

# FROM THE CITY

A SMALL COLLECTION OF STREET PHOTOGRAPHS

R. H. KANE

## TO BEGIN...

As the title suggests, this *is* a small collection, and not only because of the suggested restriction of numbers in this exercise. It is small because, of the 3000 or so photographs I've taken in NYC, these are the few that I find truly satisfactory. They may not resonate with others, but for me they have at least some characteristics of a good image: evocative, well-composed, made with intention (as far as street shooting allows that), perhaps ironic or humorous, photographically appealing, and made with a point.

Street photography is not difficult; dozens of web sites post thousands of images. There are always chances to make opportunistic photographs that, viewed after the fact, might be interesting. My catalog too has many that might have been included, but they would only fill a quota. Within the rules of this exercise those below are the only ones that matter.

Much street work is vapid and pointless, and I have an embarrassing lot of that in my catalog as well. Too many photographers, though, won't discriminate and are quick to claim a random exposure as worthy. Looking at, say, Garry Winogrand's annotated contact sheets shows how many frogs one has to kiss and how difficult it is to end up with a good street photograph. My average is about one a year, and perhaps less in other people's judgment. But it is mine that counts in this collection.

John Szarkowski once gave the opinion that a good photograph is one you can talk about. I suggest that a poor photograph *needs* to be talked about if any sense can be made of it, or a point discovered. I hope these don't require discussion but I will talk just a bit about these images and the reasons I included them; I hope I make sense.

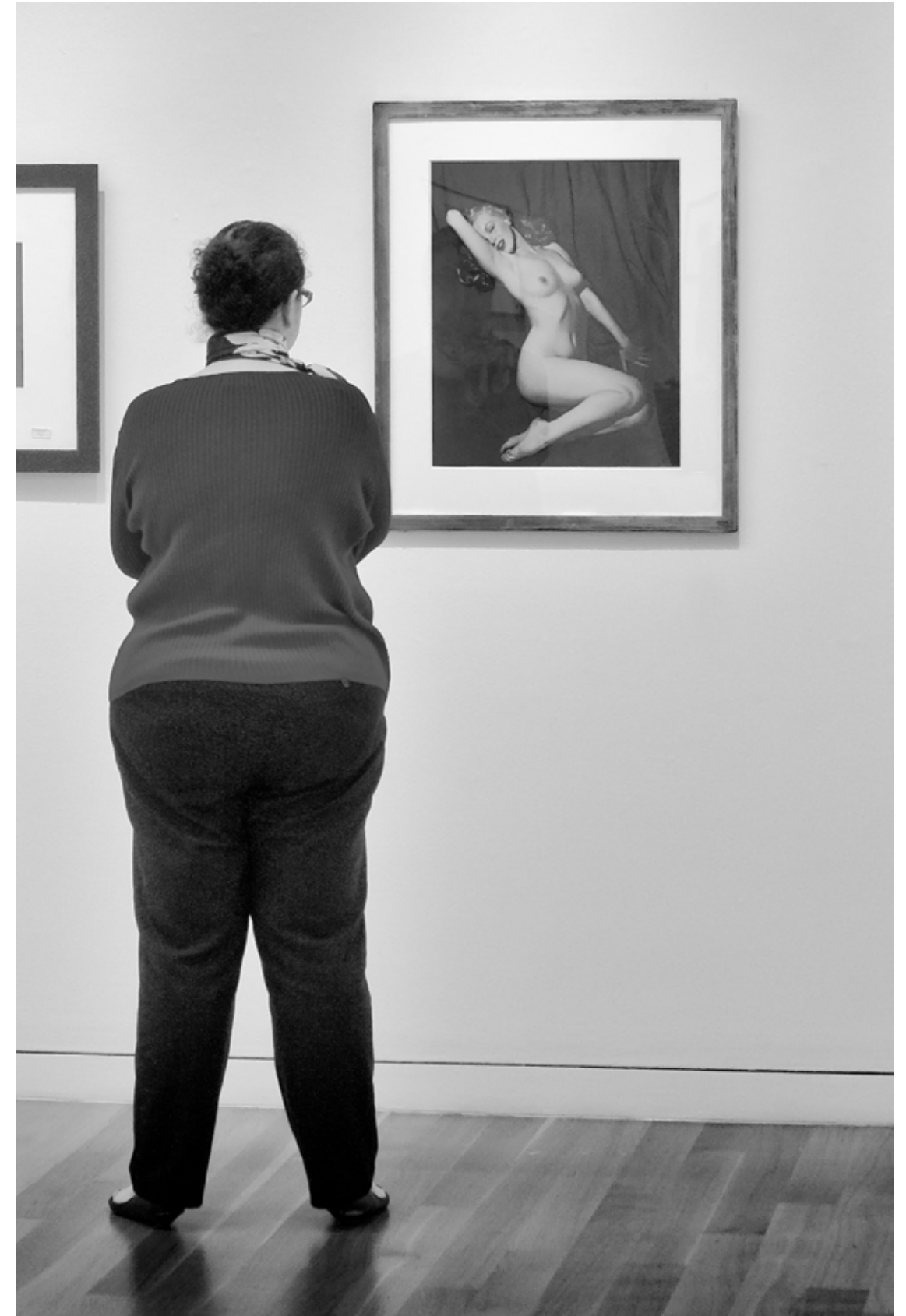
Not homeless, but apparently in reduced circumstances and presumably relying on donations for seed, he seems to be a child of the sixties. The interesting expression on his craggy face suggests empathy with his fellow hangers-out at the park; he would always feed them somehow. The contrast in textures between hair and feathers, and the broad areas of varying tonal range, add to the appeal of this image for me.



