

Robert Frank, Margaret Bourke-White, and Walker Evans helped shape his photographic vision: Frank's irony and Cartier-Bresson's geometric compositions in particular informed Carlson's early images.

Eventually he reached his own understanding of "the decisive moment"—a phrase popularized as the English title of Cartier-Bresson's classic 1952 book of photographs, *Images à la Sauvette* ("images

on the run" or "stolen images"). "There is a creative fraction of a second when you are taking a picture," Cartier-Bresson told *The Washington Post* in 1957. "Your eye must see a composition or an expression that life itself offers you, and you must know with intuition when to click the camera. That is the moment the photographer is creative. 'Oop! The Moment!' Once you miss it, it is gone forever." For Carlson, though, the "decisive moment" has not been something to take literally. "It was something surprising or wonderful or alive," he says, "in which you placed a person or object in the middle of life or a culture, in a balanced arrangement of forms that created its own logic."

Carlson traveled and photographed ex-

O P E N B O O K

Discerning a Blink

and through her mother's terminal illness. It begins with this exquisitely detailed narration of an ending, perhaps echoing readers' experience of *A Death in the Family*, by James Agee '32. From the prologue:

She left us at night. It had felt like night for a long time, the days at once short and ceaselessly long. November-dark. She'd been lifting her hand to signal for relief, a code we'd concocted once it became too much effort for her to speak and too difficult for us to understand her when she did. When it became clear that it was taking everything out of her just to lift the arm, we told her to blink, a movement that, when you're watching for it, becomes impossibly hard to discern. "Was that a blink?" we'd ask when her eyelids just seemed to ripple or twitch. "Are you blinking, Mom? Was that a blink?" until finally, she'd heave the lids up and let them thud back down to say, *Yes, the pain weighs that much, and I am lying here, pinned beneath it. Do something.*

Did we recognize the day when it arrived? A day with so much pain, a day when her patience had dissolved and she wanted nothing but to be outside of it. Pain. The word itself doesn't hurt enough, doesn't know how to tell us what it stands for. We gave her morphine. Each time she asked for

Tracy K. Smith '94—winner of the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for *Life on Mars*, her third poetry collection, and professor of creative writing at Princeton—has now crafted a book of prose, *Ordinary Light: A Memoir* (Knopf, \$25.95). It travels from the comfort of the California suburbs back to the cotton culture of Alabama,

and through her mother's terminal illness. It begins with this exquisitely detailed narration of an ending, perhaps echoing readers' experience of *A Death in the Family*, by James Agee '32. From the prologue:

it, we asked her if she was sure, and she found a way to tell us that she was, and so we were sure—weren't we?—that this was the end, this was when and how she would go...

There was a moment when I found myself alone with her in the room. Had I crept back down to steal a last look, or had we all agreed to give one another that much? It's been twenty years now. I've forgotten so much that I once forbade myself to forget, but I do remember this: snipping five or seven strands of her hair with a pair of nail scissors from her bureau. Just a few short hairs from the nape of her neck. Suddenly, those few strands, things I'd have once thought nothing of brushing off her shoulders or discarding from among the tines of a hairbrush, were consecrated, a host. For a moment, I contemplated eating them, but then they'd be gone and I'd have been left with nothing, so I placed them in a small plastic bag, the kind of bag in which spare threads or extra buttons are provided when you purchase a sweater or coat, and tucked that into the flap of my address book.



Tracy K. Smith

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Athlete Eney Jones in unexpected repose (above) and a shot from the Eilat Triathlon

tensively in the United States after graduation, before going to Lebanon in 1974 to document a group of Palestinians living there. But his plan to photograph the civil war in nearby Cyprus collapsed, and a severe gastrointestinal disorder finished off his career as an itinerant photographer. Since then, he has made his living primarily as a writer for mainstream and specialty publications, including the *Los Angeles Herald* and *TV Guide*. But he has never put down his camera, and his photographic style has evolved across the decades.

For the past 20 years, Carlson has fo-