Alleys & Ruins



From breakdown to beauty:
twenty-five years in the dark

A photographic memoir by Xavier Nuez

Praise for the book

"A simply extraordinary and inherently fascinating illustrated memoir from start to finish."
– Midwest Book Review

"Alleys & Ruins asks us to reconsider how we assign value to places and to people … an astonishing volume!"
– PhotoBook Journal

"A psychologically precise and unusually compelling account of trauma and recovery – and a rare example of creative practice functioning as self-repair."
– Dr. Lyssa Menard, Clinical Psychologist, Northwestern University

"An important work… a unique and powerful piece."
– Dr. Anka Vujanovic, Director, Trauma and Stress Studies Center, Texas A&M

"It is an odyssey of discovery and redemption for both eye and mind."
– Dr. Harold Kudler, Psychiatrist, Duke University

Praise for the photography

"Masterpiece." *– The New York Times*

"The light isn't just compositional; it's redemptive." *– Creative Boom*

"You will never see a dark alley the same way again." *– PBS*

"Using half-century-old Hasselblad cameras, and combining colored gels with long exposures, Nuez's images are vividly surreal representations of some of our most unloved places." *– Architect Magazine*

"His photographs transcend the gloom and uncover the sublime."
– Land+Living

Alleys & Ruins



The cover ruin, from video, before my lighting at night

Hardcover Edition

The signed, numbered hardcover edition of
Alleys & Ruins is limited to 1,000 copies.

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Xavier Nuez

Chicago, 2026

Alleys & Ruins

From breakdown to beauty:
twenty-five years in the dark

Xavier Nuez

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Old Light Editions
Chicago

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Cover: Alleys & Ruins no. 147, *Dequindre Couch*

Dedicated to all the friends and family who carried me along the way.

Special thanks to my brothers, Rob and Charlie, for their encouragement,

and to my mom and dad for their guidance and wisdom.

And most of all to my loving wife, Nikki, for putting up with it all.

For Neil
1956 – 2025

With special gratitude to Bob Crawford
for helping bring Alleys & Ruins into the world in print.

To the many friends and colleagues who braved one of my night shoots, thank you. Thirty years ago, a couple of years into my madcap forays, I began asking friends and acquaintances to watch my back.

You stood in the dirt and in the dark, in places you had every reason to leave. Some of you came once and once was enough, while some of you kept coming back. You saw what these places really looked like, before the transformation, and you stayed anyway. A few of you may have questioned why you ever agreed to come along, and I understand. I hope most of you walked out with stories you'll be telling for the rest of your lives. The photographs may be mine, but I always felt it was us who took them.

Over time, many of you also turned your cameras on me, and some of those photographs appear in these pages. I have done my best to identify and credit every photographer. If a credit is missing or incorrect, please contact me at x@nuez.com.

And to Alisa Bair, the reporter who asked the questions I was afraid to answer. That interview cracked me open, and this book exists because of it.

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Alleys & Ruins no. 116, *Silent Witness*, detail
Kansas City, MO, 2008. 9:45 pm

One Night

The five rapid gunshots are loud and close. I instinctively drop low, eyes toward the sound, my hand rises up to my face. I look around, a couple people have dropped to one knee. We all hold still, listening.

Nothing.

"Holy crap." And we all get back up.

I return to my camera and lighting equipment and resume planning my photograph.

A few minutes later, flashing lights approach. It's a cop car. The officers step out cautiously. One rests his hand on the top of his holstered sidearm. The other barks, "What's going on here?"

I start explaining that we're setting up for a photo.

The cops look at us, then at each other, like none of this makes sense. And why would it? Who sets up in a dark, abandoned back lot in Chicago's notoriously dangerous Lawndale neighborhood, with bags and bags of expensive equipment, in the middle of the night... to take a photo?

Getting a light reading just before beginning the shot, 2012
Photo: Jaime Pitillas



They glance through our gear, flip open a few bags, and realize we're telling the truth.

"Look," one of them says, "you guys take your photo. But be careful out here. We had a report of shots fired. Do you know anything about that?"

We tell them about the five shots that rang out 10 minutes earlier and point in the general direction. They nod, then get back in the car and speed away, looking for the shooter.



The location by day. A rotting warehouse in Chicago. This is the raw canvas, grey, abandoned, and lifeless, before the lights and the night transform it

And I get back to work.

It's dark, but I can still make out the crumbling, ugly eyesore that remains of the building. And if all goes well, I'm going to make it pretty by lighting it up with bright, colored lights.

I focus on my camera again. I make adjustments to the settings. Then I choose the lights I'll be using from my big selection of spotlights and flash units. Next is the color scheme. I pull out the gels I need and start attaching them to the lights.

There's a shriek behind me. One of my helpers has just seen a big rat.

I return to the camera. I'm about to begin the first of several 25-minute exposures (we're going to be here a while). During each long exposure, I'll be walking through the scene with a light in my hand, slowly building up layers of light and color. I click the shutter. The first exposure begins.

Now I'm going to step in front of the camera. It's the only way to create the detailed, precise lighting I need. But of course I don't want myself to appear in the photo. Over the years I've built up a big bag of tricks. It's almost pitch black and I'm wearing a black hoodie so it's hard for the lens to see me, and as long as I keep moving during the exposure, I won't appear on the negative, only my lighting will.

I flip the hoodie over my head and step into the scene to begin lighting the picture that would become Alleys & Ruins no. 142, *Luv*.

Long view of the location during the day, 2012





Alleys & Ruins no. 142, *Luv*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Chicago, IL, 2012. 10:00 pm, 25-minute exposure

Twenty-Five Years.



Lighting Alleys & Ruins no. 142, *Luv.* Photo: Jaime Pitillas

For twenty-five years, I wandered the run-down, gritty corners of North American cities, late at night with my 50-year-old Hasselblad film camera and lights. From the beginning, I got myself into situations that could only have happened in these places, and from the beginning, I started writing these stories.

My need to be here at night gave me a front-row view of everything that happens in alleys and ruins. I crossed paths with society's outcasts as I wandered where the invisible hang out. People would emerge from the shadows, drawn by the screaming light show. Some were good guys, some were bad guys. I was chased by gangs, pushed around by drug addicts, and had guns pointed at me. If the police saw me lurking at night, I was often questioned and searched.

I would enter these bleak locations, avoided by most sane people, determined to walk out with something beautiful. I felt compelled to dignify what had been rejected, to transform an ugly, frightening space into a luminous monument. I lit these dark places like stage sets, painting them with colored strobes and spotlights until they glowed like theatres.

In every photograph, the subject matter says *run* and the light says *stay*.

In those twenty-five years, I went out over 1,200 times, facing ridiculous danger and walking away with hundreds of photographs. But I was never deterred.

Even after a close call, I'd head out again as though nothing had happened. Looking back, it was sheer lunacy, a kind of guerrilla photography, operating in hostile territory with no backup plan and no permission.

I kept this up because it had become an addiction. Sometimes produced in peace, sometimes with madness swirling around me, I was exploring the alleys and ruins of my mind. With every dark corner I redeemed, my soul got a little brighter, my despair a little more distant. The tradeoff was worth the risks.

My motivation for risking it all was anchored to a deep personal crisis that had crushed the good life I once knew. This part of my story is the most difficult thing I've ever written – a part of myself I spent years hiding with a frenzy, every minute of every day. I had always hoped to take the truth to my grave.

I've never been one to complain outwardly about my own pain; I learned it was better to keep my head down and let the work speak for itself. In twenty-five years, I rarely turned a camera on myself; the work was the only proof I needed.

I tell this story now because viewers of my art have only ever seen half the picture. I needed to share how the very thing I thought would destroy me became, incredibly, the source of my greatest success and my lifeline back.

For ten years I wrestled with what to do, writing and then retreating, weighing the comfort of half-truths against the need to be honest. It wasn't until I realized that telling it was not weakness but courage that I finally committed.

This book tells two stories. One is how I became the kind of person who would plant a camera in a city's most dangerous places and think, "Yeah... this feels right. I'm gonna stand here flashing bright lights for the next three hours. Hope nothing bad happens." The other story is the collection of things that happen when a man does such a thing, consistently for twenty-five years.

The Crevice

A year after shooting *Deliverance* I'm back in the same neighborhood lugging my gear, looking for an image. I don't let any corner or space go unexplored.

I pass a gap between two brick buildings in an alley – not the wide gap I'd photographed a year earlier, this crack is maybe 15 inches wide. I peer inside the dark depth and as my eyes adjust to the almost pitch black of the crevice a shape begins to form. It can't be. I pull out my flashlight and shine the light through this narrow gap. Instantly I feel my throat clench and now I'm sick to my stomach. A man, covered in soot, wearing only tattered pants is scrunched up deep inside.

He's clawed his way 10 feet inside this narrow opening. The flashlight startles him and for only a second our eyes meet. I see the terror in his face and I turn the flashlight off immediately.

My jaw drops and my eyes open wide. I start to slowly back away as a familiar sinking feeling sets in. I know this traumatized wreck of a man only too well. *He's me*, if my mental illness had gone just a step further. It petrifies me and I feel a wave of ice-cold fear penetrate me.

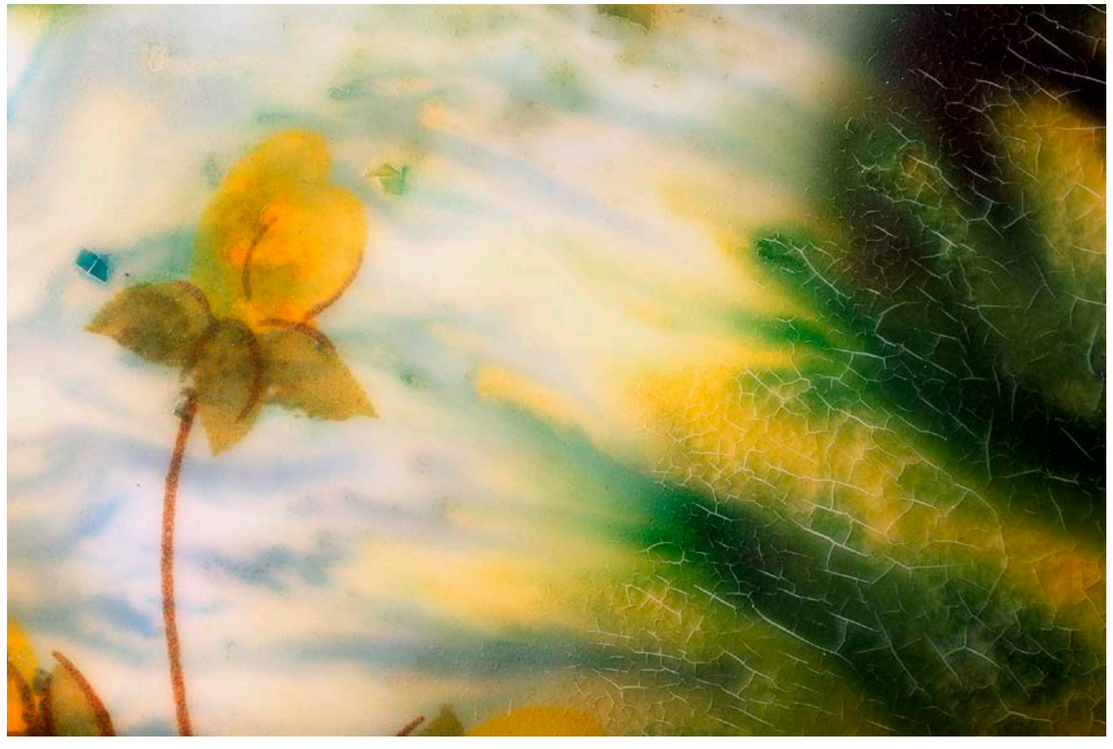
I want to go back and tell him it's okay, I won't tell anyone he's there, I'll leave him alone, don't worry you're safe where you are. But I don't go back, I just keep moving, knowing the terror that has befallen this deeply broken man as his hiding place has been discovered.



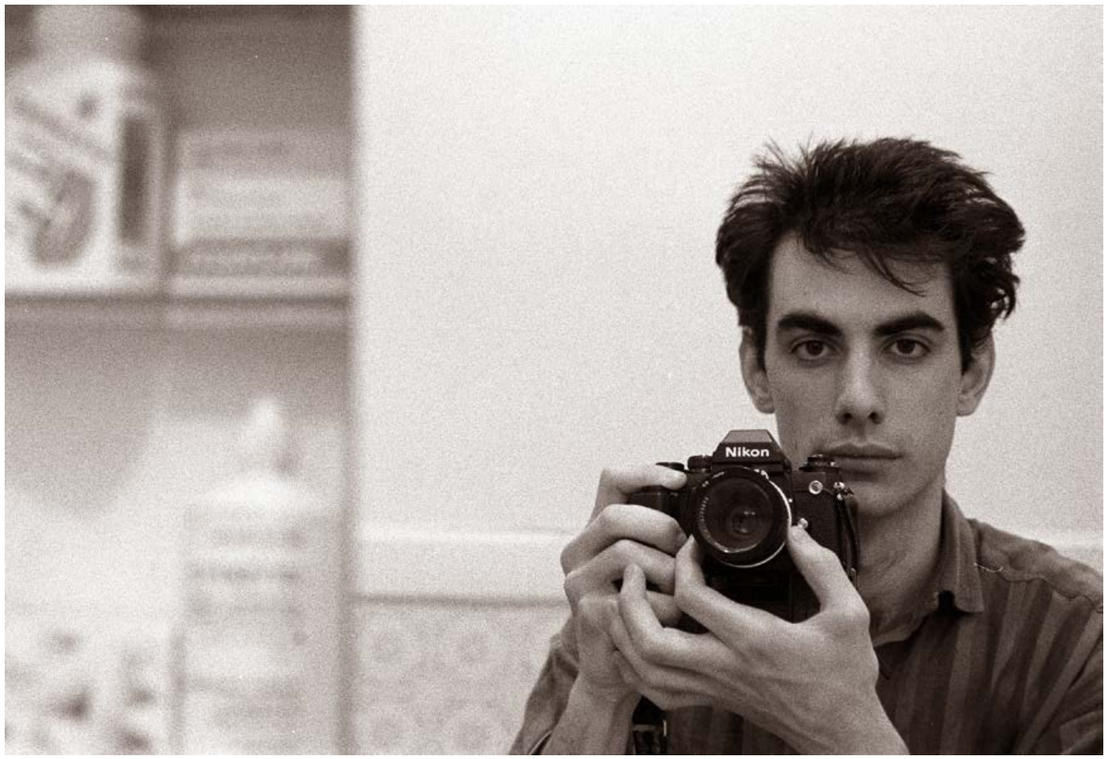
Alleys & Ruins no. 50, *Deliverance*
Agfa Ultra 50, 120 negative
Toronto, ON, 1999. 10:00 pm, 4-minute exposure

Part 1. 1987–1993

Beautiful Descent.



When I was a Child, 2001, from the Crystal series



Me with my Nikon, 1986. I was a confident 21-year-old, obsessed with photography and ready to take on the world.

I showed up on time. I usually left a good impression when meeting people – relaxed, charming – so I assumed I had a good shot at the job. But I had an irritating bug in my head that was casting a shadow over my confidence. I took a deep breath. This was easy, just freaking relax.

I got called, "Xavier Nunez?" Close enough, I thought, and didn't bother correcting him. I was led to the VP's office through a maze of cubicles.

He and the director of marketing stood as I walked in. Benoit, the VP, smiled. "Thanks for coming in. Please, have a seat. Your name is?"

My name.

The answer was there, but something was getting caught, like some invisible force was blocking the whole pathway from brain to mouth. I felt a wave swirl around my head and I was suddenly dizzy and wanted to lie down. I paused, staring in the distance, still trying to answer this most basic question and I was getting way too hot. What's my name? *Xavier*. I started to answer again but now my throat was clenching and I started to sweat. I finally squeezed out my name, suddenly afraid. *Of what*?

During the interview I felt like my eyes were too wide, my responses odd, squeezed out of my brain and mouth. I was struggling to stay present, to follow the conversation. Then my face started feeling like it was closing in on itself, like I'd just sucked on the mother of all lemons. Then muscles in my jaw seized up, locking so tight it felt like my teeth might crack. The tension and heat in my entire body was dialing up fast and with every passing second I felt worse.

I'd had moments like this throughout my life, being incredibly uncomfortable in a social setting, but these moments had been rare and brief and mild in comparison. *This was exponentially different.* Just trying to say what was on my mind – something completely normal – had at this meeting become completely complicated. My brain was using every last ounce of energy to fight to not show whatever was inside trying to burst out, to not explode. There was simply no processing power left to hear, think about and respond to questions.

I finally left the interview sweating and shaken and relieved to be gone from that brief nightmare, expecting never to hear from them again. I certainly would never hire that person.

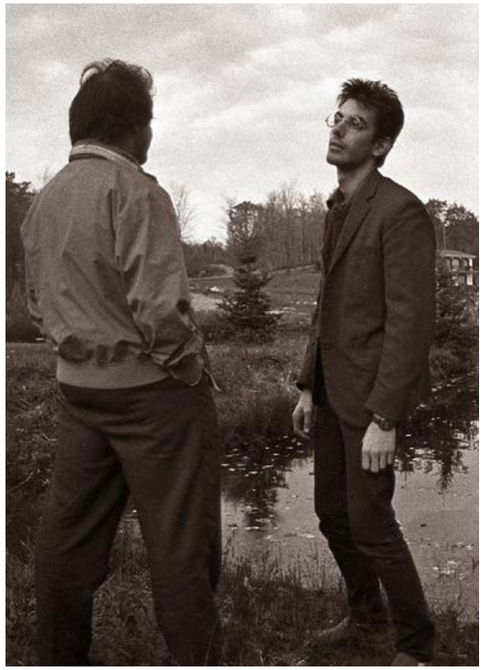
I went home and shook it off and was good again. The next couple of days were as they'd always been: blissfully unmemorable.

***

Thirty-six hours earlier, I'd been out with my friends at a party. An artist friend was having a blowout in his studio and we'd just arrived at the old industrial building. The creaky wooden stairs were packed and hard to navigate. Groups stood or sat in the moody red light, talking and laughing, most had a drink or a smoke in hand. We wound our way around the people, most wearing black as we did in those days. From the floor above we could hear the muffled, slow beat of gothic new wave music

...hiding in the crack
The shadow coming back...

We got to his studio: a sea of people,



With Steve Wagschal, spring 1987. Just before everything changed. Photo: Gerry Wagschal

a hundred crammed into the big artist space and I loved this. The party was huge and loud. I scanned the crowd, the dim lighting was just bright enough to make out faces and I saw several friends that I'd be talking and joking with later tonight. This was my element. A year earlier, when I had my own place, I'd thrown a party where maybe 200 people showed up, packing the apartment building's hallways, rooftop and spilling out the front door downstairs before the cops crashed it.

But right now I was with my best friends: Phil the filmmaker, Dan the painter, Gerry and Steve the writers, Randy the philosopher, Arnold and Ingrid, rocks I could lean on.

In the dark undulating light we cracked open a few beers from the case we brought. I grabbed a white styrofoam mannequin head, stretched my T-shirt neck around it, and started having a conversation with my new twin. "Look, I better go, my friends don't know about you yet." We all laughed and I put it back. Now I had a stretched T-shirt neck but I couldn't care less.

The summer of 1987 was days away and I was feeling pretty fucking great. After two years of trying, I was finally accepted into the college art program I was dreaming of. In a couple of days I had a job interview at an office for some summer job that would pay more than I had ever made. I had the greatest friends. And my obsession with photography continued to grow. It had filled a void I didn't know was there. I raised my beer to my friends. "Cheers!"

At 4:00 am we were done. We stumbled outside into the early morning in Montreal. There was a small bagel factory nearby cooking up a fresh batch as we spoke. We headed over and I made two disappear in a flash and after some more banter we noticed the sky had gone from black to a dark blue. It was time for this crew to go our separate ways. We said our goodbyes and I headed off with Gerry and Steve. I had been couch surfing at their place for two months and at this point I didn't even have to ask. Gerry and I had met in a creative writing class when we were 17, five years earlier, but it wasn't until a couple of years later that we became inseparable.

The next morning most of us ended up in Mount Royal Park by the Sunday tam tams to toss a Frisbee under the sun. Some of us were also nursing a hangover and chasing the Frisbee was clearing my head. My brothers, Rob and Charlie, had joined us and the three of us headed over to watch the huge tam tam drum circle. I told them about my Monday morning interview for the office job.

Charlie, seven years older, wise and always a little pissed off, warned me. "Don't let 'em shit on your soul." Then he let out a deep sigh and grinned. "You'll get used to it. Everybody does."

Rob, two years older, laughed. "Hey X'y, now you can start paying back all that money you owe me." He gave me a little push and we laughed.

"Hey losers, I gotta take off. Got a date with my camera. Say bye to the gang for me."

Rob said, "Cheers, big ears." We fist bumped and I started walking toward my bike, camera bag slung over my shoulder.

For three years, I'd been going on regular bicycle journeys throughout the city with my camera. I would ride somewhere, always alone, then walk for hours. I felt like I was getting somewhere. My images were getting stronger, I was starting to see things I hadn't before, and there was the hint of a thread running through them. Since my early teens I had dreamed of being an artist. I didn't dare call myself one yet. I felt the word was too sacred, but someday.

I had zero contacts in the art world and I kinda didn't know what I was doing, but that was okay! I was only 22. I had many years to work all this out. I had faith in myself. I was smart, I was outgoing, and if you put a gun to my head I would admit I had a bit of talent. I almost felt the world was mine for the taking.

It was dark when I finally rolled up to Gerry and Steve's. I felt pretty good about my excursion and I was thinking maybe I got a couple good shots.

I had taken over their living room couch ever since my parents moved out of small town Sorel, 50 miles away, and into the farthest reaches of Longueuil, a Montreal suburb. They insisted I live with them to save money, but it was a 2-hour commute to the city, so fuck that.

I put my things away in the small side table, my only storage, and started thinking about this job interview I had in the morning. My suit was ridiculous. It was too big, it was old, and I felt silly in it. I would wear jeans and a nice jacket. The job was assisting the marketing manager of a national electronics retail store. It would be the only impressive-sounding job on my resume. My resume. Ugh. I found that pitiful thing and put it somewhere I wouldn't forget.

I set my alarm for the interview, lay on the couch and in two minutes I was out.

Two days after the interview, to my complete astonishment, I got a call from the manager telling me I was hired and asking if I could start the next day. The thought of being in that room again made me nervous and sweaty and bug-eyed all over again. But I wouldn't be in that room, I'd be somewhere else in the building toiling away with just the manager, Bob, who seemed like a nice fellow. Frankly, the VP, Benoit, had been a very nice guy too.

And I couldn't overlook that pay. I had always been frugal and that money would be enough to room with a few people for the next school year. I'd moved out when I was 17, and moving back in with my parents felt like ten steps backward. Plus I'd hyped the job up to everyone, like an idiot. I simply couldn't say no to the offer.

I arrived for the first day of work, a little tentative, but thinking how ridiculous I was being, like I expected the boogeyman to attack me. But the monster wasn't hiding behind a door or under a desk. It had been locked up in my head all this time. It had been waiting for me to step deeper and deeper and deeper until I reached a point of no return. And it chose this moment to pounce, to begin shredding my brain, rearranging my thoughts, coloring every memory with doubt until I wasn't sure what was real anymore.

Day one at work and my world turned black. My ability to have a simple conversation was smashed, and now if I had to face someone I would freeze in terror. People wanted to say hi to the new guy, and I was still running on my natural instincts to be friendly and engage in conversation, but these simple interactions were now like trying to keep a straight face while a tarantula was crawling on my body and head. I had maybe two seconds. Two seconds of composure before the fear exploded and my face cracked. What used to be a fun and easy exchange was now two minutes of hell. My entire body would grow ice cold and stiff. I would panic. I didn't know how to move my face. I didn't know what to say. There was nothing in my mind except, *Oh my God, help me!*

Some people in the office noticed there was something wrong with me. They'd have an immediate negative reaction, take a step back, look me up and down... and of course that just made it worse.

I could barely string three words together. My brain was having some kind of seizure, like the neurons were being violently rewired in some cruel and vicious way and I could only stand there, unable to verbalize or fight back while something truly awful and truly epic happened to me and my life.

The first day of work ended and I was in a state of shock. I gathered my things and left. On the bus ride back I thought of how I had reset after that horrible interview, how in the outside world I was normal. It was just in that cursed office where the person I was had come apart at the seams, where I seemed to be in a horror-filled Twilight Zone episode.

I would soon be my old self again and this made me feel much better. I felt a rush of joy as I realized this was just a bad dream, that I was okay. But my hands were clammy and if I looked at the other people on the bus I got that same cold wave of fear. It's okay, I told myself, rocking gently in my seat, it'll be gone soon, it's okay, it's okay.

I got to Gerry and Steve's, two of my closest friends, people who had become like brothers. I walked into the apartment and Gerry said, "Hey X, how's the new job?"

The fear consumed me again. A stinging energy wrapped my eyes. My jaw seized.

This time the tarantula hadn't stayed behind in the office – it had followed me home. It was with me now, crawling on me. I wanted to bury my head. I wanted to cry. *What the fuck was happening to me?*

Gerry looked over from the couch. "You good, man? You look like you seen a ghost."

I just shook my head, unable to form a word. Steve chimed in, "Long first day, huh?"

I managed a single, tight nod and I spent the rest of the evening like that, a ghost in the room, petrified they would see the monster that was now controlling me.

The next day and the weeks that followed, the monster grew and grew. It knew my weaknesses, my fears and it seemed to delight in exposing them completely.

I moved back in with my parents within days, so afraid my friends would see that I'd become this freakish, even loathsome person.

The humiliation, the shame, the crushing self-consciousness and the confusion I felt at the time was a five-alarm fire. It kept me fighting so hard to not show my new self to the point where only a small part of my brain was left to deal with day-to-day problems. If I was alone, I still used up most of my brain energy obsessed with thoughts of:

"What the fuck is going on?"

"How do I stop this?"

"Do they think I'm crazy?"

"What if I can't come back from this?"

Maybe I should have quit, and maybe they should have fired me, but neither thing happened and so I stuck it out, expecting over and over that somehow this nightmare would soon end and I'd be the normal me again. It had come out of nowhere; maybe it would vanish as quickly as it came. Looking back, that was impossible. I'd fallen through a trap door into a dark world, and there was no climbing back out.

This new world and this new path would eventually lead me out of the dark, years from now. But in that moment, I was losing faith.

Back at work I was walking down the hall, just beginning to understand my need to be invisible. One of the women from a department near ours, an outgoing, friendly woman, had stopped in front of me. "Hi, you're the new guy helping Bob out? I'm Louise! How's it working out? I hope he's not torturing you," she said laughing.

I looked into her face and electricity shot through me. My eyes glazed over, blurring my vision. My throat choked and I could barely breathe.

I squeezed out, "It's okay."

Her smile slowly left. "Okaaay, well that's good to hear?" She stepped past me, likely thinking I was insane.

Walking back to my cubicle, I realized I had stopped breathing. For how long? My body wasn't even handling the basics anymore. I sat at my desk, trying to take a breath that wouldn't come.

A vibrating bar of pure anxiety ran down the center of my torso, from my throat to my stomach. This had become just one more thing in a string of terrible ways my body was reacting to all this. It was a constant, sickening hum of terror.

I finally managed to catch my breath and I said something like a prayer. I told myself that no matter what, no matter where this new ugly path took me, I needed to be my friend. I needed to be there for myself, I could not treat myself badly. Something inside me had been released and was trying to destroy me, but whoever I was, whatever part of me remained, I had to try and be kind to myself through this. I clenched my fists and closed my eyes and tried to force the thought through.

That pause brought a tear to my eyes because it created a glimmer of hope, and it meant I was fighting for the light inside. I wasn't going to just give in to this.

One of the most jarring moments was when I moved back in with my parents a few days after the crash. I again expected a momentary return to sanity with them, especially with my mom who had always been the most loving, joyful person I knew. As I walked toward her, she had her back to me, washing some dishes and singing out loud as she so often did. "*...Canta y no llores*..." She turned to me and in her endearing sing-song way said, "*Hola Javielito. ¿Tienes hambre?*"

That abominable chill swept through me once again and landed in my head. I had to avert my eyes for fear of being discovered. I said, "Hola mom," and quickly walked away. I closed my eyes. I wanted to smash something. A long, silent string of curse words screamed through my head. I couldn't even be calm around *HER!* My perception of reality had fractured completely.

At first, after the crash happened, I wasn't depressed, just incredibly nervous around people. I would wake up happy, jumping out of bed ready to take on the day, and I wondered why I felt so good, since I was living a nightmare. But that was how I used to wake up before: happy. It would take an hour or so for the dread and terror to sink in.

Eventually my new normal wore me down and a couple months later, the depression finally slapped me across the face. It was a moment of confused recognition: something new had joined the terror. I didn't know the words for it yet, but I could feel two different things feeding off each other, intermingling in a cruel dance. The brain is a funny thing. Sometimes it's fucking hysterical.

After that, every little task seemed like crossing a mountain. That's when I started to seriously worry about the long term and the bleakness that my future held.

Even in bed alone I couldn't hide. I started waking up in a panicked sweat from the terrible dreams I was having.

There was also the identity shock. I started wondering who the real me was. Was I wearing a mask now – or had I been wearing one before? I didn't just get anxious and depressed, I had lost myself. The confident, outgoing guy appeared dead, unreachable, and that loss of identity was traumatic by itself. I loved who I had been, but this new guy? I couldn't even look at him in the mirror.

As my summer job from hell finally reached its end I had a new glimmer of hope. I would be starting school again soon, no longer a commerce major but now an art student on a new campus. Maybe I could sweep aside what had happened over the summer and start fresh. Maybe this radical change was just what I needed to snap me back to my old self. It seemed a lifetime ago that I had dreamed of this new chapter in my life, of all the new artist friends I'd make, of all the rich, new experiences, the infinite ways my artistic process could grow.

When the first day of school arrived, and I walked through the halls to my classroom, I felt the tarantula firmly gripping my head and the ice penetrating my body. Once again, nothing had changed and all I had to show the world was the new broken me. Once more I closed my eyes and clenched my fists. Students lined the hallway, talking, sharing stories, laughing. I walked quickly, wishing I was invisible, hoping I wouldn't see anyone I recognized, absolutely petrified someone would call my name. The three years I had left of university weren't going to be filled with friendship and good times and artistic growth. I dreaded what was to come.

The alienation in school was instant and severe. Like everywhere else, I couldn't hold a conversation here either. But it had only been a few months since my breakdown, and my body's old habits would sometimes kick in, to my immediate regret. It still held memories of my instinct to be friendly, and I would find myself approaching people to say hello. The inevitable anguish would follow and the terror would leap out of my eyes, which had now developed a terrible twitching – a brand new thing to worry about – and people would take a step back.

It took a while, but I started to completely avoid people. I had already run away from my closest friends – I was truly alone in the world, just me and this monster that had latched onto me, that made me hate myself. I started to speak as little as possible to try to "get away with it," so that the person wouldn't have a chance to see the terror that lived just beneath the surface.

The old me would have been energized being around people; the new me became exhausted – completely and utterly drained from the shortest conversation with someone.

I was losing the ability to communicate in almost every way. I no longer knew how to use my body in a conversation. I would look at people talking, at how their arms and fingers moved to add emphasis, or how their heads tilted at just the right moment, or their weight shifted thoughtlessly, or their eyes moved casually during a discussion. How the hell did they know how to do all that? Was that something I used to do? I couldn't remember, and I couldn't imagine how it was at all possible.

An early assignment had to be performed in lecture form in front of the class. When my day came, I was in a panic. I couldn't even imagine what further devastation I'd be able to endure, being naked in front of this group of classmates.

In a last-second decision, I bought a few beers from a nearby convenience store and downed them all 20 minutes before class.

This worked. Somewhat. I was at least able to stand up before the class and do the bare essentials. With my senses stunted, I swayed slightly and slurred my way through the presentation, clutching the papers and just reading one word then the next word with a quivering voice to get through it.

But invisible hands strangled my throat, and I couldn't draw a full breath. I kept trying to breathe deeper and deeper – my body was screaming for oxygen, but it never seemed to be enough and then it felt like I was drowning a little bit, gasping for air between each word.

The old me – I couldn't stop thinking of the old me – had been great at presenting to a class, often making everyone laugh. I never stressed about standing and talking to a group. I had always been vocal, eager to contribute, always raising my arm to answer questions.

I'd even been up for valedictorian in high school, for fuck's sake. I'd given a rousing, hilarious speech that had the whole auditorium laughing. I wasn't selected, but the fact remained, and I clung on to these memories as some kind of proof to myself that this shitty version of me wasn't all there was.

The embarrassment of these awful

situations cut me deeply inside – the stares I was getting from people at school who would avoid me and maybe mock me behind my back. What made it so much worse was knowing intimately what the opposite experience was like: being everyone's friend, walking down the hall carefree and happy.

Was that really how it had been? My memory was starting to get fuzzy. I was beginning to sense that the condition wasn't just affecting my mood; it was sapping so much brainpower that my memory was starting to fray at the edges. Simple facts – names, recent events – they were all becoming slippery, hard to hold. It was a new and terrifying kind of loss.

I'd always been deeply curious, the kind of person who read about everything, who loved learning how things worked. But all that stopped. And it went deeper than curiosity – I was losing the ability to think at all, to form any kind of clear thought about anything. My brain was so flooded – the circular thoughts, the constant scanning of who had noticed what about me, the obsessing when I was finally alone – that there was no room left for anything but the monster. Underneath all of it ran the same terror on a loop: that my life was over, that I'd taken some horrible turn I couldn't explain or undo, that I'd woken up inside a nightmare I couldn't leave.

I remembered my close friends. I just wanted to be with them again, like nothing had changed. What I missed most was so completely ordinary – just sitting and talking. About anything. The simple joy of a conversation was what I ached for. But at this point they were probably now my long-lost friends.

When I had moved out of the brothers' apartment, I was certain they were happy to see me leave. At my parents, in that faraway suburb, I had been avoiding calls from friends, terrified that any of them would see or hear me like this, an absolutely, entirely different person from the one they remembered and cared about. I was now unlikeable, irredeemable, unable to contribute in any useful way. I imagined they'd immediately lose all respect and I'd become an endless topic of conversation. I could hear it in my head: Gerry asking, "What the fuck happened to X?" and Phil saying, "I don't know, man... he's just so tragic now. So weird." I was going to delay that inevitability.

Gerry was, or had been my best friend, and he was calling my parents trying to understand why I was avoiding him. Other friends had also called. After several months I finally agreed to speak to him and we arranged to meet at his place.

I arrived at his familiar apartment door, the one he'd opened to greet me a hundred times before, the one he'd always opened to my grinning face. This time he opened it and he must've seen a ghost. I wondered if this was the last time I'd ever see him.

Steve was in the living room and got up to greet me. The brothers couldn't help but notice the change, despite my feeble attempts to hide it. They had already seen a glimpse before I moved out so soon after getting that job.

They asked me if I was okay, and I tried to speak, but as usual I was having trouble doing that. I tried in vain, struggling to explain what I was going through, which wasn't easy since I didn't know myself. Gerry put his hand on my shoulder and they both simply explained it was okay, that they weren't going anywhere.

And that was that. We sat in front of the TV, and they started making jokes like they always did. I remember Gerry turning to me while a commercial was on. "So X, what are your WPMs these days? They don't look good. We gotta bring that number up," he said, his tone deadpan.

"WPMs?" I muttered.

"Yeah, your words-per-minute are low. We'll work on it."

I snorted, then let out a small laugh and Gerry smiled. "Yeah, they're very low," I agreed. It had been so long since I laughed. His comment was absurd and ridiculous, and it was exactly what I needed – casting a little light on this condition that I tried so hard to keep in the dark, and making gentle fun of it. For a moment, watching them joke, I felt less like a ghost and more like myself.

They told me I should move back in, take the couch again. I said I'd think about it and finally left to head back to my parents. Outside, my eyes teared up. A giant weight had been lifted. Hope had been hard to come by these days. The thought that I still had friends that cared about me was overwhelming and I cried.

I'd learned that drinking alcohol before meeting people had a calming effect, and it became something I started to rely on. It was far from a perfect solution but it was something.

For the first couple of years, I didn't even know about the meds that were available. I had seen a nitwit shrink in the first year who offered nothing. One time he had even discouraged me from thinking positive. I'd told him I felt better repeating affirmations from a poster, and he'd said almost snidely, "That's not going to help you. They're just empty words." So I stopped.

It wasn't until another psychiatrist, Dr. Gomez, had me try Valium that I realized there was something that could actually quiet the noise, but the stuff knocked me out. The alcohol was easier for now.

I started hanging around my friends again, first by getting in touch with my oldest friend, Ingrid, who I'd known since I was five. We'd been through so much together in Sorel and Montreal – she seemed like the person who would be the most okay with me just sitting there. I never told her any of what was happening to me, but my little plan worked and I started feeling a tiny bit better.

Then I reached out to my other friends, but at first I would only see the gang on the weekend when the blur of party life masked everything. I couldn't just sit and have a coffee with someone. The alcohol would calm me down enough that my true self could peek out, sometimes fully. Sometimes I could force my old self back and have a terrific time. In the morning I would wake up and think, "Did that really happen?" But I wondered how sustainable this ridiculous strategy was. I couldn't just drink every time I met people.

My experience with Gerry and Steve told me I could have told any of my close friends, but this was a secret and a humiliation I planned to take to my grave.

My symptoms kept twisting and turning so that I was always off balance. Sometimes chewing on gum or even a pen cap would calm my jaw down enough that I could almost act normal, until that stopped working. Later, eating started making things worse. I found that if I was hungry, the anxiety decreased and so I began to starve myself. It became a rigid,

decades-long strategy: I had to organize my entire life around an empty stomach. I could be in a social situation, doing all the tricks I needed to appear normal, but eat a piece of cheese or a cookie and I was fucked. My jaw would lock up again, and maybe that damned piece of gum wasn't working that month because the anxiety had moved to my cheeks. It was the traveling anxiety show.

