

Till Death Do Us Part

Animals post mortem

Fabian Haas

Foreword by Mark Benecke

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Foreword

You can see what it's meant to be

To photograph corpses, photographers use a ring-flash. This is a flash light surrounding the lens, creating not a circular reflection, but a nice and even light – as long as you do not photograph living eyes.

This type of lighting can be found, for instance, in a series by Martin Schöller, a photographer from New York. He has photographed every A-list celebrity in the USA, and more recently many homeless people, using a ring-flash lens. His subjects' faces are kept natural (no makeup or anything like that) and can be blown up to be metres large and hang in galleries displaying clarity and truth.

Despite the ring-flash, people – especially dead ones – can be fiddly or even downright difficult to photograph. Sometimes they're lying outdoors, sometimes in the shadows, sometimes their skin shines under the neon light or shows interesting details which would be made unrecognizable by a glaring assist light. «The photography done for the *Atlas* was painstaking. Every expert must be able to make the right judgement», wrote Waldemar Weimann and Otto Prokop, Heads of Departments at the East and West Berlin Institutes for Forensic Medicine, in their photographically and forensically groundbreaking *Atlas of Forensic Medicine* in 1963. Their encyclopedia was published over several editions and contains some two

thousand outstanding black-and-white photos of hanged, dismembered, buried, drowned and stabbed corpses.

Prokop was himself an expert. For example, he developed a trick to make sure the corpses were illuminated uniformly: He would make the camera's diaphragm hole as small as possible and leave the shutter open. The camera rested on a steady-as-a-rock tripod, and Prokop left the shutter open and carried the light source around the body. By moving the lamp around, he was able to illuminate his photos evenly.

The black and white crime scene photos from old New York are also well-known. There are even coffee-table books full of these photos. Individual photos of corpses were trendsetters; perhaps the most impressive among them is *The Most Beautiful Suicide* (named for those who believe suicide can be beautiful. I don't). On May 1st 1947, standout young photographer Robert Wiles photographed a depressed beauty laying stretched out as though asleep on a Cadillac, dented from the force of her impact from jumping off the Empire State Building. Her name was Evelyn McHale and she was afraid of marrying her fiancé. Viewing this photograph, one is reminded of Snow White, but also of the transience of love, although it is supposed to be a stronger force than death. So much for that idea.

Times have changed for forensic photography. In the files of over a thousand criminal cases my team and I have officially worked on to date, photos are often unusable. We barely even give photography classes in our training courses any more, although I do very much like them. But we prefer not to give them because my colleagues' hair and mine often stands on end when we're handed some blurry image and told that "you can still see what it's meant to be". Having a good photography technique and smartphones which almost always have excellent cameras (for instance, I only take my

microscopic pictures with my iPhone) is one thing. But having a good eye, composure, the opportunity and, above all, a photography routine based on thousands of failed attempts, is quite another.

Fabian Haas breathtakingly has all the good qualities of a photographer and observer, and shares them with us here. His clean but beautiful photographic excerpts from the circle of life, the recycling of foods and raw materials on which our lives depend, are neither provocative in their truth – as some poems from Baudelaire and Benn – nor too bacteria and maggot laden, as my own photos are.

Instead, we see boney gaps and holes which look like their stone and sand big brothers in their fragmented forms. Nothing is experimentally, glaringly illuminated, unless it is surrounded and suffused with the African sun. Of course, sometimes there are bloating and blowflies in the picture, but the corpses still convey a sense of life, in part due to their natural surroundings.

The images are sharp and beautiful, and when I saw a couple of skulls which have a shape our brain interprets as a smile, I had to smile along with them. For everything to be at rest and truly be in peace is something I've rarely seen captured so poetically, organically and lovingly as in this book. The fact that marabou storks are a type of corpse-eating bird could come as a surprise, at least in Europe where their name is more associated with a type of chocolate. I like these amazing animals, and I'm great friends with a cool marabou stork in the Eberswalde Zoological Garden. That makes it all the more beautiful that the sub-Saharan stork can also be found among these pages.

Our biological and chemical world works in cycles. Climate change makes this fact painful, which is why it's fitting to view the cycle of life in peace and beauty, solemnly and with a smile.

