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DENNIS LETBETTER

















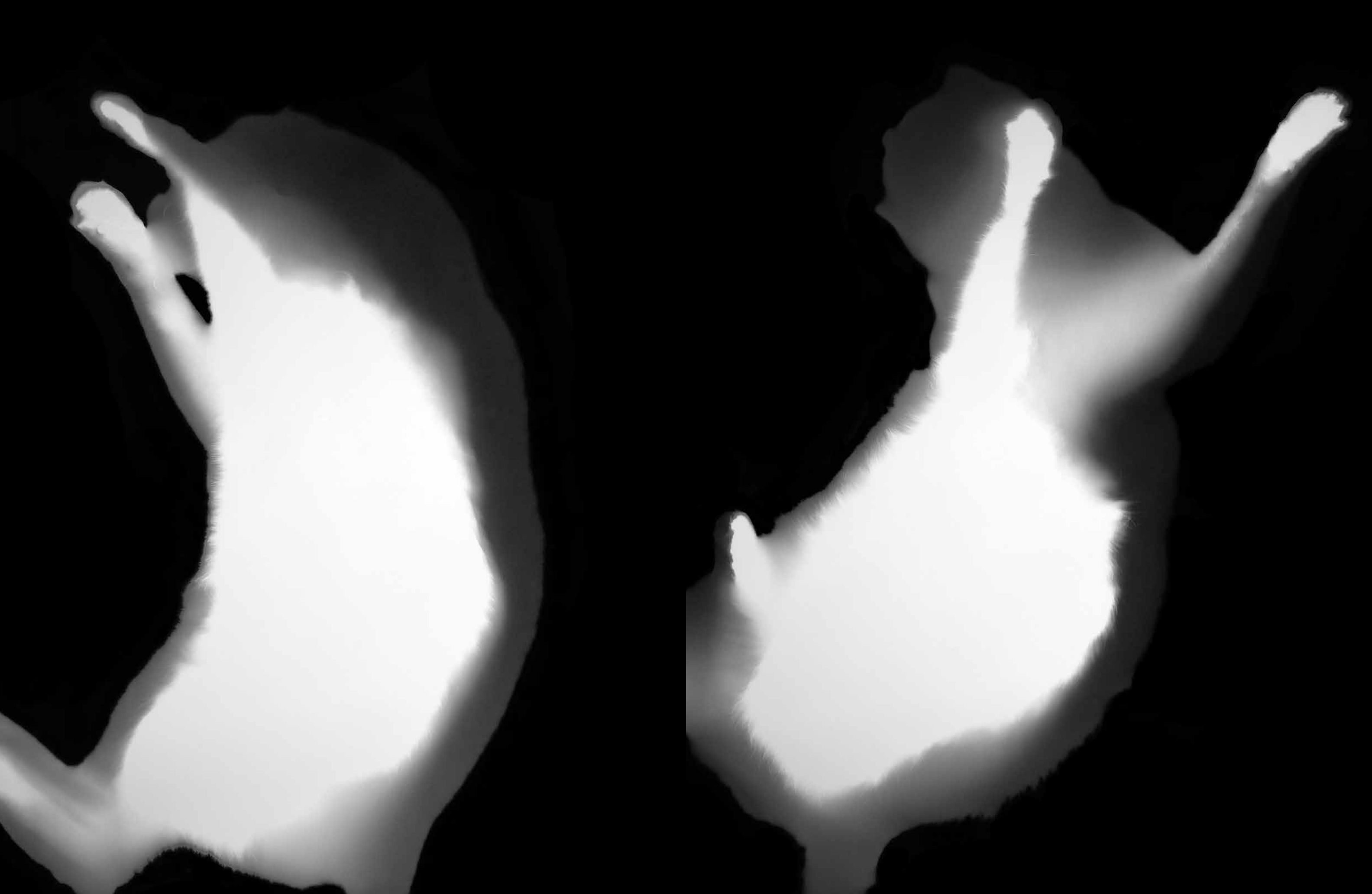


















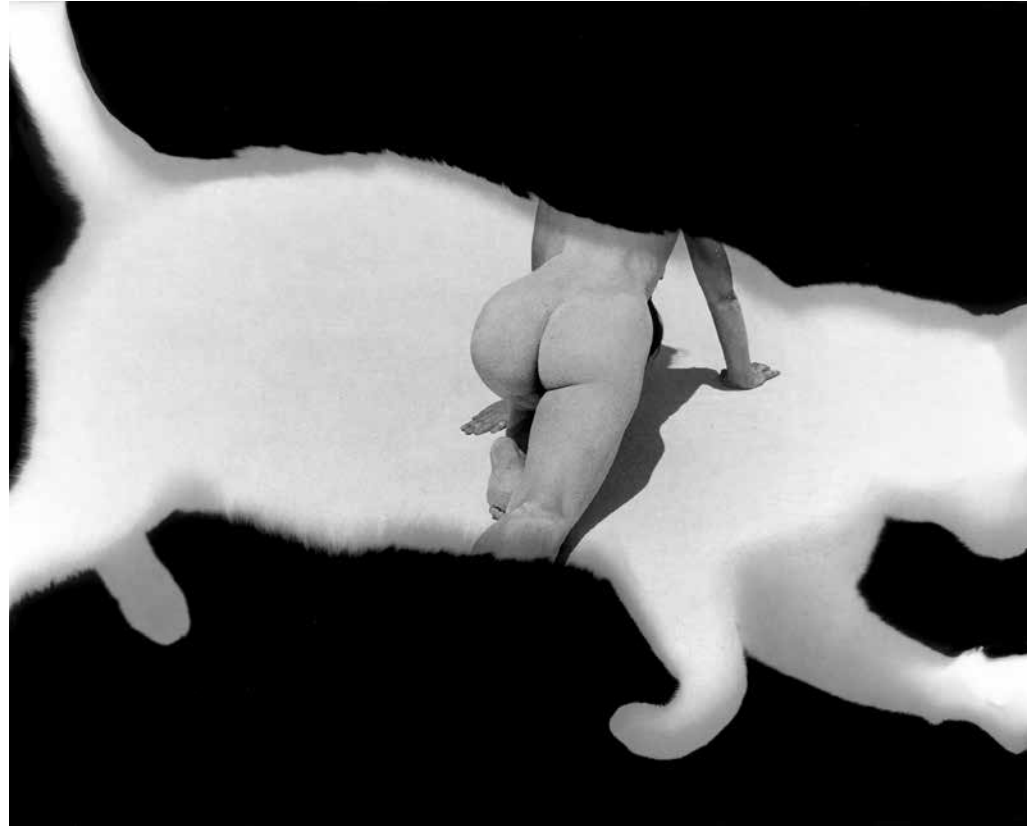
A Latent Image in Magma

When I returned from a five-year stay in Western China in 2010, I knew very few people in San Francisco. I was invited to dinner at the Bonnafont Gallery, where I met Dennis Letbetter, and we quickly began to discover our mutual interests in music, literature, and film. We recognized the type of kindredness that seems timeless, inevitable, and very easily grows intimate. It was in the context of this new friendship that Dennis asked me to look after his beloved and epileptic dog, Kayla.

At this time, the lower half of Kayla's body was immobile, and she pulled herself with some difficulty around the house by her front legs. She had to be carried outdoors down a flight of stairs, and as she probably weighed 100 pounds, this was not easy. She maintained such an elegance of spirit, that caring for her seemed to be a gift.

I do not see the Kaylagrams as eulogical, but as a dithyrambic celebration of that rare spirit that Kayla embodied. In these photos our gaze grabs a stolen intimacy—we see Kayla's chin, belly, and underside of her paws—as if she were lying on top of us. It is this somewhat uncomfortable but nonetheless uncanny view that we get of the plaster cast of a dog at Pompeii, which is very likely, the first contact print of an animal.

Solomon Rino



Letbetter, 1985



Halsman, 1948

Since few things are new in any field, I would suggest that nothing is original in contemporary cameraless photography. I pretty much lose interest after Bruce Conner's *Angels* and in any case for me Anna Atkins essentially said it all in 1843. We have always had dentistry, but now we have anaesthetics.