My breakdown happened with three years left of university and it mostly remained at its peak throughout. But sometimes, out of the blue, the walls around me would instantly vanish. For a week or so, life would open up to me and I'd breathe in the fresh air, delighted and wide-eyed. The strangled neck, the difficulty breathing, the eye twitching – all would just vaporize into thin air. Being around people would become easy and joyful again.

But it fooled me every time. I would think, "It's over! It's finally over!" Without warning, the same walls would slam down and the world would close itself to me once again. A terrible, sharp pain would run down my chest and throat, a spasm of pure stress and anxiety that felt like I was being choked from the inside.

These brief moments of light actually made things worse. They gave me the false confidence to approach people as my old self – and then the tarantula would return, and my almost-new friends would see the shocking change and just wonder what the fuck was wrong with this guy.

Eventually, even if I felt good I kept away because I had learned it wouldn't last.

This pattern would repeat for years.

The nitwit shrink, way back in year one, had told me I would be back to my old self within a year. I had become overjoyed! I started looking at the calendar, counting down the days, like an inmate obsessed with their release date. As the year approached I prepared myself for the jubilation of finally leaving this "thing" to die in the dust. As the months passed and the year came and went, I was stunned. Nothing had changed. I started clinging to the hope that he meant 13 months. Nope. Or a year and a half. Nope again. But no, no, and no! After a couple of years I was forced to realize there would be no waking up from this. This was my new reality.

I started a new countdown: the end of my school life, when I could finally leave all these suspicious eyes behind and move on, fresh.

I had forced myself to complete all my projects – I wasn't going to let myself flunk out of school. Fortunately my writing abilities had remained strong. I was barely able to communicate verbally, or in any other way, but when it came to writing, for some reason I was okay and that meant I'd get my useless degree.

My photography was a whole other issue. Through all my anxiety, it had become stunted, a useless appendage, and this had to change.

A graduation ceremony happened somewhere, at some point in time. But whenever and wherever that was I couldn't say. I wanted no part of it.

I had finally moved on from school. I was free from the hallways where I had pretended to be invisible, I was free from those staring eyes, free from all those people who talked about me behind my back. I thought for the briefest moment I could finally leave that broken version of myself behind.

I was free once again, except wherever I went, there I was. The horror had simply followed me out the door.

The cocoon of school was gone and, for a moment, I was thrilled. But the cocoon had also sheltered me from the real world, which I was now entering, unequipped to handle very much. I was untethered in the wider world and completely nonfunctional.

I needed to return to photography and now I also needed to make a living. I started contacting photographers to work as an assistant. I got jobs here and there, but my inability to connect with people made it so I never worked for anyone for long.

My new reality was harsh: I could no longer make friends. I could keep the ones I had – thank god for that – but making a new close friend was next to impossible, and in the real world this wasn't going to get me anywhere. Meeting with someone to discuss a project was completely out of the question. The world had truly closed its doors to me.

I had been ambitious once and maybe I still was, but I found my opportunities quickly diminishing. My world had shrunk to the size of my small shitty apartment while I started to see my friends move on. I could only watch from the sidelines as the people close to me advanced and put the pieces of their lives and careers together. Phone calls came in with news of big job breaks, new homes, new babies, futures that were taking shape. Their lives were growing and expanding and I was always happy for them, never jealous of any of it, only afraid of the walls closing in on me.

On the rare days I felt okay, I would work with a frantic energy, scrambling to make up for lost time. I felt like I couldn't take a single day off, because I knew the bad me was always waiting to take over again and drag me back to bed for a week. I had to claw my way forward inch by inch whenever I had the chance.

One bright sunny day when I should have been out looking for work, or taking photographs and working on my portfolio, or making a futile attempt to make contacts – I was instead lying in bed looking up at the cracks in my ceiling thinking about the rent that was due. I also needed to do the simplest thing: buy bread. But the thought of walking down to the convenience store and facing people, of having to look a cashier in the eye, had my heart hammering in my neck. My brain was just a loop of the same useless, frantic questions: *"What the fuck is going on? How do I stop this? They'll think I'm crazy. What if I can't come back from this?"* And now a new one: *"Why do I bother? I think of everything and yet I'm prepared for nothing."*

It was 1992. It had been five years since my crash and the fear of homelessness – an old ghost from my father's stories – was very real and immediate. I had decided to become an artist when I had a lot going for me, a career that's a near-impossible tightrope walk for the bravest and the best of them.

Most of what I needed to succeed in this world had been taken away and I was now literally a starving artist with no prospects and no moves left in me. I looked at my hands, and back at the cracks in the ceiling and with a kind of terrible, quiet clarity, the thought finally landed.

I am so fucked.

The dream of being an artist had led me here, to a place of total paralysis. I was cornered and I forced myself to have the most gut-wrenching thought: maybe I wasn't meant to be an artist. If I couldn't be one, I had to at least survive. I was sinking in debt and needed an escape hatch, even a soul-crushing one.

In a merciful twist of fate, I was about to find a weapon I could use against the monster, night after night.

My girlfriend at the time, Jill, lived in Ottawa, a city where stable government jobs were relatively easy to find. It seemed like a sensible solution, but moving there, starting a new life there meant almost certain doom for my art.

I landed an office job at the headquarters of Correctional Services. The moment I saw my cubicle, the ghost of the office that broke me five years earlier reappeared. For the first month, I was seized with a familiar terror, sitting at my desk petrified that someone would approach me, that the whole cycle would begin again.

But this was a government job, and the very inefficiency of the bureaucracy became my salvation. For two full weeks, no one said a word to me. No one demanded anything. In that profound, bureaucratic silence, something unexpected happened: I had time to breathe. The lack of pressure allowed my nervous system to recalibrate, to acclimate to the fluorescent lights and quiet hum of the office without the constant strain of having to interact, perform, and respond. When my boss finally did approach me, I was calm enough to speak.

As the months passed, I went from being a functional ghost to being more alive again. For the first time in years, I was almost my old self. I started to enjoy this pressure-free life in the office, the fun banter with the other workers, the security of coming home to a good, kind woman. I started getting comfortable in this new life, a million miles from the anxiety-ridden one I had left almost a year earlier. This seemed to be, from all rational measures, exactly what I needed, what anybody would want. An incredible stroke of luck. But as my debts dwindled and time passed, an ache started growing inside me. I missed photography and my art terribly.

One night, I grabbed my gear. When I told Jill I was going out to take pictures, a look of horror crossed her face. I think she saw it for what it was: a step back toward a life she couldn't understand, a life I was supposed to be leaving behind. But out in the cold, the feeling was absolutely exhilarating. For hours, I wandered under sodium and mercury city lights, shooting desolate parks, scarred and broken structures, a series of shiny banged-up garage stalls. The camera felt like a phantom limb that had finally been reattached.

In that moment, the choice became clear, even as I wondered if I was stark, raving mad. I could have stayed. The stable government job and my life with Jill, a gentle soul, had miraculously quieted the monster inside me. For the first time in years, a comfortable future without debilitating anxiety seemed possible. But the pull of my art and the independence surrounding it was too strong. I knew that choosing to go back to Montreal meant stepping back into the fire, into the crucible, but to stay would be a regret I would carry forever. I knew with each passing month, leaving would become more and more difficult. I'd given the safe path a chance and it got me out of debt and gave my mind a place to quiet down, but it had also shown me one undeniable truth: for me, this wasn't living.

So, in the spring of 1993, I quit my job, said my agonizing, emotional goodbyes, and moved back to Montreal, straight into a crumbling industrial building, nearly condemned by the city, and with a steadily leaking roof. My friend Phil Spurrell had made a deal with the desperate landlord, and it offered me a sanctuary quite different from the secure one I had just left. I didn't know how many more shots I had at this artist life, but I was determined to give it at least one more. My frenzied brain had calmed, but for how long? Had the monster finally left for good?

As I settled down in my new, cheap industrial space, one powerful thought pulsed like a bright neon sign in my brain: the night was my calling, and it was time to start exploring it with my camera. ■

MEMOIR CONTINUES ON PAGE 67



Me at my safe government job at Correctional Services in Ottawa, 1992. I have no idea how, but the film was accidentally double-exposed with one of my own future Alley photographs, visible on the left. My future work was literally haunting my current work. I quit shortly after and returned to Montreal.

The First Shadows

The early work (1991–2000)
Catching my balance



Lighting Alleys & Ruins no. 142, *Luv.* Photo: Jaime Pitillas

New Direction

Two years before the series truly began, I showed a glimmer of hope.

Before Ottawa, after the world went dark for me, I couldn't use my camera the same way anymore. The bright, confident way I had learned to see things was gone, and I didn't know what to replace it with.

By 1991, I was shooting work that screamed of alienation, and this became a drudgery that I had to stop. Many years later, I revisited some of these photos and saw that a little light had gotten through some of them. *Electric Sky* was the best example. I decided to renumber a couple of my first images, knowing they'd been essential stepping stones. *Electric Sky* became *Alleys & Ruins* no. 1. That number had first gone to my original alley shot from 1993, which wasn't very good. The Ottawa image, below, became no. 2. It was an image, and a night, that showed me – and made me feel – what was possible.

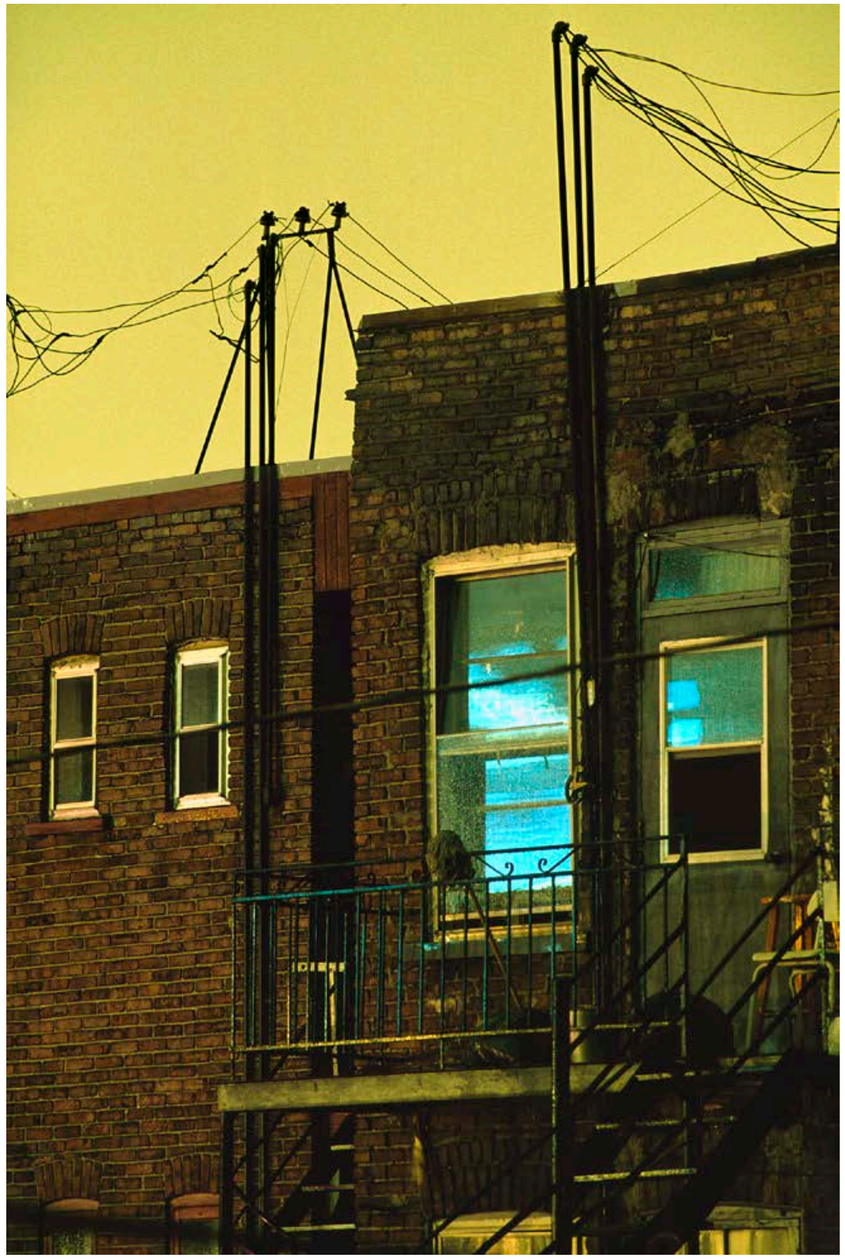
I was drawn to the city's forgotten corners at night. I wasn't looking for the kind of beauty I once had; instead I was just searching for places that felt honest. Ultimately, these decrepit spaces became a refuge, a quiet match for the ruin I felt inside.



Alleys & Ruins no. 2, *Bays*
Ottawa, ON, 1992. 11:00 pm

Making art wasn't my main goal, I was just trying to be with my camera again, to create something plain. *Electric Sky* wasn't the first run-down scene I photographed in this period, but it was the first that, looking back, surprised me. I had somehow elevated an ignored corner into something with a strange kind of grace. It was the complete opposite of how the place felt in reality, yet it seemed more true to me.

I didn't know what it meant then, or that it would lead to anything. It certainly didn't feel like a series was planned. It was just a hint that a new direction was possible.



Alleys & Ruins no. 1, *Electric Sky*
Kodak Ektachrome 100, 35mm slide film
Montreal, QC, 1991. 10:00 pm, 10-second exposure

Old Light

On that first night of shooting, after moving back to Montreal, the series popped into existence. I was pulled into the city's underbelly almost by accident, and after a couple of shots, I found myself on this desolate industrial street. That's where I saw the image, *Old Light*.

The streetlight was casting a thick shadow on the building, while it only seemed to light up a small part of the street. There was something ghostly about it. On the other side of the light, calling from out of the darkness, was a fluorescent light glowing in the window. It felt like a beacon of hope. The entire scene felt so personal – like I was suddenly looking into a mirror – and I automatically stopped to set up my camera.

This image has always felt like the first true *Alleys & Ruins* photograph. It was the one I zeroed in on when I first looked at my slides. In it, I saw my haunted, dark soul and yet, to me, it was undeniably beautiful and strangely positive.

Years later, when I was shooting bigger negatives with my Hasselblad camera, I returned here in hopes of capturing the same sublime, uneasy hope. But the street light had changed, the light in the window was different, and what I shot was a flat version of the original.



Alleys & Ruins no. 3, *Old Light*
Fuji Velvia 50, 35mm slide film
Montreal, QC, 1993. 1:00 am, 3-minute exposure

The Crawl

My brother Rob and I are walking along an old industrial stretch of the Lachine canal in Montreal, lugging my photo gear. I find a shot and begin setting up.

I'm looking through the viewfinder when my brother whispers, "X, look behind you."

I turn around and see a most bizarre and disturbing sight. Out of the darkness, a man has appeared and is crawling toward us very slowly. Around his mouth is a big gob of black and white foam; some of it is hanging off his chin. He crawls up to me and slowly rises to his knees. Then I see he's gripping a bag of glue and I realize he's totally high. He looks at me, wild-eyed, and takes a long, deep inhalation from the bag and I see his eyes grow even wider. Then he puffs out his chest, elbows bent and hands up like a gorilla.

I look at my brother and I see he's ready to pounce on him if it comes to that. I turn to the wild-eyed man, motion toward the dark alley I'm shooting, and say to him, "Isn't that the most beautiful thing you ever saw?" He looks at the alley for several seconds, perplexed, and lets his air out. His arms come down to his sides and he keeps looking at the alley. Then he gets back on his hands and knees and crawls away, disappearing back into the darkness.



Alleys & Ruins no. 4, *Orange Door*
Fuji Velvia 50, 35mm slide film
Montreal, QC, 1993. 9:45 pm, 1-minute exposure

Manhole

By the time I shot *Manhole*, after numerous failed nights, I was starting to understand what I wanted: the basest parts of the city, glorified. Like this manhole cover someone had vomited into. It was also one of the first times two key characteristics emerged: the use of my lighting and absurdly long exposures.

During the day, I ruminated endlessly about my crippled life. But here, shooting, I'm laser focused on everything around me. I'm on my first of three exposures: 15 minutes. The next will be 45, then a whopping 90 minutes.

Cars keep ruining my shot as their headlights turn into the alley. But that's fine. I move the camera out of their way, let them pass, and set up again. Nothing is going to stop me from getting this shot. I have all the patience in the world.

I crouch beside the camera, rethinking the settings. I'm using slow, 50 ISO slide film and it needs a massive amount of light, which means long exposures. The aperture is closed to a pinprick to keep everything sharp, from the manhole at my feet to the horizon. That costs me even more time.

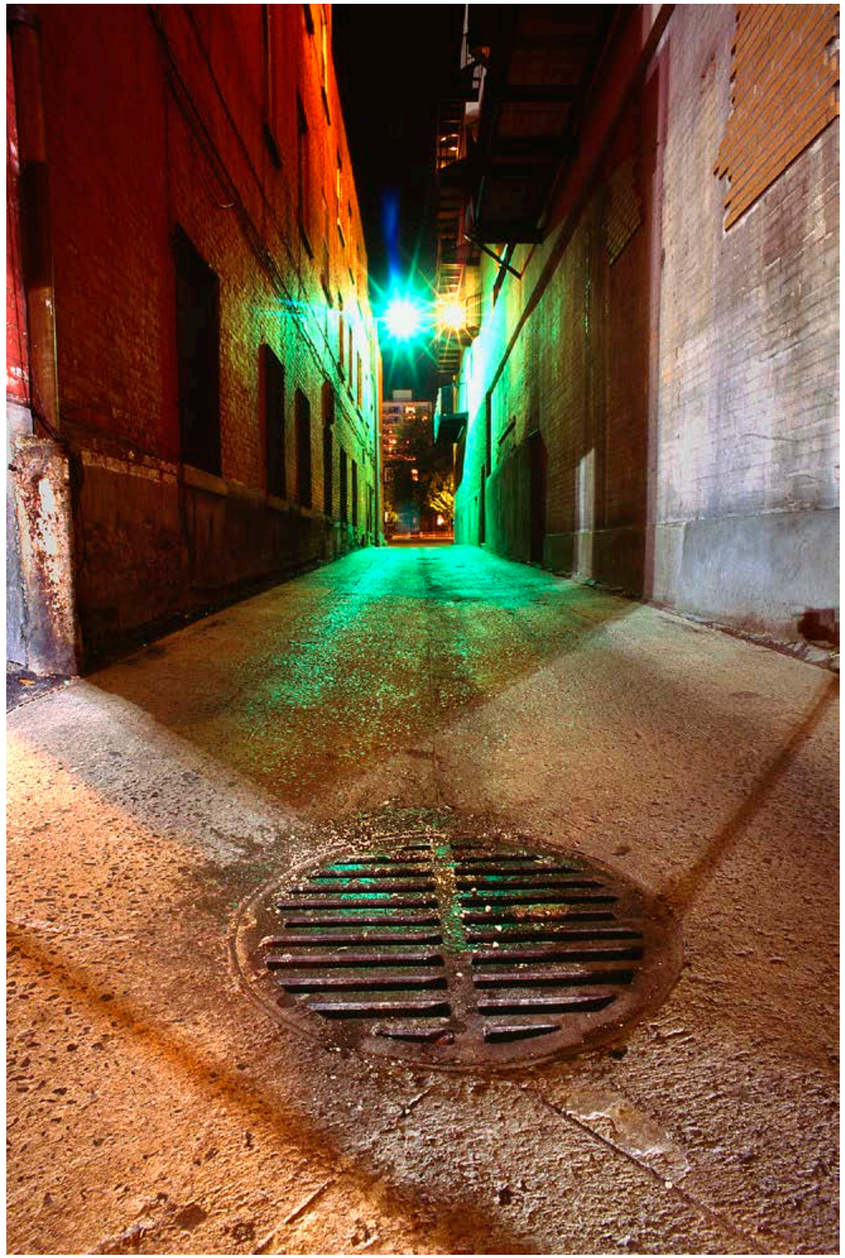
I hear a footstep and turn. Someone is walking by, staring. They're just curious, nothing to worry about. I turn back and look at the vomit, the texture, the manhole cover. It's all too dark and I want it highlighted.

A rule I've created recently is I can add light if it doesn't look conjured. If it looks like it could be city light, that's okay. It's a strict rule. I pull out my flash and fire a little burst of light mid-exposure.

I look at the streetlights. I'm just beginning to learn the colors they'll create on film. A breeze hits me and it feels good. The main mercury streetlight will turn everything green, so I've attached a magenta filter to bring the colors closer to normal. Am I missing anything?

Hours pass and I notice the silence. It's almost 4:00 am and nothing is going on out here anymore. I'm alone. But no, I hear more footsteps. I turn again. Someone is getting into their car. I stand up and look down the alley. Yeah this'll be a good shot.

I've been out here half the night. The monster has had nothing to feed on.



Alleys & Ruins no. 6, *Manhole*
Fuji Velvia 50, 35mm slide film
Montreal, QC, 1993. 3:00 am, 90-minute exposure

Company

It's a warm Friday night. Phil and I climb an old, rusty fire escape and perch ourselves on a third-floor landing. It's a rare view; usually, I'm on the ground, looking up. Tonight, I'm looking down.

I set up the shot and start calculating the exposure.

We hear them first. The giddiness. They're chattering about something that has them both entertained. Then they appear, and the contrast is jarring. Into this yellow-grey, dingy alley float two night-clubbing ravers, a blur of fluorescent sparkles: bright greens, reds, and yellows. It's a guy and a girl, holding hands, then embracing.

They drift into a dark corner on the right until we can't see them anymore. But we can hear them. Their chatter drops an octave, slowing down, bending into something else. Soon, we hear moans.

Phil and I look at each other, suppressing a laugh. *Really?*

It soon becomes clear: this young couple is having sex in the shadows. I shrug, set off the shutter release for the long exposure, and we all let time take its course.



Alleys & Ruins no. 9, *Company*
Fuji Velvia 50, 35mm slide film
Montreal, QC, 1993. 12:30 am, 10-minute exposure

The Lost Exhibition (1994–1996)

These images were shot amid the chaos in the years following my first Alley exhibit in 1993 (that story continues on page 193). My life became a hectic seesaw between experimental work, grinding club gigs, and fighting through the zombie days. All the while, these alleys remained my true north.

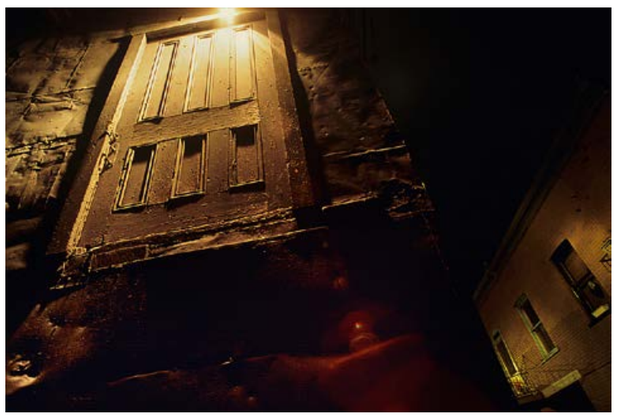
This collection was intended to be my second Alley exhibition in Montreal, but life intervened. I bought a Hasselblad camera and moved to Toronto, shifting my focus entirely to the massive detail of the much larger negatives. I felt I had turned a corner; my vision had outgrown 35mm.

Ultimately, these became orphans. They were good images that lost their place in my evolution. They were never shown anywhere, until this book.

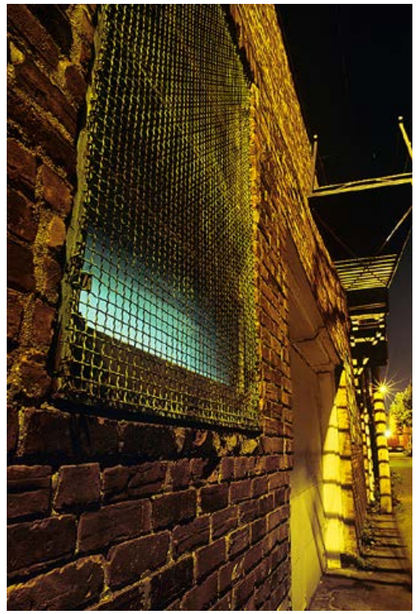
All images: Fuji Velvia 50, 35mm slide film



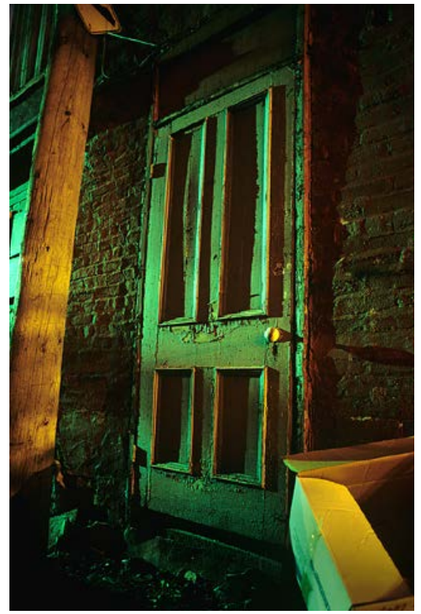
Alleys & Ruins no. 12, *Red Sky*
Montreal, QC, 1994. 1:45 am



Alleys & Ruins no. 18, *Orphan Door*
Montreal, QC, 1995. 10:45 pm



Alleys & Ruins no. 13, *Dawning*
Montreal, QC, 1995. 1:30 am



Alleys & Ruins no. 15, *Escape Hatch*
Montreal, QC, 1995. 12:15 am



Alleys & Ruins no. 19, *Night Light*
Montreal, QC, 1996. 3:30 am



Alleys & Ruins no. 20, *Oasis*
Montreal, QC, 1996. 10:30 pm

Can’t Sleep

Can’t Sleep is one of my first Hasselblad photographs. It’s also where I broke one of my early rules.

For the first few years, I operated under two strict commandments. Rule one: Don’t move anything. Rule two: The Rule of Restraint. I never added light that looked like I added light. A subtle, but to me, huge distinction. If the city didn’t light it, it was usually too bad for me.

Rule one was easier to break. One time a big box was in front of an interesting image and I moved it. Voila!

Rule two was tougher, but it began with this image, and this spot in Toronto.

I love the grit, but I’m obsessed with those small, jarring posters of a gun with the text “Can’t Sleep.” The problem is, they are buried deep in the shadow. According to my own dogma, they have to remain invisible – I can’t add light without it being obvious.

I open the shutter for a nine-minute exposure and just stand there, staring at the dark posters. Minutes tick by, and I start to twitch. I am having a full-blown moral dilemma in a deserted alley. Is it cheating? Is it better for the art?

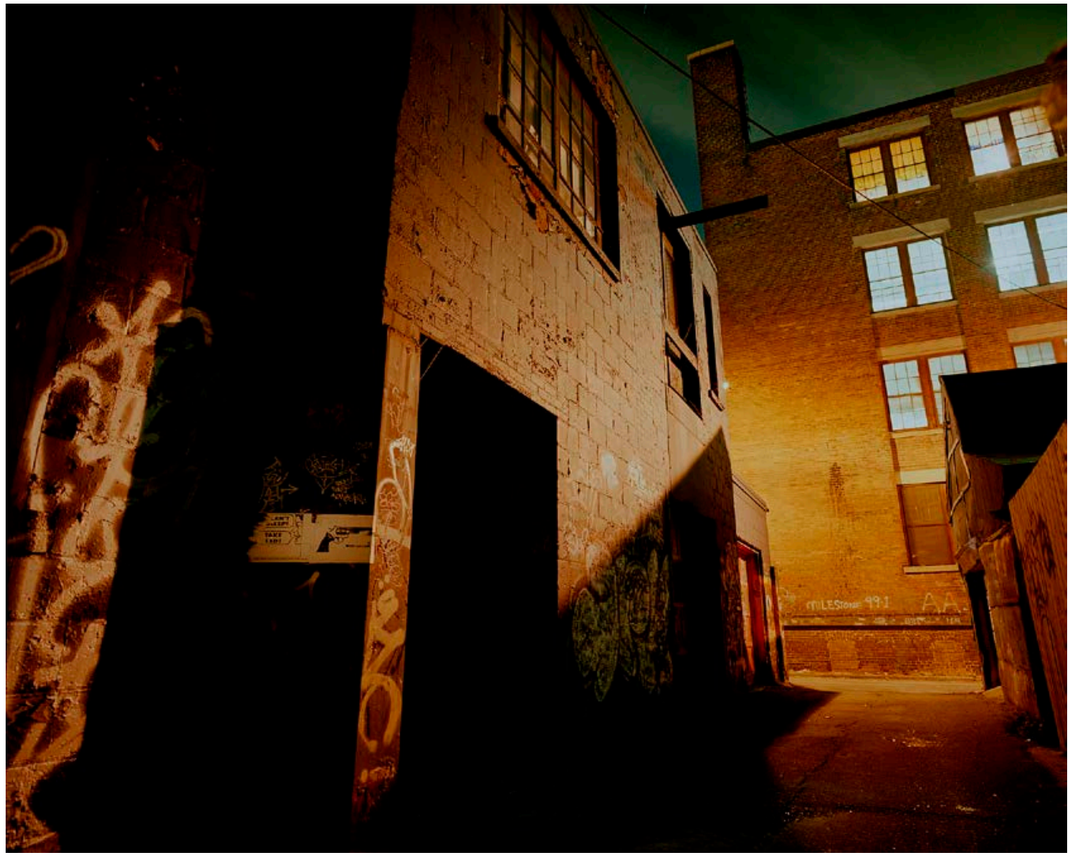
With one minute left on the clock, I snap. “Fuck it,” I say out loud.

The moment it changed. Ten seconds of handheld light on a small poster were my first step toward the theatrical work that would define the series.



I dig my Mini-Maglite out of my pocket, twist it to get a tight beam, and paint the posters with light for ten seconds. It’s an impulsive, last-ditch move.

Days later, looking at the result, I felt silly about my agonizing. The posters glowed like a surreal warning signal. That ten second impulse was the crack in the dam. The documentary rules were crumbling and the light painter in me started to emerge.



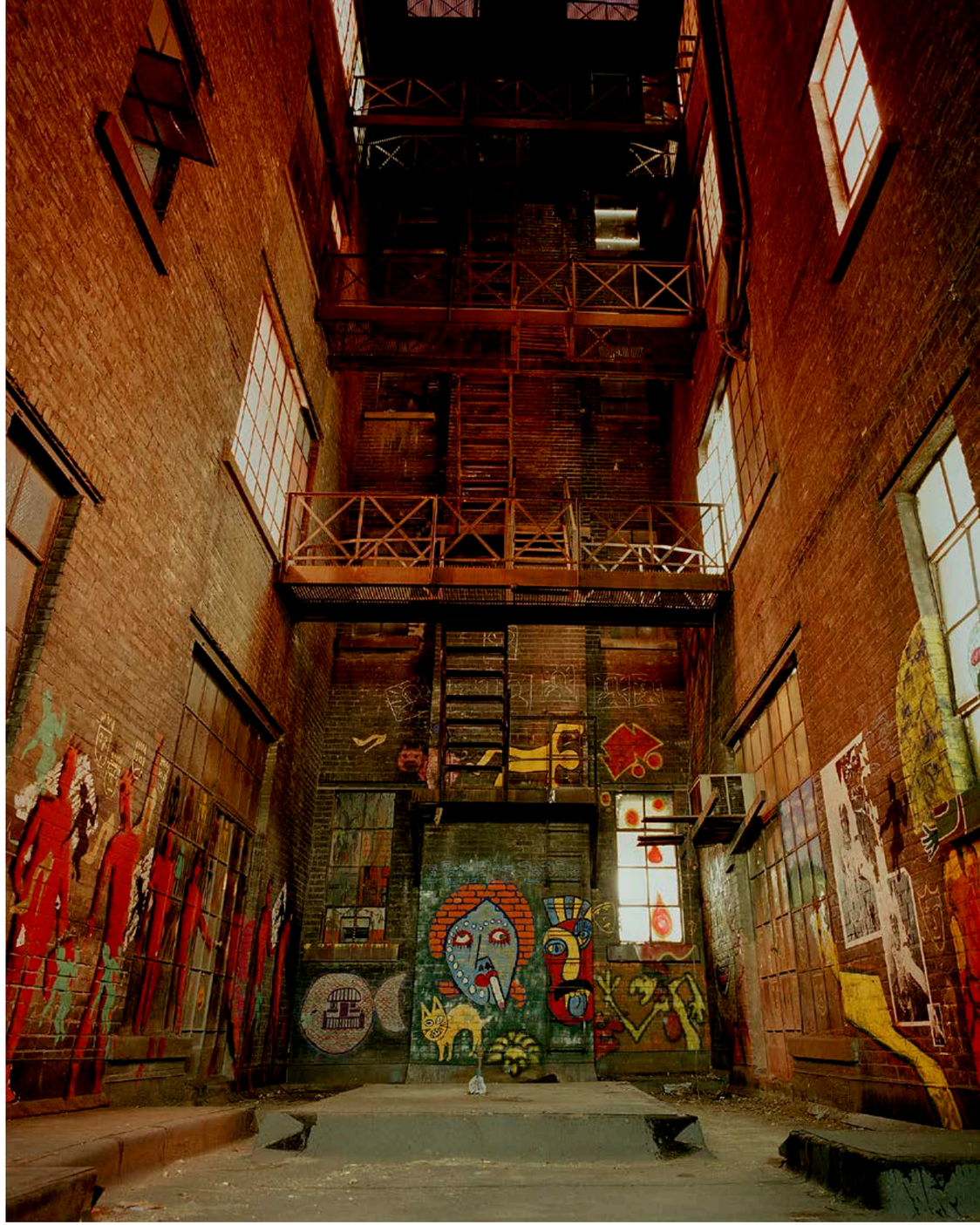
Alleys & Ruins no. 22, *Can’t Sleep*
Kodak Ektar 25, 120 negative
Toronto, ON, 1997. 12:15 am, 9-minute exposure

Secret World

I'm trudging down a long, uninspired alley carrying all my gear when I stumble on a hidden alcove exploding with shapes and color. Playful, strange figures, like something Keith Haring might have painted, dance across the walls. It's still my favorite graffiti from all my years of exploring.

Above me, a web of rusted catwalks and fire escapes zigzag between the buildings, sealing the space into its own secret world. It feels like I've stepped through a portal into another land.

A month later, I came back, eager to see it again in the daylight. But someone, in an act of pure vandalism disguised as cleaning, had scrubbed it all away.



Alleys & Ruins no. 24, *Brick Red*
Kodak Ektar 25, 120 negative
Toronto, ON, 1997. 11:15 pm, 15-minute exposure

The Meat Plant

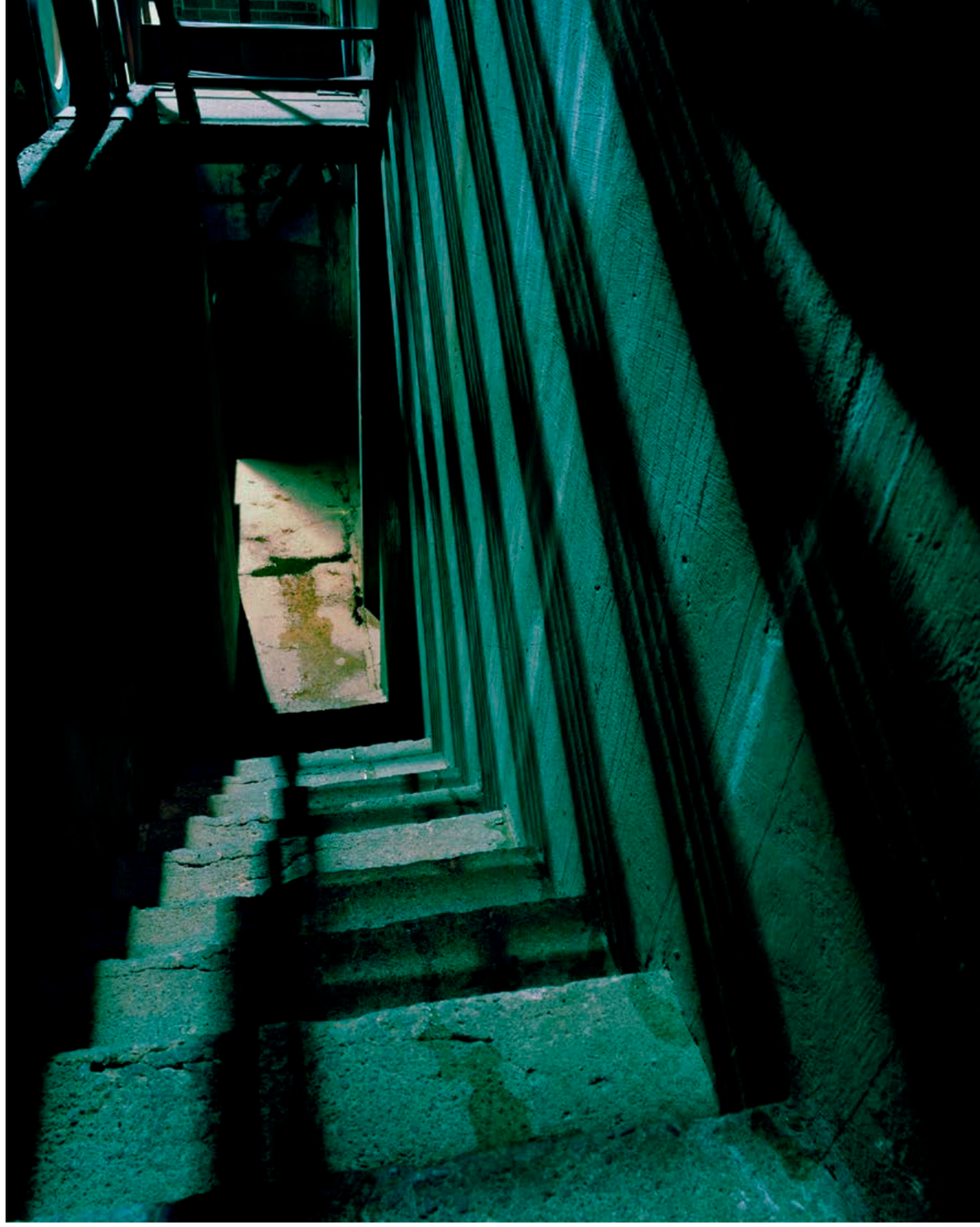
Sometimes I shot in places where an offensive odor took over. This was definitely not one of the finer points of my obsession. *Steps* remains, hopefully forever, the most putrid location I have ever photographed, a location that left me gasping for air.

