The Naked and the Nude
—three photos by Imogen Cunningham

1. Side, 1930s

A side of what? It could be flesh, could be
some twisted glove or over-ripe pepper.
If flesh, male or female? Does it matter?
Only bent leg, rippled skin, and curving edge
of spine survive the cropping. Neither naked
nor nude, these whorls and eddies of torso,
textured like rock, water, sand in shadow,
even a hint of scar part of the design.
(In my book a banana plant bristles
on the opposite page, though without label
it could be rumpled foil, or farmland
from an airplane.)

Looking closer, I see
how nothing but living skin shines this way,
curled for the naked eye to judge, easy to love
as a meal. Anonymous and true,
flesh consumed with or without label.

2. Two Sisters, 1928

No doubt it was fashion to crop their faces,
as if to show photography can mimic
the headless heroines of ancient Greece.
Yet if they are no more than light and form,
why the title? For as they are sisters
they are stories, and as they are stories
they blur and fade, they will not sit still.
Are they twins? Do they enjoy being nude
together before this accurate eye?
Can form be beautiful without content?
And if their goose bumps, their moles, and the hair
between their legs are not beautiful,
then the eye is false witness to the heart.
Half a century later, these women may still live. Imagine eighty-five year old twins sharing an apartment in Florida, sleeping in the same bed, taking baths, always nude, always together, their changed bodies still mirror images.

Even if she only exists before I was born, a nude woman interests me, but any sister would know we are best unobserved, loveliest seen through the eyes of self-fulfilling love. This photograph has love in it, more than most, but no one could wholly love these women and still see.

3. Triangles, 1928

Clouds, leafy shade, the long roll of water between wind and stone, mirage of desire: mother-triangles in the rectangle of art. Light and dark, light and dark again, until the thing comes right, becomes word without turning to statement, becomes nude open to light, casting shadows herself on herself, softness created by light more than by smooth belly, nipple, and thigh, and all folded into triangles, yes, like a mother folded around her daughter yet to be born, yet to be conceived.

David Graham