this better than the image as presented. It's not a failed photograph, but rather a *deeply felt* one.

This is a great example of why it is so commonly said that cameras don't make pictures, photographers do. No camera would make this picture, and I suspect few photographers would have the sensitivity to do so. Making this photograph requires that the photographer — somewhere along the process — feels the potential to make *this* representation of an everyday scene in spite of the fact that this is not what our eyes see, not what our camera wants to make, and not what most people would consider a good photograph.

This brings me to an unexpected characteristic of successful art. Making art requires a great deal, but of all the requirements there are perhaps none greater than for an artist to have the *courage of their convictions*. Making *anything* is an active commitment that results invariably in judgments. There is no question that many people would look at this photograph and think that it is improperly exposed or developed. Without the courage of one's convictions, it's easy to surrender our creative vision to the herd mentality.

Artists must commit, but can be criticized for doing so. Unfortunately, this has become even more true in the age of the Internet and social media. The ubiquitous "like button" is a not-so-subtle way of cajoling photographers toward mediocrity and the commonplace image. A so-called "like" is most often an expression of approval based on expectations. If a photograph doesn't look like our expectations of what a photograph is *supposed* to look like, it rarely earns approval. The yearning for "likes" pushes us more and more toward the cliché and the usual. An image like this one by Loli Kantor doesn't ask for our approval; it asks for our sensitivity, our understanding, and a large measure of compassion. It is a vehicle to connect a sensitive artist with a sensitive audience. That alone makes it a perfect photograph.