It's a meatpacking plant with rotting meat all around me. The trail of thick liquid on the stairs is probably leakage from a bag of animal parts. A greasy, foul-looking conveyor belt with meat clearly stuck to it runs diagonally just behind me, reaching up to dump more parts into waiting trucks. The plant is closed, and the belt has shut down for the night, yet a truck parked next to me appears to still be loaded with rotting meat. I can't imagine what happened. This is an invitation to all the vermin in the neighborhood, and clearly multiple code violations. It feels as if the workers just marched out in the middle of the day, leaving the biohazard behind.

I try not to think about it, but every few seconds the horrible stench wafts by, and my good friend Zuza and I have to squeeze our watering eyes shut. It's like someone is holding a plate of rotting meat under my nose the entire time.

I work as fast as I can, even though I'm shooting several 25-minute exposures. During each shot, I make my way to the bottom of the stairs and shine some warm light through the exit, which leads to a lower loading dock where another filthy truck sits. Each time I walk down, I have to be extremely careful not to step in the trail of liquid.

In the end, I come away with a sinister-looking image that feels just as toxic as the air we are breathing.



Alleys & Ruins no. 28, *Steps*
Agfa Ultra 50, 120 negative
Toronto, ON, 1997. 11:45 pm, 25-minute exposure

Emerald Palace

A very bad rock band rehearses throughout my entire stay. On the second floor, up the fire escape to the right of the Emerald Palace, their instruments wail and a woman screeches. They are a terrible ensemble, but I imagine that they think they're pretty good. I start wondering if this is related to my own brief, disastrous flirtation with enhanced creativity.

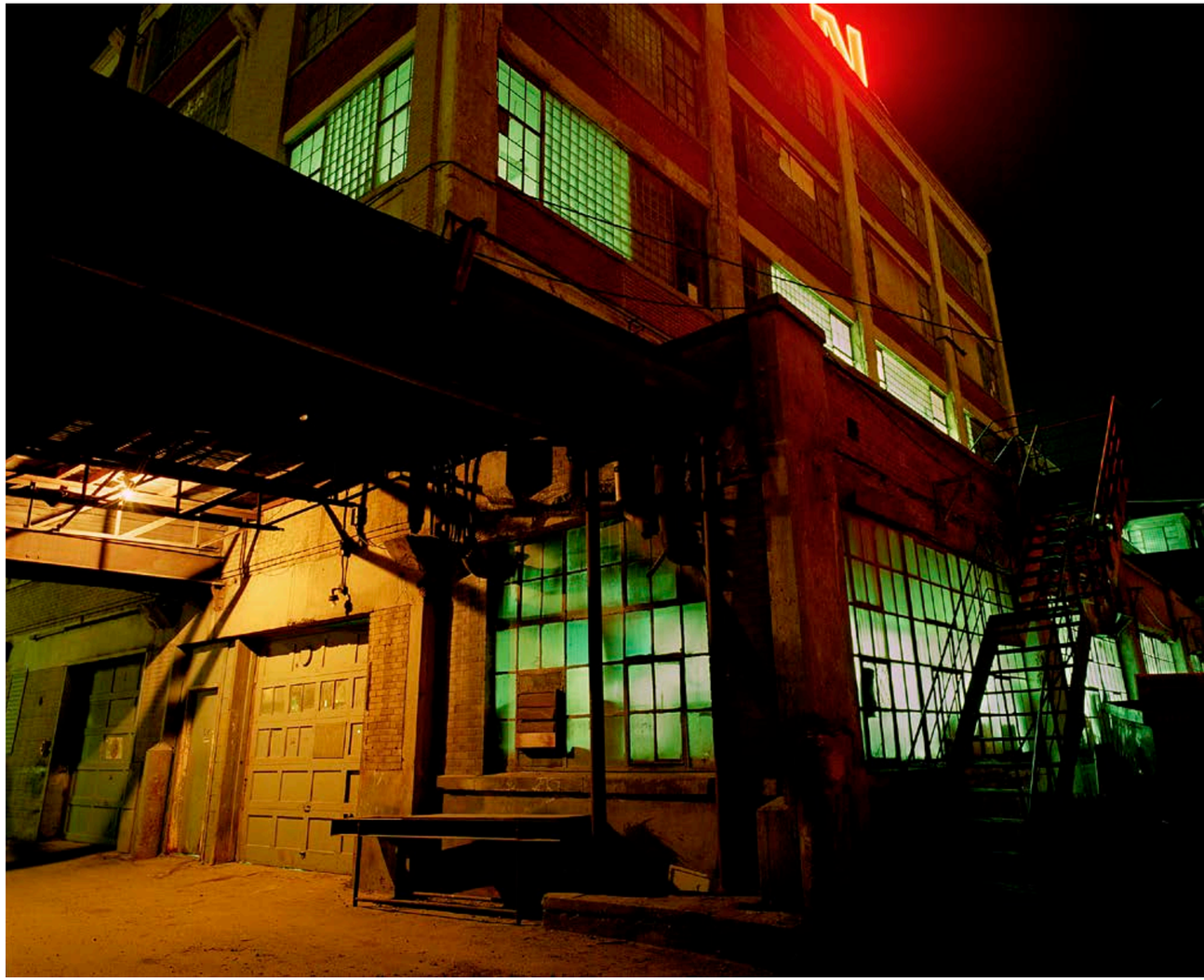
Back then, I would smoke pot every once in a while, usually to head out for a walk alone with a pad and paper to capture any constructive thoughts. Nine out of ten of these notes would be hysterically bad, but I always came back with that one fantastic idea, a thought from a slightly different dimension that could truly help my personal life or my art.

One night, I decided to try the same thing with the Alley images. I grabbed my gear, smoked a joint, and headed out to find that fantastic, different dimension. While I worked, shooting image after image, I thought I was gathering stardust, capturing the most epic photographs I'd ever shot.

But when I got the contact sheets back, I had to laugh. It was the worst garbage I'd ever created. There was no tenth thought genius here. And nothing was even remotely close to earning an official Alley number.

Early on, I had become fiercely protective of the series. An image didn't just get a number because I took it; it had to earn it. It took a lot for me to unclip the velvet rope and admit a photograph into this exclusive club, and these stoned versions of myself didn't cut it. I decided the weed experiment was closed for good.

Back in the alley, I listen to the band playing and wonder if that's what's going on up there, and they're just having a good time. Somehow, that thought is comforting, and they keep me company while I work.



Alleys & Ruins no. 38, *The Emerald Palace*
Agfa Ultra 50, 120 negative
Montreal, QC, 1998. 10:45 pm, 10-minute exposure

Spirit Window

Sometimes the real story happens years later. This encounter has lingered with me, reshaping the way I see this photograph forever.

When my studio was in the Chicago Arts District, I would open my doors for the monthly 2nd Friday gallery walk. One evening, I noticed a teenage boy standing in front of *Window Fire,* hanging on my studio wall. He was pointing at it, his arm rigid, his index finger locked on the image. His head was tilted at a sharp angle toward his arm – strained and awkward – his eyes intense and unblinking, fixed on the photograph. He was frozen there, yet exploding with a kind of silent energy.

I walked over to the man standing beside him. "It seems to have caught his attention," I said.

The man nodded, his eyes never leaving his son. "He has autism," he told me quietly. "He likes art shows, but he's never been so stunned by a picture in his whole life."

I tried to ask the boy what he saw, but he didn't respond. He just kept pointing, lost in the world of *Window Fire*. I went to the back of the studio, found an 8x10 print of the image, and brought it out to him. "This is for you," I said. "A gift."

He looked at the print, and the spell broke. He took it in his hands, stared at it intently for a moment, and then suddenly grabbed my hand. He kissed it, repeatedly, looking up at me with a wide, radiant smile.

I was a little embarrassed and I looked at his father. His mouth was open, tears welling in his eyes which made me even more emotional. He was beside himself, stunned that a piece of art could unlock such a burst of pure, positive emotion in his son.

Whenever I look at *Window Fire* today, I don't just see the orange light burning through the painted window. I can't help but wonder if in any way, this is how this autistic boy sees the world.



Alleys & Ruins no. 40, *Window Fire*
Agfa Ultra 50, 120 negative
Brooklyn, NY, 1998. 1:45 am, 60-minute exposure

West Side

nutin tu say was the second image I came away with on my trip to New York in 1998. That trip opened my eyes to the necessity of expanding to other cities, but it also introduced me to a new level of danger.

While in Brooklyn's underbelly, I'm walking down a long narrow passage that intersects with an alley 40 feet ahead. I see some shadows that interest me and I set up my tripod. It's dark and the exposure will be 40 minutes, so I start the timer and stand back while Oliver and I gear down for the wait. It's a vulnerable location so I keep an eye out for trouble.

Somewhere in the middle of the exposure, a gang comes around the corner. I stare at them for a very long second. There are five or six, and at least two are gripping thick, heavy chains that dangle as they march. I see black leather and metal studs. I look at their faces and glimpse an odd rage. It feels like a scene from West Side Story, but the threat is visceral.

They're marching quickly toward me, but they're looking somewhere else. Have they even seen me? Of course they have, I'm right there. Are they headed for a confrontation?

I snap out of it. Enough thinking! I grab the camera, Oliver grabs the bag, and we bolt. We turn the corner 20 feet away and hear yelling behind us, but we don't stop to check if they're pursuing. We just keep running, finally stopping several blocks away near a gas station. I have no intention of returning.

Later that evening, we find *Alleys & Ruins* no. 41. Oliver pulls the tire iron out of the trunk and stands guard while I set up. It's also a 40-minute exposure.



Alleys & Ruins no. 41, *nutin tu say!*
Agfa Ultra 50, 120 negative
Brooklyn, NY, 1998. 3:00 am, 40-minute exposure



Alleys & Ruins no. 53, *Steps II*
Toronto, ON, 1999. 10:30 pm, 12-minute exposure

Alleys & Ruins no. 55, *Blessed Light*
Toronto, ON, 1999. 12:30 am, 7-minute exposure





Alleys & Ruins no. 56, *Green Door*
Agfa Ultra 50, 120 negative
Montreal, QC, 2000. 11:30 pm, 10-minute exposure

Part 2. 1947–1982

Pure Laine.



A Universe Beckons, 2013, from the Crystal series

My parents stepped off the train in Montreal carrying a two-year-old, a single suitcase, and 80 dollars. It was the winter of 1960 and the cold hit them like a wall. They had never felt anything like it, the kind of cold that burns your lungs, that makes your eyes water and freeze. Leopoldo and Bienve stood on the platform, poorly dressed for a Canadian winter, exhausted, breath visible, surrounded by two languages they didn't speak, in a country they could only begin to imagine.

They had fled Spain to escape the dictator Francisco Franco's boot. They didn't know a different kind of war was about to explode in their new country.

They had also immigrated to escape the toxic family dynamics they'd found themselves in. Barcelona spoke a different language, Catalan, and treated them with a quiet hostility.

My dad had moved to Barcelona from Zaragoza following an epic family collapse. He had grown up spoiled in a wealthy family that ran a successful tapas bar. His mother would parade him around the park in his pristine white outfit, forbidden to play with the "lesser" children. But when his father died of a sudden heart attack, the fortune evaporated overnight. His mother collapsed in grief and was swindled out of their last remaining assets by a neighbor. They were left destitute.

At 15, the weight of the family fell on him. Crushed by the pressure of a life where everything had once been handed to him, he ran away. He lived on the streets for weeks, sleeping under stairwells and eating spoiled produce left behind by the market. He had come a long way from being the spoiled kid in the park.



My father, Leo (right), in my grandfather's successful tapas bar, 1947. This was the world of comfort and status he grew up in, just before the family's epic collapse.

He eventually returned to support them, but a life of struggle had just begun. He moved to Barcelona to find work, becoming an outsider in his own country, a feeling of displacement that would become the specific legacy he passed down to me.

My mom brought her own scars to Barcelona. Raised in a conservative town in Andalucía, her family had fled a scandal. When her older sister became pregnant out of wedlock, the entire family was disgraced. She and her four sisters found themselves shunned by suitors.

They moved to a city that viewed migrants like them as *charnegos*: mongrel dogs, second-class citizens.

Leo and Bienve found each other in the absurdity of Franco's Spain. While dating, one afternoon they were on a park bench and my father innocently kissed her cheek. A plainclothes cop jumped out, accused him of *¡Escándalo Público!* – Public Scandal – and fined him on the spot. The next day his name appeared in the newspaper for violating public decency. It was a regime where even affection could be treated as a crime, but they stayed happily married well into their nineties.



My mom, Bienve, in Málaga, 1949, shortly before a family scandal forced them to leave their hometown. She was also four years older than my dad, another minor scandal that almost derailed their wedding plans when my mom found out.

With money tight, my dad moved in with my mother's parents, entering the domain of Josefa, a woman whose cruelty knew no bounds. She had groomed Bienve to be her servant in old age and she viewed my father as the thief who had stolen her doormat. She made their life hell, often threatening to throw them and their newborn baby onto the street. Her husband, José, a former feared Guardia Civil, stayed quiet, knowing better than to cross her.

The escape hatch appeared when my mom's sister Maria wrote from Montreal, promising streets paved with gold. It sounded ridiculous, but the seed was planted.

The breaking point came in 1959. My dad, 26 and studying drafting at night to build a future, spread his papers on the kitchen table. Josefa exploded in a rage over the "stolen space." She threw him, my mom, and their two-year-old son out. They were allowed back the next day, but the damage was done. By 1960, they had saved enough to buy third-class tickets to Canada. At the port, as they boarded the ship to a new world, Josefa stood on the dock and watched them leave without showing a single emotion.

The first part of the eight-day journey was a party, literally. There was an electric joy running through the large group of migrant passengers. Those with instruments formed a band on the sunny deck and then the dancing and drinking started. The thrill of starting new, of leaving your problems behind – the promise of a new land full of opportunities was infectious. These thoughts spun around everyone's heads while they laughed and danced for hours.

Then the harsh reality of the North Atlantic seas set in. The winter ocean got rough and cold and seasickness became rampant. The mood on the ship began to change.

Looking at their passport photos now, taken just a few months before they left Spain, I see the truth plain on their faces. They look absolutely exhausted. My father has dark bags under his eyes; my mother's mascara is running. They were enduring the immense, unspoken pressure of uprooting their lives and heading across an ocean into the complete unknown.

One night my dad walked out on the



The 1960 passport held their official faces, but the strain is undeniable. Dark circles and running mascara betray the sheer exhaustion of uprooting a life to head into the unknown. Everything else they owned fit in a single suitcase with just $80.

deck alone. He looked into the cold blackness of the vast ocean. Sea spray slapped his face, and as he stared into the infinite darkness, he had his first real doubts.

After the long, cold voyage, they docked in Halifax's Pier 21, Canada's equivalent of Ellis Island. From here it was another 22-hour journey by rail to Montreal. They stared out the train window at endless snow-covered trees, whiteness whipping by hour after hour, and wondered what the hell they'd done.

The cold, snow-covered winters were one thing, but what my parents didn't know was that they had moved to Quebec right on the cusp of a seismic political shift in the province. The ramifications would soon turn their lives, and those of their children, upside down.

They moved in with my mom's sister, Maria, and started looking for work and for a place of their own.

My mom found work from home as a seamstress, while my dad cycled through a series of jobs he wasn't yet qualified for. In Spain, he'd had fake draftsman papers drawn up. In Montreal, he'd get hired with his falsified papers, last a few months until his inexperience showed, and then get fired, often by a boss he could barely understand. Between these short-lived jobs, he washed dishes and studied drafting at night, slowly, painstakingly climbing a mountain with no clear summit.

Three years after setting foot in the country, my brother Rob was born. Two years later, in 1965, I arrived.

After five years of hardship in Canada and finally earning his draftsman certificate, my dad was hired by Marine Industries as a junior draftsman in Sorel, a small city 50 miles northeast of Montreal. This was a pivotal moment in his life, finally having a job he was proud of, and my parents celebrated their big step forward. They found a house they could barely afford and we packed up and moved out of Montreal.

We moved to Sorel in 1965, obliviously walking straight into the heart of a brewing storm.

The French province was waking up, and its patience with English Canada had snapped. The FLQ, a separatist terrorist group, was carrying out almost monthly bombings in Montreal's English neighbor-



A quiet Sunday in Sorel, 1967. This was the life my parents had crossed an ocean for, a moment of peace, while also discovering the storm they had moved into in Sorel. Colorized from B&W

hoods. Their grievances were rooted in a sobering fear: that French Québécois culture, surrounded by 300 million English speakers, was being swallowed up.

The French majority were treated as second-class citizens in their own province, their language and traditions pushed to the margins of power. They were right to be angry.

But in far-flung towns like Sorel, that anger found a new target: *us*.

My father tried to do the right thing. When we first arrived, he attempted to enroll Charlie, our oldest brother, in the local French school. They refused him because he didn't speak French. He barely spoke English. But it didn't matter, to them, we were already sorted.

Resentment simmered not just against the English, but against the new wave of immigrants. To the locals, newcomers like my parents had committed a betrayal. They had moved here to build a better life, then aligned themselves with the oppressors.

Sorel was the land of the *pure laine*, literally "pure wool," the white, French-Canadian descendants of the original settlers. In this monoculture, we were anomalies. English-speaking children of immigrants made up maybe one in a thousand. It was impossible not to be noticed. Anyone speaking English on the streets of Sorel got a second look. If you were heard speaking Spanish, that put you in a whole other category.

By 1968, the Parti Québécois had emerged with the promise that Quebec



A moment of joy in our Montreal home for my brother Rob's second birthday, 1965, just before moving to Sorel. My mother holds me while my brothers, Charlie and Rob, eye the cake.

would separate from Canada. With this newfound political force, something became unchained. A drumbeat took hold in the streets and on the airwaves – that outsiders were diluting Quebec, and it was time to push back. Voicing bigoted views became far more acceptable.

Montreal, 50 miles away, was bilingual and tolerant. But in Sorel, we were viewed with suspicion. The bigots were certainly outnumbered by decent people, but in those days, the fury was so loud that it was best to not say anything at all, lest you be branded a traitor.

And yet, I grew up sympathetic to the French. Quebec's culture was rich – more European than Canadian. It was fun, emotional, theatrical in the way life was lived out loud. You could see how easily it might vanish. But understanding their reasons didn't help me. I was still the outsider, still the enemy.

The bigots often couldn't contain themselves. A few too many times I saw my dad insulted, taunted, and humiliated downtown in front of his family. The hit to his ego, his manhood, must have been devastating.

But we were stuck. My dad dreamed of leaving, but the very thing that made him a target on the streets of Sorel – his Spanish heritage – was exactly what made him indispensable to his employer. Marine Industries was expanding into Latin America with massive hydroelectric projects. They needed someone who could speak the language and understand the technical work.

My father was their perfect, cost-effective solution. He lacked a formal degree, so they gave him the title of "Project Engineer," enough authority to represent the company abroad, at a fraction of the salary a degreed engineer would have commanded. It was a position he could never have gotten elsewhere, in a town he would have done almost anything to escape.

After getting his draftsman certificate, he tried to break out. Three times a week he drove to McGill University in Montreal, chasing a mechanical engineering degree. He drove an hour each way through Quebec winters, at night, after full days at work.

One afternoon I opened one of his thick physics textbooks. It was in English, and every second word was circled with the Spanish translation penciled in the margin. The entire book. He was learning English while studying physics while translating everything again into French at work.



The only photo I have of my dad at work, circa 1970. I look at his smile now and see the mask of an immigrant learning, as he wrote in his journal, to "swallow ice."

He did this for a year and a half until his car ended up in a ditch during a snowstorm. He decided it wasn't worth dying for a degree.

On my dad's first day at work, when I was 10 months old, he found a sheet of paper on his new office desk. He flipped it over and read the anonymous handwritten message: "*Québec c'est pour les Québécois*." Quebec is for Quebecers. When he looked up he saw a couple people staring at him, and the rest of the office looking away. Again, it wasn't politically correct at that time and place to defend immigrants, nor to chastise bigots.

He worked for that company for 27 years and as much as he tried not to, he often brought back the anger it instilled in him and he became a difficult and distant father. At home, we didn't fully understand why he was so angry – he never talked about it. We just knew the air grew heavy the moment he walked in the door.

I see now that he was bringing home the weight of a silent battle, absorbing the relentless pressure and casual bigotry of an office that saw him as an outsider. I asked him years ago to tell me some of the things that happened to him and my mom over all those years. Awful stories came rushing out – I could hear my mom in the background contributing – and after 20 minutes he stopped and asked if that was enough because he had hundreds more stories.

My dad's life was angry and tormented, but it was broken up by happy family moments and the occasional party from a small circle of English friends.

But if my father was the darkness in our house, my mother was the light. She sang all day, almost every day, while caring for three unruly kids and running the household. She received her fair share of insults and snubs, which hurt her deeply, but nothing could poison the absolute joy that lived inside her.

She didn't have a car, so she would walk the one and a half miles to the grocery store, usually with two young children, Rob and me in tow. Coming from a military family, and not wanting us to be bored, she figured this was a good time to have us march and sing Spanish military drinking songs she learned from her dad. Rob and I would parade around like we were soldiers screaming lyrics about loving to get drunk as loud as we could "*Y a mí me gusta el / Pim-pi-ri-bin-pin-pin / De la bota empinar.*" My mom would just laugh and try to sing louder. As endearing a sight as this must have been, it no doubt angered many.

My mom was a positive ray of light her entire life, and the reason the flame inside me never died. I carried both. His

darkness and her light, fused in me. With her infectious joy, she always managed to make some friends among the French, and it was her who got them both into that circle of English parents and their life got better for it.

In 1970, the FLQ reached a new level of violence. They kidnapped two government officials, one of whom was later found murdered in the trunk of a car. Prime Minister Trudeau invoked the War Measures Act and sent troops into Montreal.

Six years earlier, my mother and my brothers had been in the middle of it.

It was August, 1964. She was downtown Montreal with my two brothers, Charlie, six, and Rob, barely a year old, and four months pregnant with me. My father had gone alone to get the parked car.

Then the gunfire started.

An FLQ cell had tried to rob a gun store. When the police arrived, the revolutionaries opened fire. My mom, caught in the middle of it, grabbed her children and ran for cover. She found a mailbox bolted to the sidewalk and crouched behind it, pulling Charlie and Rob down with her, shielding them with her body.

The gunfight went on and on and she could hear the bullets whizzing past, then the sharp crack of metal or brick when they hit something solid. She pressed her children's faces into her coat and tried to make them smaller, shaking so hard she thought she might drop the baby.

A block away, my father was stopped by cops blocking the road. He could hear the shots but couldn't see her. He was frantic, pleading, but they wouldn't let him through. He stood there, trapped, listening to the gunfight, knowing his pregnant wife and two small children were somewhere in the middle of it.

When it was over, two innocent bystanders were dead. The shooters were captured or scattered.

My mother found my father at the barrier, both of them crying, the children wailing. They didn't talk about it much afterward.

Five months later, I was born.

Decades later, when I asked her about it, she told me it felt like it lasted an hour, and she could still hear the sound of the bullets hitting. *Ping. Ping. Crack.*

Montreal, 1967. Charles de Gaulle's cry of "*Vive le Québec libre!*" from the balcony of Montreal City Hall electrifies the separatist movement – and outrages English Canada. The banner reads: "Our French state... we will have it!" Photo © Meunierd | Dreamstime.com



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While the FLQ were kidnapping government officials, I was turning six, and about to have a life-altering experience. I was going to lose all my friends – every one of them French – in one fell swoop.

At that age we don't retain many memories, but this incident produced some of my earliest vivid moments, mostly remembered in short vignettes: I remember having more friends than I could count, usually playing on the street; then having my sixth birthday party where they were all invited; not one of them showing up; going door to door with my mom to see what happened; hearing one excuse after another; playing with my new Hot Wheels car with my brother Rob; the next day, back on the street asking why they didn't come and being told that their parents didn't want them being my friend now that I was in English school; and then being shunned by them for ever after. I don't remember being sad, just confused. It probably took a while for the magnitude of what had happened to sink into that six-year-old. My mom and dad, livid at all the parents, never let me forget this story.

I had lost all my friends, but I was now attending my new little English school, Harold Sheppard. Two school buses scooped up the few English kids within a 25-mile radius. My Grade 1 class had thirty-three students. By Grade 8, our graduating class had nineteen. Grade 9: twelve. The world around us was emptying out.

I started making new friends, Anglo friends, right away. But it was no longer a case of stepping out my front door and playing with the neighbors. These few new friends were scattered for miles around; most lived too far to visit, so I mostly saw them at school.

One friend, Nicky, lived close enough to reach by bike. When I was eight, we became best friends. We climbed trees, rode through the forests, and set up a No Girls Allowed club in the weedy field behind his house. Our club had just two



Me, playing in the backyard of our Sorel home, 1968, unaware of the maelstrom swirling around me

members, so really it was Anyone Allowed, anyone at all.

Nicky moved away a couple of years later and I was devastated. I became so quiet and somber that my teachers called my parents to express concern. I had no other nearby friend like him.

This became the pattern. I would make a new best friend and they would move away. Over and over again. With the separatist fervor gaining momentum, the English were leaving in droves, seeing no future for their families in these small towns and cities.

The families with English names were leaving: the Robinsons, the Hamiltons, the Baileys. The ones who stayed could navigate both worlds. They were perfectly bilingual, moving between cultures seamlessly.

My dad wanted desperately to leave. But no one else would hire him as an engineer without a degree, and he'd gotten too old to wash dishes. He forever regretted not having tried harder – to educate himself, to leave. With each passing year we stood out more and more, as hun-



Clowning around with my brother Rob, 1976. Super 8 still frame. He was always there: big brother, close friend, protector. He still is.

dreds of thousands of Anglos left Quebec over the next 25 years.

When I was eight, I had a baseball coach who called me *le p'tit Chinois*, the little Chinese kid, all season long. Not once did he use my real name. He called everyone else by their name, just not me. I obviously wasn't Chinese and I didn't understand why he kept calling me that. I may have corrected him; I can't remember. I was just confused.

It wasn't until years later that I realized what was really happening: he didn't see me as someone worth identifying. I was the child of immigrants, spoke French with an accent, and that was enough to lump me into some vague "otherness" he could mock and dismiss.

It wasn't just ignorance, it was everyday racism and xenophobia, so ordinary that no one flinched. Today in Sorel, times have changed; parents would speak up. Back then, silence was the rule. You could be called *maudit anglais, un ver, un Chinois,* anything but your name. Because to them, I wasn't really someone. Just a thing. I was absorbing the world around me, and what I saw told me this was just how things were.

The only other time I had close contact with French kids was when playing hockey. I was passionate about the game. I was a goalie, and I was pretty good. I started skating and playing in nets when I was four. My brother Charlie and his friend Derek, both seven years older, would put me in nets in the basement and take slap shots at me with a rubber puck. I loved it, and I was always one of the best on my team.

On the ice I was a hero. In the locker room, I was one of the boys. Outside in the parking lot, I became a stranger again. Even in our team photo, I'm the only player without a helmet – the goalie had to remove his mask to be seen.

But here also booby traps had been laid out for me. In 1976, when I was 11, I was the starting goalie on a team that won the local then regional tournaments and went all the way to the provincial finals in Quebec City. We finished third. Our bronze medal was no small feat in a hockey-crazy province. In the raucous locker room following our win, the coach said we needed to award the team MVP and he wanted to hear from the players. The kids started chanting my name, "Xavier! Xavier!"

My first team, 1970. For years the hockey rink, in front of the net, was one of my favorite places to be.



"Look, we don't have to decide now," the coach said. "We're going to talk it over among the coaches and we'll let you know." Our best forward got the MVP. I was happy for him but it still stung.

We returned as heroes, the local paper had a big picture of us following the win and they had a ceremony for us at our local rink. One of the parents had planned a celebration party at her house. She started walking down the line, you're invited, you're invited, you're invited.... When she got to me, she kept walking.

I mean, what the fucking fuck, right?

My dad saw this and became livid. He got into an argument with the woman that went nowhere. I never went to the party.

The next season when the rosters were released, I was relegated to the B League, an absolute insult. Their bigotry was stronger than their desire to win.

My dad was the angriest of all. He stormed into city hall and cursed them all and I had to decide what I wanted to do with this sport I loved and that had become such a big part of my identity. I liked my hockey friends, even if we were just buddies at the rink. I wouldn't see any of them in the B League.

I thought of the two times I'd won best goalie in the league. Each time, I was presented with a trophy with my name misspelled. I couldn't make this up if I tried. One year I was "Xavir Nuez." The next time I was "H Nuez."

And then I thought of what was becoming a recurring theme: the rejection and the humiliation. I did not want to bump into any of the coaches or my old teammates at the rink. I started to wither just imagining it.

So hockey was out, aside from the pick-up games I'd play at the many rinks in town.



Les Comètes de Tracy décrochent une médaille de bronze au championnat provincial catégorie Atome

En fin de semaine dernière, les Comètes représentaient la région Richelieu au championnat provincial qui se tenait cette année dans la ville de Québec et les environs. L'équipe des Comètes a évolué à l'arena de Sillery.

Dans une première rencontre, l'équipe de Tracy a perdu 8-6 contre les Cantons de l'Est (Sherbrooke); cette défaite conduisait l'équipe au championnat de consolation. Les Comètes ont défait la Côte Nord 3-2 dans une première partie de ce tournoi. L'équipe de Tracy a défait lac Saint-Louis 5-1 dans une deuxième partie et a dû céder en finale la Mauricie par un compte de 3-2. Par cette dernière partie, les Comètes de Tracy devenaient l'équipe championne du tournoi de consolation catégorie Atome et recevaient la médaille de bronze.

Félicitations à l'entraîneur et à ses deux assistants: M. Emile Patent, M. Yves Guay [illegible]

Les Comètes, 1976 provincial bronze medalists. We returned as heroes. This captures the peak, just before the humiliation that drove me from the sport.

I never again hung out with the French kids on my own. I had written them off. The constant drip of bigotry could go fuck itself.

But a dual existence began to take form. I seemed to have two completely different lives and personalities. I was popular with my English friends, extremely outgoing, joyful, and funny. In the presence of the French, however, I became quiet, withdrawn, and nervous, like my presence was conditional, suspicious, or just wrong. My social anxiety had taken root.

I felt safe only inside a tiny, fragile enclave: my friends and, for the most part, my family. Nothing has changed. Today, I am comfortable with a small group of friends; outside of that, it gets dicey. My

years in Sorel were a long, slow identity erosion, invisible from the outside, but inside it was like acid on the soul.

In those early years of grammar school, my name was a source of low-grade embarrassment. In a town rigidly divided between English and French, "Xavier" didn't fit on either side. Back then the name was extremely rare, exotic. In Sorel in the 1970s, I didn't need another reason to stand out.

There was always a pause. A new kid would ask my name, I'd say it, and then I'd brace for the look. That slight squint. The confusion that screamed, *What are you?* I hated it. I didn't want to be different. I just wanted to blend in. I wanted a normal name.

But the name was only part of it. I had my father's olive skin, dark enough to notice in a sea of pale faces. I didn't think much about it until a friend told me matter-of-factly, "When someone looks at you, they know you're from somewhere else." For a while, I wanted to shed my own skin.

My brother Rob gave me the solution by accident.

One spring day, we were running around the yard in shorts. Rob looked at my pale, winter-white legs and cracked up. "Look at Sexy X'y over here!"

We both laughed. It was just brotherly teasing. But something about the sound of it stuck. Over the next month, the "Sexy" part thankfully dropped off, and I was just "X." My brother Charlie picked it up immediately. By the time I was ten, Rob had taken it further: as a prank, he started telling all my teachers that my name was X. Amazingly, it stuck.

Before I knew it, I had a new identity. "X" was short, sharp, mysterious. It didn't invite the question, *Where are you from?* It just was.

I didn't realize it then, but Rob had given me a shield. I could hide "Xavier" and all the confusion that came with it behind a single, crossed letter.

But even with my new shield, the environment took a toll on me that it didn't seem to take on others. Most of my English friends could shrug off the discrimination, or didn't experience it at all since they were completely bilingual and blended almost seamlessly into Québécois culture. Maybe I was more sensitive. I'll call it "artistic sensibility" and make it a win. We were tight as brothers and sisters – absolute lifesavers – but unlike me, they all had their own French friends as well.

Because of my alienation from the culture, my French slowly faded. When I was six, I was completely fluent and spoke without an accent. With each passing year, the language became more difficult, more awkward, more stressful.

But my Sorel upbringing had countless beautiful moments that kept everything even. I had incredible friends. Weekends spent with campfires by the river, riding bikes through forest trails, drinking, smoking up, hanging out in the dark. With them I learned to talk about what mattered, like fears, doubts, the weight of things – conversations forbidden at home, where others had always suffered more. But even here, certain things I kept to myself.

We loved exploring out-of-the-way corners of old Sorel, but I was the one who would drag the gang down a dank alley or into a dark, greasy corner. The old



Inside the chaos of the photo booth, 1981, with two of my best friends, Vivianne and Ingrid. We were a tight-knit crew, my absolute lifesavers in those Sorel days.

rusty industrial port was always a winner with tons of hiding places amongst the corroded debris. We had gritty corners downtown when we wanted that, and our enchanted forest when we craved nature. And next to the forest, Red Ranch: a giant field of tall grass and bushes with a pure spring flowing in the middle of it all.

Many years later, when I was trying to calm my frenzied mind, Red Ranch became my Happy Place, the setting I envisioned when I closed my eyes and needed somewhere peaceful.

And being good Canadians, winter weekends were different. Saturday nights in January could mean sitting in a snow-covered field, freezing our asses around a case of near-frozen beer, smoking joints and laughing like idiots. Or if we were close by, the semi-sheltered players' bench at an outdoor rink, cracking open beers out of the wind.

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In 1977, the Hells Angels established their first Canadian chapter in Quebec. Within a year, they had built a heavily fortified clubhouse in Sorel, complete with gun loops in the walls. It sat out in the open behind a big Hells Angels sign. My friends and I sometimes biked past it and we thought it was kind of cool, but we were clueless kids.

The Quebec chapters would earn a reputation so violent that journalists dubbed the province "the Red Zone." The bikers were nearly all francophone – tough, working-class, suspicious of outsiders. Seeing them roll by in formation, a dozen roaring Harleys, became a common sight.

Yet one of the English guys from our school, a couple of years older than me, managed to join the club. He was smart, charismatic, and crucially, spoke both French and English fluently. He rose quickly, becoming a top lieutenant.

Years later, after crossing the leader of the Montreal chapter, he was lured to a meeting at the Sorel bunker and never made it out. His body was recovered from the St. Lawrence River a year later.

Once established, the Hells Angels began taking over bars, nightclubs, and strip clubs, owned outright or controlled through intimidation. These became hubs for drug sales, recruitment, and money laundering. Sorel got seedier and more dangerous.

When we were 14, my friend Mario and I decided to visit a downtown strip club. We had zero worries about getting in; ID checks weren't exactly a priority. The carnival inside blew our minds while a hooker tried to get me to go upstairs with her for 20 dollars. We barely had enough money for two beers. Once they were in our hands, we just watched and gawked at the gonzo, lawless circus swirling around us. But the danger was clear,

and we only whispered so no one would know we were Anglos.

This was a radar we had developed over the years: knowing when to keep your English mouth shut. If I had to speak to someone, like ordering a beer in a greasy strip joint, I learned to talk in short sentences and concentrate on my accent so I wouldn't give myself away.

We only went the one time. For a couple of dirt-poor teenagers, the two beers had nearly bankrupted us.

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A year later, we were ready for our first year of senior high school. Harold Sheppard only went to Grade 8; after that, we'd have to go to the nearest senior high, 45 miles away in McMasterville.

In Grade 9, there were only twelve Anglo kids. Twelve of us spread across a 25-mile radius, picked up by one bus that meandered through vast territory, collecting maybe thirty-five kids from Grades 9 through 11 along the way.

We called it the Sex, Drugs, and Rock & Roll Bus.

The long daily pilgrimage to Richelieu Valley Regional High School lasted three years. We'd pile onto an old retired long-distance coach, not an orange school bus, but a battered commuter bus with high-backed seats and bad suspension. It offered perfect discretion and we made the most of it. That bus was a rolling refuge, a private world with no adults in earshot, no supervision, no rules.

Sex, drugs, and rock & roll, yes, and sometimes beer, though rarely. Beer was risky. You had to pace yourself, because once you had to pee, you'd need mercy.



Hamming it up on the bus ride to school, our rolling refuge, with my friends Manon and Chantal, 1980

Our bus driver, Donat, had a soft spot for us. He'd get mad, but he'd let you walk down the stepwell to do your business while the bus rolled down the highway, aiming for the small gap between the closed door and the step. Luckily, I never had the privilege.

We could drive for miles through quiet fields and forest to pick up just one student in some forgotten rural pocket. Some kids were on the bus nearly two hours each way. For me, it was close to 90 minutes. The ride was often long, cold, and brutally boring. I'd press my head against the glass, counting trees or farmhouses, trying to nap with a school bag as my pillow.

But in between all that waiting and staring, there was chaos and connection. Someone always had a boombox blasting rock cassettes. Pot smoke drifted low along the aisle. Sometimes a couple of kids would have sex, throwing a coat over the naughty bits for... discretion, even though everyone knew. We were teenagers in exile, and the bus was ours.

Everyone on that bus was my friend.

But I had my core: Mario, Claude, Ingrid, Vivianne. Claude had it rough. He was Abenaki, living on the Odanak reserve another 20 miles in the opposite direction from Sorel. His day started 45 minutes earlier than mine. Claude and I were the hardcore pot smokers, with Mario close behind. Once it hit, the idiotic laughter would begin – long, ridiculous fits that made time fly.

But not every day was a party. There were stretches of silence. Days when no one felt like talking. Days when the weed made you introspective instead of euphoric. The ride could feel endless. But still, it was our space – loud, messy, unsupervised.

