

Frank Gohlke

THE TORNADO that crossed Wichita Falls, Texas, on April 10, 1979, destroyed twenty-six hundred homes, damaged twice that many more, injured three thousand people, and killed forty-six.

Frank Gohlke, who was then teaching in Colorado Springs, managed to reach Wichita Falls three days later, and had only a Saturday and part of Sunday to photograph. At the end of his work, though he calls himself an apostate, he went to church; he speaks, still in wonder, of the beauty of the old hymns. One is reminded that, though the pictures show a public tragedy, they result from a lifetime of individual experience — Gohlke had grown up close to the stricken neighborhoods, and members of his family who still lived in Wichita Falls had been in danger. An idea of the intensity of his personal response can be sensed from the fact that his record was achieved with only forty-three sheets of film, all he had. If Ansel Adams is right that a photographer does well to get a dozen first-quality shots a year, then Gohlke lived better than a year in a day and a half.

The pictures are significant ultimately because they are about more than the news or one photographer's private response to it. Many who went through the storm remarked

that it seemed to them like a war; there had been warning sirens, abrupt destruction accompanied by terrifying noise, and eventually soldiers, roadblocks, and crowded hospitals. The war the photographs suggest, however, is one we can so far only imagine; unmistakably the remnants are of modern suburban America, a landscape immune from any but nuclear attack.

Newspaper photographs carried this same frightening prophecy, though Gohlke's pictures are not as a group likely to be confused with them. What the wire photos showed was wreckage, simple and absolute, whereas Gohlke's pictures, although they too make clear the devastation, show order. His composition implies a belief in the endurance of shape; the pictures are metaphor, an assertion of meaning within the apocalypse.

True, Gohlke would, like most photographers, not want to talk about his beliefs (he shows them). He speaks immediately about not having wanted to falsify with any philosophy the truth of specific facts, and explains that he was committed to this in part because he felt guilty about taking pictures while others worked to repair basic necessities. But he would not, moral man that he is, have been able to keep at it if he had not realized that his pictures of the destruction would be, as much as carpentry or masonry, themselves acts of reconstruction. It is his vision of form that is his chief gift to his old neighbors, and to survivors generally.

Gohlke's well-ordered photographs are convincing because they show an analogous structure in nature itself. Life validates art. The trees particularly are prime evidence ("Why do all photographers have to photograph bushes?" Alfred Barr once asked Nancy Newhall): with them Gohlke shows what can and cannot happen. The storm ranked 4 on the international Fujita scale, a magnitude documented by the wind's scouring of bark from trees. But what resilient



XX Frank Gohlke, *Bent Pole*, 1979

wrecks these trees are; in the photographs many still exhibit their basic, upright symmetry, and will be green again before the summer is out. Gohlke feels toward them as do his fellow townspeople, who plan to memorialize their dead by planting a grove.

What remains of our technology is of course itself eloquent too. Boards lie patterned across fields, wrack on a peaceful ocean. A light pole stands bent to the force of the wind, tracing the configuration of the unseen (Plate XX).