My first animal photograms were done in 1985 with Mac McGinnes' cat Kipling. Mac had entrusted me with Kipling's care, and I promptly put him to work making catograms. I placed him randomly on exposed undeveloped photographic paper of nudes made at White Sands, New Mexico.

Making photograms in 2010 in San Francisco with Kayla and Monkey had an unimaginably fresh aspect. Kayla, the kindest dog I have ever known, was quite long suffering. Monkey, a stunningly handsome black cat, brought a wholly new take on life in the darkroom, a place I had previously imagined as a comparatively passive and boring environment. He exhibited a focused refusal to cooperate after a few exposures had been made.

David Hancocks has written in *Animals and Architecture* about the different takes of animals on interior spaces. Animals' notions of places of solace, comfort and play differ in comparison to those of humans. The experience of working with Monkey in the darkroom obliquely brings to mind the work of the scholar Mihai Nadin on anticipatory systems, rather too simply put, "I anticipate, therefore I am." One might think of the increasingly uncooperative cats during the creation of Halsman's portrait of Dali, *Dali Atomicus*, after 28 attempts over six hours. It is interesting that two of the greatest practitioners of the photogram, Man Ray and Christian Schad, have their own names for the form: Rayographs and Schadographs, (the latter actually named by Tristan Tzara) creating puns in English that are almost too perfectly descriptive.