Then we'd arrive. The bus would hiss and lurch to a stop outside RVRHS, and we'd be swallowed by this big suburban high school with more Anglophone kids than we'd ever seen. We'd scatter into the crowd, the spell broken – a group of ragtag long-haul misfits who didn't always fit in with the suburban kids. We smelled of weed and diesel and long rides, and something harder to define. A certain rural roughness, maybe. Or just the fact that we'd already lived a full day before the first bell rang.

And there it was again, that old ache of not quite belonging. Back in Sorel, I was alienated by the French kids who saw me as a foreigner, a *maudit anglais*. Now I felt it among English speakers too.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. During the summer before Grade 9, I was pumped. I had this excited, proud feeling that the new, big English school would be different. It was far from all the French-fueled disasters in my life. I couldn't wait to get into this huge, wonderful world of English kids where we all shared the same language, the same bond.

In my mind, this school would be another utopia, another safe haven like Harold Sheppard where I would fully belong.

On the first day, in a moment of disastrous, misguided pride, I decided to fully embrace the name that once embarrassed me. I wore a hockey jersey with my full name stamped across the back: XAVIER stacked over NUEZ. I thought I was making a splash.

It got attention. Just not the kind I wanted. A few students latched onto it and started mocking my name relentlessly.

In the grand scheme, it wasn't a big deal, just a few kids in a school where I would end up making lots of friends. But I had been primed by my years in Sorel. I was used to hostility from the French; I expected it from them. The shock was that English kids could be mean to me too.

That shock smashed my utopian vision. I internalized the ridicule far more than the reality warranted. Maybe I was an unnaturally sensitive kid, but I magnified casual mocking into a calamity. It confirmed my deepest fear: the problem wasn't just Sorel. *The problem was me.*

The bullying faded. By Grade 10, it was half as bad. By Grade 11, I was almost friends with them. But the hurt was deep and permanent. The lesson was brutal: being visible was a liability. When I finally moved to Montreal for junior college, I remember walking in on the first day, stomach tight, terrified it was going to happen all over again. ■

MEMOIR CONTINUES ON PAGE 135

Made in America

American alleys & ruins (2004–2006)
The nights get stranger; the work gets stronger



Lighting Alleys & Ruins no. 137, *Portal*. Photo: Robert Stolarik / *The New York Times* / Redux, 2011

Canyons

In late 2003, 16 years after the collapse, and 10 years after the series began, I moved to the states and hit the road.

I found myself in a different city every week, doing art shows. This was the engine that finally allowed me to expand the *Alleys & Ruins* series across the continent.

It took a while to get my rhythm, but eventually I developed a routine. During my shows I would meet people, and I'd often find someone interested in going on a night shoot with me to some location I had usually already scoped out.

I start off with a bang. After finding someone to go with me in Chicago, we head off at night to *Canyons*.

To get the shot, the camera has to be very low to the ground. I place some cardboard on the wet alley so I can lie on my back. As I squeeze my body between the cardboard and the camera to see through the viewfinder, the guy I brought along excuses himself and walks away.

I crawl back out and watch him walk right out of the alley and out of sight. I think he's abandoned me – he was a vital second set of eyes looking out for threats and he just left.

But 10 minutes later he comes back with a six-pack of beer. That makes me very happy.

His name was Neil Moldenhauer and he hadn't bailed, he just thought we needed supplies. That six-pack was the beginning of a brotherhood. When I eventually moved to Chicago in 2010, Neil became my best friend.



Alleys & Ruins no. 60, *Canyons*
Kodak Portra 160VC, 120 negative
Chicago, IL 2004. 10:30 pm, 15-minute exposure

The Actor

I'm shooting in a Chicago alley with Phil Blass, an art student who would go on to help with many of my shoots. We've just finished the shot when a homeless man approaches us, eyes locked on the gear. "I gotta be in your movie," he says. "I wanna be in your movie." I tell him these are still photos, but he ignores me. "You look like a great director. I *need* to be in your movie."

Phil decides to roll with it. "Okay," he says. "I'm shooting a film. Why don't you audition for us right now?"

The man nods, getting into character, but then stops and looks at me critically. "You're forgetting something. The camera? It's not pointing at me."

I laugh and swing the Hasselblad around to face him. "Okay, go ahead."

He waits, looking at me impatiently. "And? You've gotta say, 'Lights, camera, action!'" So now, in a Chicago alley at night, I begin yelling "Lights, camera, action!" to a homeless man.

He instantly launches into his scene, wandering towards the street, screaming and throwing his arms in the air. "I don't want realism!" he yells, now in the middle of the road, stomping the pavement. "I want magic! Magic!" Suddenly, a squad car rolls up behind him, slowing to a crawl. The man is lost in character and commits even harder. He turns to face the car, screaming "Fire! Fire!" right at the bumper.

The officers are eyeing him with that look, like *okay, time to take this guy in.* I quickly rush toward the street, waving my arm, and catch the cop's eye. Smiling, I gesture casually to the "actor" and then back to my camera. "It's okay, sorry, I got this, he's with me. We're filming." The cops look at the tripod, assume it's a legitimate set, and drive on.

The man finishes the scene and walks back to us, breathless. "Do you realize how close you came to getting in big trouble?" I ask him. "The cops were right there."

He grins, tapping his temple. "I have eyes in the back of my head. Did you see them drive by? Wasn't that intense? What a scene!"



Alleys & Ruins no. 62, *L Train*
Kodak Portra 160VC, 120 negative
Chicago, IL, 2004. 2:15 am. 7-minute exposure

Smash

Smash was the first Alley I shot in Detroit. A few years earlier, I'd walked through downtown during the day and seen a hellscape. Every storefront seemed abandoned. Windows were smashed, broken glass lay all over the sidewalk. Looking up was even worse: beautiful neo-Gothic skyscrapers stood like rotting teeth, their windows boarded up or fluttering with tattered blinds. It looked like a city of abandoned tenements. Back then the idea of shooting in this city sounded like suicide.

Then I meet Tom Holt, a lieutenant in the Detroit Fire Department. I ask him if he thinks we can get some shots in downtown Detroit at night. He doesn't blink. "We can do it," he says.

We meet up and drive until I see the back of the dark and looming Metropolitan Building. I get out to set up. The three buildings in the shot are abandoned. Tom reaches into his car, pulls out a baseball bat, and rests it casually on his shoulder. It's long after midnight and over the next hour, a few people walk by. The second anyone even glances our way, Tom barks, "What the fuck you lookin' at?" He raises the bat and tells them to keep walking.

I'm not scared. Tom's absolute confidence keeps me calm. But watching him wave that bat is an incredible eye-opener. It is almost unbelievable to see the city's rules enforced so bluntly.

The Metropolitan Building, 2025, now the completely renovated Element, part of Detroit's renaissance.



It was a very effective strategy, but not one I could use. I wasn't going to walk around with a baseball bat, and I didn't have or want a gun. I'd have to take my chances.

Over the following years I returned to Detroit dozens of times, venturing into its deepest ruins. I walked its downtown streets at night with no fear, or at least I acted like it. When people hollered, laughing, "You lost?" I'd smile and say, "Nah, I'm good," and keep walking.

The real fear kicked in when I pulled out my gear. Suddenly I'd be there with a gleaming Hasselblad on a tripod – that's when I'd start hearing every little sound.



Alleys & Ruins no. 63, *Smash*
Kodak Portra 160VC, 120 negative
Detroit, MI, 2004. 1:30 am, 15-minute exposure

Coffin

Six months before Katrina devastates New Orleans, I'm here with my close friend Mary Ellen looking for a shot. We come upon a narrow entrance between two buildings and I get out to investigate. I slip through and my mouth opens – I've found a beautiful, old crumbling courtyard with history written all over it, one that screams New Orleans. But it's almost completely enclosed, in a not-so-good neighborhood, and it's dark. This is going to be a long exposure. I'm nervous but energized.

I tell Mary Ellen to stay in the car at the entrance where I can see her, and where she can alert me if she needs to.

I set up and click the shutter. It's a seventy minute exposure.

At first I'm still. The old buildings around me have shattered doors and windows; there could be people in them and I'm listening. Thirty minutes in, my pupils have dilated and I can see around me. I relax and decide to explore.

I walk around the courtyard, looking more closely at the buildings. More than most locations I shoot, this is one where I can feel the ghosts of the past. The life, the loud banter, the children playing. Peering through windows, I see the clutter in the various rooms and wonder why it's all still here: old furniture, perfume bottles, toys.

I step through a doorway where the door itself vanished long ago. Inside, I'm back in complete darkness and the anxiety creeps back. I walk slowly, blindly. There's a large object in front of me. I pull out my flashlight, turn it on, and aim it. A black coffin, dirty with dust and rubble from the years. I gasp.

I look it over and turn off the flashlight. My heart is racing as I head back to the camera to finish the exposure.



Alleys & Ruins no. 67, *Coffin*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
New Orleans, LA, Feb. 2005. 11:00 pm, 70-minute exposure

Enter

I've just finished Alley no. 69, a technical puzzle involving traffic lights and black velvet, exactly the kind of challenge I love. I had to manually dodge and burn the exposure for each light cycle, pausing the shot with the same black velvet every time a car drove by. Tailoring the shot to work around complications is always part of the enjoyment.

Having solved it, Mark and I decide to push our luck. It's 3:30 am. We're driving along Woodward Avenue when I spot an interesting water tower. We park and head off to scout it. I'm standing in an empty lot when a haggard man with cracked and blistered lips shuffles toward us, vibrating with nervous energy.

"Do you have 50 cents?" I ignore him, but he persists. Finally, I reach in my pocket and hand him two quarters. "Aw man, I just need another 50 cents." He steps closer, bumping into me, his face inches from mine. His voice drops into something menacing. The shot isn't worth this. I signal to Mark to leave, but suddenly we're confronted by six guys in white bandanas. One hollers, "What the fuck you doin' here!" and they move toward us fast.

Mark and I peel off, sprinting toward Woodward. We turn the corner hard, and we hear boots pounding the pavement behind us. "Get your ass back here!" one screams. My heart is hammering against my ribs but we don't look back, bolting down the avenue until the shouting fades and the street is empty again.

We finally stop, gasping for air, safe several blocks away. We look at each other and start cracking up in the middle of the deserted street, fueled by adrenaline.

Then Mark stops and looks at me, dead serious. "We still have to go back for the car."

We stop laughing. We agree to wait an hour in our relative safety before making the long, cautious walk back.



Alleys & Ruins no. 69, *Enter*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Detroit, MI, 2005. 2:30 am, 4-minute exposure

Night Clubbing

There was rarely any advanced planning on my shoots – I never knew if I was in a notoriously dangerous area, or not. I just followed my nose. But I'd at least try to have someone watch my back. People have backed out a handful of times over the years, but never like this.

I'm in Buffalo, meeting Hector, a young guy who volunteered to come along. He tells me he's bringing friends. Great, I think. More protection.

But when the SUV rolls up, bass thumping, I realize my mistake. These guys are dressed for Saturday night clubbing. One guy is already hammered; another is wearing a silk shirt. My heart sinks. Do they realize we'll be trudging through mud and rust?

"How long's this gonna take, bro?" asks Hector. "Like, an hour?"

"At least," I say. "Let's hurry."

I lead them down a narrow alley between two rusted industrial hulks. It dead-ends into a small, rough lot – a one-time parking area, walled in on three sides. The only way out is the way we came in.

I find my shot and walk back to the SUV. The music has been off for a while now and it's very quiet.

"There's a good shot right here."

"How long this gonna take?" he whispers, looking into the darkness, "like, 5-10 minutes?"

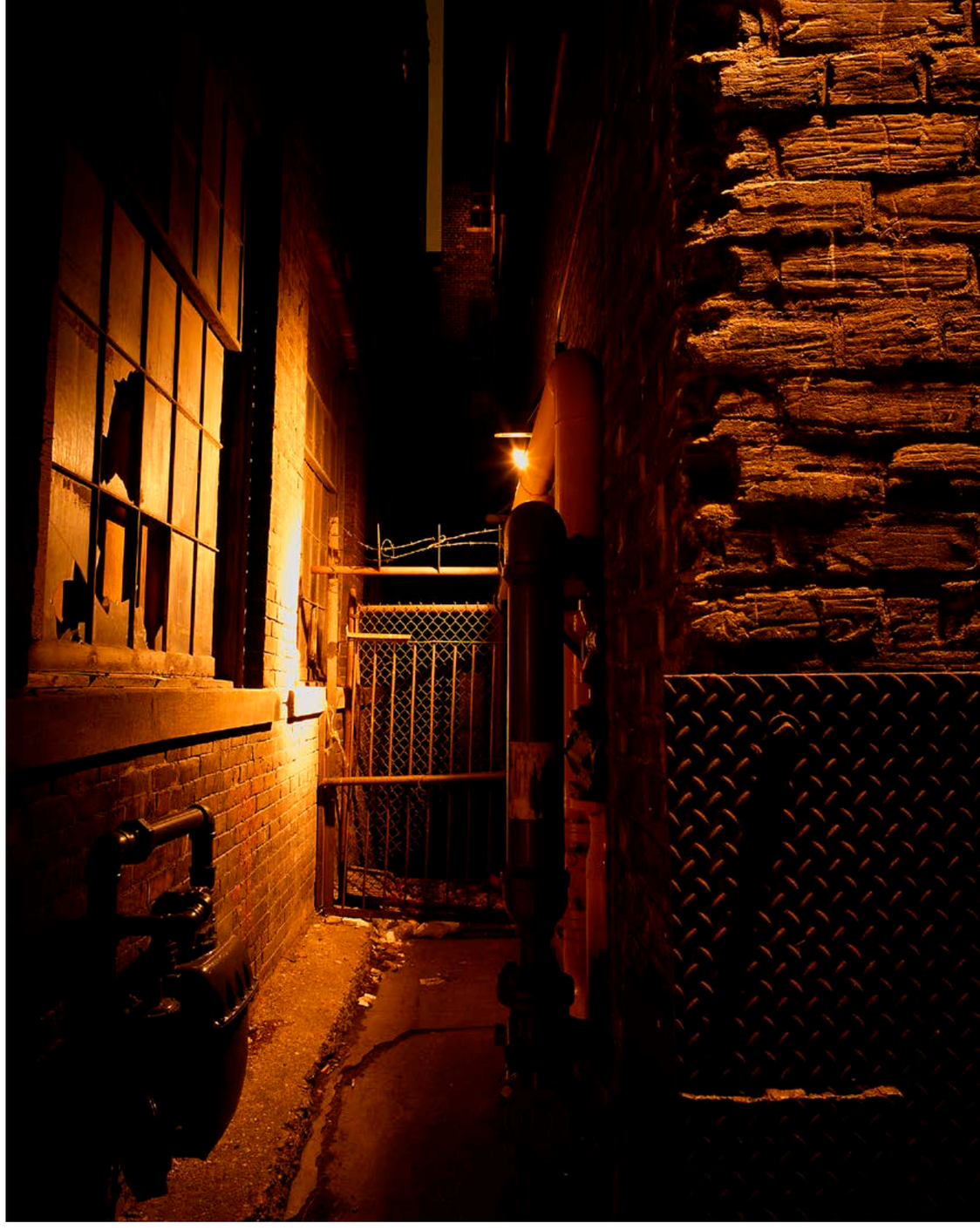
"What? No! At least another hour."

"Cause we gotta go. Our friend Jimmy's been calling. We gotta pick him up."

I stare at Hector, then at Silk Shirt. I never would have entered a trap like this alone.

"You telling me you're leaving?"

"Yea, sorry bro."



Alleys & Ruins no. 68, *Gated*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Buffalo, NY, 2005. 11:15 pm, 20-minute exposure

"Well... that's fucked up! What's this neighborhood like?"

"Not good," says Silk Shirt, through a strange grin.

"Um... are there any gangs? Do people get killed around here??"

"Not here," slurs Drunk Dude. "This is just where they dump the bodies." He laughs nervously then looks around.

"Nah," says Hector. "There was a gas station back there on the main road, so there's people around – I'm sure it's safe. But we gotta go. Sorry bro."

I don't even know what that means – a gas station? What I do understand is they're leaving.

He rolls up his window and gravel crunches under the wheels as they slowly drive back out of the long narrow alley.

I look at the shot again and shudder. Dammit. It's too good to abandon. I have to save it.

I work furiously, trying to get lost in my work, while looking around constantly. The silence is heavy. I trigger the shutter on the Hasselblad and wait. After 20 minutes of holding my breath, I have the image. I throw the gear in the van and race out, cursing Hector all the way to the highway.



Alleys & Ruins no. 57, *Footfalls,* detail
Montreal, QC, 2000, 1:00 am

Ripples

A year after shooting *Canyons* with my new Chicago friend Neil, I'm back in town and we get together to shoot this image, *Zig Zag*. Once we set up, Neil excuses himself – again! – and disappears. Ten minutes later, he returns with a six-pack. It's freaking hilarious and now officially a tradition.

In 2011, a year after moving to Chicago, I host a party in my studio for everyone on my local mailing list. A woman catches my eye. Her name is Nikki. We're chatting, and she asks, "Is it true you bring people on your night shoots?" "Yeah," I say. "It helps to have another set of eyes in these locations."

She smiles at me, "Can I come?"

A few days later we're under the L tracks at a spot where the Metra train crisscrosses way above that. I'm trying to find a good angle and decide to scramble up a steep slope leading to the tracks. Suddenly, I hear the crackling and rumbling of the rails. There's a train barreling down on me.

I look down and spot a dumpster with its lid closed and it looks like a soft landing.

I drop down, but I am so wrong. I crash right through the plastic lid and land hard on the steel floor of the empty dumpster. I feel a sickening pop. I look down to see my foot twisted at a surreal, horrible angle. Adrenaline takes over; I grab my foot and somehow wrench it back. I'm limping badly, but I'm mobile.

That's the end of the shoot. I can barely walk, but neither of us wants the night to end.

We head to a nearby bar. Halfway through our conversation, Nikki gives me a look. "You don't remember me, do you?" I freeze. "I'm sorry... maybe?" "Yeah. Last year I bought your photo *Zig Zag*. That's how I got on your mailing list. That's why I was at your party."

Zig Zag instantly becomes my favorite. A few days later we go on our first date, and seven years after that we're married.



Alleys & Ruins no. 72, *Zig Zag*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Chicago, IL, 2005. 10:00 pm, 15-minute exposure

Speakeasy

My regular watering hole in 2005 is TC's Speakeasy in Ypsilanti, Michigan. It's a classic dive with a large cast of regular characters, and I love the place. I've been going every Monday to their open mic night for a year – a couple of times I perform my songs on stage with a guitar.

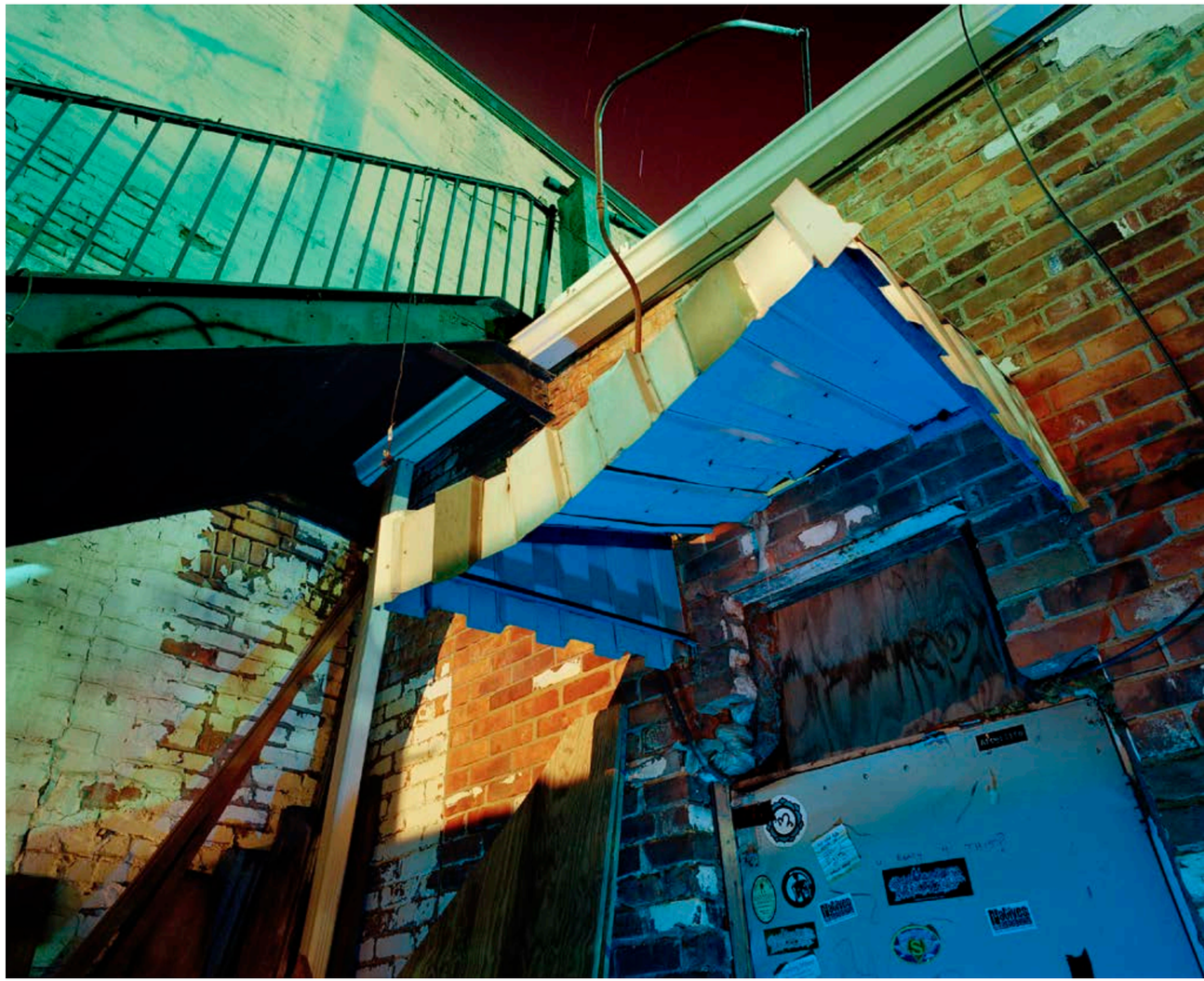
At 3:00 am, I stagger out drunk with my friend Eric, aka Satchel Jones, a talented Monday night folk singer. It's late and we're both kinda stumbling, but I want to prowl around looking for a photo and Eric gives me the thumbs up. I take the gear from my van and now we're on the hunt for alleys and ruins, walking around this crusty old town. We lug my heavy equipment around for an hour, walking down alleys, up fire escapes, and over garbage.

I spot an intriguing awning in a garbage-strewn alley, and stare at it for a few minutes. "Nah, lets keep going," I say to Eric and we keep walking. Then I stop. "Just a sec," and I go back for a second look; the awning is stirring something inside me. "Let's set up," I say. It's a 10-minute exposure, star streaks are visible in the sky. Through my beer haze I realize the image is missing something. I pull out my flash, attach a blue gel and fire the light once under the awning and surrounding area.

"Hey X," says Eric, suddenly realizing, "this is fucking TC's. It's the back door!"

"What? You have got to be kidding!" But of course it is.

I get a warm feeling inside; what a fitting tribute.



Alleys & Ruins no. 74, *TC's Speakeasy*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Ypsilanti, MI, 2005. 4:00 am, 10-minute exposure



Alleys & Ruins no. 85, *Bridge*
St Louis, MO, 2006. 1:15 am, 12-minute exposure

Alleys & Ruins no. 87, *Play*
Chicago, IL, 2006. 12:00 am, 3-minute exposure







Working on *Green Window.* The first photo of me working, 12 years in. I never thought to document myself; my focus was always on creating the photographs. The few photos that exist of me in the alleys were taken by friends brave enough to come along, or by press photographers covering the work. They became my accidental biographers. Photo: Phil Blass

Alleys & Ruins no. 75, *Green Window*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Columbus, OH, 2005. 10:45 pm, 10-minute exposure

Armored

I'm passing through Chicago one night when I get a sudden urge to go shooting. While exploring beneath the Lake Street tracks, I discover this bizarre scene: a Mad-Maxed bus tucked under the L. It had been armored and seemingly abandoned to gather dust and graffiti until it felt like part of the structure.

I set up my camera and pull out my lighting equipment. During the 15-minute exposures, I furiously fire away with my green-gelled flash at the bottom of the tracks, and I even venture down into the distance where you can see small bursts of green light near the ground.

I'm shooting alone making the experience a little tense. So the first time the train screams by above I'm not prepared for the sound. It nearly blows my ear drums. The screeching is so fucking insanely loud, it also serves as an adrenalin boost and my heart almost bursts through my chest. I am suddenly even more aware that I'm alone.

But I have a job to do, and now whenever the train passes and the grinding steel sends sparks flying above me (seen in the photo as a bright light), I plug my ears and wait for it to pass. Eventually, I'm satisfied I have the shot, and I'm gone.

In 2008 I spot the bus again and see that it's been moved. I take a closer look and find it sitting with four flat tires.

In 2008 I found the bus worse for wear with four flat tires





Alleys & Ruins no. 77, *Trains and Buses*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Chicago, IL, 2005. 12:30 am, 15-minute exposure

Don’t Move

Phil and I have been exploring some of Detroit’s ruins. We find a tunnel where years of unchecked grime has settled into a thick cake on all the steel beams; where garbage runs the length of the tunnel floor; and where an ethereal light beckons me.

We’ve been exploring in and around the tunnel for an hour and no car has come by. There’s an irony to the Motor City. With millions of cars having been manufactured here over the years, poverty runs so deep that there are very few cars on the roads.

I decide to set up my tripod in the middle of the street, where the light and composition is best, and I click the shutter for the 20-minute exposure. I also decide to add some blue light with my flash, walking the tunnel’s length and firing my flash almost 20 times. I return to the camera and wait out the few remaining minutes.

Suddenly a car’s headlights appear at the opposite end of the tunnel (visible in the photograph). I quickly close the camera’s shutter, pick up the tripod and camera, and run to the side of the tunnel to get it out of the way of the oncoming car. Then I hear the car’s engine roar as the driver floors it, followed by red and blue flashing lights. It’s a cop. The car comes to a skidding halt and the two doors swing open. Two flashlights are now on us, and they have their other hands on their guns.

“DON’T MOVE!” We freeze. “What are you two doing in here?”

“I’m an artist,” I say. “I’m taking a picture.”

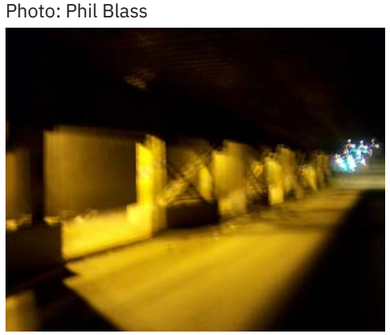
“A PICTURE?!” one of the cops growls, not believing me. “OF WHAT?!”

“I take pictures at night in places like this. I guess that sounds strange? But that’s what I do.”

“You stay right there!” he orders me.

Nervously, he steps away from the safety of his car door and approaches, never taking his eyes off me. The other cop still has his hand on his gun and is glaring at us.

The tunnel lit by sodium vapor lights
Photo: Phil Blass





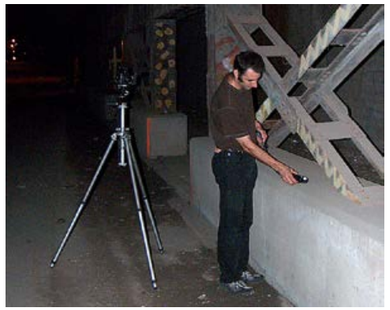
Alleys & Ruins no. 79, *Tunnel*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Detroit, MI, 2005. 2:15 am, 20-minute exposure

"Wha'do we have here?" he says, flipping open my various camera and lighting bags with his heavy maglite. He looks through my equipment and sees I'm telling the truth. Both cops start to relax. One cop looks at me shaking his head, "Hey I love art," he says. "Just be careful out here. It ain't safe." They give us a long look, like they want to say something but they don't know what, so they get back in their cruiser and leave.

I set up the tripod again. I'm not sure I got the shot, and I don't want to walk away with nothing. Ten minutes later another car appears and I have to race my camera to safety, ruining the shot. It's a cop car again, but this time the red and blue lights don't go on. The car drives by slowly, with the two officers staring curiously at us, but they don't stop. I try again, putting the tripod on the same mark, reframing and releasing the shutter. Again, minutes later another cop car, two different officers, drive by. I set up again, and one more time, two different cops, this time an unmarked car.

Apparently word has gotten out that two lunatics are taking pictures in a dark and dirty tunnel in a not-so-good part of town, and the cops just want to see this bizarre scene for themselves. This last drive by is the end of my patience and I decide to have faith in my first exposure. Phil and I leave; me, with fingers crossed that I have the shot.

Getting an ambient light reading
Photo: Phil Blass



Alleys & Ruins no. 114, *Starry Night*, detail
San Francisco, CA, 2008, 10:30 pm

Heidelberg

I had heard about a surreal art project in the heart of Detroit's devastated east side – another neighborhood in ruins, where abandoned or burned out homes outnumber those that are lived in. One of its residents, Tyree Guyton, decided years ago to give life to this area in the form of the Dadaesque Heidelberg Project. He would reclaim empty homes, the street, trees, empty lots – it would all get a major makeover. My friend Eric and I decide to drop by, at 2:00 am.

Wandering through, one lot is more bizarre than the other. Massive black tubing engulfs one house, the tubes entering it in numerous places. Elsewhere, a front yard has maybe 30 vacuum cleaners lined up in rows; a jumble of old boats, nailed together, form a 20-foot-high sculpture, and everything is painted, much of it in red. The heavy brush strokes have left streaks from the dripping paint.

The "Doll House" (aka Party Animal House) during the day, 2008. In 2005 at night I wanted to shoot the front, but I felt too exposed. The back however revealed its own strange beauty.





Alleys & Ruins no. 81, *Heidelberg Project*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Detroit, MI, 2005. 2:00 am, 23-minute exposure

The project as a piece of art is brilliant, oppressive and angry. However, some years ago, in a fit of civic shortsighted stupidity, the city attacked the project, bulldozing much of it. Plenty remains however, and Mr. Guyton keeps on adding.

I'm looking at oil drums painted over with the word GOD when I notice that the same car has driven by several times, and it's not a cop. I'm getting more nervous by the minute – at night, this truly is a dangerous place and maybe it's time to go. Eric wants me to take my camera out and take pictures, but I'm saying that's a bad idea – I've survived 14 years of shooting places like this at night because I can draw the line somewhere.

Then I see the Doll House. It's almost too much to take in, plus the lighting is perfect. And I think, "Oh no. Now I *have* to take my camera out."

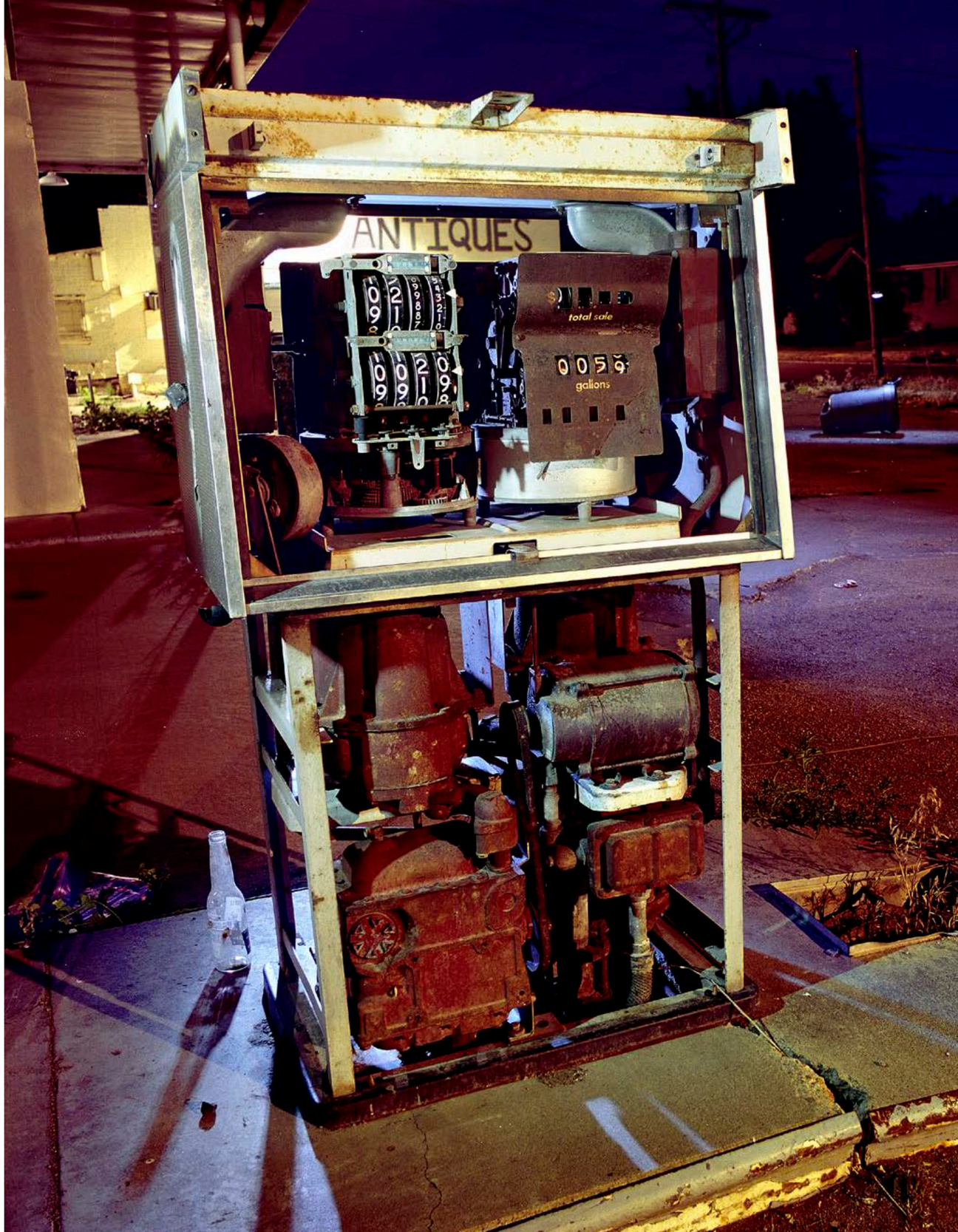
I quickly set up. It's a 25-minute exposure, and I can't waste time. Somewhere in the middle of the exposure, gunfire erupts. Eric and I – crouched by the tripod – look at each other and grimace. What we're doing here is nuts, but I have to finish the exposure.

The same car drives around for a fourth time, this time even more slowly. The driver is studying us and the equipment. And in the distance, bullets are still being fired.

I look at my watch: 23 minutes. Good enough, I tell Eric. We jump in the van and take off.

Memorial to the Heidelberg Project's "Doll House," 2020
Destroyed by arson in early March 2014.
Photo: Nikki Simkus





Alleys & Ruins no. 112, *Gas Station,* detail
Denver, CO, 2008. 2:00 am

Stadium

I'm in Miami exhibiting my work when I meet Emmett, a young graffiti artist with manic energy. He tells me he has a place I have to see. That night he takes me to the remnants of Miami's Marine Stadium, damaged by Hurricane Andrew 14 years earlier.

Getting in is half the adventure: dragging my gear, we slip through a break in the fence, climb a short structure, and pull back a loose sheet of plywood. I turn on my flashlight and graffiti covers every surface. We work our way through to a door at the far end, Emmett opens it – and I get my first glimpse of what's inside.

This isn't even the stadium yet. This is just the infrastructure surrounding it: massive concrete ramps and pillars, cavernous hallways with ceilings that disappear into darkness. Fourteen years of rot. The barricades were futile. Graffiti artists and vandals have had their way with the place, and we haven't even reached the seats.

We climb toward the second floor, and I start exploring. Unknown grimy streaks cover the walls. The floors are caked with garbage. The stench of urine and mold is thick in the dark. I walk from one destroyed room to another, pushing deeper into the labyrinth, until I find a bathroom that stops me. It's a sheer horror. People have gone berserk here – stalls ripped apart, chunks of ceramic and drywall everywhere, piled on top of a dark mass of even more garbage, dozens of holes punched through the walls. I'm seeing all of it through the narrow spot of my flashlight and it has my senses on high alert.

Miami Marine Stadium during an evening concert, 1967.
Photo: State Archives of Florida



I back out and realize I've lost Emmett. I decide to hide my gear behind a pile of rubble.

I find my way to the main landing, catch fresh air, and turn toward the stadium seating. And then I freeze. Four guys are walking toward me.

"What are you doin' here?" one asks.

I'm grateful I stashed my gear, I can't look vulnerable.



Alleys & Ruins no. 83, *Stadium*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Miami, FL, 2006. 3:30 am, 90-minute exposure

"Checking this place out with my friends," I say, keeping it casual.

"We ain't seen no one else."

"They're walking around. This place is amazing."

The guy mutters something and they move on. I exhale and keep making my way in the dark.

When I finally step through to the stadium seating, my jaw drops. The main event has opened up before me. On one side, rows of seats climbing up many levels, every surface blazing with graffiti. On the other side, nothing but Biscayne Bay and the distant glow of downtown Miami. It's a modern American colosseum left to disintegrate. I find Emmett down near the water and tell him about the four guys. He's concerned, but says gangs don't usually hang out here. He tells me to do the shot and go retrieve my gear.

The light is impossibly dim and I get no reading on my meter. The only illumination is downtown, two miles across the bay. I take my best guess: 90 minutes at f/5.6. I release the shutter and wait.

Thirty minutes in, flashlights appear. It's the four guys. They've walked right through my exposure and the shot is ruined. Then Emmett calls out behind me, "Hey Joey! It's Emmett!"

They're tagging partners. Joey looks at me. "Man, you with Emmett? We thought you was crazy walking 'round here alone."

But my shot is dead. Emmett can't stay another 90 minutes and besides, dawn is too close. We leave, but I know I'm coming back tomorrow.