PIGEON MAN, WASHINGTON SQUARE PARK

This is an opportunistic photo that almost looks staged, and I am close to embarrassment for including it—not (of course) because of Marilyn, but for my insensitivity to her weight. Still, since I didn't show it to her, no harm/no foul..... A cheap shot, but still humorous (to me, anyway). Not that many chances like this come up.

CRITIC, SOTHEBY'S



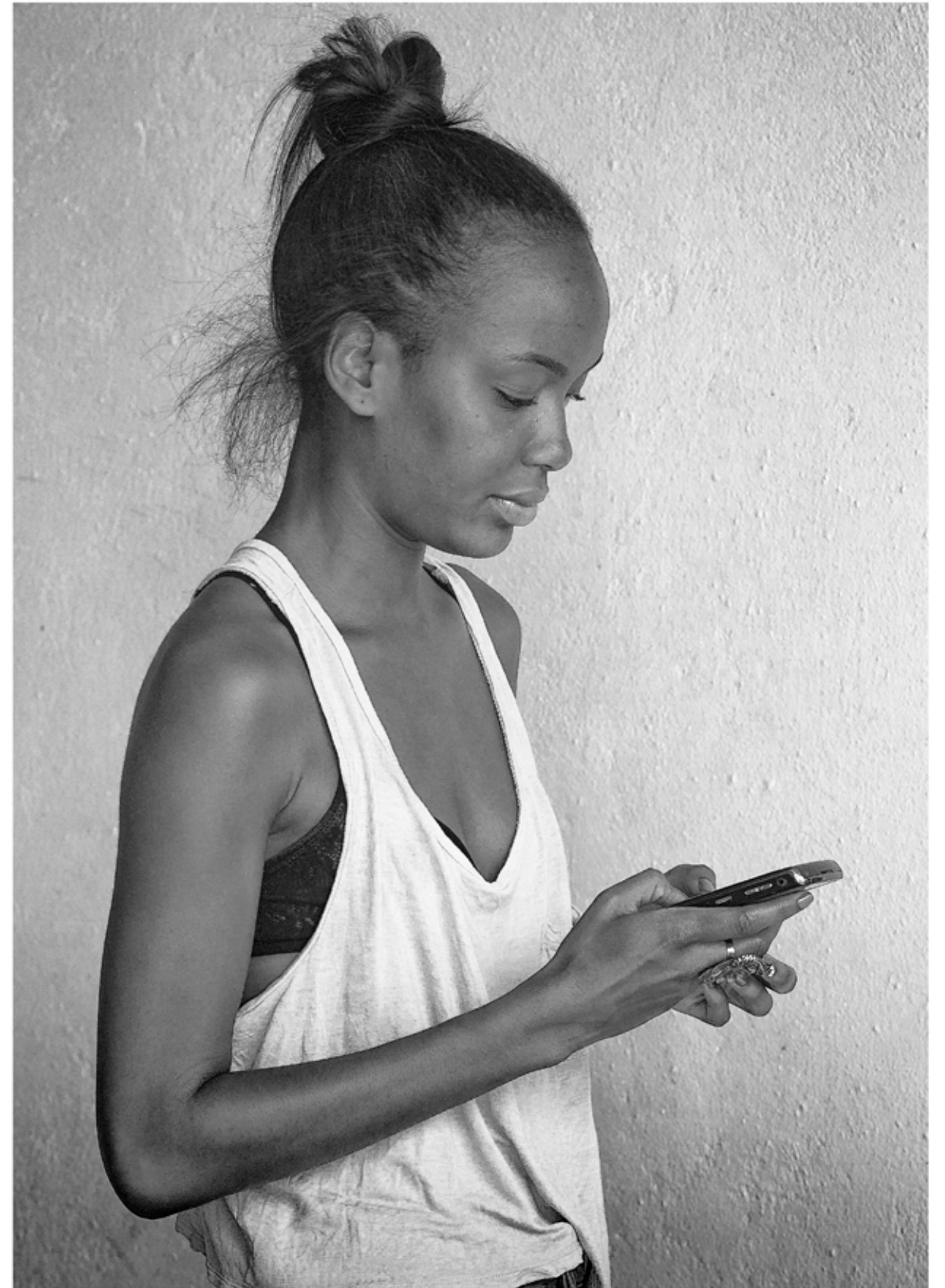
While this could have been taken in a former opium den, it was made in an open park near noon. The sinister looking hooded figure at right suggests that the stakes are exceedingly high, our main subject hoping his luck will improve. The lacy smoke adds enough atmosphere to rate inclusion.



CARDS, CHINATOWN

Her topknot, seemingly careless (but probably well thought out) dress, and her slimness all suggest dancer to me. Or model, perhaps? The neutral expression while texting reduces the impact of her face on the composition; the phone or even the entirety of the image then becomes the subject. As with Pigeon Man, the broad areas of wide tonal range drew me to take this. Had she been a white woman there would have been far less appeal in the opportunity. The variety of textures—hair, wall, shirt, skin—add a subtle interest to the image, and the tonal variation also moves the eye over the photograph in a way that only a monochrome treatment might.

CELL PHONE, EAST VILLAGE



The circle of figures doesn't imply unity, but rather boredom. Will father be a soccer coach? The reading matter doesn't suggest sophistication, and that perhaps carries over into family life. Does the child sense this? The cluttered background seems suited to the image; there is no cohesiveness there, either.



FAMILY TIES, 50TH STREET STATION



This is my favorite street photograph and comes closest to what I hope for when shooting. Nothing in the image implies that they are lost or distressed; clearly, they are just bored, possibly with each other. The cast iron facade behind them suggests the solidity of nineteenth century expectations for most peoples' lives, contrasting with the fluid uncertainty of present day life, in the form of our subjects. And I am particularly partial to middle grays.

