The photographic series Luminosa calls attention to what Sara Angelucci describes as the “changing history of vernacular photography” and the importance of understanding its role in how we interact and remember the past. Produced during a two-month stay in her ancestral Italian village of Montostone, her pictures depict the last generation of people who relate to the photograph as a unique object valued for its ability to speak to the past and hold their stories. As such, luminosa can be viewed as a disburdenment: a lament for the past in an individual’s life, and a lament for the death of the photographic object.

As we sit together to view her work, Angelucci describes the village as a typical medieval hill town in this region, with rolling hills and quaint, brick houses. “Days move slowly in Montostone,” she notes, and other incidents of leisurely strolls into town for afternoon coffee and extended conversation. In this town of one thousand inhabitants, everyone knows one another, many having been there all their lives. But as her anecdotes multiply and we look deep into the people reflected in Luminosa, this rather simple, anthropological picture gradually becomes more nuanced and complex. A significant percentage of Montostone’s resident families are elderly, and many are widows—some widows—so it is a village on the verge of disappearing. In the time she spent there, she heard countless reminiscences about life during the first half of the twentieth century, much of it coloured by the hardships of farm life and the trials of living through the Second World War. These stories were usually accompanied by a small selection of black-and-white photographs, brought out from an old shoebox or a worn photo-album, used to punctuate and bring them to life.

Each photograph in Luminosa stand[s] in for a wealth of shared recollections; not only what the field of their emotions in time, stopping only to beam; multiple trips made daily to the public fountain to gather the household water, carried home in clay jugs on a women’s head. The public font, like the public wash-own, was a place for exchanging the daily news.

Importantly, these are not just narratives relaying memories, but Angelucci’s interpretation of them. They include the circumstances of their telling, flipping back and forth between her subjects in the past and present. Her perspective, as a first-generation Canadian seeking to connect with her cultural history, allows its way into her description and brings new layers of meaning into play. In this way, her telling mirrors the framing of her pictures.

Throughout Luminosa, the same visual treatment is repeated: a closely framed colour image of an elderly woman’s hands holding a single, black-and-white photograph. Angelucci asked each person to select their favourite or most important photograph and in most instances they chose an image in which they appeared. And so, the two pictures (heres and theirs) document the same person, but at different stages in their lives. Each image is, in fact, two images—an act of layering the past onto the present to create a double image. “The hands become the frame,” she explains, “a kind of mise-en-abyme,” referring to the subject’s immersion. Significantly, we are seeing only a partial image of the sitter. As Angelucci tells it, her elderly subjects were often more comfortable having only their hands photographed. In some ways, the photos they hold are as acceptable substitutes, showing them as they’d rather be remembered.

The artist’s descriptions of her visits are not formally part of Luminosa, yet even without Angelucci to relay these accounts, the evocative quality of her photos, hovering between past and present, evokes the rich tales she must have heard. The floral-patterned dresses and dresses, combined with the aged hands, provide a set of icons and context. At first glance, the people are all part of a familiar type: their distinctive European clothing style and wrinkled skin reveal both their age and origin. But the typological approach serves to sharpen our focus on the differences in the details that change from image to image and points to the unique paths travelled by each individual within this tightly knit community. We catch glimpses of the varied lives documented within each held photograph: a young woman posing at the beach, an immaculately dressed couple posed beside a car or a woman kneeling next to a young man in a formal communion portrait. A curious juxtaposition arises between the present-day individuals given such similar treatment and the complex personal histories held within their hands.

The close-laying of the two types of photographs in Luminosa accentuates their differences, making them all the more vivid. The black-and-white photographs stand out as tangible objects, created at a scale for holding. As such, they bear evidence of wear—gentle creases, small stains and worn edges—that come with years of touching, no matter how much care may have been taken. While many images contain inscriptions or dates on the back, one image stands out for the writing on the front.

Angelucci states: “At first, when I saw this photo with the writing on it, I noticed the date, but I didn’t try to transcribe the text until I was printing it, much later. What it actually says is: ‘everyone in the family—except me’ I was in Spain in 1937.” The father was away in the Spanish Civil War. In his place in the family grouping would have been next to his wife—but she’s missing, and instead he inserted himself by writing on it in red pen on the front. His insertion speaks to the importance of having missed his occasion. The woman holding the photograph is the little girl in the image. Everyone else in the photograph is gone now except her.

Such photographs have proven immeasurably meaningful for the generation of people represented in Luminosa. Angelucci notes that they play an important memorializing role in the village. “As most people were poor before and after the war, they had only a few photographs to show of their early years—usually taken on formal occasions. The ones they had became precious memoraries of loved ones, or of the way they themselves were at an earlier age.” Each image is one-of-a-kind, the negative no doubt long lost, and likely one of just a handful of images taken over the course of each person’s life. They are part of a different era of vernacular photography, one created and printed with both care and quality. Notably, nearly all of the hand-held images are fibre-based prints, and although some are snapshots, others were clearly shot with a large format camera. Some, such as Luminosa (Masked Men), were taken in studio by a professional photographer. “The lighting is incredible; the print quality is exquisite,” Angelucci says.

The process of viewing Luminosa necessitates a continuous navigation between the past and the present. But there is another layer, an unseen, third dimension that is implied in this doubling: the digital snapshot. In conjunction with the rarity of these black-and-white images, the digital snapshot is at the opposite end and of the photographic spectrum. With our autonomy to take countless images at any time, the photograph has never been more pervasive, and hence, less meaningful on a singular basis. Many of us now have hundreds, if not thousands, of digital images documenting our lives. It seems impossible that we would ever be inclined—or interested—in editing a growing number of casually generated images to a small handful that stand as the essential, iconic moments of our lives, let alone print them. The endless reproducibility and screen-based viewing of the digital file renders the final object relatively unimportant—or seemingly so. How often do we stop to consider print quality or durability? Has the hard-drive replaced the family photo-album? As the technical capacity of personal digital cameras steadily increases, the consideration and attention paid to the individual image rapidly wanes. Most people seek out professional photographers for rare occasions, if ever. But with what results? Is something lost in our disinterest in generating the kind of singular keepsakes that the (now) men and women in Luminosa seem to hold with such reverence? This may be just a natural process of change toward our relationship with the image, but there’s also the chance that we’re missing something as we rush through this quantity driven, instantaneous age of photography.

The Italian “Luminosa” is part of the musical portion of the requiem mass performed for the dead and originates in Latin, lumen, “to weep.” For many of Angelucci’s subjects, the photo they chose to hold had a close connection with this. All photographs imply death in some way, and certainly they document past moments that are irretrievable. The elderly villagers in this series represent a particular generation of storytellers who view photography as both a touchstone and a record for their histories. As vernacular photography increases its prevalence through the digital medium, Luminosa gives us pause to consider photography’s past incarnations. It reminds us of our relationship to the image, how its making and consumption are part of its meaning, and the role it plays in the lives of passing and future generations.