ENGL 121: Cultural Critique
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By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. — Elishevlyne Eliason

Angels of Death

by Elishevlyne Eliason ’25

It was a zoo made of one-way glass. The vulture watched the girl. The girl did not watch the bird. Instead, she bent her head hellward, forehead kissing the dirt as though she were in prayer. She clasped her hands around a patch of yellowed grass as if the ground had split open and it was her last tether to the earth. The vulture watched the girl. It seemed to be waiting to pick off her protruding bones what little flesh was left. The girl did not watch the bird. No one moved.

A man named Kevin Carter also found himself a participant in this scene. He watched the bird and the child from afar, his camera trained on their unmoving bodies. He took some photos. The bird and the girl did not pay any mind to the incessant clicking of his shutter. For twenty-odd minutes, Carter hunched over in a crouched position, hoping the bird would unfurl its tucked wings. The bird, true to its nature, did not budge. Vultures are scavengers, not known to approach their prey until their meal has drawn its final breath. The bird would only strike once the child’s fate was sealed.

Carter, aware that his resolve would not measure up to that of the bird’s, eventually set his camera down and chased the bird away. The child, who perhaps now sensed the absence of immediate danger, lifted her frail body off the ground and continued her journey, one gingerly-taken step after another. Carter watched the girl. Then he walked off in the opposite direction of the child and returned to the group of photojournalists he arrived with.

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In 1993, the *New York Times* bought Carter's image. They placed it on the third page of their Friday international paper under a headline about Sudan's continuing humanitarian crisis. An advertisement for miniature silver elephants flanked the article's right side. Each cost $1,050. The figurines were dubbed Baby Elephants, a name quite uncreative considering the advertised price. I am sure this layout choice was not intended to be some sort of statement on the African nation.

After the publication of the photo, the American public took issue with the events of that day. They criticized Carter for not shooing the bird away immediately. They reprimanded him for taking the picture in the first place. They heckled him for not saving the girl. They sent him letters and published papers and wrote books calling him a predator, a voyeur, an opportunist, a man destined for hells hotter than the scorched earth of Sudan, a vulture himself.

The *New York Times* also received inquiries from the public, though most were to ask about the whereabouts of the girl. Perhaps a few, confused, were hoping to negotiate the price of the Baby Elephants. Later *The Times*, apparently feeling inclined to appease their readership, published the following statement on Carter's photo:

> *"A picture last Friday with an article about Sudan showed a little Sudanese girl who had collapsed from hunger on the trail to a feeding center in Ayod. A vulture lurked behind her. Many readers have asked about the fate of the girl. The photographer reports that she recovered enough to resume her trek after the vulture was chased away. It is not known whether she reached the center."*

This update was tucked among several advertisements, including an advert for $371.99 executive leather briefcases. Thankfully for the penny-pinchers, this time, the advertisers promised to price-match any briefcase of equivalent caliber.

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Journalistic photography is a delicate art. It is a delicate art not because it features subjects who are often bruised or bleeding or defenseless or distraught, but because with each slight adjustment of the frame, the value of a photo is affected. A lesser photographer can, with little effort, make a war zone appear as a parodied stagecraft, much like splattering ketchup on a fake crime scene instead of actual blood. The potential for bad photos is high; the possibilities for good shots, few. Much stands in the way of a good photograph: challenges to good lighting, coloring, framing, patterning, positioning; not to mention the added inconveniences of war that tend to be an obstacle for art: screaming, gassing, bombing, rioting, dying.

Much about Carter's photo made it an effective face for the *Times'* assessment of Sudan. Perhaps most impactful was the photo's positioning. Had Carter gotten too close, his photo would have been more gruesome than it already was, less palatable for the already tender sensibilities of readers, and perhaps less publishable because of this fact. The girl would have appeared like a needle-pierced pin cushion, her gaunt and slight bones bursting, awfully, from the skin. Had Carter taken the photo from further away, the bird and the girl would have been but a blip on an otherwise level horizon. The orientation of Carter's image put his work at the fulcrum between these two extremes. Positional balance is not a purely aesthetic expectation of good photography; it is inherent to the material makeup of a camera. Deep within the machine's

bowels are a mess of mirrors and chips. The sum of these parts dictates what is and what is not perceived by a camera's sensor, and if a subject is too close or too far, the camera simply will not focus.

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Save the girl. America's demand of Carter. What, then, would it have meant for him, as a photojournalist, to have broken this fourth wall, to have collapsed that necessary distance between him and the girl, to have scooped up her slender body into his arms, to have cradled her as though she were his own newborn baby, to have carried her to a place of refuge, to have, for a moment, made her burden his own? It is the stuff of movies, of human interest stories, of perfectly timed snapshots, of plays, of novels, of entire industries, industries that intellectualize and explore tragedies that will never befall their creators and consumers. *Save the girl,* they begged Carter. *It costs you nothing. You are a monster if you don't.*

To blame Carter for the girl's plight was perhaps the most effective option for the American public for the same reason Carter's photo elicited such a visceral reaction from its viewers: doing so parsed out an unthinkable sadness into more digestible units. The hunger of millions is strangely, though invariably, small when stacked against the visual weight of one starving little girl. To antagonize a man is much easier than to blame the *New York Times* for buying the photo and plastering the image on newspapers across the nation, or to blame the British for manufacturing a crisis in Sudan in the first place, or to blame oneself for pursuing the advertisements of those same crisis makers and backing a child's undue hunger with the full force of one's dollar.

For this reason, movements are known by their martyrs and their miscreants: King was assassinated, Marie-Antoinette was out of touch, Yousafzai was shot, Davis was jailed. That horrible wheel of human suffering is best moved, in the mind, by individuals alone. Carter was a sacrifice upon the bloodied altar of the American conscience. His crime: making reality too real, forcing onlookers to move one way or another on their fulcrum of comfort. Their options: move closer and reveal their disgust or move farther and reveal their indifference.

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Kevin Carter would kill himself soon after taking the photo of *The vulture and the little girl*, but not soon enough to escape winning a Pulitzer for the photograph. The public had a variety of choice words for Carter once he won the award. When he ended his life, however, these remarks suddenly halted. The New York Times published an obituary in Carter's honor a few days after he had died. The page was devoid of *Baby Elephants* or executive leather briefcases or any other adverts for that matter. The obituary section, perhaps, is the one portion of the paper where it is deemed too inelegant to sell a coffin along with the death.

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The girl featured in Carter's photo did, in fact, make it to the feeding center. She, in fact, outlived the photographer who captured her likeness. And the girl in the photo was not, in fact, a girl. The girl in the photo was, in fact, actually a boy. And Carter had, in fact, wanted to help the boy in the photo. But the then prevailing belief that foreigners could transmit diseases to the

medically vulnerable Sudanese population stopped him from doing so. And Carter did not, in fact, stalk off immediately after the boy limped away. He lit a cigarette, thought of his daughter, cried, prayed to God.

But these facts would not be uncovered until a much later point in time, and at this point, *The Times* would have other crises to occupy its front pages and the public conscience would have other intellectual exercises to conduct on what should or should not be done about these far off disasters. There is always more disaster in desperate need of judgment. After all, if lead-filled bodies fall in deserts and the American public is not able to hear, from the comfort of their couch, the frantic last prayers of soon-to-be-dead men or the mechanical clicking of guns ridding themselves of their bullets or the crumpling of deadened flesh into the sand, do these bodies, these heavy things, as they tumble and plummet, ever even make a sound?

Word Count: 1,587