The next night, I go alone. I know the routine, I just don't need to bump into anyone again.

At 3:00 am I slip through the same fence, past the same plywood. I move slowly, listening. On the second floor, odd noises freeze me in place, my heart racing, until I realize it's just animals scurrying through the debris.

I reach the stadium seating and set up at the same spot. It's so dark I can barely frame the shot. The bright red steps you see in the final photo are, tonight, just a grey blob. I clamp down the tripod and release the shutter.

The next 90 minutes crawl. I check my watch constantly, convinced 15 minutes have passed when it's been two. Every sound pulls my attention, but nothing happens around me this time. There are no flashlights, no voices, no footsteps. But while I sit in the darkness, something is happening in the camera beside me. The film is slowly being exposed, light accumulating grain by grain, and with each passing minute I'm one step closer to capturing this place.

When the exposure finally ends, I pack quickly and head out, giving the halls of this ruined stadium one last look.



Alleys & Ruins no. 83B, *Stadium Exterior*
Miami, FL, 2006. 11:00 pm, 35-minute exposure

The shot that almost cost me the main event

Earlier that first night, I spent a couple hours on this exterior, not realizing what an epic sight awaited inside, how dark the interior would be, and how long the shot would take to expose. By the time I finished this one and explored the inside of the stadium, it was too late. It now earns its place as the appetizer to the main event.

Balance

Clinton approaches me. He's tall and thin, his brows furrowed in concentration. He asks for a cigarette. "I don't smoke," I say, but he wants to tell me something.

"Do you know the secret to life? The secret to life is balance! If you got no balance, you can't do nothin'. Let me show you somethin'."

I'm fascinated – this man is preaching some truth! He then proceeds to toss a two-foot long stick in the air and tries to catch it by chopping away at the air in fast Bruce Lee-like motions. The stick bounces off his arm and falls to the ground.

"Balance is the key. Watch this," he says earnestly, apparently unaware of his first missed attempt. He quickly picks up the stick and once again flicks it high up in the air and chops away at the warm humid night, the stick bouncing off his rapidly moving arms, and again falling to the ground.

Believing he's done something right, he looks at me, his eyes narrow. "See what I'm saying?" He throws the stick up several more times, always ignoring his failed attempts, and even giving me pointers. "Notice how quickly my hands move – you have to feel the stick in the air – you can't just catch it if you don't feel it. Watch closely."

He throws the stick up again and finally catches it, displaying the clenched stick with grave satisfaction.

He then decides to toss the stick onto a row of chained dumpsters next to him, but he hits the side and it falls to the ground. This time he awkwardly places the stick on one of the dumpsters, but it falls behind where he cannot retrieve it.



Alleys & Ruins no. 86, *Crossroads*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Boston, MA, 2006. 10:30 pm, 5-minute exposure

A Conversation

On a warm Chicago night, I've framed Alley no. 90 and released the shutter. And then I wait for the 30-minute exposure to complete itself.

"What's up?" I ask Henry, a homeless man who's wandered toward me. He's short and stout, swaying heavily as he walks.

"I'm just talking to you guys," he says nervously.

"What you been up to?"

"I came to talk to you guys."

"What I'm asking is, what have you been up to tonight?"

"I been talking to you guys."

"Okay, but what were you doing before this?"

"Well, I came to talk to you guys."

"Yeah, but what were you doing before you met me?"

"Well, before this, I was gonna come talk to you guys."

He stares at me, and I feel like he wants to say more, but it's like he's caught in a loop.

Trying to compose *Window* in the dark. Photo: Phil Blass



And then I see myself in him.

The monster is not a distant memory for me. I'm not completely out of my own loop yet, the circular thoughts, the cycles of fear and obsession, the way I keep coming back here, night after night.

I tell him it's all good and calmly return to my camera, giving him some space and the dignity of patience.

He finally gives up and walks away.



Alleys & Ruins no. 90, *Window*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Chicago, IL, 2006, 10:45 pm, 30-minute exposure

Floodwall

I've just broken down my booth at the Saint Louis Art Fair. A full day on my feet, talking to hundreds of people, then packing everything into the van. I should be exhausted. Instead, I grab my gear and head out.

I couldn't find anyone to come shooting tonight, so I'm going alone.

I find myself in front of a graffiti wall that seems to go on forever, two miles of paint on the concrete floodwall that protects the city from the Mississippi. I spend an hour walking around with my gear, scouting, looking for the best location to set up. Working alone in this open expanse, I'm watching my back every few seconds while trying to focus on what I'm doing. Tonight, while I'm out here alone, St Louis is ranked the most dangerous city in America. But I don't care. I keep scanning for the right composition.

I find my spot and shoot several long exposures, working through the shots, adjusting my lights, firing bursts of color into the sprawl of paint. Two hours later, I'm finally done and packed.

I settle into my spartan van bed after midnight, gear stowed, film exposed, body finally still. Roughing it is nothing. With the booth packed, there's just enough room for me to lie down on my sleeping bag. But lying there in the dark, I don't feel the 16-hour day on my feet, or the weight of the gear I dragged tonight. What I feel is a rejuvenation deep in my bones, the familiar payoff from another night shoot that made all of it worth it.

The wall during the day, 2009



This was the pace I kept for years. Full days in the booth, nights in the alleys, sleep in the van, repeat. Wake at six, hit a gym, shower, work another full day, then try to find someone else willing to go out with me after dark. Sunday nights, after breaking down, I'd often go out again. I never complained about being tired or cold or hot. I didn't mind dragging my gear through ruins and alleys at midnight after another long day. The photography was always the reward.



Alleys & Ruins no. 91, *Mutant*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
St Louis, MO, 2006. 11:45 pm, 6-minute exposure

Acme Banana Co.

Acme Banana Co.? Are you kidding me? It's a no-brainer. I have to stop and get this shot. It's 11:00 pm, I'm alone, and there are too many unsavory characters drifting in and out of view, so I decide to play it safe and come back later. At 2:00 am, the street is quieter, though not exactly welcoming.

The scene is flat under the distant street lighting, the painted sign barely visible, the bricks lifeless. I set up the camera and start pulling lights from my bag to do some tests. The scene is so dead that for an hour I circle the place, taking test shots, shooting far more Polaroids than usual, convinced there's something hiding here. I'm checking angles, is one inch higher or lower better? I'm trying hard to get it lit up as if it still matters.

That's when a man approaches from the shadows, moving a little cautiously. He tells me he works across the street. "Hi, my boss has been watching you and wants me to find out what you're doing."

"I'm taking a picture of the building – I'm an artist. I work at night," I say with a smile.

"My boss thinks maybe you're a terrorist," he chuckles nervously. A terrorist. That's a new one, I think to myself. I've been mistaken for many things, but never this.

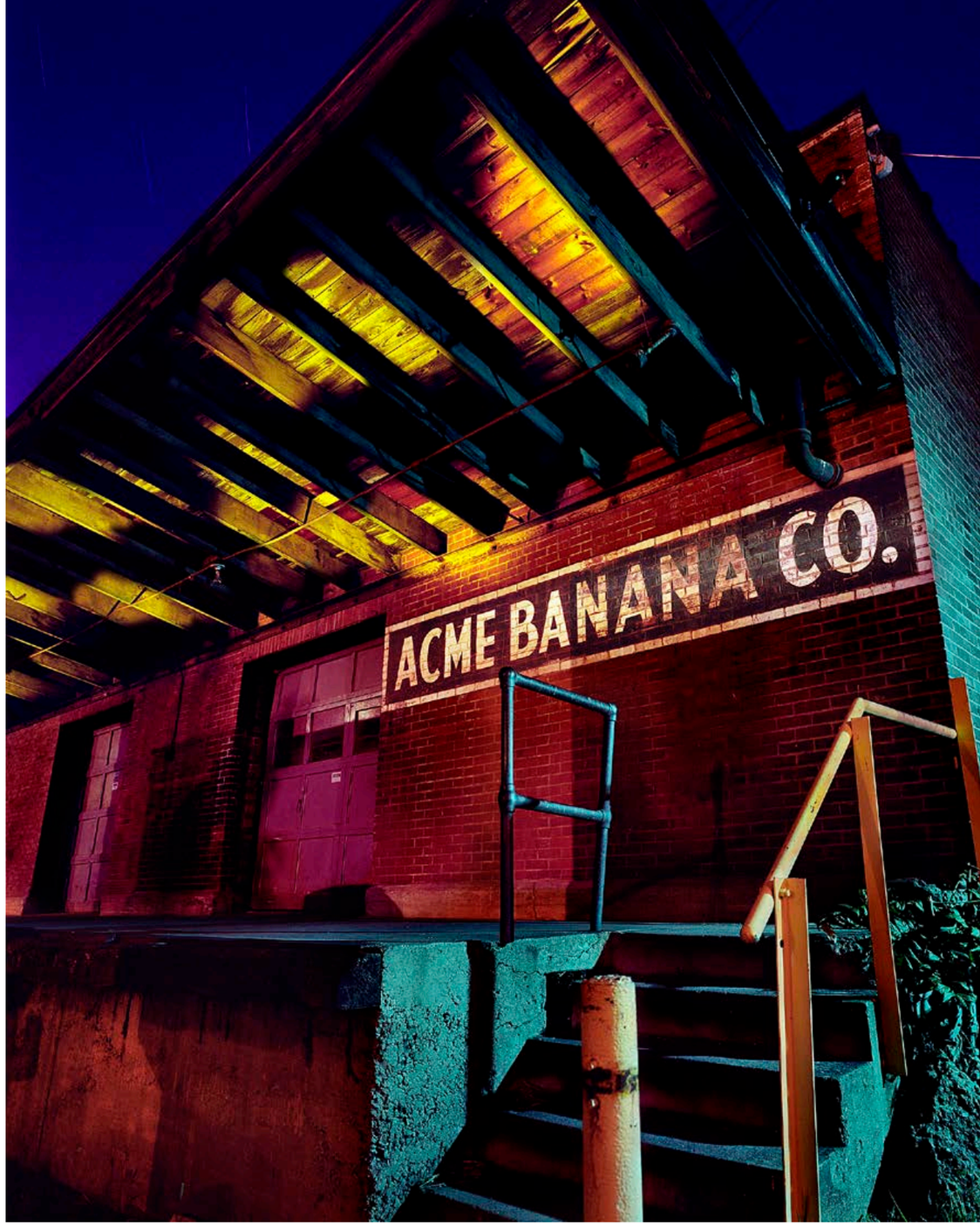
Archival photo, c. 2005
Photographer unknown



But maybe his fear is normal these days. It's not every day someone takes great interest in an old warehouse late at night. I guess I can understand the suspicion.

I assure him I'm not a terrorist, and he returns to tell this to his boss.

The warehouse has seen stranger nights. The building was once home to the Pittsburgh Banana Company, later renamed Acme Banana. In 1936, a gas explosion in the company's ripening room blew away nearly a third of the building. The blast was so strong it shattered windows across the Strip District and tore the towers from a church



Alleys & Ruins no. 92, *Acme Banana Co.*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Pittsburgh, PA, 2006. 3:00 am, 45-minute exposure

across the street. The one worker there, Peter Kavanek, was buried up to his neck in debris and bananas, but somehow walked away with only minor injuries.

The suspected cause was a combination of gas heaters used for controlled ripening and the ethylene gas naturally produced by bananas. All it took was a spark, probably from an electric fan he turned on, to ignite a room full of ripening fruit. That morning, bananas literally rained over the neighborhood.

In 2010, I was exhibiting this photograph in St Louis when a woman approached me in tears. She pointed to the image.

"When I was a little girl, me and my sister used to sit on these steps," she said. "My grandfather owned Acme Banana. He was such a kind, generous man. We spent whole days here, running around, eating ice cream or watermelon. He sold a lot more than bananas. Those were some of my happiest memories. But it's all gone now. We were once very wealthy, and now it's gone."

Her grandfather, Tom Ayoob Jr., died in 2003. He was remembered for his integrity and fairness, and seemed to be the thread holding the company together. It shut down soon after. By the early 2010s, the Acme Banana building, along with many of the old industrial structures in Pittsburgh's Strip District, was demolished.

The night I was there in 2006, the place looked abandoned but still solid, still full of character. Today the site is a parking lot. That painted sign is gone, along with the steps where two sisters once sat, never imagining that their grandfather's company, and the building that held it, would vanish.

Alleys & Ruins no. 89, *Glass Painting*, detail
Chicago, IL, 2006, 11:30 pm

Hallmark

I'm setting up for Alley no. 94 when a homeless man and woman walk by us and head down the alley, stopping at the garbage bin, visible in the picture. The man pulls the dumpster back and grabs a few large cardboard pieces stashed behind it, taking them around the corner a few feet further up. He reappears soon after, and walks past us. A few minutes later, he returns with a big bag of bread rolls. He stops and asks what we're taking a picture of and I ask him where he got the bread, since it's 1:00 am.

He tells me a local bakery throws it out. "I feed the rats with it. Look, I gotta keep 'em away from my wife, cause if I don't feed 'em, they get mad and come after us." He tells us how he tosses the bread over the fence on the other side of the alley, away from their cardboard home, where the rats gather.

"I love my wife more than anything and I want her to have a good sleep. I'd do anything for her. Look, I been to jail five times and she stuck with me through everything. I tell you, I'm the luckiest man alive. My wife's a good woman – she loves me. Ain't that somethin'? Look where we live..." he says, motioning. "This woman is truly a miracle – I gotta protect her."

He asks us if we could spare some money and we give him a few dollars. He looks at the money and says, "Hey I wanna give you guys somethin'."

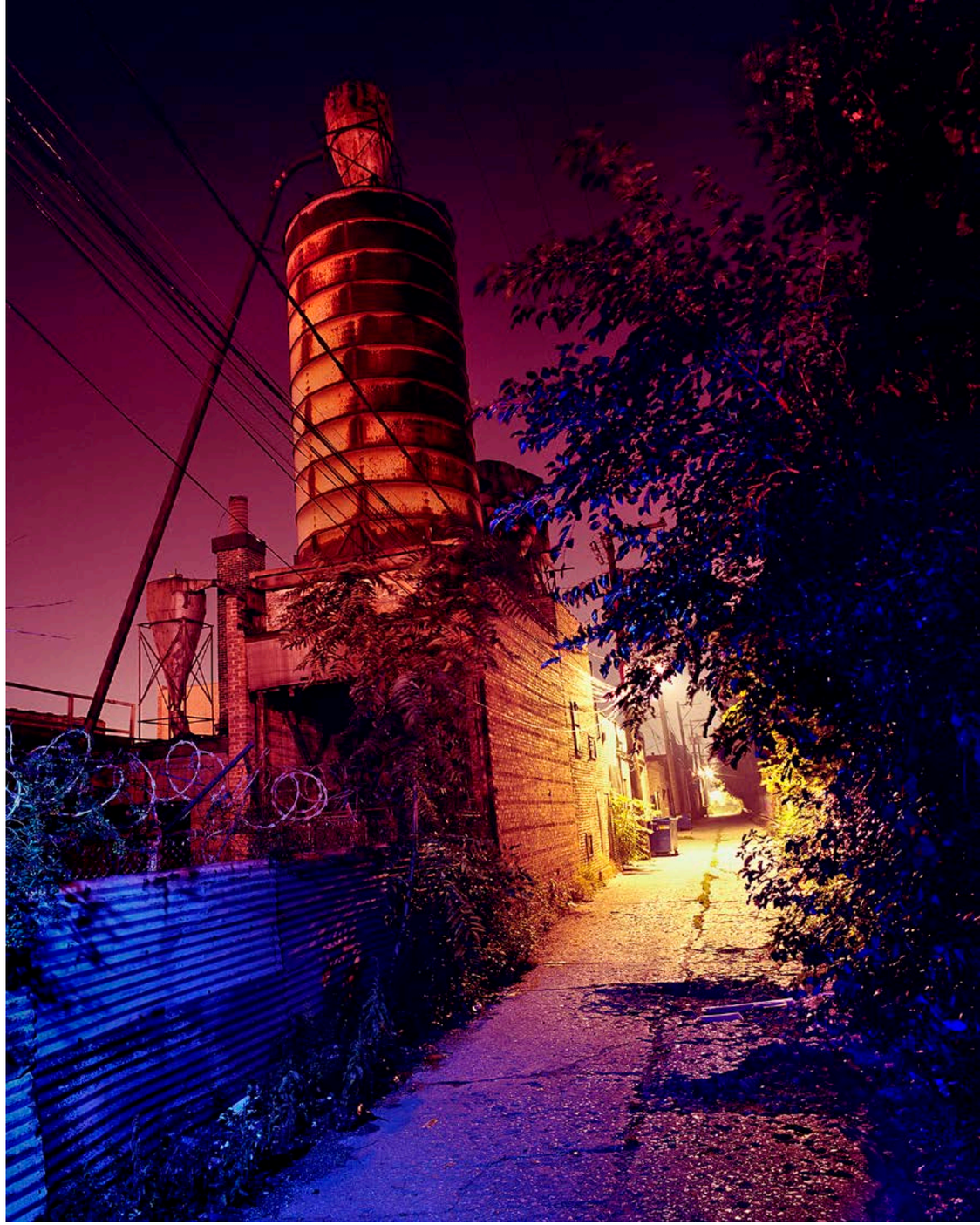
He heads for his cardboard home, and returns, giving each of us a big bag of condoms that he got from a nearby mission, The Night Ministry. Mike, Jim and I laugh.

"Why you guys laughin' – don't laugh, man. This gift is from my heart. *It's from my heart.*"

We stop laughing."Thanks for the gift, Tyler, I really appreciate it," I say. We shake hands and he walks back down the long alley toward his beloved wife. I stare at him and it occurs to me what a lovely light he'll be sleeping under tonight. It's almost a Hallmark picture... but not quite.

Daylight, 2008. A return visit reveals the stark reality of the spot where the couple made their home.





Alleys & Ruins no. 94, *Hallmark*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Chicago, IL, 2006. 1:00 am, 3-minute exposure

Central Station

It's just past midnight and I'm circling Michigan Central Station again, looking for a way in. The building looms over Corktown like a ghostly palace, its windows smashed, its marble bones exposed to decades of wind and rain. This is my fourth attempt. Every other time, the police have spotted me and told me to leave, one time being asked if I was out of my fucking mind coming here alone at night.

This time I'm not alone. My friend Toko, a tiny Japanese woman who seems fearless, has come along. She's my bodyguard in theory, but really, we both know it's just the two of us against whatever shows up. Once again, I'm trying to find a clear view beyond the razor wire fence. After looking around hopelessly, I walk up to the gate and rattle it... and find that the chain is loose! I manage to find a spot where the gap is big enough to slide my lens through. The scene is a mix of elegance and decay, the grand columns faintly lit by street lights that I know from experience will blend nicely as both green and orange lighting. I set up my gear, work fast, and get my shot.

And then I almost lose it forever.

After the trip, I drop the roll at my lab. It holds not just the station, but work from two other Detroit locations and a night of shooting in Nashville. In the weeks that follow, I keep bringing in new rolls and picking them up, never noticing that this one never makes it back to me. I actually forget I even shot it.

Michigan Central Station in 2025, after the $740 million renovation



Months later, I'm moving to California with Pam, my wife at the time. Together we're starting the 2,500 mile drive when I stop at the lab to grab one last roll. The clerk comes back with two. "This other roll's been here a while," he says casually. "Might be yours."

I open the packet and there it is, Central Station glowing in the night, months after I stood in front of it. I groan at my own idiocy but can't stop smiling.

I can still see it as it was that night: dark, broken, and magnificent. Standing there in the glow of streetlights, I could not have imagined it reborn. But the photograph shows both versions, the ruin and the beauty.



Alleys & Ruins no. 95, *Central Station*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Detroit, MI, 2006. 12:15 am, 8-minute exposure

The Van

Steve, a friendly homeless guy in his 60s, walks up to me and says, "Hey buddy… whatcha doin' wanderin' 'round here?"

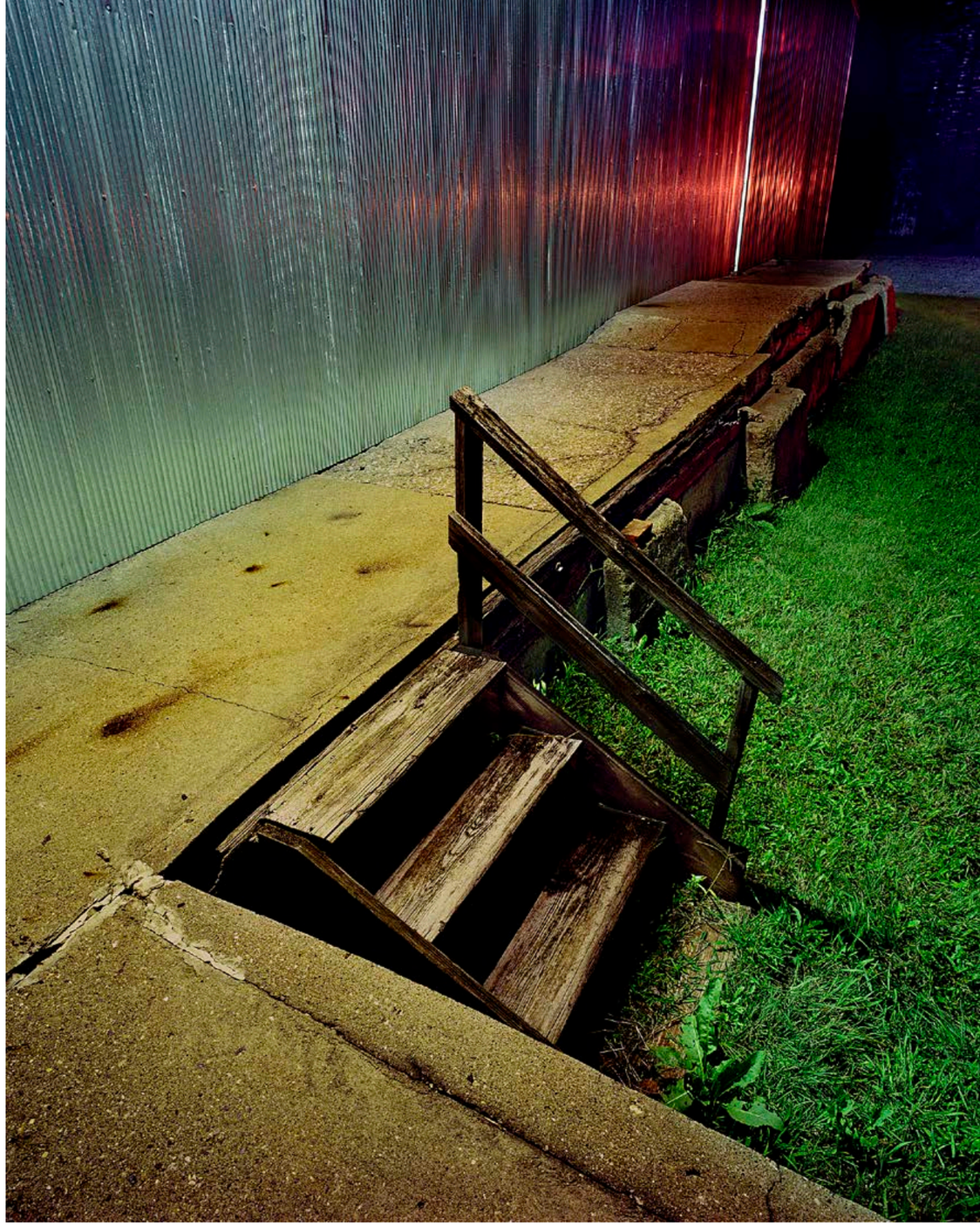
I've been walking around alleys all night in Des Moines, having found nothing to shoot, so this is a welcome distraction. He's very animated, gesticulating in exaggerated ways when he speaks. He quickly lands on the subject of his life and wants to tell me his story.

With arms gesturing in absurd, unrelated, and distracting ways, he tells me when he was in his 30's he was drifting through life. A close relative dies and he gets a big inheritance. He decides it's time to get serious. He gets a job, finds a woman, gets married, and buys a house, because that's what you do when you get serious. The marriage lasts three years and they divorce and sell the house.

In the settlement he is told to pay his ex wife half the value of the house. He freaks out since the house was paid entirely with his inheritance. His arms and hands are moving like mad now. He says the hell with the verdict, I'm going on a journey! He buys a van and decks it out with plush carpeting in the back, installs shelves, a closet, a bed.

He takes the money and goes on a road trip around the country. He spends money extravagantly, meets lots of women, and one introduces him to crack.

After two years, his bank account has been reduced to zero and he's a crack addict. Soon after, he's living on the street. He fights the addiction and tells me breaking his crack habit was the most horrendous thing he's experienced in his life – a thousand times worse than being homeless, which he seems to accept as not too bad. Now he's mostly drunk, whenever he can, but there's no way in hell he plans to stop that, he says laughing heartily as his arms finally come down.



Alleys & Ruins no. 96, *Steps III*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Des Moines, IA, 2006. 11:30 pm, 15-minute exposure

Part 3. 1982–1991

Luminous Joy.



Dream til morning, 2000, from the Crystal series

When I was 17, I escaped to Montreal. Officially, I was there for junior college, a CEGEP as they call it in Quebec. But really, it was a moment I had longed for my entire life and it was transformational.

Big cities were my thing; I'd known it back in Sorel where I'd always thought of my shining city on a hill just 50 miles away. But it wasn't until I moved into that basement apartment with my brother Rob, two blocks from the grit and neon of downtown's seedy end, that I could feel the "why" in my bones.

I loved the feeling of being anonymous, of everyone being so different that different became normal. All the cultures and subcultures and languages. Fuck English vs. French, this was every language mingling happily together.

You found oddballs in all corners of the city: women with mohawks, men dressed like women, people wearing things that didn't make sense, balloons for a hat, underwear outside your pants? And nobody cared! It was all freaky as fuck. It was overwhelming. It was fantastic.

Montreal, 1985. The basement apartment I shared with Rob, my first real taste of freedom. My parents and Charlie visiting. This was the backdrop of my Luminous Joy years, the sanctuary where I became myself, just before everything changed.



And the endless grit and grime, some of the things I'd loved about Sorel's downtown but on an epic scale. It all made me wonder what I'd missed, what had happened in this dark corner, or behind that crumbling wall.

Everything looked so weathered, like there was a backstory baked into everything. The city was half run-down, half electric: punk clubs next to fancy cafés.

Then at night, looking up and seeing the skyscrapers lighting up the sky, a testament to the incredible things humans could do. Sainte Catherine Street, two blocks from my place, lit up 24 hours a day. At two in the morning, the streets would still be packed!

I'd gotten a taste of this in my visits to the city, sometimes to stay with my good cousin Alex for a week. We'd cycle around his east-end streets; maybe go downtown for a day. But things looked different when you lived here, when you had the time to savor it and let it sink in. I wasn't a tourist anymore, this was my city now and I was taking it down in huge gulps.

I had already decided I wanted to be an artist. I used to sketch and paint a lot as a kid and I had no other deep loves to pursue. My dad wanted his three boys to be something practical, like engineers. As a desperate immigrant, playing it safe had been his only option, and it had more or less worked for him. But it wasn't going to fit in with my plans.

My dad would have had a stroke if I studied fine art, so for now, with bile rising in my throat, I enrolled in commerce at Dawson College. But this wasn't going to last.

My brother Charlie got the ball rolling. I had two elective courses to take, which was anything but the dreaded business classes I was majoring in. He noticed there was a Photography 101 class and showed it to me. My eyes lit up. *Yes!*

My dad owned the cheapest SLR on the market, an East German-made Praktica MTL with a single 50mm lens. It was built like a tank behind the Iron Curtain, the bare minimum for a photography class, but to me it was everything.

On the first day of class, my photo teacher, Glay Sperling, had to teach me how to load the film. He lifted the rewind knob, opened the back, dropped the film in, pulled the film to thread it into the take-up spool... holy crap, this was harder than I thought. But a couple of tries and I finally got it.

And then I was off.

All I thought of after that was taking pictures. A month later, and inspired by my new passion, Charlie bought an old, used Minolta SRT 100 that came with a normal lens, a telephoto, and a wide angle. I looked at it like he was holding something sacred.

That one photography class, the only one I've ever taken, turned into an insane obsession. With access to the college darkroom, I lost interest in many things. I went out all the time with my camera, looking, trying to see something.

And then I'd spend hours developing and printing. Even after the class ended and no Photography 201 course was offered, I continued to sneak in until they understood it was just me.

To save money, I would buy 100-foot bulk rolls of black-and-white film then cut and roll my own 36-exposure rolls into reusable film cassettes.

Charlie's camera soon became my camera, but he came out with me a number of times and ended up as the subject of my first nighttime alley photo.



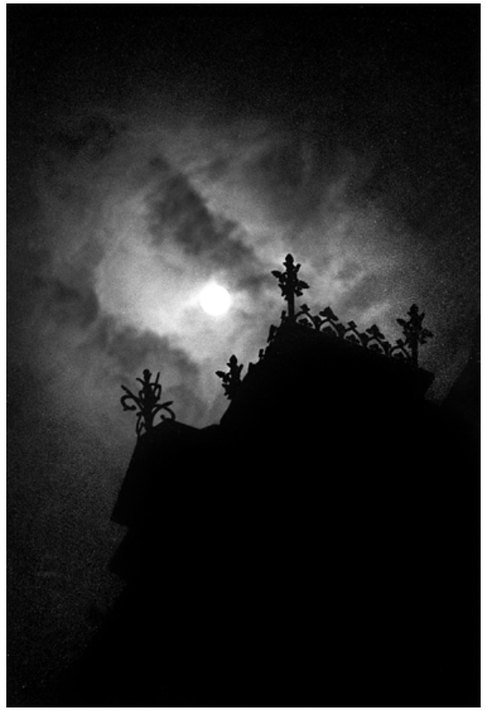
First night alley, 1983. My brother Charlie is barely visible, lighting a cigarette in the dark. He bought the camera I was learning on and came out with me on these early night shoots.

I was shooting everything, but night photography hooked me early for its immediate narrative intrigue and surreal quality.

My brothers were huge supporters of what I was up to. They loved my pictures and the whole process, and their encouragement was profound, but it was my teacher who sent me over the edge.

One day midway through the semester, he held up a few of my contact sheets for the class to see.

"I want you to look at what Xavier is doing. I want you to see how he's not using traditional subjects, how he's match-



Untitled, 1983. The week Charlie bought his Minolta, I finally had lenses to explore with. This was one of my first shots.

ing up things that shouldn't go together. I want you to broaden how you look at things when you're shooting." With that, he passed around the contact sheets, telling people to look at specific photos.

After class he asked me to stay behind. I stood there as the other students filed out, my eyes fixed on him as he said his goodbyes. He always dressed in these British-looking safari suits, which I found funny. But he was kind of legendary in the film and photography department and I loved him as a teacher. I waited eagerly to hear what he wanted to tell me.

Finally he turned to me. "What are you majoring in, Xavier?"

"Commerce," I said, feeling like I should say more, but not knowing how to elaborate.

He winced in pain and looked at me, surprised. "I have to ask you a big favor," he said earnestly. "Don't do that – pursue photography. Trust me."

I walked out baffled. At that moment it seemed like the greatest praise I had ever gotten since my hockey days. And that cemented it. I knew precisely what I wanted to do for the rest of my life, and I knew it would be *this*.

The timing was perfect. I had finally made it to Montreal, my lifelong dream, but it had come with a price: my friends had all stayed in Sorel or moved elsewhere. I was alone in a new city. But then I picked up a camera, and suddenly, being alone was okay. In fact, it was more than okay, it was *necessary*.

My routine quickly became a hunt for free time. I'd take my bike to a new part of the city, get off, and just walk for hours with my new best friend firmly in my hand.

Old Montreal was a favorite destination. I'd walk its cobblestone streets for hours, drawn to the mix of history and decay. The old stone buildings, the waterfront, the narrow alleys, it all felt lived-in, like a place where every surface had a story to tell.

One of my new friends, Ron, was another avid photographer and we'd sit in his apartment talking photography and looking at photos. He was a few years older and guided me with some great lessons. He taught me the value of shooting with one lens for a week, then switching to another the next week, and repeating the process until I could really feel the difference. He shot black-and-white but also a lot of color slide film and the slides



Dawson College darkroom, 1984. After Photo 101 ended and no 201 was offered, I kept sneaking in. Eventually they knew it was just me, and let it go.

looked magical. I'd been shooting B&W exclusively for a year and a half, but when I saw his slides, everything changed. I had to try color.

The moment I looked at my color slides at the lab I freaked out. Color had come so unexpectedly loaded with energy. I now had to see the world a whole different way. With B&W I had been looking at form and texture and shadows. Color was a nuclear bomb in the mix that in my head had to rule over all the others.

But color film with processing was going to cost me *way* more and I had little money.

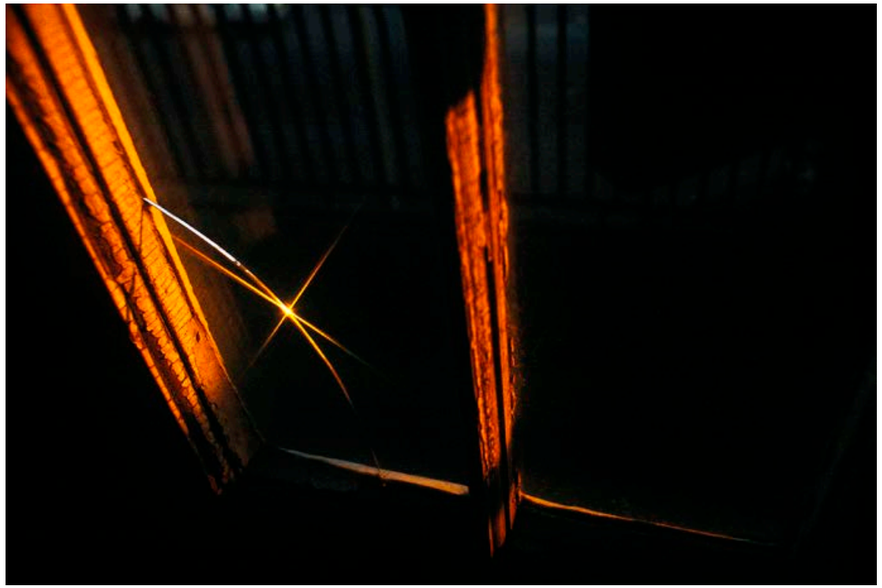
And so I started shooting both. If I was going to shoot people, it would be in B&W because people kept moving and you needed many more frames to get the right one. And also the color seemed to get in the way a little when you just wanted to see the person. Color was going to be the one and only choice for my cherished bicycle adventures.

Because of the cost difference, the solution was simple. I was photographing mostly static subjects so I had to be really sure before pressing the trigger. An entire day of shooting and I might press it only a few times – I didn't want to waste a frame, all 30 cents of it. But that scarcity turned out to be one of the best teachers I ever had. Every single time something pulled at my bright antenna, I had to stop and diagnose the scene, fast, because even static subjects are fleeting. The angle, the colors, the balance, the emotions it evoked: I'd break it all down in my head, weighing what was working against what wasn't. If the answer came back no, I moved on. But when I finally pressed the shutter, the picture had earned it. Being forced to think that hard about every frame sharpened my vision far faster than snapping a hundred careless shots ever could.

I tried shooting with friends a few times, but it never worked. Photography, for me, was a solo, introspective act. If a buddy wanted to chat, I couldn't fully concentrate, which is what the work demanded. These outings became moments for me alone.

Despite not having much money, I had started saving for a new camera, a good one that I could call my own. And then I could finally give back the one I had essentially stolen from Charlie. I settled on a used Nikon FE and purchased it in 1984 when I was 19. I was working part-time at a photo store, and I got a good discount.

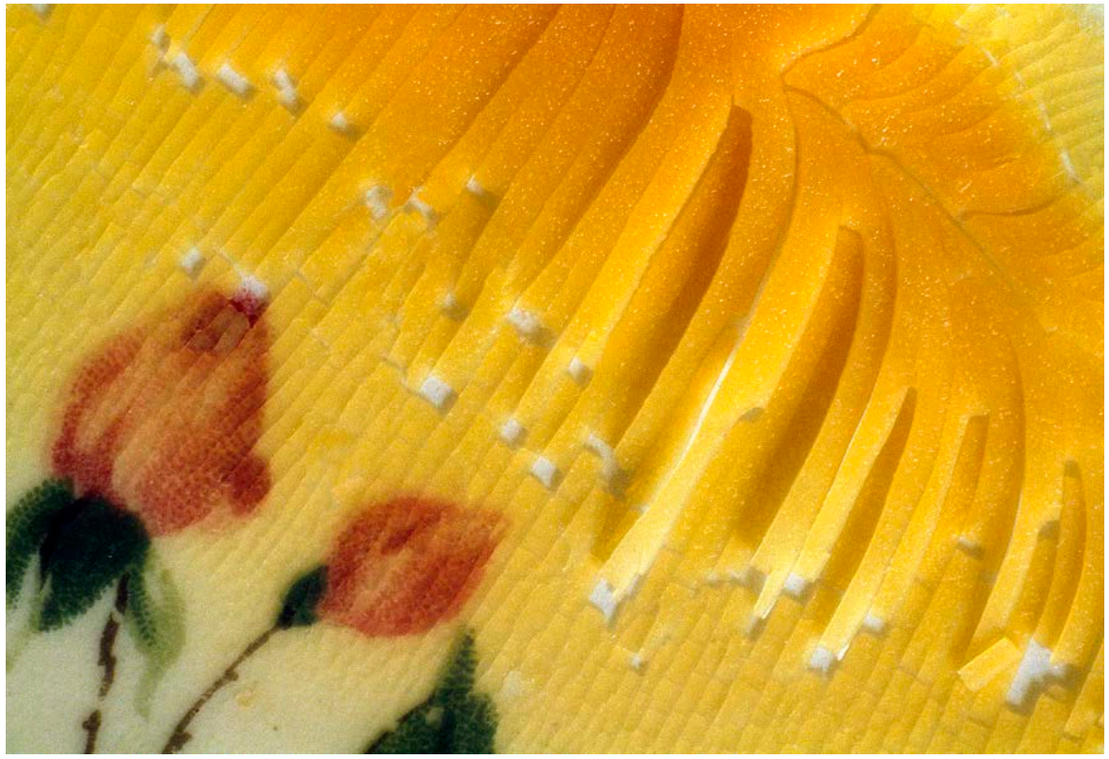
I took it home like it was a newborn baby. After taking it out and trying out the zoom and wide angle I had purchased with it, I suddenly looked up and realized I was afraid. The fear of death had flashed before me. I was afraid I would die before I knew what I could do with my new camera, with photography. I was



Cracked Window, 1986. Luminous Joy period, 1983–1987. 35mm slide.

