A black and white photograph of a dirt road winding through a wooded area. The road is the central focus, leading the eye from the foreground into the distance. On the left, there are dense, dark trees and bushes. On the right, there is a grassy area with a wooden fence. The lighting creates long shadows across the road, suggesting a low sun position. The overall mood is quiet and somewhat somber.

A SHORT WALK
DOWN A
BACK ROAD

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down a
Back Road

text and photos
by
Peter Hegeman

Pat saw them first. Funny looking shapes pressed into the roadbed. She thought they were frogs, but you couldn't see much beyond their vaguely amphibian shapes. They were too far gone to tell green from tan, bumpy from smooth, moist from dry.

It was a lovely day, late morning. We'd just finished a run along a narrow dirt road between Deer Creek a few yards to the north and a couple of sediment catch basins on the Army's tank testing grounds just to the south. The wider world was locked down. Not so very far away the disease raged on, unabated.





We turned around, walked back to where she'd seen it, the light gray splotch on the darker surface of the road. You could just barely make out a squat little frog belly, bent frog arms, legs like a pair of angled brackets.

Except that once you recognized the first of them, the others were suddenly more visible. They looked like sea nettles floating in the murky water of Chesapeake Bay, like the discarded condoms you see in neglected parks.

Here were more frogs than I'd seen in years....

When I was a kid we saw them all the time. Squat little toads in the garden, big green frogs in the creeks and ponds. Peepers loud enough to wake the dead.

Now they were rare, almost silent, unseen. Like the insects and birds we used to take for granted, they'd faded away. Except here. Perhaps a dozen of them. Smashed into the roadbed.

Birds chirped. A car came along, too fast. We had to step out of the road.

Not long ago I'd read something about the great amphibian die off—the debate over the cause: was it climate change, a change in UV radiation, pollution, pesticide use, some novel fungus.

Here it was just too many cars. Too many people.





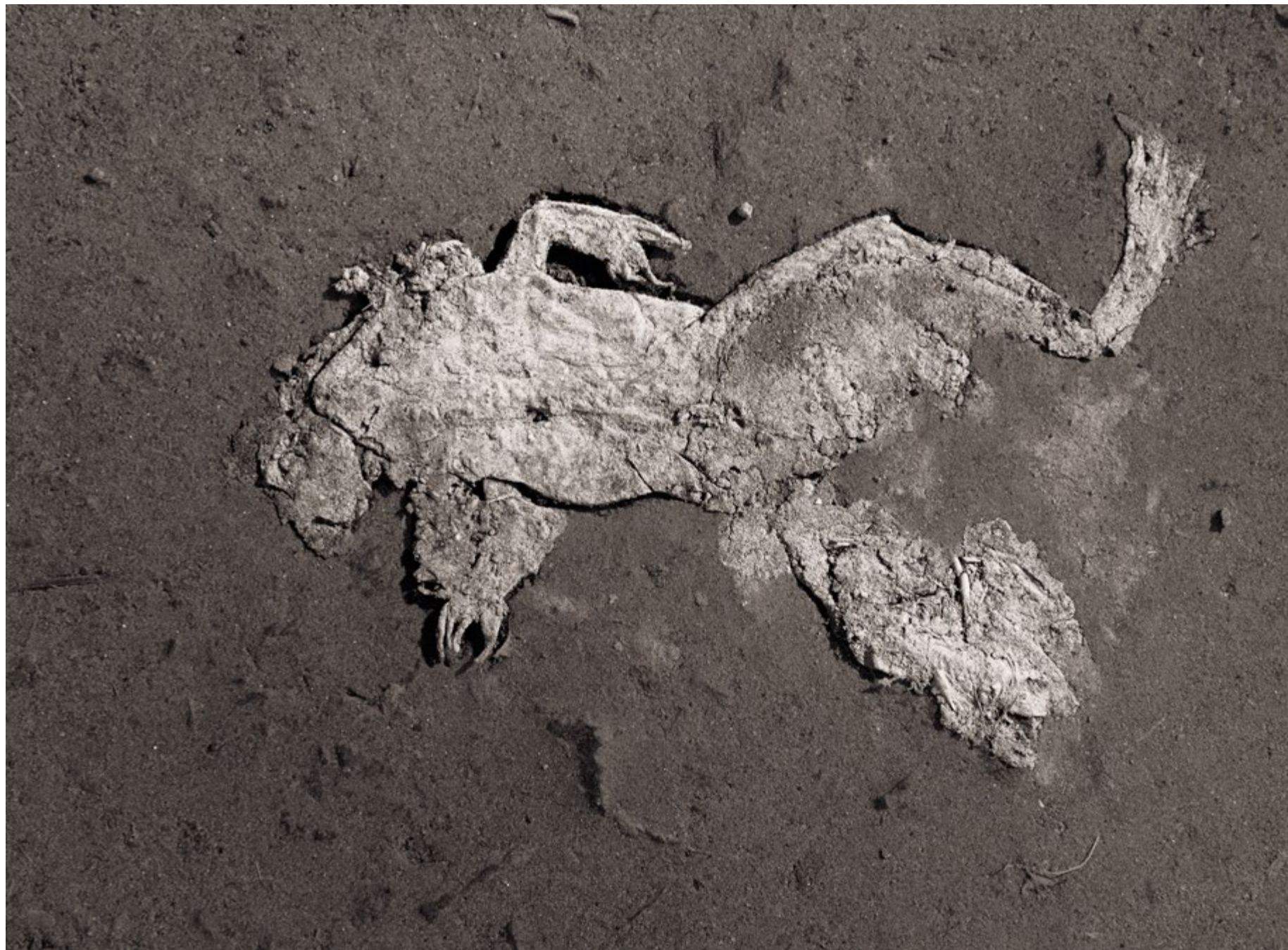
I went back with a camera. And now with eyes that knew what to look for, I saw more and more of the white frog blobs, not one dozen but several, on and on, the further I walked. At first I thought they looked like figures inlaid into a background. But then as I looked longer and as I took more and more pictures it almost seemed as if I were standing on a bridge, watching a stream of the poor creatures passing below me.

I could not have imagined that death had undone so many.









I photographed fifty-four dead animals, though perhaps if I'd walked farther I would have found more. As I worked, I felt a great and building sadness, a sense of loss I couldn't explain. So many small creatures so casually killed. Not even deliberately, just as a byproduct of people's comings and goings, people wrapped in glass and steel, hurrying from place to place.

Dominion over the earth.









The stratigraphers who have named these times the Anthropocene now carefully debate the period's exact geological markers. Is it a layer of radionuclides, of plastics or toxic wastes? Some simple byproduct, some unintentional metabolite of our strength and power and hubris. Something universal.

But there are also signs of our age that are individual, local, as particular to their one place as were the gods that used to dwell in rivers and trees.

Here there are these several dozen dead frogs, these once sentient creatures now stamped into an ordinary back road.

These signs of our sad and lonely age.