



*Post-Mortem Solutions*

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On the slopes of a hillside covered in wild grasses, separating a perfectly maintained garden from the forest looming above it, you climb the rain-soaked incline, dragging a construction shovel behind you. Your rubber boots are sucked into the mud, and with every step, you must be careful not to lose them. Finally, dirty and drenched in sweat, you reach the old, moss-covered barn marking the end of your ascent. Wipe the misty drizzle from your glasses and scan the forest. In the distance, you recognize the dead tree with a trunk split like a Y, near which you buried the frames nearly three years ago.

The path hadn't seemed so difficult back then. Yet you had transported the fifteen large empty frames using a wheelbarrow, making several trips. But it was the end of winter, and the ground was frozen solid. You recall the invigorating sting of the dry cold. Today, however, the cold has a different nature. It insidiously saps your energy, as if the decomposition processes occurring beneath your feet were consuming the heat from your body. Perched on a post supporting a fence, an orange slug points its upper antennae in your direction and lingers its gaze on you. Step over the fence and head toward the tree.

You are now in a small clearing, inspecting the ground. You scrape away the carpet of dead leaves with your foot, exposing the surface of the humus layer. You find sprouted acorns, colonies of flies, but no sign of the place where the frames were buried. You turn over clusters of brambles and ivy that have invaded the area, to no avail. Take out your phone and find the photo you took while digging the pit. The image shows a neat hole, a little over a square meter, drawn with precision like an excavation on an archaeological dig. Shortly after taking the picture, you had reached the rocky soil beneath the earth and had to attack it with a pickaxe. By late afternoon, when the blisters on your hands forced you to cut your work short, the hole looked like an artillery crater. You placed the frames inside, one on top of the other, arranged by size. The largest ones formed the base of the stack, resting against the sides of the crater. You covered them with soil and plant debris that had accumulated near the hole, then hastily gathered your tools before nightfall.

Holding the screen firmly in front of you, you walk around the dead tree, trying to match the image to the surrounding environment. You adjust your perspective with crab-like steps until you find the exact spot where the photo was taken. The image, stripped of the distance separating it from its subject, immediately loses its magic and vanishes like a soap bubble. At no point, as you slip your phone back into your pocket, does this idea cross your mind.

Before you stretches a flow of emerald-green moss, at the center of which you spot a white ridge. Kneel down and dig until you uncover the outline of the stack. You unearth the first frame, its backing streaked with black marks left by long-vanished rhizomes. You prop

it against the trunk of a tree, taking a moment to appreciate its aesthetic qualities. The second frame is infested with a greenish fungus. It crumbles as you try to lift it from the ground. You continue the excavation, arranging the frames—each in varying states of preservation—against the surrounding trees.

Now, you reach the final frame. It has escaped rot and corrosion, and once freed from the gravel covering it, it regains the same immaculate whiteness that had dazzled you when you first unwrapped it. Sliding both hands underneath, you tilt it towards you as if opening a trapdoor. Suddenly, you let out a toneless moan, seeming to rise from beneath your diaphragm. For in the cavity beneath the frame, coiled in several concentric circles, lies a long viper with slate-gray scales. Seized by terror, you release your grip, letting the frame slam shut over the nest.

In the days that follow, you feel a faint warmth on the back of your right hand—a subtle sensation at the exact spot where you believe you touched the viper.