



## I. PROLOGUE

### *The Photographer (1863)*

*Oh yes, we shifted the body. And yes, we positioned him somewhat, turning his face toward the camera. We found a musket and propped it up against that wall, suggesting a story—someone’s, possibly his. It is conceivable that blood from his ears and nose meant concussion. A Federal gunner could have cut his fuze so that a shell exploded precisely overhead, killing our young man. The blunt facts are indeed that he was in the battle and that he is dead. But of course we created a composition. What is art? Selection and arrangement. Photography is an art. A bloody face is only horrible. We didn’t mean only to frame the grotesqueness of war. Our photograph, our portrait, was not of gore—was not even of him, exactly; we meant to photograph his folks back home. Not their faces, but their love and grief. We tried to picture pathos and pity, and the loss his mother felt, his sister felt, perhaps a young and hopeful wife waiting. His body was insensate, empty, an object, but their sorrow, unspeakable, found expression in the photograph: a young man, someone’s darling, someone’s child—childhood innocence recalled in that repose—that’s what we meant. War is loss; war is families destroyed.*

*Oh yes, no doubt he was not innocent, and neither was his family. Could be he was the sharpshooter who murdered Hazlett and Weed. And Southern women were the backbone of the war; the rage of battle was*

*partly their rage. None of us is innocent. But somewhere beside our murderousness, does there not flutter the better angel of our nature? Is there no light within? That is what we’re after, like all the portrait artists of the past. Our medium is light. The medium of everything is light. Without art, it’s all a hash of flesh and blood and gore. Our photograph shows nothing of the stench. Can you imagine what the odor was the day we photographed that boy? Horses and men unburied; flies in brazen billions. We vomited what little food we ate. Decay is everywhere; we’re dying now. Even Vermeer was forced to catch his light between the sausage and the privy, the rank sweat of a summer afternoon thickening the musty air in his studio. “In the midst of life, we are in death,” the old saying goes, but also in the midst of death, there’s life.*

*And so we bare its light; we make visible the invisible. It’s all murder: creation feeds upon creation, flesh devours flesh, and the wise die, Solomon wrote, no better than the fool. And yet, isn’t there something else—something essential, that is ordinarily unseen? It’s all here on this battlefield: cruelty and courage, senseless death and higher purpose, horror and nobility, the flesh and the spirit. Battle is life compacted. One little bit of light enters the camera, the eye, illuminates the dark, imprisoned soul, and the blind see. 🍷*