Friends, 1983. Luminous Joy period, 1983–1987. 35mm slide.





Sunday Morning, 1984, from the Crystal series. Luminous Joy period, 1983–1987. 35mm slide.

that fixated.

Between the ages of 18 and 22, I shot constantly or at least I looked constantly. I remembered something Sperling had told us, that the more you shoot, the more your own personal vision begins to crystallize, and something like that had started to happen. I know I had a sense of this emerging style, but I couldn't have put it into words at the time.

My eye was getting more refined and the color photos I shot during this period are a special collection. This was a treasured time, where I seized every day. Though I was starting to make good friends, I would spend as much time alone with my camera, looking for shots, but also thinking of them and sketching them out. I couldn't close my eyes without seeing photos I hadn't yet taken.

I wasn't interested in photographing beautiful things. To me, that was like taking a picture of the *Mona Lisa* and saying, "Look at the great photo I just shot." I was more interested in ordinary things and light was beginning to be the main subject.

This collection of images is bright, joyful, and surprisingly, formally confident in a way I'd spend years trying to relearn. I worked hard to train myself to see photographs, learning what made an image succeed and why.

It was a time of fertile artistic invention. I did more than just take pictures, I actively experimented, developing unique creative processes. In 1984, I discovered an unusual technique where I re-glazed and repainted old dinner plates with interesting designs on them, heating them in unusual ways to create different crackle effects. I would then use a macro lens to find the very tiny images within the random colors and crackle.



Gerry and Steve having breakfast, Montreal, 1985. My attempt to channel the street photographers I loved.

I had no idea then what this little experiment would become. Fifteen years later, long after the monster arrived, I would return to it and build an entire body of work from those plates: the *Crystals*. It's the only series I created from the innocence before the collapse – which meant that going back to it gave me something I'd lost any hope of: the rare and precious chance to reach back through the wreckage and collaborate with the person I used to be.

I read tons of photography books and magazines and grew to love the great black-and-white street and documentary photographers – Henri Cartier-Bresson, Brassaï, Robert Frank. For a while I tried to shoot like them, looking for the poetry in the everyday lives of people, but I found myself drawn more to the spaces between people, to light itself as the subject. Their influence stayed with me, though. I started looking for ways of suggesting human presence, even when no one was in the frame.

Also in these early Montreal years, I started making the friends I would have for life. They were artists or artists at heart: Gerry and Steve, and Phil, Dan, Arnold, Randy and Ingrid from the Sorel days. They were all outgoing and curious and great fun to be with. I loved them all.

I started going to parties almost every week. Artist loft parties were the best where a ton of people would show up. And even though Montreal was a big city, the smaller English population would funnel down like you were in a much smaller one. So you started seeing the same people and it started to feel like one big community.

I started having my own parties at my apartment. One day my neighbor and I challenged ourselves to see how big a party we could throw. For a couple of weeks we spread the word, and when Saturday night finally arrived we were unprepared for the onslaught. Hundreds arrived. My apartment on the second floor, and his apartment on the first, were packed, but so were the hallways and stairs, and then someone broke the door to the roof and that became a party, then people started spilling out onto the street where the party continued. Someone started throwing beer bottles at cars from the rooftop, and then someone – maybe a petrified neighbor – called the cops.

Eight units arrived and the cops stormed in, smashing speakers and bottles from people's hands and threatening to put us all in jail if the party didn't stop, now. The party ended, but it had been so big that an hour later enough people had returned or just arrived that a smaller, normal-sized party continued, this time with the music down.

And in school, after trying for almost two years to get into the extremely exclusive Communication Studies program at Concordia University, I finally got the acceptance letter. I'd be studying film and photography and video and sound production. We'd be looking at old movies, studying a lot of theory, writing a lot of papers on theory. I couldn't wait.

And then the cherry on top was the call: I'd landed that high-paying office job for the summer, way better than the busboy and waiter jobs I usually did. The interview had gone very strangely and had made me feel truly awkward, but that was over and I'd be walking in fresh.

A friend had told me once, not long before, "You're one of those people, you've got a light inside you." I believed it. Everything was falling into place.

But that's not how it went.

My crash, a couple of days later, had decimated my ability to interact with people. What it did to my photography was equally profound.

Months after I had lost myself to whatever this mental breakdown was, I thought I could get a bit of relief from my trusted Nikon. On a Saturday morning, I grabbed my camera bag, got on my bike, and headed out like I used to, leaving my parents' home in Longueuil in search of anything but this.

I found a big park and started walking with my camera in hand. The morning sun was low and the light was perfect. I looked for a photo like I did in the old days, waiting for something to catch my eye. I was using the same process I had

created for myself, looking to shoot the same things as before, to continue refining my vision.

A couple of hours later the sun was high up and I started to look for anything that might be backlit, anything worth shooting, but I saw nothing. Light was filtering through the leaves of a tree, but I couldn't see a photo. The light was bouncing off the lake in the park, but still nothing to shoot.

Frustration started spreading; I hadn't taken a single photo. Then it became afternoon and my eyes were starting to pulse and glaze with anxiety. I started looking more frantically, like I'd lost a child. But I still couldn't see. Then it was late afternoon and the light was perfect again. Shots were right in front of my face. They were all around me. But I couldn't see any of them!

Slowly, the magnitude of my collapse started to become clear. This crash had been horror upon horrors. It began to dawn on me that I couldn't see anything for a very good reason. I could spend a week looking, it wouldn't matter, it would be hopeless. Whatever I had was now lost. My burgeoning vision had been destroyed as well.

I had somehow, instantly forgotten how to use my own body to communicate: my mouth, my voice, my head, arms, eyes. But I had also lost the ability to see what I had before. In the months ahead, I tried a few more times to photograph the same things the same way, to keep building what I'd started, but it was useless. Eventually it became clear that even trying would be a farce.

Those photos carried a luminous joy. They were bold, bright, and happy. It was a time when I thrived on discovery. This was a whole new dark chapter.

Shooting the same as before was impossible. There were positive, loud emotions behind those old photos that weren't there in myself anymore. There was a certain fierceness I could no longer conjure. How could I possibly tap into those old emotions when I just wanted to hide in a closet? I shouldn't even try to photograph what I had before; if I did, it would be a massive lie. My entire photography plans, my vision, my dreams, they had all plunged into a black hole and it became clear I couldn't continue.

But to keep shooting – shooting anything – I joined the school newspaper, *The Link.* It was an incredible learning experience. I got tons of assignments, which forced me to continue taking photos, even as my personal luminous path felt like it was gone.

It was one more place where I would feel the sting of alienation, but the work itself – the craft of shooting, developing, and seeing my work in print – was a powerful, practical education that kept my hands on a camera.

But the personal work would have to stop. With my visual tools blown to smithereens, I didn't know what else to shoot, and I mourned the loss. I didn't know if I would ever continue on that path again.

More than a year passed before I found the energy to give myself another chance. It was 1990, three years after my crash, and I decided to try something new. I told myself to forget what I did before, forget trying to tap into my old, long-gone instincts. What if I instead started from scratch, and felt my way through this new version of me, followed whatever new instincts I had, and saw what an honest photo would look like now?

I wasn't sure how to proceed, but I loaded my camera with color film and tried to find what my new dark antenna would pick up.

I did this for a full day and this time shot a dozen images. When I finally looked at the slides, I saw I had succeeded, but I didn't like what I saw. These photos were dark and bleak. One particular photo, of someone in drab overalls walking by a bus stop shelter, shot from behind the grimy interior, perfectly summed up how I felt. It screamed of alienation. I didn't like the sentiment, but I recognized the truth in it. It was so vastly different from what I used to shoot. It was negative and depressing and drab.

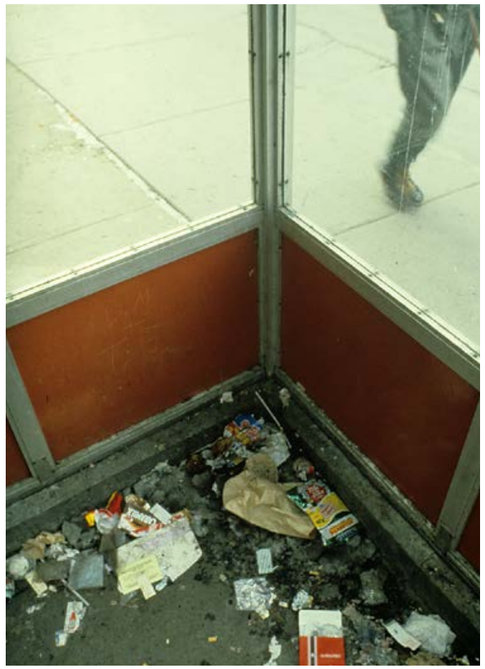
But if I had any chance of being an artist – a quickly fading fantasy – I would have to continue shooting what I felt right now, what was honest to me at that moment. I was starting from scratch. I continued shooting along this line, following my new dark vision; just letting myself develop a new honest body of work.

I began creating images of alienated people and places, lonely and fragile. I started shooting in isolated places, featuring gloomy locations, during the day and at night. I tried this, on and off for a year.

I think of this as the *Hollow period*. A handful of months where I tried to photograph the wreckage directly, before I realized I couldn't keep looking at it.

I was celebrating nothing in my new photos, as I had in my old images. I didn't work with the same rigor, the same crazy enthusiasm as before. I used to love looking at what I had shot, to learn from them, to pluck out the winners. Now I dreaded looking at these new images, all windows into the depths of my despair.

My new photos brought me no joy, they only reflected my own misery back at me. I wanted photography to take me away from this darkness, to offer some respite. Instead it became drudgery, as my new work would force me to look into the abyss every time.



Untitled, 1990. The first image that gave me a clear view of my new dark vision. *Hollow period,* 1990–1991. 35mm slide.

The tool that was once my greatest passion had become a source of pain. This would have to end here. I was at an artistic bottom and I didn't even want to look at my camera anymore. I grabbed it, turning it over in my hand, and ran my thumb over it, feeling the little dents and scratches it had received over the years. I put it back in the camera bag and slowly zipped it shut. But the spell broke and I grabbed the bag in disgust, throwing it up high onto a shelf. I had surrendered. ■

MEMOIR CONTINUES ON PAGE 193

Coast to Coast

I move west (2007–2010)
Now I roam everywhere



Lighting Alleys & Ruins no. 146, *Electric.* Photo: Guy Bodin

NOW

Planning my first foray into the bowels of Los Angeles at night, I know for sure I want someone with me. I've invited two new acquaintances, but they both cancel at the last minute. I can't say I blame them. One has decided to watch TV instead; the other is apparently wasted, screaming into his phone, "Yeah, no, man. I'm driving to Vegas! It's fucking awesome!"

Left to explore alone, I promise myself I'll just look, not shoot. That promise dies the moment I see the underbelly of the 7th Street Bridge.

When I first arrive, a group is huddled under it, so I back off. An hour later I return, only to retreat again when a gang spots me down the tracks and begins walking my way. Still, there is no chance I'm going home without that image. Thirty minutes later, I come back for a third try.

My heart is racing as I set up. I have a survival routine for these moments: I start the long exposure immediately after locking the camera down. This compresses time. I can figure out exposure length and plan the lighting while the film is baking, allowing me to get out faster.

I calculate a 15-minute exposure and as I'm reaching for my lights, a train roars in and stops directly in front of me. It just sits there, a wall of steel blocking my shot. I pace, cursing my fate, scanning for trouble, picking up and putting down my lights. After what feels like an eternity, the train eases forward. The second it clears the frame, I release the shutter again and go to work.

Detail: *NOW*



I run through the rubble, half-crazed, firing blue bursts under the bridge and switching to warm gels for the pillars. Adrenaline makes me reckless. I trip, hit the ground face-first, and fill my mouth with dust. My flash bounces hard on the ground. Miraculously, it still works.

I finish the lighting, stuff the gear into the van, and drive off, buzzing with that familiar rush. I had unshackled another dark corner and set it free.



Alleys & Ruins no. 97, NOW
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Los Angeles, CA, 2007. 1:30 am, 15-minute exposure

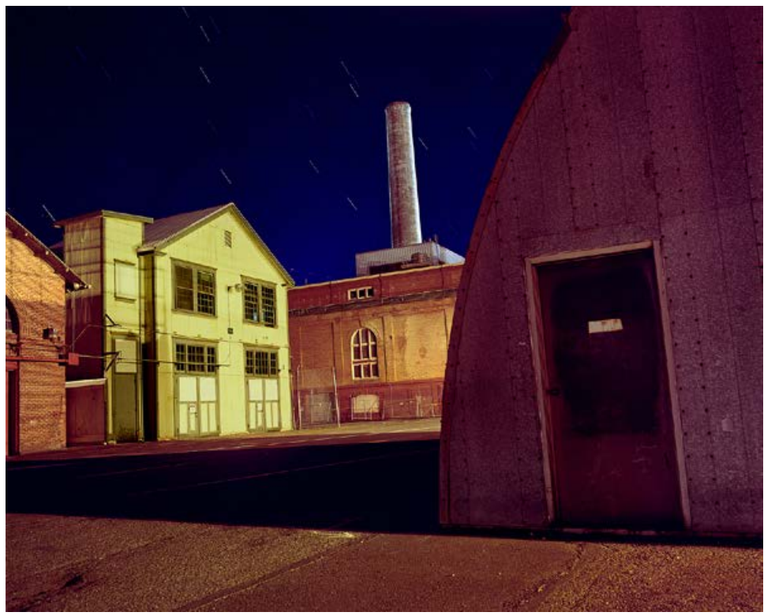


Alleys & Ruins no. 98, *Misstep*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Phoenix, AZ, 2007. 11:30 pm, 5-minute exposure



Alleys & Ruins no. 105, *Time is tickin*
Seattle, WA, 2008. 12:15 am, 8-minute exposure

Alleys & Ruins no. 106, *Stacked*
Mare Island, CA, 2008. 10:30 pm, 20-minute exposure



Nothing Corner

While composing a photograph in the dark stillness of Kansas City's mostly abandoned West Bottoms, I spot movement out of the corner of my eye. It's an injured bird, maybe 10 yards away, lying on the edge of a dimly lit street, one wing fluttering weakly against the pavement. I stop to look at this sad scene, and beside me, my friend Brian says nothing. There's nothing to say.

The night is so still I can hear the faint, rhythmic tap of its feathers on the asphalt. It seems to be the only part of the bird that can still move. It's trapped in its final, helpless moments.

Before I turn away, something else catches my eye.

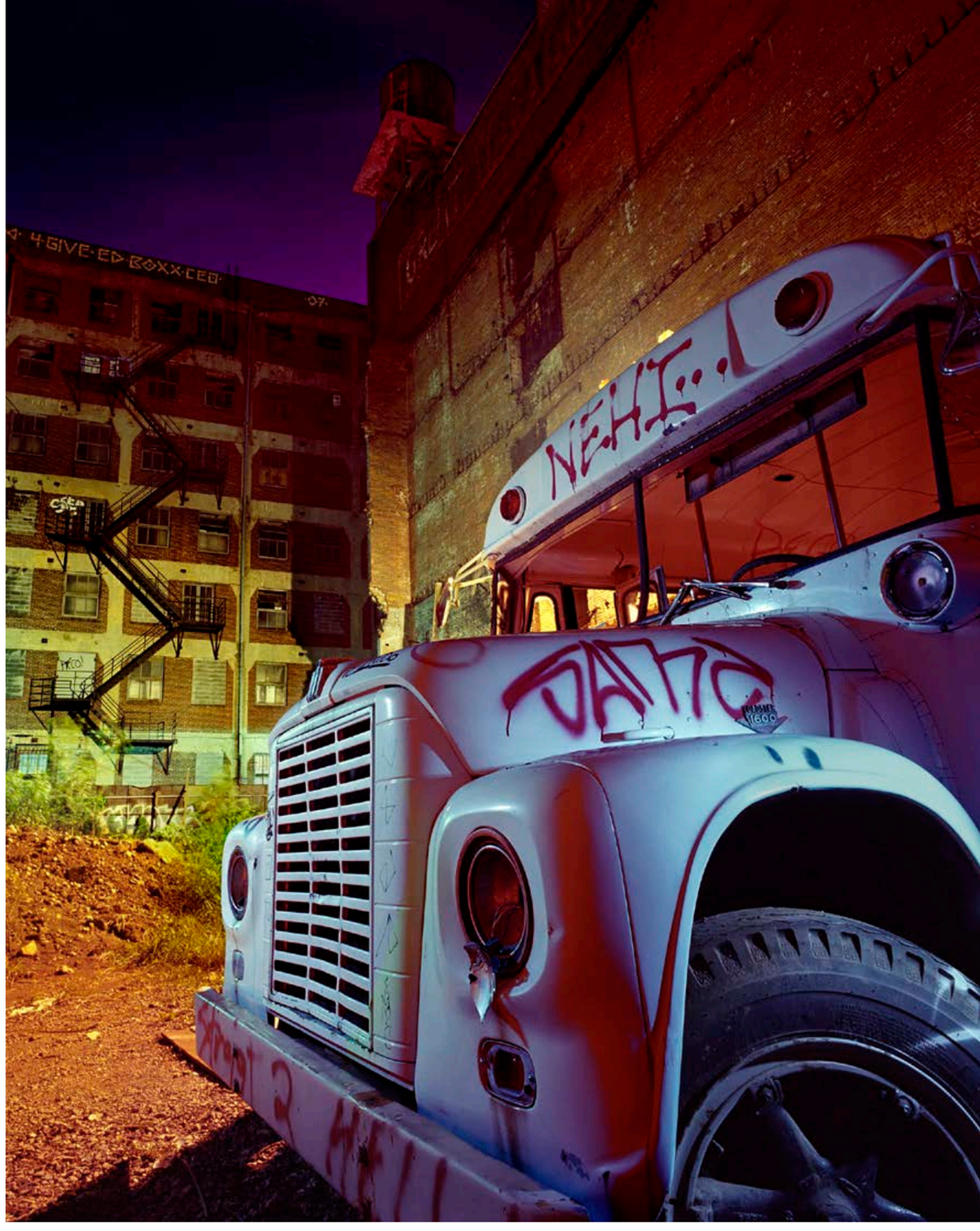
There's a silhouette, a little farther beyond the bird. It's a small, still, feline. A cat. Its ears, head, and body are backlit and glowing ominously from a distant streetlight. It's watching the bird, and probably us too. Its posture is firm, upright, and very still and it becomes clear that it's waiting – either for the bird to stop moving or for us to leave so it can finish the job.

I return to my camera, secure it on the tripod, and prepare my lights for the long exposure. The scene around me slips into the background, but not out of mind. As I begin the shot, I glance back: the bird is still feebly flapping, and the cat hasn't moved an inch. It might as well be carved from stone.

This macabre standoff plays out silently behind me as I work. For two hours, the bird clings to life, and the cat waits, silent, with a predator's patience.

I finish, pack up, and walk away without looking back. I don't want to know how the night ends in this little nothing corner of the city.

The events described in *Nothing Corner* occurred while photographing *Silent Witness*.
Detail shown on page 13



Alleys & Ruins no. 99, *4Give n 4Get*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Kansas City, MO, 2007. 9:45 pm, 20-minute exposure

Ghost Story

Walking alone at night through Kansas City's West Bottoms, I'm surrounded by the echo of screams. It's Halloween season, and the district's haunted houses are in full swing. Recorded cries, moans, and guttural growls from blocks away spill into the streets, bouncing between the brick walls of century-old warehouses.

This area was once the industrial beating heart of the city until the catastrophic flood of 1951 sent everyone running. Businesses fled uphill, leaving behind a vast, empty shell that never fully recovered. It was the perfect, popular, rotting backdrop for staged terror, and it's one of my favorite neighborhoods in the country.

At first, the canned horror feels like a joke, a fitting soundtrack for my night. But as I prowl the empty streets and darker alleys, the novelty fades. The sounds twist into something darker. I start feeling it in my spine. I catch myself looking over my shoulder, my skin crawling. The line between the fake screams and my real anxiety starts to blur.

I want the sounds to stop, but they won't. If I want an image tonight, I have no choice but to push through.

I force myself to keep looking until I find the composition for *Ghost Story*. I set down the tripod and begin unpacking my gear. The moment I've settled down for the shoot, the ritual takes over. The routine calms me down, and knowing I've probably found a good shot makes me feel even better. By the time I'm calculating the exposure, the fear has evaporated. The horror sound effects become comical again, just background noise to another joyous outing.

When I finally pack up, the streets are still empty, the distant screams still echoing and drifting on the night air, but I'm immune. I leave the West Bottoms to its ghosts.

Test Polaroid before exposing the final negative. The murky blues here translated to the vivid palette on the right – reading these was half the battle.





Alleys & Ruins no. 100, *Ghost Story*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Kansas City, MO, 2007. 1:30 am, 20-minute exposure

Goast Pier

The night I photographed the rusting skeleton of the Copra Crane, the water was black glass, still enough to mirror the hulking ruin. The peaceful shoot was the exact opposite of an outing a month earlier in nearby Hunter's Point that had gone very wrong.

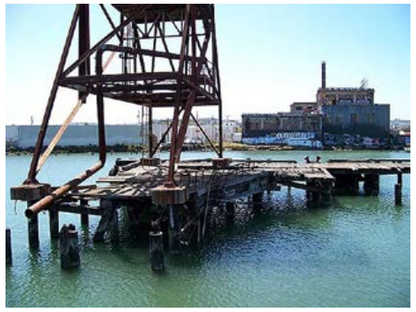
I'd been exploring an abandoned building surrounded by tall grass with Pat and Miguel, two guys I'd recently met. We slipped through a gap in the fence. Technically it was trespassing, something I rarely do, but my usual strategy is simple: if caught, be nice, play the dumb artist, apologize, and leave. It always works.

The building was a bust. We headed back out, ready to move on, when we heard a shout from the distance. Suddenly, Pat yanked me down into the tall grass. I was annoyed. It felt like a massive overreaction. I started to get up to wave and explain, but Pat grabbed my sleeve. His grip was hard, his eyes wide. "Stay. Down."

Then I saw the beams. Police flashlights were cutting through the darkness, sweeping the field. They were getting closer. "I think I saw them over here," a voice said, clear and authoritative. I froze. Through the blades of grass, I saw a uniform and a flashlight beam 30 feet away. "You see anything?" Another voice: "Nothing yet."

I could feel my heart against the ground. We lay there for what seemed like forever, barely breathing, until the lights faded and the cruiser drove away. When we scrambled up, I was furious. "What the fuck! That was completely unnecessary. We could have just talked to them." Pat looked at me, dead serious. "Dude, I'm on probation. No way I'm gonna go down for trespassing."

The Copra Crane by day, 2010.
It was dismantled two years later.



My blood ran cold. I thought of the dozens of times cops had stopped me. My "dumb artist" routine worked for me, but it wouldn't have worked for him. If they had run his name, we all would have gone down. Looking at the Copra Crane, silent and safe on the water, I remembered the lesson: always know who is standing in the dark with you.



Alleys & Ruins no. 102, *Goast Pier*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
San Francisco, CA, 2008. 11:30 pm, 9-minute exposure
Named for the graffiti tags covering the pier

Angel Luis

This is Compton, so I'm not surprised when I hear the same thing over and over: "No, are you crazy?" I've got a list of people I've met doing shows, and luckily, finally, I find a couple of guys crazy enough to walk into Compton's run-down alleys with me. The city is notorious for gang violence, home to Bloods and Crips factions and dozens of other crews. Ben, Jeff, and I head to a spot I'd scouted earlier in the week, right where three alleys meet, far from the street. I start setting up. Thirty minutes later, I head back to my van for a light.

That's when I see Ben and Jeff running full tilt toward me, hauling my gear. "Open the doors, now! We gotta get outta here!" Then I see a gang of maybe 15 guys in black hoodies chasing them.

I dig frantically for the keys, unlock the van, and we throw the gear and ourselves inside. Seconds later, the mob turns the corner and surrounds us, yelling for us to get out of the fucking van, Now! "You in our territory now!"

They're Latino, and I'm still crazy enough to hope I can talk my way back to the shot. I roll the window down just enough and say, in Spanish, "I'm real sorry, I didn't know. I mean no disrespect, I'm just an artist taking pictures." They ease up slightly, until one sticks his nose in, "I wanna see your camera!"

Then the oldest guy, the only one in a shirt, and clearly the leader, looks closer. "Hey, I know you. Aren't you Luis? You work for Ramon. It's Jorge, you remember me?"

What? He thinks I'm some guy called Luis? Do I say yes? If I say no, are we in trouble again? If I say yes and he figures shit out, then I'm *really* in trouble. I lock eyes and smile. "Yeah, that's me, how you doin'?" He turns to the gang, "He's alright, *es un buen chico*. I seen him around."

He puts his arm through the window and we shake hands. He keeps repeating to everyone, "He's cool, he's cool," and the whole mood in the gang changes. Suddenly everyone is all smiles and friendly, laughing. I'm shaking one hand after another through the window.

With some hesitation, I decide to open the door and get out. Jorge gives me a big



Alleys & Ruins no. 103, *High Wire*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Compton, CA, 2008. 11:00 pm, 10-minute exposure

hug. "How you doin, man, you remember me? *Te acuerdas de mi?*"

"Of course I do, you crazy guy." I end up hugging half the guys. Ben and Jeff come around and we are one big happy family.

Jorge tells me I can do whatever I want, I'm safe here, as long as I don't cross certain streets. I'm not sure I want to break out all my treasured equipment, so I just hang out with them for a while. Minutes later I really do feel we've passed that hurdle and everything is cool. This is my chance to continue my work.

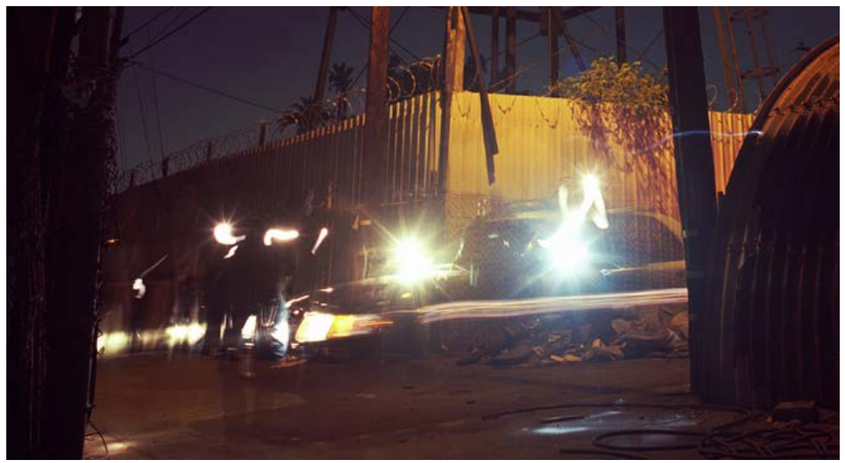
We pull all the gear out and set up again. Jorge decides to hang out, and so do a couple of his blackhoods. He calls them his "gangsters."

I set up at the same spot as before, click the shutter open, and step in to start my lighting. I notice a light getting brighter and realize a car is headed for the alley intersection. Before I can react, the lights blast through and I start running toward the camera in a futile attempt to cover the lens and save my shot.

But this wasn't just a car. Two cops jump out screaming and pointing laser-guided handguns at us. I was the only dummy running, so they're paying extra special attention to me. I stare down at my chest and see a red dot vibrating. "LET ME SEE YOUR FUCKING HANDS! PUT YOUR FUCKING HANDS IN THE AIR!"

A minute later, we've all got our hands on the hood of the cop car. One cop is sweeping the dark corners of the alley; the other is taking glances at my camera on

When the cops burst in, I ran to close the shutter, thinking the shot was ruined. It turned out to be the image that best captured the evening.





Alleys & Ruins no. 104, *Angel Luis*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Compton, CA, 2008. 12:30 am, 15-minute exposure



Photo at the end of the shoot: From left: one of Jorge's gangsters, Jorge in the white shirt, Ben, Jeff, me, and a drunk local who stumbled in singing Spanish love songs. Another gangster took the photo. Behind Jeff is my camera still on the tripod from the last shot.

the tripod.

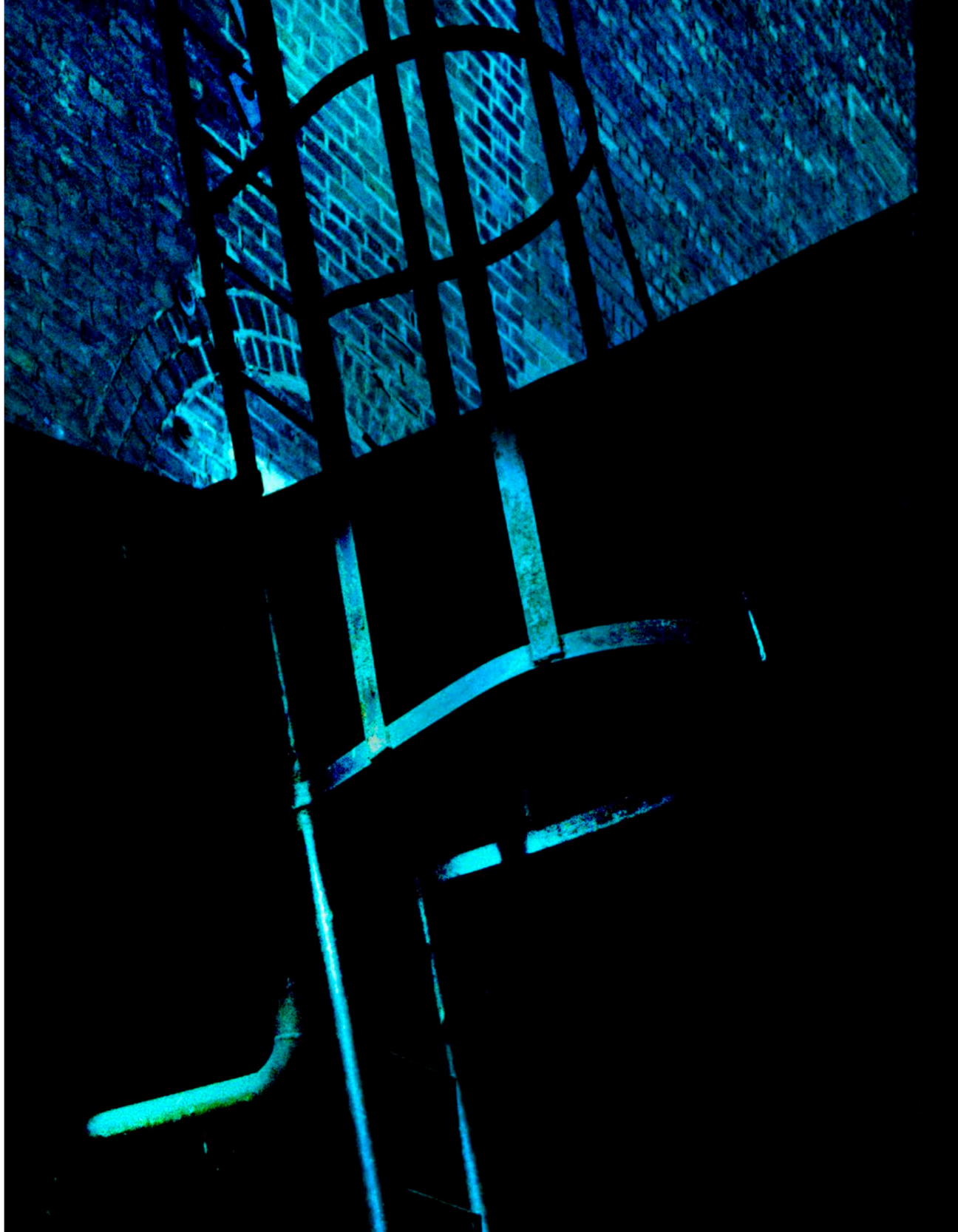
When the second cop returns, I'm about to explain what we're doing, but Jorge – who's been cool as a cucumber – says, "Hey, you guys know Officer Menendez? He's a friend of mine."

The cops freeze and become a shade more pale. "Ah, okay... sorry, we thought maybe you were up to something." One shakes Jorge's hand. "We're gonna leave now." They get into their car and back away. I look at Ben and Jeff and we all have the same thought: What the fuck just happened?

I tell Jorge he's the King of Compton. He grins. "And you're not Luis." But it no longer matters. At this point, we've become friends, so we just laugh and pat each other on the back.

I finish the shot, and there's one more I want two blocks away. Jorge sticks around for that one too. When I'm done, we do a group photo, and he invites us for a beer. We head to his favorite bar, eat and drink and have a great time. "Man, is you lucky you look like Luis," he says.

Weeks later, looking at the group photo I notice something. Above my shoulder, the graffiti on the wall looks like it says "Luis." There he was. Luis. Right above my shoulder the whole time.



Alleys & Ruins no. 26, *Hobbit*, detail
Montreal, QC, 1997, 12:00 am

Shadow Web

I take hours one night walking most of the half mile where the MacArthur Bridge hovers over St Louis before it finally hits solid ground. I still haven't learned my lesson about hauling everything before I know what I want to shoot: my camera, tripod, lights, dragging it through mud, climbing wet beams, scraping against rust. And yet that part is fine. The real weight is being alone, again. It's not like the early days of my night shoots when the whole point was to be alone. My attention the entire time is divided between looking for a photo and looking over my shoulder.

I find a lovely spot: steel beams crisscrossing above me, shadows spilling across the wall. The light is faint, so I set up to do several 30-minute exposures. I get absorbed in the work, grinding my way through the shots, filthy from the mud and the wet rust. Again half my attention locked on creating the best photo I can, the other half scanning the darkness for sound and movement. But I build the photograph layer by layer.

When it's done, I start packing up. I'm unhooking the camera from the tripod when I see, to my infinite delight, that the tiniest little spider has spun a small, simple web – just a few strands – across the lens shade. It's now sitting patiently, directly in the center of the lens.

Some nearly invisible part of the spider working away, spinning its web is probably in the photograph somewhere, though I haven't been able to see it. When I look at the image today I like to think that the little fellow managed to thread itself into the web of beams and shadows that grabbed my attention in the first place.



Alleys & Ruins no. 107, *Shadow Web*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
St Louis, MO, 2008. 12:15 am, 30-minute exposure

Parking Lot

While searching for a location to shoot, I pull into a small industrial complex that looks like it was drop kicked a few times, then left to bake and rust. I immediately feel good about the place, so I stop and get out to look more closely. Hobbling toward me is a homeless man who asks what I want. I tell him I'd like to take some photos here in a day or two, and he tells me he can help. "I'm Jesus. I live here, and I take care of the parking lot. I'll give you permission to take your pictures." I look at him, uncertain he can take care of anything. Nevertheless, I agree.

Two days later, I return with my friend Jeff, unsure if Jesus would still be there. From under a blue tarp, thrown over a rusted-out collection of garbage, he appears. He rubs his groggy eyes – I woke him from his sleep.

I start setting up and I get to know Jesus. He was an electrician in his previous life and was very good at his job. Drugs and alcohol gave him this new life. He's been living in the parking lot for years, in various spots.

"So what does the owner think about you living here?" I ask.

Working on *Parking Lot.* Photo: Jeff Eastin





Alleys & Ruins no. 108, *Parking Lot*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Los Angeles, CA, 2008. 10:30 pm, 9-minute exposure



Me and Jesus. Photo: Jeff Eastin

The owner wanted him out for a long time, but when the business tenants learned of this, there was an uproar. They wanted him to stay, and finally the owner gave in.

"They all need electrical work," Jesus says. "*Soy su hombre*. They pay me a little and I save them a lot. The owner asked me to keep an eye on the place. *Ahora estamos bien*."

"And the police?"

"I love the police. When they're here, no trouble, the gangs keep away. Sure, they used to kick me out all the time, but I always came back. *Nunca me rindo*." He grins. "They finally gave up. Now we're friends."

Jesus stays close by for the three-hour shoot, and his presence is comforting. I start to believe this homeless man really does have some authority to let us be there. We finish shooting and I give him 20 dollars. He's grateful.

I ask him if he thinks he could find real work again, but he points to his temple and shakes his head. Too far gone, he says. Unemployable.

Still, somehow, this wreck of a man has carved out a little business for himself, and held onto his bit of dignity in this parking lot.

Alleys & Ruins no. 88, *Brick and Ash*, detail
Boston, MA, 2006, 12:00 am

The Faithful

When I first see the ship in late 2007, I am stunned. I have never seen a vessel this size, up close, in such bad condition. She's covered in weeds, tied up at an old quay in Alameda. Rust creeps across nearly every surface. Parts of the rear canopy have been crudely rebuilt with sagging sheets of corrugated roofing held up by thin steel poles, as if someone had tried to keep the ship alive with scraps from a junkyard. It looks tired and neglected, like it's been slowly dissolving into the harbor for years. I know nothing about her yet, just that I need to photograph her.

Two nights later I'm back with Pam to shoot. To do this right, I need to climb aboard with lights while she works the camera. And the only way to climb aboard is to walk a mooring line like a tightrope. I do the shot and go home to develop the film.

But because of the swaying ship, my first attempt is a complete lighting failure.

On my second visit a month later, I know what I need to do, but the camera fails and nothing is exposed. I freak out, knowing from experience that I need to get the shot *now*, because tomorrow everything might change.

Another month passes before I can go back for a third attempt, and by now I've become a pro at prepping the ship. I arrive at low tide, adjust the lines to frame Oakland in the background, and get my lights ready. I'm about to step aboard when I see headlights approaching. We're in a very secluded and dark place, so I stay with Pam until this possible danger has passed. As the car nears, red and blue lights start flashing. It's a cop. He tells us this is private property and we need to leave. I beg him, asking for a little time, but he's curt and clearly we had better leave now.