I call my images Kaylagrams and Monkeygrams. I have lived with both of these animals and they have lived with each other. Wonderfully so.

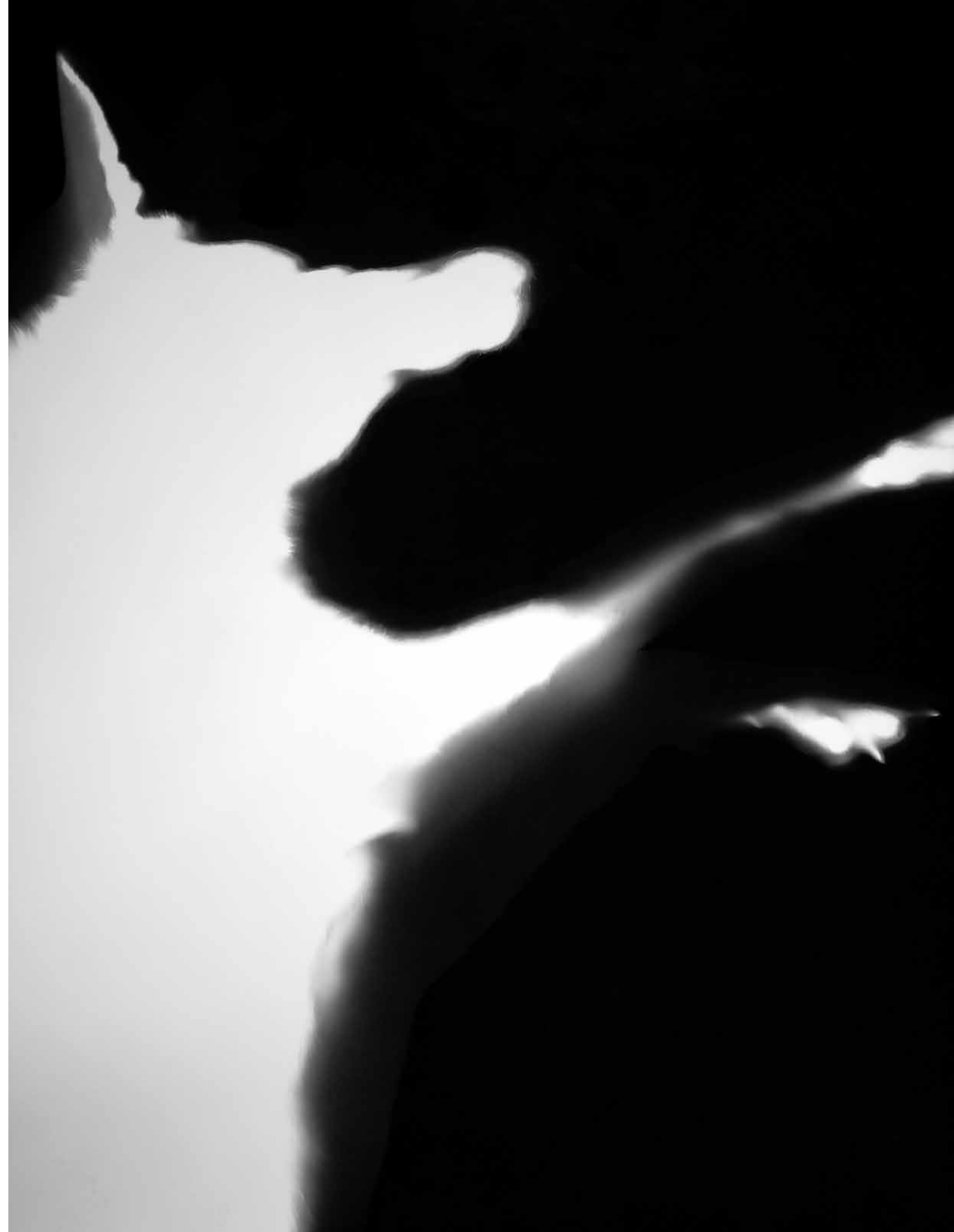
Dennis Letbetter

i mag no. 2
DENNIS LETBETTER

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eyemag.org
1256 Masonic Avenue
San Francisco California 94117-2917
www.eyemag.org
dennis@eyemag.org

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[The camera] may be said to make a picture of whatever it sees, the object glass is the eye of the instrument —the sensitive paper may be compared to the retina.

William Henry Fox Talbot