

Nicollet Island, about 1948



SOME PHOTOGRAPHS are more notable for their affect than their content. This image, which is built on about four notes of tone—bright white in the sky and the laundry, almost detail-less dark shade, and perhaps two gray midtones—simulates the experience of arising from a catnap or emerging from an afternoon movie, a moment when the light is a touch too much. We are clearly facing the sun here, shaded, however scantily, by meager tree branches.

The layout of the image, made around 1948 by Gordon Ray, seems drawn from cartoons or perhaps from the illustrations of Wanda Gág. It is stylized, almost abstract, in its chiaroscuro rendering of a little house wedged between and behind its relatively massive neighbors like a calf peeking out from behind a protective enclosure of cows. A bit of research on photographer Ray helps; besides working in still photography, including a number of remarkable industrial and natural landscapes along Lake Superior's north shore, Ray also did extensive film work in studios, where lighting and set design collaborated with photography to fashion an image. Here, we see that same team at work, except that the lighting is natural and the set design a by-product of random urban planning on a piece of land that exists in suspension between urban and residential areas of Minneapolis. Perhaps the photographer, too, felt the blast of light we experience in his photograph when he came upon this sun-and-shadow-filled scene.

The image is at once delightfully creepy—"Halloween" was my first mental caption for it—and decidedly Spring-like in anticipation. Ray captures a quiet moment of imminent natural drama, a vernal one Minnesotans



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know intimately: the drama of growth and warmth making their annual return. The ground looks compressed, like the snow melted only days ago and the late-winter lawns are weeks from greening. The laundry may be getting its first good line-drying in several months. The trees seem on the verge of budding out; a color photograph might have given us a very different, celery-tinted description. But Gordon Ray's moody, cinematic shot reminds us that some entries in the visual record lean dramatically toward the expressionistic, no less effective for shunning the descriptive. Sometimes, evocation is more telling, and more intriguing, than fact.

—George Slade

George Slade is a writer, curator, consultant, and historian of matters photographic. He was born in St. Paul, is in the process of relocating to Michigan, and can be found online at re:photographica.

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