Georg Gasch, *Wappen von Hamburg*, 1956. Stadtarchiv Kiel. CC BY-SA



That's three attempts and three failures.

Now I do something I'd never done before: I decide to get permission. Finding the owners of *Faithful* proves impossible, but after being passed off to a dozen people, I reach the landowner, Fleet Industrial. Their one stipulation is that I cannot



Alleys & Ruins no. 109, *The Faithful*
From 120 negatives, multiple exposures
Alameda, CA, 2008. 10:30 pm



The Faithful on my first visit, deck covered in weeds. Late 2007

board the ship. There's no shot if I can't board so naturally I agree. "Don't worry," I reassure them, "I don't need to go aboard."

When I return in early 2008, I get a sinking feeling. Someone has removed most of the weeds. But on the upside, I can now see the old wood deck, which looks beautiful. I adjust the lines and do my tightrope act once again. On board I'm tense, knowing if the cop returns and catches me on the ship, I'm done. But I do my lighting, this time with my friend Kathy at the camera, and finally everything works flawlessly.

A month later, *Faithful* is towed away.

That's when I start researching the ship, and the story is unbelievable.

She was built in Hamburg in 1955, an elite yacht-like cruise ship christened *Wappen von Hamburg*. Over the next two decades she was bought and sold a dozen times, renamed nearly every time: *Delos* for Greek island cruises in the '60s, *Polar Star* for Alaska runs, *Pacific Star* for the South Pacific, *Xanadu* for expedition-style voyages to Mexico. In 1963, as *Delos*, she appeared in the Bond film *From Russia with Love*. She was one of the inspirations for *The Love Boat*. Before the cruise ship boom of the '80s, she was one of the most elegant small ships in the world.

Her decline came fast. The industry changed and city-sized megaships made vessels like her obsolete. She languished until a failed attempt was made to turn her into an exhibition and trade-fair ship called *Expex*. Then plans emerged to convert her into a Christian hospital ship. Christened *Faithful*, she sat in the Los Angeles harbor illegally for years, clandestinely occupied by missionaries, until she was seized.

In 2005, she was towed to Alameda for conversion to a luxury yacht, but her owners vanished and she was moored illegally again. Abandoned and left to the elements, rain damage caused severe internal corrosion. Alameda's development services director said it all: "The boat has a history of being in other places. It got evicted there because it didn't pay rent there either. It has kind of a bad reputation." The Federal District Court declared her a "dead ship" in 2007, and that's when I found her.

One month after I got my shot, she was towed to a ship graveyard on a remote island near Rio Vista. But apparently the *Faithful* continued to charm. In 2009, the History Channel featured her on *Life After People*. Someone saw the episode and fell in love. He bought her and spent years restoring her, now the *Aurora*, returning her oak trim to its original luster. A Facebook page with legions of fans followed her resurrection.

And then, one morning, a section of hull that no one had thought to patch finally gave way. The river rushed in and she was found sunk at the dock. She was raised, but the dream was over. In December 2024, she was towed to Mare Island, on the other side of the Bay from where I had found her in Alameda, and scrapped.

Eight names. Twelve owners. Seventy years between the shipyard and the cutting torch. I caught her in her final months as the *Faithful*, when she had hit rock bottom – a disintegrating ghost ship, its last passengers the homeless souls sheltering deep in her hull. And while they wondered what the hell was happening on deck, I lovingly lit her up like she was still the belle of the ball, the queen of the seas. You just had to take a second look.

Big Mike

A year after shooting *Compactor*, I return to Indianapolis and to the east side where the image was shot. A lot has changed in one year, and the current economic crisis has produced more dangerous conditions, forcing me to be more careful. As I'm walking around with two friends, looking for a shot, I notice there are many more hostile faces than a year before.

I find an abandoned residential apartment. It has crumbling stone steps leading up to a decaying brick deck and front door. The whole building and setting is ghostly and rich with character – it'll make a great shot.

After finding and marking my composition, I pull the equipment out and I set up the camera. A few people have gathered down the street, staring at us until finally they leave. A few minutes pass and there's a hulking figure walking toward me a block away. He's a giant – very tall, very big, and more than a little intimidating. I look at my friends, Abigail and Chelsea, and decide to put the camera away. I tell them there's a small chance we'll have to run which doesn't go over well with them. The man arrives and I introduce myself. Appropriately, his name is Big Mike, and he's a 37-year-old drunk homeless man.

We talk and joke for a while. He sometimes sleeps at his mother's, but he doesn't like being there, so he mostly sleeps on the streets. In the winter, he goes to the top floor of a nearby abandoned building and he covers himself with a dozen blankets. Ten years ago, he spent a year in jail for breaking and entering and for robbery. An acquaintance had stolen 50 hits of acid from him, and he was trying to retrieve his goods, only to get caught in the process. He tells me how he used to do acid every day and once took 25 hits. He didn't sleep for four days. At one point he convinced himself he could fly, but through his acid haze he had the life-saving notion that jumping off a third-story rooftop might not work out for him. Now he just drinks.

Test Polaroid before exposing final negative



Despite his shady past and present, I decide I can trust Big Mike. He has a noble and endearing qual-



Alleys & Ruins no. 110, *Compactor*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Indianapolis, IN, 2008. 2:00 am, 25-minute exposure

ity. But I also decide I can use Mike for protection, so I ask him if he wants to make $10 as my lighting guy and he happily agrees. I start setting up again and my beautiful and expensive Hasselblad is once again on top of the tripod for all to see and admire.

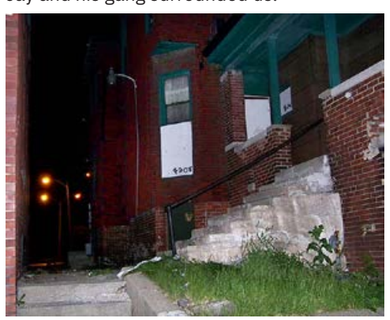
Ten minutes later five guys arrive and they surround us – their leader is Jay, and he's not happy. "Nah, nah, nah. You can't just come out here taking pictures. That's not how this works." Then several more black hooded guys appear and they are now completely surrounding us. We've been swarmed by a gang and I'm getting a sinking feeling. Two of them are standing a foot behind me.

No threats have been made, but clearly this is very bad. Big Mike also seems a little nervous but he towers over us all, and my $10 has become the best investment of my life. Big-ass Mike is on my side. So I try to keep a light conversation going with Jay, about him, about the neighborhood – anything to distract him. Then Big Mike says that I'm paying him $10 to do the lighting. Jay looks at me and says, "I wanna get paid too! We all wanna get paid."

I tell him all I can afford is what I'm paying Mike, but the gang is not listening. I turn and face one of the two guys standing behind me and I say, "Hey, how ya doin, I'm Xavier."

They stare at me in disgust without saying a word. I shiver inside, then turn to Jay. I keep a minimum amount of small bills on me for just these occasions. "I have $20 on me. If I give Mike $10, I'll have $10 left. I can give you half of that, cause I'll be broke if I give you the whole $10." Jay is pondering this but is not entirely convinced. The one flaw in my offer is the same thing Jay has been staring at: my gleaming Hasselblad on the tripod, the big Metz flash in my hand and the camera bag full of seemingly priceless equipment. This shot was aborted when Jay and the gang arrived, but it's now time to put the gear away in preparation for a getaway. The tense small talk continues, but now the attention turns to the girls and it's time to slowly disassemble the gear.

The aborted location, 2009. This is where Jay and his gang surrounded us.



Jay is looking at Abigail and smacking his lips. "You have a boyfriend? Coz I'd like to be your boyfriend."

I'm starting to feel unbearably guilty – if something were to happen to the girls I don't think I could forgive myself. Before meeting Big Mike, the girls had freaked when I took them here. "We never go to the East Side – it's dangerous here."

"But you saw my work," I had said. "I only shoot in these places." I had told them it's okay, we'll be safe. But now 30 minutes later I'm not so sure. And yet, the girls are playing it very cool. Abigail has picked up an empty gin bottle and she's clinking it repeatedly against the brick wall, joking that she likes to smash people in the face with it.

I look down at the ground, grasping for options. I really don't want to be here any more and I'm wondering how this tense situation is going to play out. I start imagining what everyone is thinking.

Big Mike is thinking about his $10. He doesn't have it yet, and as long as I'm safe he'll get it. If the gang attacks us and wins, he doesn't get his money.

Jay is thinking he wants everything, but how does he get it? He wants the money, the camera, and the girl. He's trying to work out the odds and with Big Mike there, he's not sure which way to go. Does he signal the gang to jump us?

While this chess game is being played out, I slowly put the gear away, which feels like an eternity. I zip up my camera bag and look around. Our vehicle is down the dark alley next to us, but that would be the wrong direction to go. I signal to the girls that we're heading for Washington – a half block away. I pull out my money and I only have $10, not $20 as I had thought. My stomach is churning inside. Now I have to go back on my word with Jay. I tell Big Mike I'm done, thanks for the great job, and here's your money. The girls and I instantly head for Washington. I have to make my way between a couple of the angry hoods, and Big Mike follows. This all happens more quickly and smoothly than I expect and in no time we're on the main street. Jay's gang is left in the dust befuddled and angry they let this fish go. I'm feeling a massive weight lifting, like I'm waking from a terrible nightmare and realizing that the gang in this nightmare won't be smashing my face in, stealing my gear, and dragging the girls away.

As we walk quickly, I tell Mike how he really earned his money. He looks at me uneasy and says, "They wanted my money, they were gonna take my money too!"

Abigail, Chelsea, and I walk around the block and end up behind the building where we can see the car in the small, dark parking area. It's risky, but we quickly head for it, with the gang possibly still on the other side of the building. We jump in and race off.

Truck Stop

I meet Steve in Milwaukee at night while I'm out looking for places to shoot.

Steve was a high-energy kid who partied hard with his friends. But at 19 he's convicted of his third DUI. The judge sends him to jail for three months in Arizona, where he's placed in a rehabilitation program. It teaches the hazards of drugs and alcohol, but also pushes a moral code: you can "save others" by reporting them. Inmates are urged to come clean not only about themselves but about those around them. Later I look into it and find it's tied to a wave of jail-based programs in the late 80s and 90s modeled after the federal Stay'n Out and "therapeutic community" approach, where informing is framed as proof of rehabilitation. Steve doesn't know the name of the program, but he carries its inevitable consequences with him.

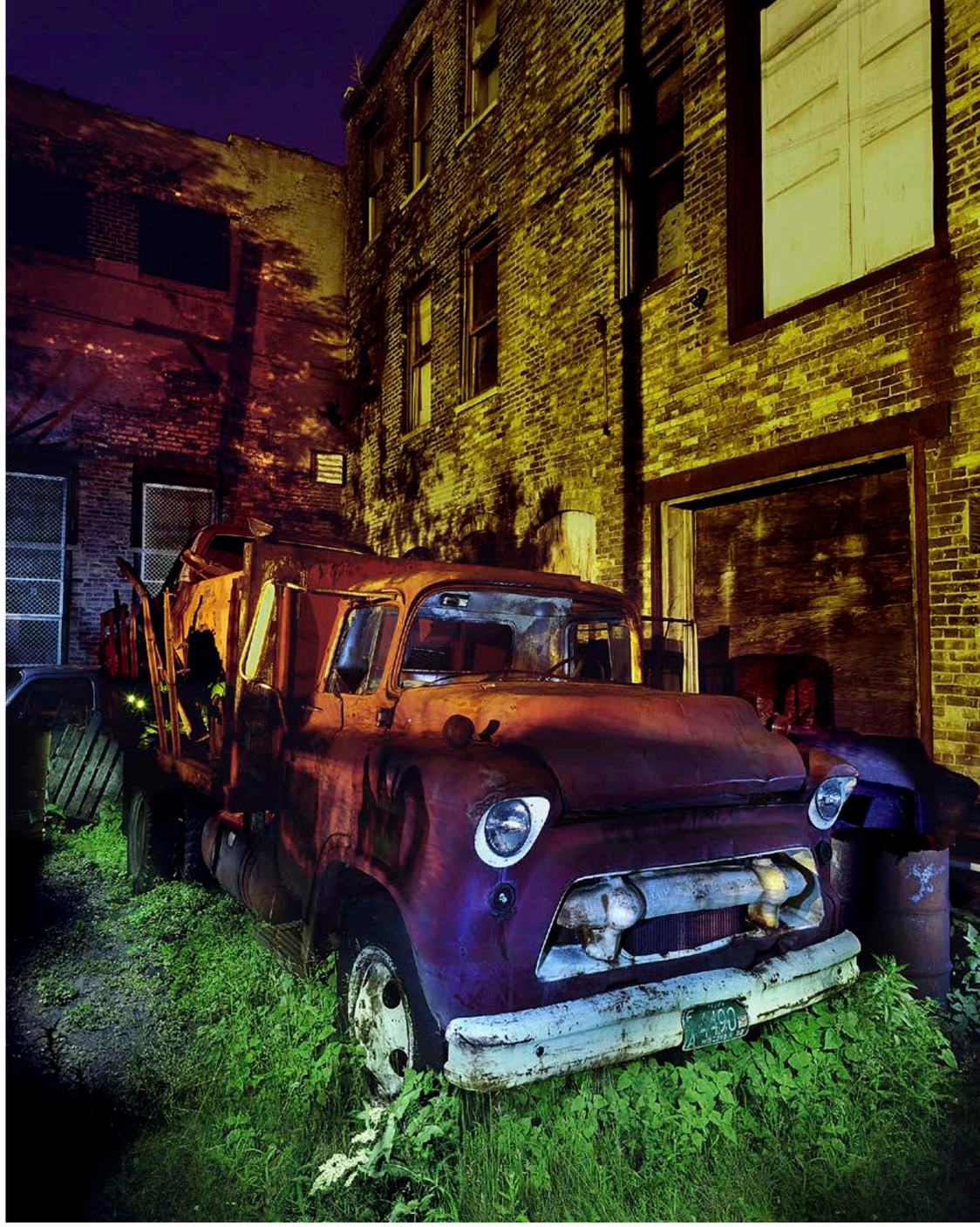
As he tells me the story, he stops and leans forward, his voice dropping almost to a whisper. Then he looks down. He says he was so brainwashed by the program that one day, when he sees two inmates he knows using drugs, he goes straight to the authorities. They get busted. From that moment on, Steve is branded a rat. Things happen after that he won't talk about.

When he gets out, trouble keeps circling back to him. He's in and out of prison for the next 15 years, each time still known as a rat. His biggest regret in life, the thing he can't forgive himself for, is that he snitched on those two men.

And yet tonight, standing next to me, it's hard to see that burden. He laughs often, and he laughs like he means it, even when his story is painful to hear.

Test Polaroid for *Truck Stop.* A few years later, the truck was gone and the abandoned building became a home decor center.





Alleys & Ruins no. 113, *Truck Stop*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Milwaukee, WI, 2008. 1:00 am, 15-minute exposure

Boxed In

In Cleveland, four years after *Boxed In*, I'm exploring a labyrinth of alleys where I see a few makeshift beds. Beside a dumpster, the ground is lined with cardboard with a couple stained, crumpled blankets on top, a pair of shoes, and a folded jacket. A little further down, an alcove with a rusted steel door, more cardboard, a soiled sleeping bag, empty water bottles, a coffee tin full of butts, a spoon.

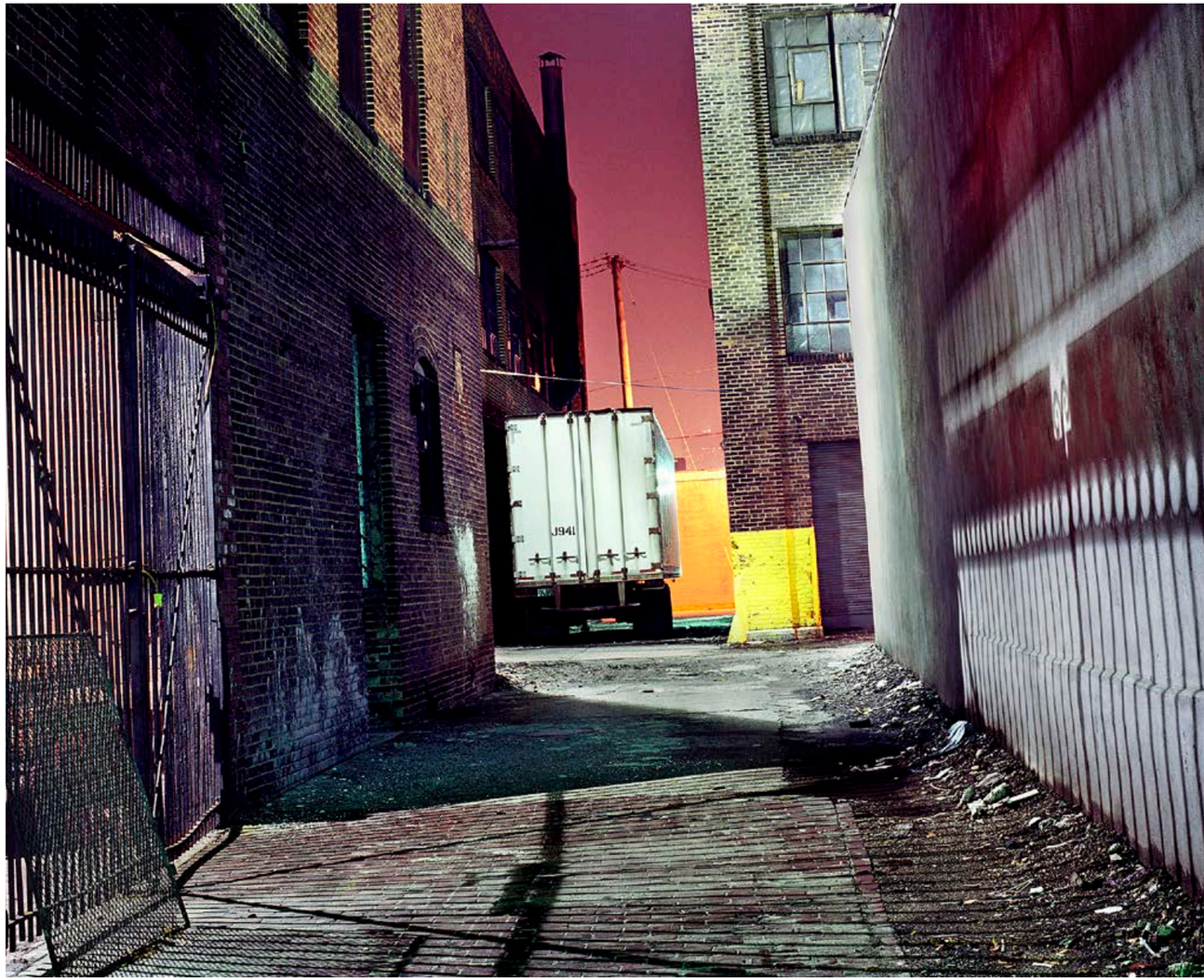
The smell is old grease and wet wood from pallets stacked nearby.

I've seen countless setups like this. They usually look long abandoned, but the situation here feels different, like every corner was evacuated just recently. It still feels lived in.

I continue on and see another alcove, this one in complete darkness. I walk by and there's a huge mass of something shiny. I pull out a flashlight and see it's roughly rolled-up plastic. It takes a second, but then I notice bits of blood splattered across the inside of the plastic. There's something dead at the center of all that wrapping. Something has died violently here, and in its final throes, someone rolled it up and tossed it where it wouldn't be easily seen.

I don't look closer. I don't want to know.

This is not where I want to be. I go back to my van with a pit in my stomach and leave the area. I won't be coming back. There'll be no alleys redeemed tonight.



Alleys & Ruins no. 118, *Boxed In*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Cleveland, OH, 2008. 11:30 pm, 20-minute exposure

No Trace

This abandoned loading bay runs parallel to the Mississippi River and the Great River Road and was a remarkable setting for the shoot. A dozen old and corroding bay doors were flanked by large pillars, under a crumbling ceiling. Decades ago, trains would unload their cargo here onto waiting trucks.

While we're setting up, a dozen souped-up cars appear and the drag racing begins. They tear past us down a stretch of the Great River Road, returning again and again. This goes on for half an hour until police arrive and a chase ensues. Sirens blaring, they all disappear down the road. Suddenly it's quiet. Twenty minutes later they're back, but this time it's short-lived – a couple more races and they're gone for good.

Then a ragged man walks past us and stops. He looks at my gear, at the camera on the tripod and asks what we're doing. He's been kicked out by his wife for drinking too much – this has happened many times before. If he comes home staggering, she won't let him in. That's not good when you're a drunk.

He says he's heading under the bridge where a friend sleeps, past the last pillar. He'll get a blanket and a spot for the night. But then he recants his story, and now denies over and over that he's planning to sleep there. He's an incredibly bad liar, but he's afraid the cops will bust him, and he's suddenly suspicious of us. But he gives us a good look and finally admits he really is going under the bridge to sleep.

He walks along the bay doors and into the frame while the shutter is open. The long exposure leaves no trace of him, and he passes through the image like a ghost. His quiet defeat goes unrecorded.



Alleys & Ruins no. 122, *Pillars*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
St Paul, MN, 2008. 12:30 am, 20-minute exposure

Bond & Bailey

It's 11:00 pm and I'm walking Detroit's barren wastelands with my friend Anna.

We pass by a group of young guys, looking at us a little surprised. "You need help gettin' somewhere?" one of them says. His friends laugh.

"Thanks man, we know where we're going," I say, raising my hand and smiling. We end up at the foot of a long-gone machine shop near the Ambassador Bridge.

The best spot for the tripod is on the street. I keep looking for alternatives but nope, nothing comes close. The camera ends up in the middle of the road. It's not a huge problem. There are shockingly few cars on the streets of the Motor City.

Anna stands by the tripod for the next hour while two cars pass by. She has to wave at them so they don't run over the setup, or her. They drive by with no problem. Meanwhile I walk around these buildings painting them with my lights.

I've finished lighting my last shot and now I'm just waiting for the camera to count down the last few minutes left in the exposure. A cop drives by and slams the brakes. He jumps out yelling, "Are you trying to get yourselves killed! If you get hit here, in this part of town, don't expect help for hours!" I apologize, acting the fool, and the cop looks at our setup and calms down. "Are you taking a photo?"

"Yeah we're almost done, then we'll pack up."

"No. You're done now. Pack your things up."

Bond & Bailey during the day, 2012, the shell next to it already gone.



I look at my timer – there's 20 seconds left in the exposure. Perfect! Another shot in the can. I wait a few seconds then close the shutter and we begin packing up. The cop stands there watching us the whole time. It's part anger, part protection, part fascination. He watches us closely as we pack up my gear, sticking around until we load the car. I thank him for watching over us and we head off.

The "aw shucks" routine had worked again. I also knew it was a card not everyone gets to play.



Alleys & Ruins no. 129, *Bond & Bailey*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Detroit, MI, 2009. 12:00 am, 15-minute exposure

Bubble Gum

I'm exhibiting *Bubble Gum* in Ann Arbor when a stranger, Jameson, approaches me and wants to show me something. He points to a platform in the picture and says, "I used to sleep up there." He walks up closer to the picture and just stares at it.

I'm looking at Jameson, and despite his flea-bitten fedora, he doesn't look homeless. He's shaved, he's confident, his shirt and jacket are nice. But I see he's become misty eyed as he's reliving a complicated memory.

"For a year I didn't have a home – I had nowhere to sleep. This alley was one of my favorite places and that platform was a good place to rest my head at night. No one bothered you – you were hidden and that felt good. Looking at it is bringing back all kinds of memories. I used to pull myself up by the pipes and by grabbing those bricks. I had to climb up there every night, hoping no one saw me."

"Sorry man, that sounds awful. But looks like you worked it out!"

"I probably woulda died on the streets but someone brought me to Dawn Farms and they took care of me and fixed me up. Now I have a job and a home and lots of reasons to live."

I ask Jameson about Dawn Farms. It's an addiction and recovery center in nearby Ypsilanti. They got him to work on their farm, providing treatment, room and board in return for the hard labor.

"They saved my life."

We talk a little more and I have to know about the old, tattered fedora which sits in such stark contrast to the rest of him.

He smiles. "I've had this hat a very long time. I wore it when I was homeless. I keep it now as a reminder to never take what I have for granted, to cherish each and every day. I plan to wear it until it's so worn down it won't even sit on my head anymore."



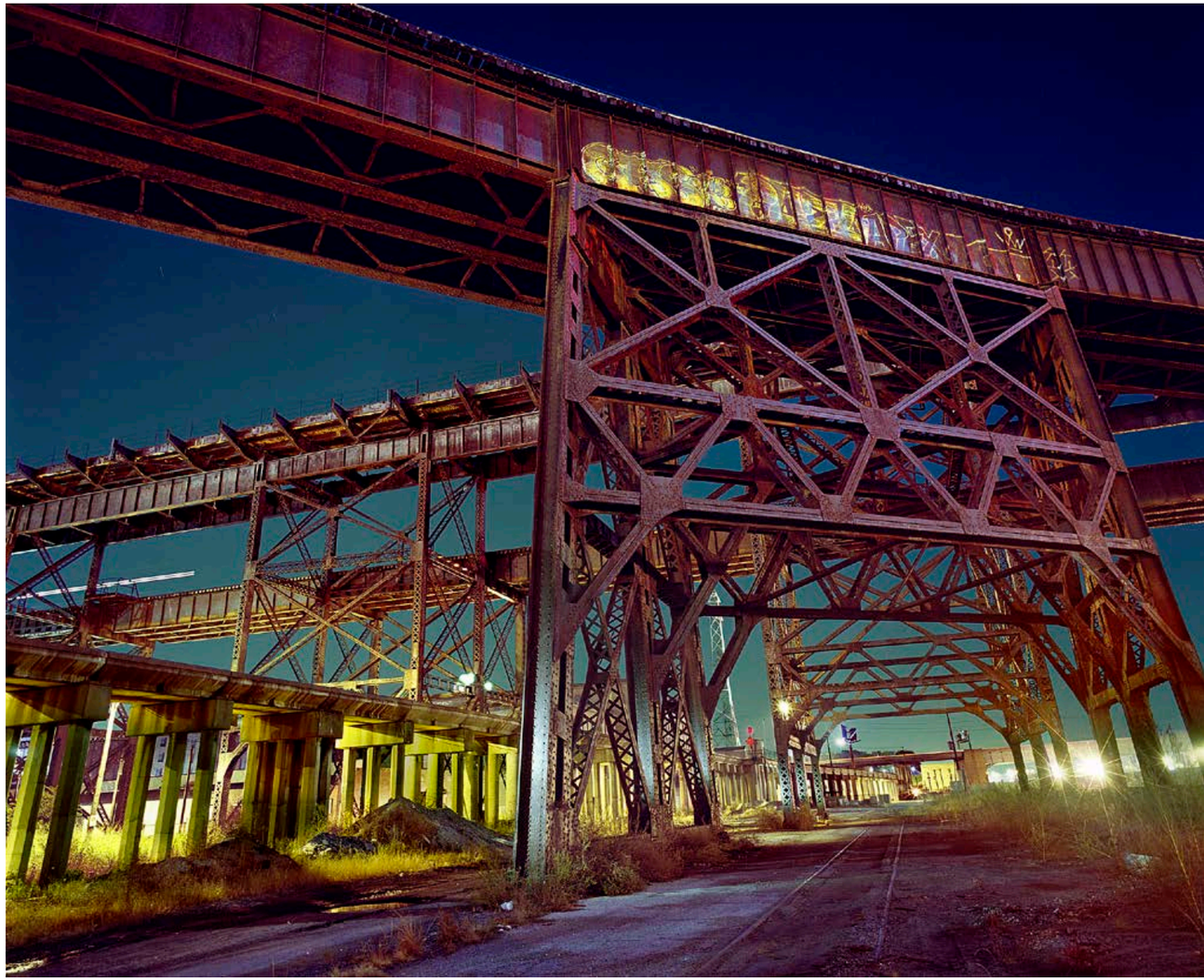
Alleys & Ruins no. 130, *Bubble Gum*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Ann Arbor, MI, 2009. 10:00 pm, 9-minute exposure



Alleys & Ruins no. 115, *WARNING THE DOG*
Los Angeles, CA, 2008. 11:15 pm, 10-minute exposure

Alleys & Ruins no. 128, *Magnificent Desolation*
Seattle, WA, 2009. 1:30 am, 15-minute exposure





Alleys & Ruins no. 131, *MacArthur Bridge*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
St Louis, MO, 2009. 12:45 am, 8-minute exposure

Cornucopia

When I set up to shoot this looming structure – an old conveyor belt from the 1920s – I know some acrobatics will be required. It's pitch black inside the gaping hole overhead, and to get the shot I want, I need to bring lighting inside. This means climbing up into it.

The problem is the street is busy with cars and I don't want to get spotted climbing into an abandoned structure, let alone get caught trespassing. But every once in a while there's a long enough break that I figure I can scramble up before anyone sees, with a flash and yellow gel jammed into my jacket.

I teach my new friend Ross how to cover the lens with black velvet to "pause" the exposure, so the film doesn't see cars going by, leaving light trails.

Once we're ready, I wait for what looks like a solid break in traffic. I click the shutter open for the 10-minute exposure and I climb up as quickly as possible, knowing the film won't see me. Inside, I shine my small flashlight and realize I have to be extremely careful. I'm walking on thin, rusted tin, supported by metal beams on the underside. If I take a wrong step my foot is going through the floor.

We wait for another break in traffic and I start my lighting. Another break and it's time to climb down quickly. Then I do some final lighting under and around the structure. The Polaroid looks decent so I slap the film magazine onto my Hasselblad and we do it all over again three more times on film.

During the second shot, a cop rolls by, slows down to see what's going on then continues, thankfully unaware that I'm hiding above.

Ten-minute Polaroid lighting test
Shot low, next to the street while I worked inside the conveyor with lights.





Alleys & Ruins no. 132, *Cornucopia*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Atlanta, GA, 2010. 11:00 pm, 10-minute exposure

Part 4. 1993–2015

Alleys & Ruins.



Dance of the Spirits, 1999, from the Crystal series

One spring night in 1993, six years after my crash, and after years of barely shooting personal work, I grabbed my camera bag and tripod and walked out of my Montreal studio into a cool, refreshing breeze. I had no plan, just go outside at night with your camera.

After quitting my safe government job in Ottawa and settling back in Montreal, I was walking on eggshells. Ottawa had been a sanctuary, a reminder of what life was like before the crash.

But now I was back in Montreal, the scene of the slaughter, and I was terrified the monster was still in a closet. That reprieve was a gift and I knew what a gamble it had been to return to the city. But I was constantly scanning my mind for any minor flashbacks, any sign that it was coming back. I also worried that all those years in the darkness had somehow permanently damaged my brain.

If I saw people, I headed away from them. A few more of these encounters and I ended up where people don't hang out at night, on a sketchy street at the foot of an old, unlit alley.

I looked in, trying to peer as deep as I could. At the far end I could faintly see a wall. I stepped in, and as I walked deeper, the city's noise dimmed and the darkness thickened until I became shrouded by it, the noise reduced to a hum. The extreme darkness felt good, like a security blanket. A strange comfort settled over me, a kinship with everything around me.

I had developed many irrational fears, but apparently walking down a dark urban alley at night wasn't one of them. I should have been afraid. I was in a menacing location, any dangerous character could suddenly appear. I was vulnerable, carrying expensive gear fully on display. But none of that concerned me. Instead, I was incredibly calm. This was the first true relief I'd felt since returning. It wasn't the sterile safety of the Ottawa office, it was a deeper, more authentic peace. I was safe, and in this dark alley I was also *at home*.

After my crash, when things got progressively worse, I became certain I'd end up homeless. My father had lived on the streets for a while in his youth growing up in Spain. A few times when I was a kid, he told me stories of living under stairwells, and of eating food off the street to survive. These stories had freaked me out. I had thought, if my dad could be homeless, why not me?

I tried forging crazy strategies for that inevitable day when I'd find myself in the same situation. I came to regard alleys and other run down urban spaces as sanctuaries – safe places to live and hide. I'd look under stairwells and other shelters and think, "It won't be so bad, I can always live there."

As my eyes adjusted, I looked more closely at where I was. The brick walls on either side were deeply etched, gouged by passing trucks maybe? I could smell the metallic tang of wet rust and the old grease on the ground beneath me, glistening gently from the moonlight. Just ahead was an old door, the paint peeling and curled. Under the door, a very faint light glowed and I imagined an enchanted world on the other side of this desolate alley.

I felt a clarity I hadn't in years. I was beyond calm, this was serenity. I set up my tripod, attached the camera, aimed it down at the door and the glowing gap. I pulled out my light meter, but in this almost pitch black darkness I couldn't



My Montreal studio, circa 1994. This was the crumbling industrial building I moved into with Phil after quitting my job in Ottawa. It became our sanctuary, a creative laboratory where the *Alleys & Ruins* series was born.

get a reading. Leaving my camera on the tripod, I headed back to the street, to the light. Finally my meter gave me a number, something to work with. I walked back into the darkness, guessing how much longer the exposure would need to be this deep in.

Since the crash, enthusiasm for my photography was hard to come by, but tonight it was there. I knew I couldn't shoot the old, happy stuff, and maybe never would again. The pure light I once had was gone, the raw joy replaced by something else. Tonight, that was simply something quieter, and that was okay.

Right now, once again I wanted to photograph what was ugly; that felt like the only honest thing to do, the only thing I felt comfortable shooting. I also knew I was probably doing the same thing that made me give up photography a year ago. And yet this time felt different, like I'd settled into a kind of peaceful acceptance.

I calculated a 40-minute exposure, released the shutter, and waited. I kept staring at this beat-up old location in the darkness. When you look at places like this, you know there are stories here, but there's no one left to ask, so all you can do is imagine.

The industrial building had once been brand new, a beaming child. What had it been like here back then? I pictured the sun shining down on a bright new structure a hundred years ago, workers in overalls, all the years in between, all the things that must have happened on

this spot. So much history, right here, that no one would ever know. A history that had left all these scars – the grime, the scrapes, the smears, the smells.

I was no different in a way. All this was a mirror of the slaughter I had survived, that still burned a hole in my brain, the physical form of the very wreckage I was now terrified of falling back into: ruined and shunned ugliness. And yet right now, for once, that felt like a safe place to be, in all this rot and silence.

The alleys were where I'd decided I would end up – the place I'd go when I finally became the homeless man my father had been. I had filed them away as my future. So when I started photographing them, finding them beautiful, some buried part of me had started working something out. I looked around, and it snapped into place: I was the alley.

When the exposure was done, I put away the camera and moved on, continuing to look for more out-of-the-way places. Lonely and ugly. Where no one could find me and where I felt a bond.

I stepped into a deserted industrial street and composed another photo where a building's lit-up window shone almost like a silent beacon of hope. I continued working well into the night, quiet and unhurried, until I was too tired to go on. When I returned to the studio, I was shrouded in a kind of bliss. I lay in bed fully at peace.

I picked up the film the next day and started to dread what I had to do next, what had made me surrender years earlier. I was no longer in that quiet, dark peaceful bubble that had lulled me into a trance the night before while working. In the stark daylight, I was fully back to reality. I would have to look at the images, reflections of myself. You couldn't pay me enough to look into a mirror, into my eyes. And here I was making myself do just that.

I opened the box of slides and spread them out on the light table. I scanned the images slowly. It took a minute, but then my weight shifted and my mouth opened and I had to look more closely. I was seeing something I could have never imagined. I had wanted ugly photos, expected them and even welcomed them, because ugliness was the only honest response to what I felt inside. But in my hunt for ugliness, I had found *beauty*.

A couple of nights later, more determined than I'd been in years, I grabbed my gear and went out again to find more urban blight. Again, in the darkness, alone, a form of tranquility settled over me, drawing me into another peaceful state. And again I worked with a simple, clear focus, nearly hypnotized by my setting.

The next day, I looked at my images, again in confused amazement. I had attained the same results. In pointing my camera at ugly subjects, I was coming back with both things: ugliness and beauty. I didn't know how and I didn't know it then, but my old light was starting to peek through. The luminous joy in me had never been extinguished. It had been buried, under years of soot and shame, but it was poking its way into my dark perception, leaking through whether I wanted it to or not. I thought of the image I'd shot just days ago – the one that would become *Old Light*. What was going on inside me? My two visions were merging.

My brother Rob called me a few days later.

"I've been going out at night with my camera. It's all I wanna do these days," I told him. "I'm so freakin' happy with these new pictures. I gotta show them to you! But I'm... shooting in kinda rough places."

"Hey, I'm real happy for you bro! You said at night?"

"Yeah, I'm shooting these super long exposures, and getting beautiful colors from all the different city lights out there."

"What kinda places again?"

"Well, not the best. Kinda shitty locations actually, but that's a good thing! I'm thinking of heading for the Lachine canal next."

"At night? Holy crap. I guess that's cool. Can I go with you?"

A few nights later the two of us were walking along the Lachine canal, back then a polluted industrial stretch of land and water with countless run-down locations. I spotted a building's beat-up back entrance, its old stone landing cracked and spreading like tectonic plates. A single incandescent bulb hung above it and I knew what a beautiful warm light it would cast. I was starting to lean into the search for beauty in the alleys.

I set up the camera while a man in tattered clothes came crawling out of the darkness towards us. Rob had to alert me to the situation. I turned to see this guy crawling slowly on his hands and knees looking up at us, a big glob of white and black foam was stuck to the side of his face. It was surreal and disturbing. He got up to his knees and that's when I noticed how big he was. Then I saw that in one hand he had a small, clear plastic bag with what looked like a small amount of pale amber glue, cloudy with air bubbles. He put the bag to his mouth and took a deep inhalation. His eyes got wider and more unfocused – a strange mix of bliss and terror. His soiled T-shirt was sagging from sweat and grime. He looked at me, now in a kind of rage and took another long, deep breath from the bag, puffing out his chest, elbows bent and hands up like a gorilla.