Take your time, because often we don't see what things are really meant to be.

Enjoy your time discovering the photographs in this book.

Mark Benecke, Ph.D.
Forensic biologist

Introduction

Skeletons on the Savannah

Life and death are inseparable. We do not know what comes before life. Neither do we know what is after life. And we usually avoid dealing with it. A dead body lacks what gave him life before: the rhythm of breath, the lively high lights in the eyes, the warmth – nothing of it is left, when life is gone. Earth takes back what is hers from the beginning.

To contemplate about death has something surreal. Even more surreal is to deal with a body after life is expired – is that possible at all? Somehow constrained: yes. For example in the Savannahs of Africa, with the dead animals, which can be found and observed when you travel the vast plains and smooth hills in Kenya. What hides behind the curtains of civilization, is the life after death in the wilderness – the cadaver of elephants, zebras, gnus, giraffes, and yes, the scavenging marabou storks are finally food for the cleaning army of the savannah: The hyena, the vultures and after those the beetles, worms and maggots feed until nothing is left, nothing left at all of the proud wild animals. Earth is taking back, what she provided.

This book is entitled Till Death Do Us Part –Animals post mortem, and it approaches on nothing less than the secrets of nature: The protection against neglect, the demise of this part of earth. Dead animals do last not for very long in the Masai Mara, the Tsavo and in other protected areas in Kenya. They are there for a short spell, the bloated bodies,

and hyena and jackals quickly remove flesh, reaching the bare bones that lie bleached, gray and white in the green grass or on the bare red soil of the laterite. And soon these bones will be gone too.

The wilderness always exercised a bizarre attraction on humans. The observation of two cheetahs chasing an escaping gazelle, the wrangling of elephant bulls, the lion's hounding of an impala - or the drooling lurking of spotted hyenas. The bizarre attraction continues after the hunt: when the body signals its end, exhales its last breath, with opened mouth, the tongue hanging out, the eyes lifeless without shine. The eyes are eaten first by grass land cleaners, even before the entrails; skeletons, skull, long bones, bizarre appearances, assumptions of the end, an notion, an idea of finality and of limitless natures.

Fabian Haas has dedicated himself to this natural phenomenon and approached it with thousands of photos on his safari in the Kenya wilderness. Moments of this safari to the end of life have been selected in this book, a tribute to past and future life.

Ulrich Werner Schulze

Bodies in Transition Decay & Decomposition

Every animal is born, grows, proliferates, matures and finally dies, decomposes and decays to re-enter the eternal cycle of nutrients.

This is theory and practice of nature. We do not find tons of hairs on our ways left behind by the myriad of dead mammals that lived in the last million years. Or scales and skin of Dinosaurs. Wood is decomposed and eaten by fungi

and insects over decades to distribute it as molecules into new wood and insects and fungi. All creatures follow the same faith.

Decomposition is not seen often in our today's life. It unites death, decay and decomposition with the thriving life, reproduction, growth and sex. The carcass attracts all sorts of insects to lay eggs their offspring grows and closes the circle.

Carcasses attract bigger animals. Birds feed on insects and on flesh, sometimes fresh sometime pre-digested by the insects. It attracts even bigger scavengers such as lions, leopards which never shy away from an easy bite, and hyenas. The latter, for what ever reasons, got a bad reputation from doing just that. This is simply what almost all predators do: feed on carcasses.

And even herbivores are attracted - on occasions - to carcasses and practice the somewhat unclear osteophagy, feeding on bones, literally. How much bone and mineral they swallow no one knows, maybe they simply wonder about the scent they smell and the structures they see, bare bones in the tropical sun.