ENNUI, SoHo





One can only imagine the offense that has upset her, but she is clearly unhappy and he is the cause. With lawyerly persuasion he seems intent on returning to good grace and I was lucky enough to catch the moment. I sense that she can be brought around. I'm happy with this, but wish I'd used a wider aperture to separate them better from the background. No second chances on the street.



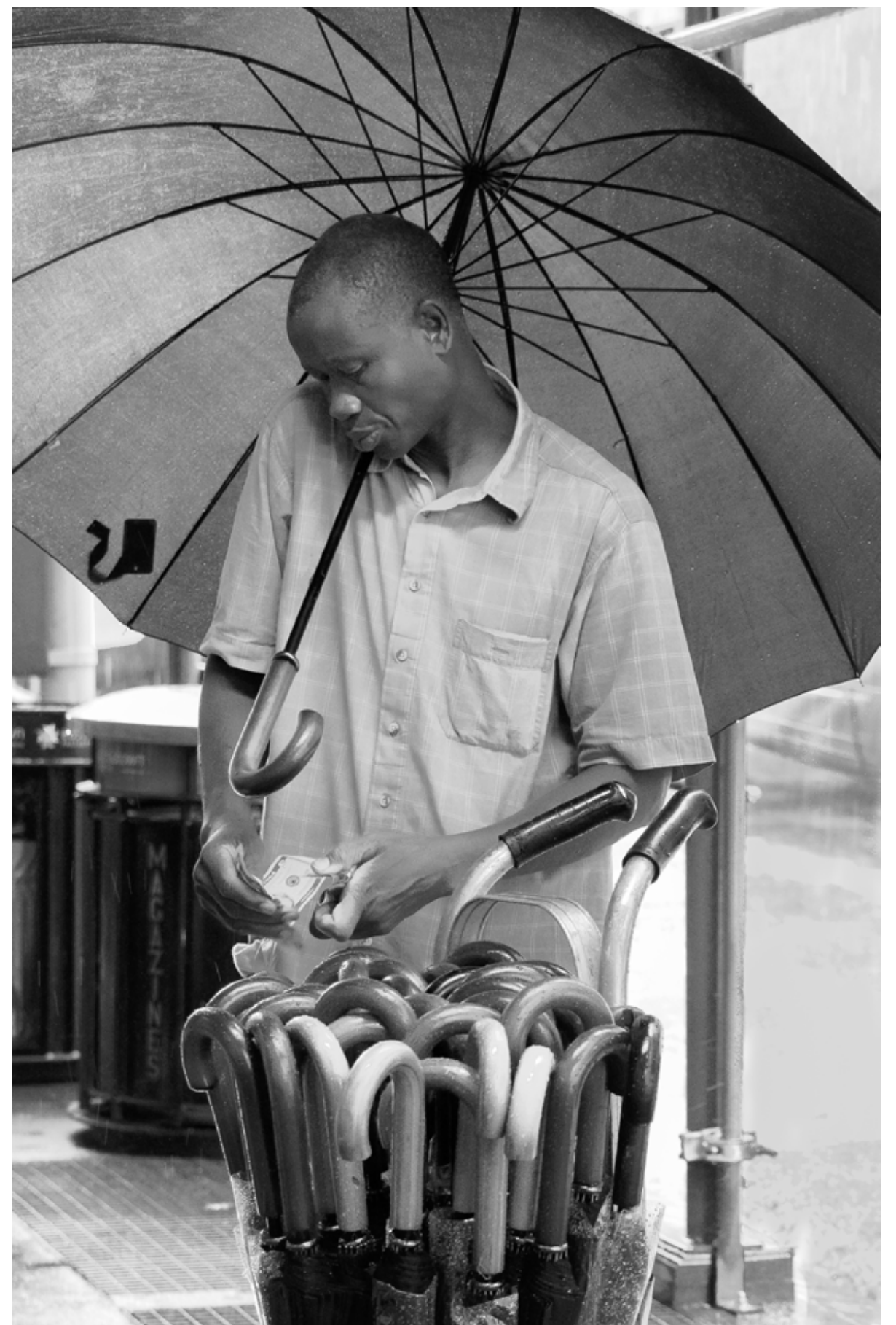
SWEET TALK, THE HIGH LINE

This photograph is what I would call “cute”, made only to illustrate a minor gender difference. Certainly it is not universal one, but common enough for most to understand the point. Had I presented only one of the exposures there would have been no point at all, just a reasonably well composed and exposed image to present. But it’s fun (for me, at least). Not every photograph needs to be deep.