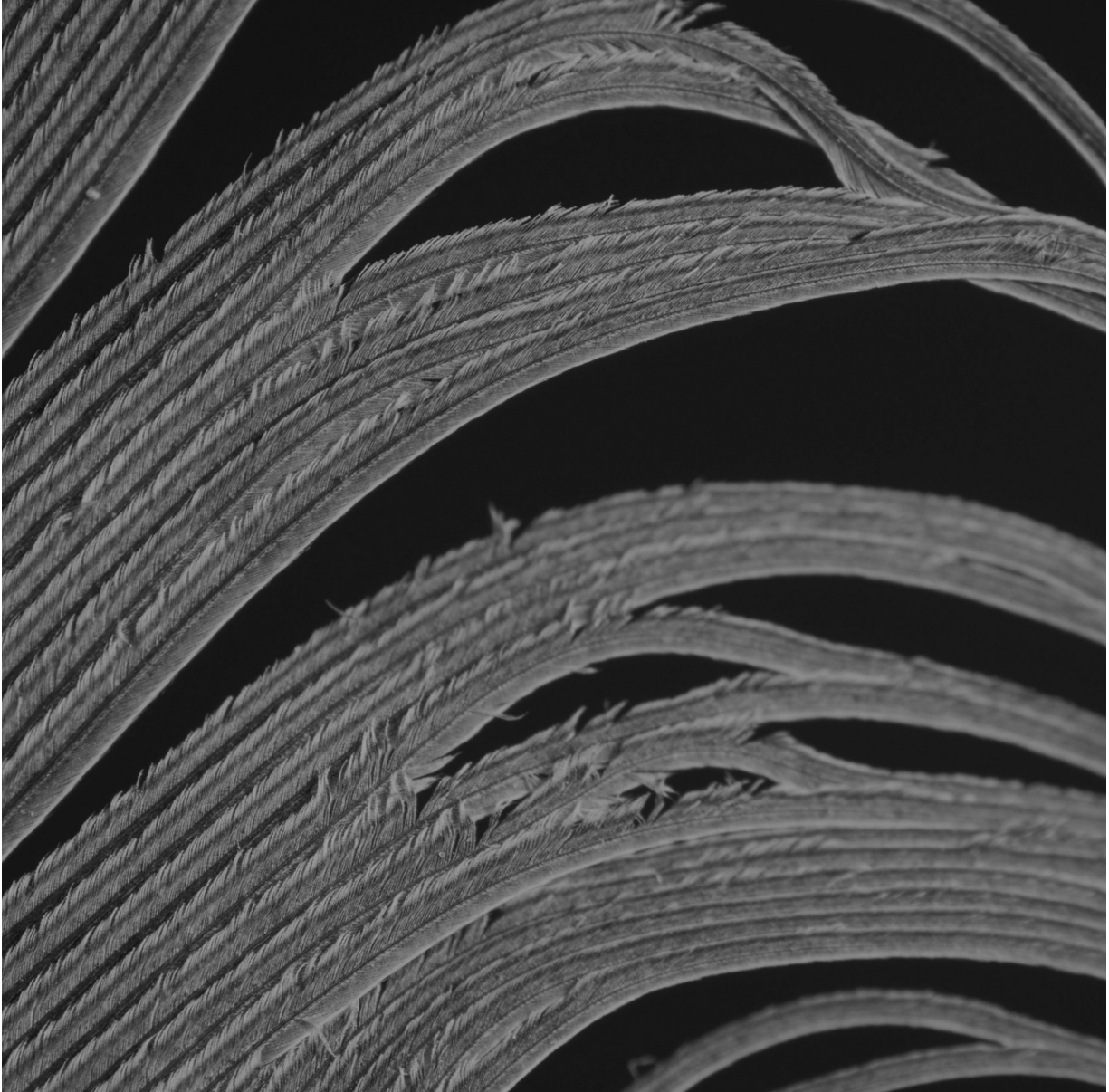
Maybe I am a herbivore there: attracted to something you usually do not see. Structure usually not accessible to the naked eye and curious mind, as long they belong to a healthy animal. Once it reached the final stage of its life, it disintegrates and releases all internal structures from the inside to the outside world. Almost offering their energy and nutrients to all those to start their life or simply have to continue living. Like the hyena feeding her cubs.

I accepted this invitation to look at the insides and found new insights and structures, found a whole universe of life in

a apparently dead animal. I could see the spongy structure in an elephant skull and the wonderfully fine nasal bones in buffalo's nose. Wonderful architecture, and yet we all so often ignore it.

Join me on my explorations.

Dr. Fabian Haas



Cattle