CONVERSATION, PIER 94

Sheltered from the rain by overhead scaffolding, this enterprising young man stands to profit well from the downpour we were waiting out. The count is important so, hands-free, the shaft is tucked in and provides a spoke halo. How did he anticipate the rain and prepare for business while we just got caught in it?



RAINY DAY ENTREPRENEUR, MIDTOWN

This was amusing when I took it, about five years ago. With the recent gyrations of the Dow it seems even more appropriate to the times now. I'm certain that Merrill Lynch did not anticipate that their icon would be used for amateur social commentary. Yes, it's just one note and it's in your face, so to speak, but it's timely. The mood of the spectators suits the idea.



AWAITING MARKET REPORT, BROADWAY

I'm usually happiest with the result when the subject is unaware of the camera, as in this winter portrait. The pensive expression might have disappeared otherwise, the main reason I like this photo so much. It might have made a decent monochrome image in any case. Might.

AT THE BUS STOP, ASTOR PLACE





As a rule, I don't photograph homeless or disturbed street people, but this girl brings home to me the fact that children on milk cartons are not there as decoration. Her shoes and the flowers in her hair indicate an innocence that can't cope with life in the city, and the dollar bill suggests at least one reason for the distress shown on her face.

LOST, MIDTOWN



With the activity of the city just over the wall, the apparent loneliness of the woman seems amplified by the turned backs. There is a real sadness in her face, and had she been aware of me I would have passed on the shot to avoid the intrusion. We can only speculate about her thoughts (if in fact she really is lonely). But we have here just a narrow slice of time; in another moment she might have been smiling to give a very different image not worth taking. Even had I caught her just a millisecond from a grin, perhaps as a friend approached, this is the photograph if not the reality.



ALONE, CENTRAL PARK



Departing from my preference to avoid being seen by a subject, I took this shot fully aware that I was spotted. I wondered why a twenty-something was watching a seventy-something as I walked past the tattoo parlor; perhaps “staring down” is the better way to put it. Maybe it was the big 1Ds2 and 70-200 hanging off my arm. Used to attention (or perhaps requiring it), she probably expected a shot, so I obliged. Her expression hadn’t changed during the whole encounter, so she didn’t pose for this. I don’t care for tattoos, on either men or women, but her attitude demanded a photograph.

GIRLFRIEND, THE WEST VILLAGE



Just before this photo was taken she leaned over in the affectionate gesture that we see here, perhaps after a shared lunch. He seems pleased with the sentiment, and though I've titled this it isn't clear what the real relationship might be. Were they married, or have they just found each other late in life? Whatever the case, the moment is touching. So much of street photography is chance, the confluence of happening and being there.



BFFs, NEAR THE COOPER UNION

This hug lasted a long time, enough for me to get more prepared than I usually am. It surprised me that the couple was well into their forties, and this appeared to be more than a casual hug. Had his jeans been neater I would have been happier, but their connection along with the strong geometric elements formed by the stairs outside the Arcade make me more than pleased with this photograph.

HUG, CENTRAL PARK



She had been strolling (strutting? trolling?) alone for some time around the fountain, and then found her target. Demonstrating a practiced stance she occupied his time for quite a while before he was dismissed. Watching before the encounter, and after she lost interest, was amusing. I'm happy I got this shot.

ATTITUDE, BETHESDA FOUNTAIN