I looked at my brother and I saw he was going to lunge at him if he had to. I pointed toward the door I was about to shoot and calmly said, "Isn't that the most beautiful thing you ever saw?" He looked at the door, confused. I didn't know what the hell was going on or what was going to happen. He let his air out, his arms came back down and while on his knees he kept staring at the door, his body sagging slowly. Then he got back down on his hands and knees and turned to crawl back into the darkness.

Rob and I looked at each other, our mouths and eyes wide open. "What the fuck just happened?" he asked.

"I have no goddam clue. I've seen glue sniffers before, but in a place like this? Holy shit that was creepy," I said with a huge grin. We were relieved it was over and I got back to my camera.

I took the shot that would become *Orange Door*, and we moved on.

Back at the studio later that night, I was putting my gear away, but I couldn't stop seeing this addict crawling toward me with that big glob of foam stuck to his face. I decided I couldn't let this story just slip away. I sat down and quickly wrote down the details, leaving the scrap of paper on my desk. This would become a habit, logging the odd things, along with ruminations that would take place during my night shoots. My first Alley story – *The Crawl* – had been documented.

These night shoots became more and



My friend Phil Spurrell in the Montreal studio, 1994, after a chunk of the ceiling collapsed from water damage. We'd laugh, clean up the rubble, and set up more of the tarp drainage system. The art on the walls was hung to cover other damage

more frequent and the more I shot, the more these decrepit urban settings became an oasis, a home. I felt at ease and in sync here, in these locations that were cast away from society, looked down on, and avoided. I loved the tranquility, even though it had become obvious a part of me needed to be on red alert, looking out for danger.

I wasn't naive about this danger, but I was also aware of the armor I was born with. I'm a six-foot-two man, which helped tremendously. It allowed me to occupy these dark spaces and bought me an extra layer of security. I often boosted this shield by wearing a black leather jacket. Anything to keep people away so I could focus on my work.

A couple of times, while in the middle of a shot, someone had appeared out of the darkness and headed toward me. For a few seconds I had snapped out of working on a photo and gotten ready for anything. But so far, they had just walked by, seemingly curious and a little nervous themselves.

But for the most part, these were places where I could work alone, comfortably away from other people. Despite their oppressive, bleak and gray look, in my photographs I wanted to drench them in color and make them wonderful and alluring. They are presumed ugly and scary, so instead of ugly I made them beautiful; instead of scary I made them inviting and enticing. I found I could do this with my color film and through very long exposures, thanks to the peculiar nature of city lighting, and by adding my own colored lighting, though gradually at first. In time, I saw I was creating monuments out of these shunned locations, transforming them into theatrical, luminous versions of themselves. It was a way of fighting and deflecting my fears, of building a sort of escape hatch. I was redeeming these places – and they were redeeming me.

People talk about bringing light to the dark like it's a figure of speech. But there was nothing figurative about how I was doing it. I hauled real light into real darkness, night after night, and my nervous system couldn't tell the difference between lighting up a ruin and lighting up the thing that was ruined in me.

My live-work situation could not have been more conducive for my new all-consuming passion. This incredible, cheap studio was a blessing and it had been a one-in-a-million opportunity.



Phil in the Westmount studio, 1994. He and I shared a crumbling building for three years, and somewhere along the way, shooting absurd portraits of him became a running gag. Whenever one of us got a crazy idea, we'd drop everything and set up another shot, usually howling with laughter. These sessions captured the manic, creative joy of that place.

Six months earlier, my friend Phil had found this marvel: a huge, crumbling industrial building that was too wrecked to sell and too legally snarled to renovate. It was in a state of advanced decay – not yet officially condemned, but close enough that the desperate landlord couldn't secure tenants and risked having the city cut the utilities. Phil, ever the resourceful filmmaker, made a deal: he could live and work there for $280 a month, provided he managed the rapidly worsening water damage.

His solution was ingenious and chaotic: a system of tarps and plastic gutters strung across the vast ceilings, funneling the relentless leaks toward the proper drainage system. It was a ruin, a sanctuary, and a studio for all his creative needs all at once. He set up a film studio and office and got to work.

When I'd told him I was moving back to Montreal, he mentioned the building. And when I finally got a tour of it, I jumped at the landlord's equally generous offer and moved into the space next to Phil's.

This began one of the most creative periods in my life.

The space was incredible – a massive two-story building in the middle of West-

mount, Montreal's most famously posh neighborhood. It stood out like a sore thumb, an unkept crumbling building at the foot of Mount Royal surrounded by multimillion-dollar homes, with only Phil and me for tenants. Occasionally, a huge chunk of the ceiling would collapse, but we'd laugh it off and clean it up. It was a small price to pay.

The low rent, the freedom, the newfound commitment to my art and to my new burgeoning series of night photos – it became a powerful elixir and further cleared my dark clouds.

Phil was one of the funniest and most hard-working people I knew. Film was his obsession and he and I had the run of the place, running around like lunatics at all hours.

Late at night we'd explore all the odd rooms, remnants of a childcare facility in one, dusty air with a couple stick-figure crayon drawings lying in a corner, surrounded by gathering lint balls, above them faded rectangles marking where perhaps other drawings once hung.

In another part of the building, a series of rooms showed evidence of a Legion Hall, the air stale, faintly sour from old beer and cleaning fluid. An old bar with stained rings on it, a couple of Legion mugs, and an old Vimy Ridge poster, curled and dusty. I would stare at these remnants of other lives, imagining their ghosts walking through the space.

Phil's studio was twice the size of mine and sometimes we played office-chair hockey, with the music blasting, rolling around with hockey sticks, smashing into each other while trying to score a goal.

My studio was smaller but it was a real showpiece. The previous tenant had had a faux finish business and her work adorned my walls. Between the windows on the longest wall, one section was marble pillars from floor to ceiling, the next was painted to look like mahogany, then wispy white clouds over a baby-blue sky. Other finishes appeared on the walls inside faux frames, and outside my four big windows was a clear and enviable view of the mountain. The kitchen was converted into a darkroom, the best one I ever had.

After months of shooting what I was then calling the *Alleys and Fire Escapes* series, I had put together 10 decent images. This is when I should have started showing the work to galleries, but all these years trapped behind my walls made it so that even when I felt good I could barely venture outside of my bubble. But Phil loved my new series of photographs and he was always out meeting people. He introduced me to a young curator, Monique Beaudry, who was looking for artists for a show at a small space, Soul Gallery, in five months, and she loved my work. My first Alley exhibit, my first exhibit where I would show a truly unified body of work, would be in December 1993.

But Phil wasn't done with me yet. Filmmaking was expensive – he'd already founded the Montreal Film Society, screening rare 16mm and 35mm films once a month to a growing legion – but he needed more to feed his passion. On weekends, his gigs were a little more frenetic and lucrative. Nightclubs would hire him to create visual spectacles. He would set up multiple looping film projectors and slideshows to create what was back then a visual onslaught of light and motion, something rarely seen in those days.

His biggest client was Club Metropolis,



My promotional photo for *Oye!*, a Latino event, 1994. My highly visible work at Squeeeze led to a flurry of new, high-profile club gigs, which soon led to the surreal experience of seeing my images splattered on posters around the city, month after month.

the reigning queen of Montreal nightlife. It had once been a beautiful theatre, and all that decor remained, but it was now a concert hall and nightclub for over 2,000 clubgoers. He'd set up a dozen projectors to fill the cavernous hall with provocative images. On Saturday nights an event called *Squeeeze* was just starting up, a night where drag queens, fetishists, and misfits turned the place into a living art piece – part runway, part theatre – while hundreds of ordinary clubgoers packed the floor just to dance and watch the spectacle unfold. He convinced the owner to include images of the drag queens in the projections, who were becoming the stars of the night, and he knew just the photographer.

A few days later, two drag queens – Buddha and Plastik Patrick – arrived in my studio and I spent a vibrant afternoon creating photographs of them. The owner and artistic director loved the images, and when Phil projected them at the club a roar of approval rose up from the crowd. I was hired to create more and more images, until I realized the best time and place to capture the energy would be in the club itself during Squeeeze nights. For the next year I would often set up a quick photo studio somewhere in the club on Saturday nights and I quickly became an-



The end of the opening reception for the group exhibit that included my first Alleys exhibit, Soul Gallery, 1993. We were tired but exhilarated. That's me (left), curator Monique Beaudry, and fellow artists Derek Doucette and Gilbert Leblanc. It was the peak of my "eight-month gift," just before the storm returned.

other freak sideshow, doing wild fashion shoots while a crowd watched.

This odd twist in my life grew exponentially. I was the highly visible photographer at the club and I started getting hired by other clubs to create images. Eventually I became something like a VIP club photographer even though I'd never really liked nightclubs. I could enter any of the most exclusive clubs on a whim, bypassing any long line of beautiful people, dragging along any friends I wanted. I'd get free drinks, everyone knew me, and I was making good money to just have fun. It was an absurd situation.

Through all this the monster seemed to be receding from memory and I was having a glorious time. I started to believe it was over. It was nice knowing you, dipshit!

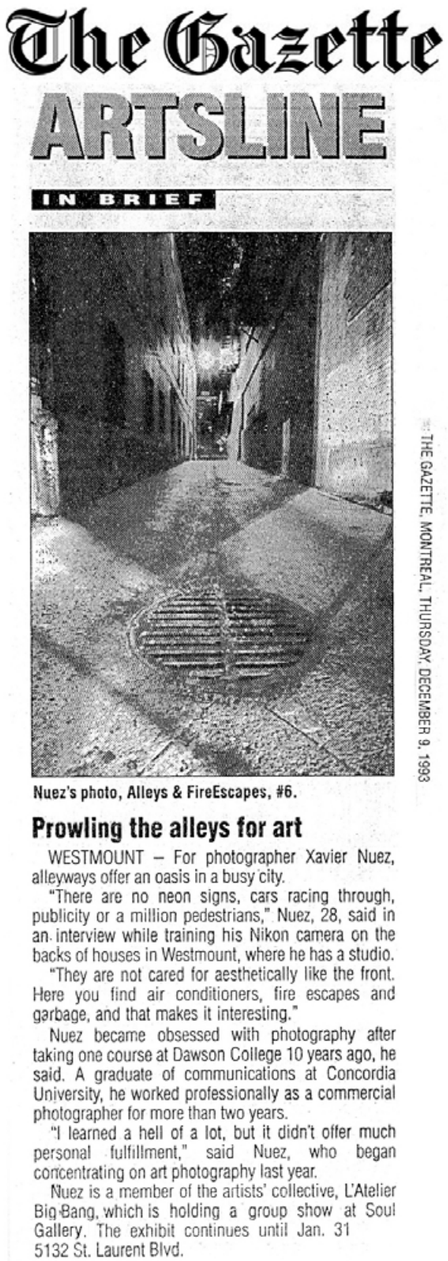
Back in my real life, I was still focused on creating art that was true to me, going out as often as possible with my camera at night to continue my Alley series. The exhibit had also given me a deadline for my pieces to be ready and framed.

My new dark and bright vision was maturing and expanding. One night I was crawling around the dank, filthy basement of the studio building, looking for any kind of inspiration when I saw a curious thing. A dead fly had gotten stuck in a spider's web. But the web was partly on the floor and as I lay down to get a closer look I saw an intimate portrait of this dead fly, surrounded by its silky grave. I grabbed my photo gear and a small flashlight, taped the light to the wall just above the fly and set my camera on a sandbag to secure it. I loved the resulting photo. It once again seemed to blend my new dark brain with a kind of beautiful aesthetic of my old work. I called the photo *Giorgio: in silk*.

I developed the body of work further, where I was obliquely and unknowingly addressing the broken yearning I had inside. It was the start of what I called the *Glam Bugs* series, inspired by the intense love/hate nature of my club photography. I would collect dead and decomposing insects and set up miniature dioramas, giving them a name and a history. I was anthropomorphizing each bug as different

Giorgio: in silk. 1993. *Glam Bugs* series





The Gazette

ARTSLINE

IN BRIEF

THE GAZETTE, MONTREAL, THURSDAY, DECEMBER 9, 1993

Nuez's photo, Alleys & FireEscapes, #6.

Prowling the alleys for art

WESTMOUNT – For photographer Xavier Nuez, alleyways offer an oasis in a busy city.

"There are no neon signs, cars racing through, publicity or a million pedestrians," Nuez, 28, said in an interview while training his Nikon camera on the backs of houses in Westmount, where he has a studio.

"They are not cared for aesthetically like the front. Here you find air conditioners, fire escapes and garbage, and that makes it interesting."

Nuez became obsessed with photography after taking one course at Dawson College 10 years ago, he said. A graduate of communications at Concordia University, he worked professionally as a commercial photographer for more than two years.

"I learned a hell of a lot, but it didn't offer much personal fulfillment," said Nuez, who began concentrating on art photography last year.

Nuez is a member of the artists' collective, L'Atelier Big Bang, which is holding a group show at Soul Gallery. The exhibit continues until Jan. 31 5132 St. Laurent Blvd.

versions of a fictional me.

In my fantasy, and in the photos, they became many things: powerful figures to be reckoned with, inspirational figures to be loved, gorgeous and famous creatures to be fawned over, while in reality they were dead, decomposing bugs, revolting remnants to be swept away.

So now I started looking all over for dead bugs – on window sills, basements, gas stations – working on this series alongside the Alley series, while still doing my wild Saturday night shoots at Metropolis and my many other club gigs.

As the exhibit date grew near I spread the word as much as I could. I selected six of my best images with Monique, the curator, and made beautiful 16x24 Cibachromes in my darkroom. These prints had impossibly saturated colors and a glass-like surface. I wished I could see them enormous, big enough to stand in front of alone, like being back in the alley. But 16x24 was what I could do in my darkroom, and it was more than enough. Seeing my Alley images printed on such a rich, slick surface was almost comical. I thought of the actual night shoots, of how grimy and filthy they often left me, of the actual locations and the darkness and debris and danger. And when you looked at these beautiful bright, colorful photos, the locations looked almost elegant. I had truly managed to turn these bleak places into something beautiful.

I was excited for the exhibit, now just days away. The six framed pieces looked amazing. Anyone I showed them to couldn't help but exclaim how stunning they were.

The opening reception at the gallery was exhilarating. My friends and family were there and I had become friends with

the other artists in the show and with Monique. Three of my pieces sold and I was over the moon.

A few days later the city's English daily, *The Montreal Gazette* called. They wanted to feature me in their *Artsline* column. This was the first real press attention I'd ever gotten and it was all beginning to be too much for me.

I had begun to sense something was wrong. Over the next few days I started to feel a familiar creeping anxiety. I started to panic, wondering if a bomb was going to go off in my head again, searching desperately for any way to keep it at bay. But how was I supposed to defend myself from something I didn't understand?

One morning I woke up and as soon as I got out of bed, I knew. It had returned with brute force. I felt a hundred pounds heavier and the morning light filtering through the curtains was burning my eyes.

I had plans to meet friends that night, a Friday, and Saturday was Squeeeze night. The thought of these events, of once again setting up my public studio at the night club, made my heart race. The old familiar cold chill racing through my body was back, the throbbing eyes, the choking, the heaviness that made me want to lie down. I couldn't believe it. But I couldn't be sure. Maybe this was temporary, maybe it was just some other fucking thing. I shook my head at the old familiar thoughts. I wanted to cry. It was like I kept getting punished if I was having a good life. I had had an incredible eight months in Montreal, but deep down I knew it would stop here. The monster was back and once again I had become someone I could no longer be.

Me in my studio, circa 1995. This is what it looked like when the monster had its grip on me. Walled in, my voice gone, completely alone on the inside. What the photo doesn't show is the quiet, stubborn refusal to stay that way. Photo: Philippe Spurrell



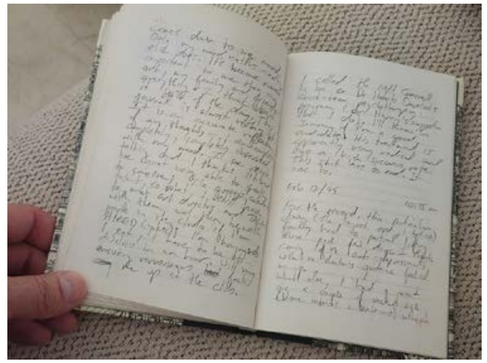
Looking back on that period, I see the "eight-month gift" for what it was: a grace period. It was as if some cosmic force gave me just enough time, peace, and manic energy to build my lifeboat. I had to discover the Alleys, begin to master my signature techniques while creating the photos, and get that first successful exhibit under my belt. And the moment the boat was proven seaworthy, the storm I hoped had passed returned with a vengeance. I had been racing against a clock I didn't even know was ticking.

In that time I had also gotten very public photo gigs where I needed to be outgoing and entertaining. How the fuck was I going to do that now? My thoughts immediately went to alcohol. I didn't know what else to do.

When the Squeeeze gig arrived, I downed a few beers before heading to the club. I had an open bar as usual and I took advantage of it. By the end of the night I was drunk but I'd made it through.

For my birthday a couple of weeks later, Monique gave me a blank journal. I put it aside, but after a couple of months I started to write in it almost daily, and it became an incredible source of information for this book, my Rosetta Stone, a document informing me exactly how I felt at the time from March 1994 to my last entry in October 1995. In its pages, my younger self obsessively analyzed the crash with raw, in-the-moment details that my memory, 30 years later, had buried. It nailed down the timeline of the "eight-month gift" and confirmed every horror that I half remembered.

One of the first things I write is: "The world has closed to me again." As much as I would have loved to get long, deep insights into my art, or anyone else's art, or my thoughts on anything interesting, when the monster was around, everything else was a trivial concern. The best I could do in my journal was talk about my art as either a weapon or a casualty, a battering ram to get me through this, or something that repeatedly suffers when my system goes down. Either way, I constantly cling to art as the one true, stable part of my identity. "My art is who I am. It'll be with me for life."



The journal, a gift from the show's curator, Monique, on my birthday in January 1994. It became my "Rosetta Stone," capturing the raw, day-by-day reality of the seesaw struggle with anxiety, a private battle hidden beneath a public life of art shows and club gigs.

More than anything, the journal details my never-ending struggle to get well, how there didn't seem to be a pattern for how long I'd be "up" or "down," which seemed to be in equal parts, unlike the first years after my crash, what I call "my dark ages" in the journal, when my mind seemed to be constantly spinning out of control.

What's also striking is just how debilitating the down periods were, where I could lay in bed for days, or mope around like a useless, slow-walking zombie.

The up periods, in contrast, were when I got things done. I seem to have

built my career in those windows of functionality.

The journal tracks the frustrating parade of therapists and medications I tried, all while constantly reminding myself to "think positive," and meaning it.

The pills were a constant cycle of hope and failure. Paxil, which I started in April 1994, "made me more depressed than ever... I sleep all day. I have no appetite, no energy, no nothing." I switched to Zoloft and Xanax, which for a time seemed like a "blessing," clearing my head of the debilitating anxiety, but eventually the darkness would just return. Valium would calm me down momentarily but then I'd quickly become so tired and sleepy I couldn't function.

My experience with therapists was just as chaotic. One doctor finally explained the framework of my condition, telling me I had "two things and not one... a depression, but as well as that, I've developed a full-blown phobia of people." This insight was a revelation. Before that, I'd assumed all depressed people were anxious around other people. But it wasn't a cure and, just as frustrating, no doctor could explain how, with my original crash in 1987, I'd gone from normal to a train wreck in the blink of an eye. The mechanics of the "how" remained a mystery.

Other attempts were a dead end, like the experimental psychotherapy program I joined. The nice doctor would "switch to bad cop and practically yell at me to stop ruminating," trying to get me angry. I couldn't perform for him. As I wrote in my journal, "I think he would have loved it if I grabbed something and smashed it against the wall... I think he decided I wasn't worth it anymore."

In the end, the journal makes it clear: all these external solutions ultimately failed. The "magic pills" were a mirage and didn't work for whatever had caused my damage. The only solution that would offer "real natural goodness for my body and brain" was the one I had to find myself.

And I had already found it. I just didn't know it yet.

During the "eight-month gift," I'd stumbled onto the Alleys as a survival mechanism, but I hadn't yet understood their power. The blueprint for my crazy, quixotic mission to redeem the darkness had been drawn during those months, but I still needed to experiment with other directions, to learn by contrast what I'd lose if I abandoned that work. The Squeeeze and *Glam Bugs* projects became that experiment.

I still fit in night shoots, but the frequency dropped enough that I could feel the difference in my mood. The detour proved what I needed to know: the Alleys weren't just good work, they were the remedy. When I returned to them full-time, I returned with clarity.

By now I'd gotten the ball rolling on two other exhibits, and had finally given them their proper names: *Mondo Squeeeze* for the club photography, and *Burial Grounds* for the *Glam Bugs*.

Through the seesaw of my mood, I found myself preparing two exhibitions at once: Squeeeze in 1994, my first-ever solo show, and The Bugs in 1995, which would be my second. With practically no experience exhibiting, it felt daunting. I wanted these images to be as strong as possible, as perfect as I could make them. The Alleys would have to wait.

I was being pulled in other directions



This was the bohemian life I returned to after quitting my government job in Ottawa. My friend Phil in 1995, filming for our friend Dan's movie, balanced on the roof of my old jalopy. Dan painted the fake "Lino's Pizza" logo on the side for the film. I loved working inside my small tribe, all in for the art.

as well. I'd started to help Phil more and more on his film projects. I wanted to learn more about motion picture because I thought it would help my art. Plus film production is so labor intensive, he needed all the help he could get.

In the next couple of years, through my work on his short films and through Phil's connections, I ended up working on three feature films for other filmmakers, doing everything from the lowest rung to cinematographer.

But the film world required constant socializing and endless networking. My fragile psyche couldn't sustain it. And the level of creative input I could contribute on these big productions was approximately nothing.

When I worked on some of the smaller projects with friends, I was able to relax more, contribute more, and that's where my best memories lie.

I drove an old jalopy, given to me by my brother Rob. In its advanced decay, a giant rust hole had formed in the driver's side floor pan so you could actually see the road under your feet.

This thing wasn't worth much so when my friend Dan needed a prop car for a film, I happily offered up mine. He painted pizza delivery signs on the doors and sometimes we'd rig the camera on the roof of the car to get more dramatic shots. It was a hilarious setup, and this is how I liked working, within my small tribe.

I continued my seesaw life, working hard during the up periods to push along



Behind a 16mm film camera on an indie shoot, circa 1995. Working with Phil and our friends and learning cinematic techniques was a big step in developing my theatrical lighting style.

these bodies of work that now had to cross the finish line. Club Metropolis and I had agreed on a date for the exhibit: September 1, 1994. The giant club had multiple side rooms and one, the VIP lounge, was the best fit for an exhibit. It was a big classy room with great wall space and track lighting. The Squeeeze show was going to feature 20 framed 11x14 prints.

In that year of photographing drag queens I had come to know them very well. One night they took me out on the town for one of the zaniest nights of my life. It was me, the straight man, arm in arm with three queens, going from club to club while they raised their own special, happy version of hell. Everywhere we went, people knew and loved them. It was a riotous night of laughter and gonzo moments.

According to my journal, at this point I was cycling through my highs and lows roughly every two to six weeks. If there was any logic to it, I never cracked it. It could bury me on the days I'd let my guard down, and spare me on the days I was sure it would destroy me. That was the cruelest part: there was nothing to learn, no pattern to decode, just the same collapse on repeat. I couldn't even learn its rules.

My biggest fear was that I'd be in a zombie state for the opening night reception. I'd had a great stretch of fresh air, I just needed to make it to the finish line.

While spreading the word for the show, it quickly became evident that this thing was going to bring the house down. Squeeeze had become a sensation at this point and it seemed everyone was just waiting for the exhibit, to see the photographs of the stars printed and framed.

A week before the opening I crashed hard. In my journal I write, "I can barely walk. I can barely see. Anxiety is squeezing my brain with a trembling hand and choking me with the other. And depression is pulling me down like a burning candle."

But knowing everything that was left to do for the show and that I couldn't stop now, I added, "Enough of this fucking melodrama, I have to get up and frame."

Fumbling through quaking, blurry eyes, and working in a slouched, slow motion from the weight of depression, I spent the next couple of days doing what I could have done in an afternoon.

I framed my pieces for the show. I was grateful I had gotten nearly everything done in my long functional period preceding this crash. But on top of the anxiety and depression, I added panic. I couldn't be like this for the reception.

The place was going to be packed, everyone there to see me: friends, family, the whole club scene that employed me. Already the press had shown great interest, among them Quebec's answer to MTV. MusiquePlus was going to be there taping a feature for their top-rated show, *Fax*, which would then rebroadcast across the province up to five times. If they were going to put a camera and microphone in front of this basket case, well I could never live that down.

I'd somehow managed to make myself small when a crash would hit. I'd make myself scarce, I wouldn't show up at a gig if it was optional, as some of these club gigs were. I sometimes couldn't believe how I'd managed to get away with this for so long, hiding it even from my best friends. If I had to be around people, I'd learned to just keep my mouth shut. The twitching pained eyes and locked jaw and many of the other outward physical symptoms from the dark days weren't as obvious anymore. If someone was talking to me, I could look kind of normal, but if I spoke more than a few words, the terror, the monster lurking just beneath the surface, would come out swinging his cane, happy to see me go down.

A night out with the queens. Montreal, 1994.



The result was that I had to give up my personality. Another kind of hilarious journal entry summed it up: "When I'm down, I'm as interesting as a rock. Put a rock on your kitchen table and pull up a seat. Now enjoy your scintillating conversation with the rock. See you later."

My mind and my personality were often trapped behind the monster. In my head I knew what to say. I often thought of interesting or funny things to add to a conversation, but the mechanism for getting those thoughts out of my mouth was still fucked. And so when I was down, I remained silent.

As the opening day approached I was still a slug. I had managed to take care of any remaining essential details. All the extra little things I could have done could go fuck themselves. I assumed at this point I was going to show up drunk, still the only way I knew to barely get through a social function in this state of mind.

The morning of the show I woke up, slowly got out of bed and checked myself. I felt better, much better!

I went through my day tentatively, feeling the hangover of the intense down I was getting over. I never knew for sure if it was still there until I met someone.

But the day went smoothly. Somehow my body, or the fucking monster, had had pity on me and decided not to nuke my life today. I was so grateful I could have cried. Then I thought of its generosity. If it could choose to spare me, then every other time, it had chosen not to.

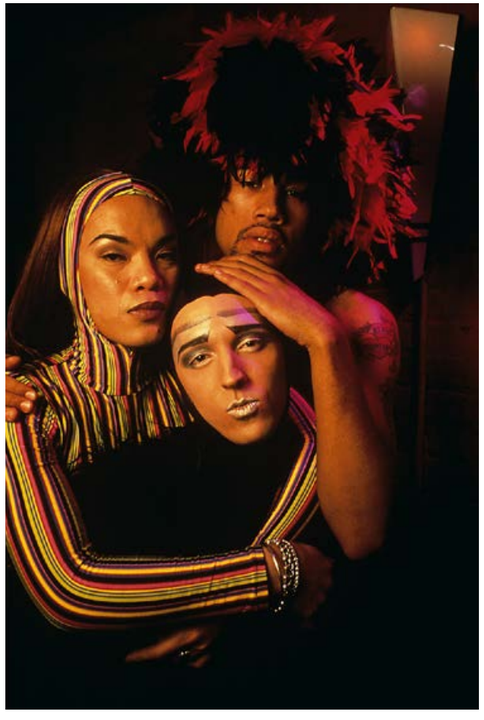








Characters from the wild Squeeeze nights at Club Metropolis, 1993–1994. I became another freak side-show, running a studio in different corners of the vast club while the music blasted and a crowd watched.
From top left: Buddha; Martine; Luc; Manny, Mathieu & Étienne,
Opposite page: Mocha Sheena





Being interviewed by MusiquePlus at the Squeeeze opening, 1994. To the camera, I was the confident artist. Inside, I was just relieved I could speak.
Still from *Fax*, MusiquePlus, 1994

I arrived at the reception, charming and happy. The evening went great, and my dirty little secret remained my dirty little secret.

One of the queens grabbed my face in both hands and kissed my cheek. “Regarde-moi ça!” she announced to nobody in particular. “Un artiste et beau en plus.” An artist, and handsome too. I turned red and grinned. She threw her head back laughing and disappeared into the crowd.

The buzz at this opening reception is one I never expect to see or feel again at any other opening. It’s the one and only time the subjects of my art were flamboyant, explosively loud and funny drag queens and club kids. All my friends and family were there, supportive as always, though I’d had to twist my father’s arm to get them to come. I couldn’t go two seconds without someone wanting to talk to me. The place was a packed, raucous, exhilarating madhouse.

The TV crew was there, they turned their bright spotlight into my face, shoved a microphone in front of my mouth, and I delivered a performance – in French! – that any regular person could have done, but to me it was a grand slam. I had survived to live another day.

Before they left, the reporter breathlessly asked me to let them know the next time I have an opening reception. But there wouldn’t be another like this, and this is what they were interested in. My Saturday nights setting up the studio at Metropolis had run its course. I had my eyes set on the art that truly mattered to me.

In the next couple weeks, nine different media outlets – newspapers, radio, TV – reached out for interviews. The clincher was when the *Westmount Examiner* called. This was a paper known for its society pages, which notoriously featured the parties and galas of the city’s wealthiest. They wanted me to be Westmounter of the week! Phil and I howled with laughter. I don’t think I even lived there legally. The nearly condemned building we shared wasn’t zoned for habitation. But I humbly accepted.

The exhibit stayed up for three months, much longer than it was supposed to. Half the pieces sold and then I quickly had to pivot for the next show, the *Glam Bugs*.

The glossy Cibachrome prints in this show were going to be thumbtacked to wood paneling, like they were posters of stars or heroes in some teenage kid’s basement room.

I was finding it hard to make close-ups of dead decomposing bugs look glamorous and alluring, unlike the *Alleys & Ruins*, where it just came naturally. I shouldn’t have been surprised: they were close ups of dead decomposing bugs after all. But the images slowly started coming together.

At this point I was also making more of an effort to find better paying commercial work, including gigs assisting other photographers. It was becoming clear that my art wasn’t going to pay the bills, now or maybe ever. And these gigs were giving me good experience with lights.

My somewhat better frame of mind was letting me get away with quick jobs here and there, but making real connections that lead to devoted clients was not a thing I experienced in my world. Plus, more than half the companies and photographers I approached were French and my stunted language skills made this a huge hurdle.

One morning Phil came into my studio. “X, I’m freaking out, I just talked to the landlord. He might be selling the place and if he does we gotta vamoose!”

“Oh shit, that’s not good. When do we find out?”

“He’s gonna show them the place in a few days. He says they’re serious, which means we might be seriously fucked. I don’t know what I’d do. I’m gonna start looking at options for the Film Society.”

I knew even less than Phil what to do. He was extraordinarily resourceful and I knew he’d figure it out. Me? Shit, I didn’t even want to think about it. Move back in with my parents? Rent a room in a basement? I closed my eyes and clenched my fists.

I went about my business, trying not to think about it. But a strange thought entered my head: I thought about running away and leaving everything behind. If the place sold, maybe that’s what I’d do, just burn my life down and start over on the street.

After two weeks of holding our breath we heard back from the owner. They decided not to buy. We were back to normal.

But the stress had taken a toll on me, and I plunged into another deep depression, realizing how much I had been taking for granted, how tenuous and vulnerable my life was. Once again I started beating up on myself, thinking how ill-equipped I was for this life.

My most lucrative client, Club DiSalvio, owed me a big check, and I figured putting that in my account would help my mood.

Metropolis had been my most visible client, and that visibility had been instrumental in getting all kinds of other gigs, but they didn’t pay a lot. DiSalvio, on the other hand, was almost embarrassing in its generosity.

It was the most elite, hard to get into club in the city, a place where fashion models stood in line for an hour to get in even though it looked the same inside as any other club. I couldn’t have given two shits about the place a year earlier, but now they were a huge source of revenue and another high-profile gig. I assumed they hired me and paid me so well because of my high visibility, because of my own ridiculous kind of status in the club world. All I did for them was take party snapshots.

I called the club’s bookkeeper and he told me to come by and pick up my check. In my deep depression, and in zero position to talk to anyone, I wondered if I should medicate and sedate myself or drink something before going, but this was going to be a quick hand off over a few words and I hated the sedatives the doctors had prescribed. The bookkeeper never said much, so I decided to go as I was, hoping to not bump into anyone.

When I arrived I was told to go to the restaurant downstairs for my check, an-

other elite venue, also owned by the club. Now I started to worry.

I walked into the restaurant and there was the entire staff – the husband and wife owners, manager, promoters, doormen, waiters, and others in suits who I'd never seen before – all sitting around a big table having a lavish dinner. Over a dozen of them, there for the owner's birthday.

They turned to see me walk in and they all happily hollered my name. The bookkeeper walked over and handed me my check while the owner, Marco, stood up. "Xavier! So glad you could make it, have a seat," he said, motioning to an empty chair. "Order something! You're part of the family too!"

That awful, petrifyingly cold rush of fear and panic swept through my body like a tidal wave. My mind was suddenly consumed by terror and my face started to close in on itself. For a split second I thought of bolting, but even in my diminished state I knew that would be too strange to explain. The tiny bit of brain power that remained couldn't think of a quick excuse to leave, and I found myself slowly walking to the empty chair that Pierre, a big friendly doorman at the club, had pulled out for me.

I sat down, and they were all turned toward me with big friendly smiles. The other owner, Sofia, said, "We know so little about you! We only see you at the club and we never get to talk. Where did you grow up?"

The tarantula had made a rare appearance. "Welcome back," I thought to myself. It was now on my head, wriggling freely and I had to somehow keep my face from exploding. I was fighting the twitching in my eyes, while noticing they were getting larger and larger from the fear, completely out of my control. The muscles in my cheeks started contracting and I wondered what this looked like from their side as I slowly disintegrated.

"In Sorel," I said, as if I was being interrogated. The mood instantly shifted as everyone's head kinda popped up a little. In my mind I imagined they were all thinking, "Oh, he's crazy."

Sofia stared at me for a second too long then she added, "And you do photography full time?"

"Yeah."

She stared again, this time even longer. Then she turned to one of the waitresses. "Eve, you do photography too, don't you?"

And the conversation moved away from me. I sat still, not knowing how to use my arms again, imagining that everyone had discovered who I really was, the awful, awful ugliness beneath my surface. The cold fear had morphed into heat. My face felt like it would spontaneously combust.

I sat there still as a rock for 10 minutes. When I finally stood, my joints had seized. Rigor mortis was setting into this body, still alive. "Thanks for everything but I have to go."

Marco said, "Ok well it was nice to meet you." It sounded like a question, but it didn't matter. I stepped away from the table and nodded my head briefly and walked away, to my Lino's Pizza jalopy, parked discreetly a couple blocks away. Inside my car I felt hollow, gutted, cut to pieces from the humiliation.

The following Thursday night I showed up at DiSalvio's with my camera, not knowing what to expect. Everyone seemed to act like nothing unusual had happened and I started to wonder if maybe I had imagined how awful it had been and that no one had really noticed. But how could that be? It just seemed impossible.

A week later I dropped by to pick up my check and the bookkeeper wanted to discuss something with me. He said he and the owner had been talking about my fee and they felt it was much too high. They wanted to reduce it by half. I stared at him, blinking. By half. I understood fully. That's how much my currency had dropped following the dinner. It hadn't been my imagination. I told him I would have to think about it and they should reconsider.

I went home. It was a blow and I couldn't help but blame myself and hate myself for it – hate myself for not always being that guy I once was, a thousand years ago, the one everyone loved, the one who wasn't Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, the one who would have left that dinner party glowing, not slashed in half.

Even half was good money but it was still deeply disturbing and upsetting. A couple of days later I called the bookkeeper to see if they had reconsidered. Of course they hadn't. I accepted the new deal but now money was going to be tight.

My body was turning on itself again. With every breath, the air seemed to claw its way down my throat, and climbing the stairs to my studio left me gasping. There, through my pulsing eyes, I looked at all my stuff, thinking none of this was worth it. I needed to get away, for good.

The next day I got in touch with the woman I was dating, Melissa, a talented music student, a very proper soprano. We sat together on a park bench and I told her my plan.

"We fill a couple backpacks with the things we need and we leave. We don't come back. And we just travel. Think of how great that'll be, we could go anywhere. No responsibilities."

"You wanna leave? Like run away? I don't understand, how would we eat, where would we sleep?"

"We just figure that out as we go. It would be amazing."

"X, we'd end up being homeless, begging, like those people with filthy gray clothes and a dog."

I looked into the distance, wanting to be further away than my eyes could see. I was getting desperate. "It doesn't have to be like that, Melissa. I don't know, we'll live in shelters, we'll do it different."

"X, what's going on?" she asked, looking at me puzzled and a little disgusted. "None of this makes sense! I have a life here, I can't just leave everything, no way, are you crazy?"

Yes, I thought. Yes I am.

There would be many other relationships. None of them lasted.

The next morning I met Gerry at our regular cheap breakfast place, a greasy spoon we'd been calling "The Shit Place" for years, though I didn't remember why. It was pretty good.

Through the sound of clinking plates and mostly French chatter, Gerry, as usual started the conversation. "X, you don't look so good, and I notice your WPMs are low. What's going on with you?"

I told Gerry my plan. "I asked Melissa to run away with me, but she doesn't want to."

"Gee I wonder why, she's got a life. People don't just leave everything behind. Something's going on, X. What is it?"



Crystal: the forest fairy, 2011
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Glam Bugs series



Atlas: carried a weight, 2001
Kodak Portra 160VC, 4x5 negative
Glam Bugs series

Rhodius: fallen hero of Troy, 1999
Kodak Portra 160VC, 4x5 negative
Glam Bugs series





With Gerry Wagschal, mid-90s. Whether he was gauging my depression by my "words per minute" or talking me out of running away to live in a shelter, he was the rock who could always make me laugh.
Photo: Steven Wagschal

I always told Gerry more than anyone else. "I feel like I need to get away, Ger, like too many people see the side of me I don't like."

He looked down at his coffee. "Ah, I see what's happening. You're talking about your tail? You're worried someone saw your tail?"

"My tail?"

"Yeah the part of you you're trying to hide."

"Yes! Exactly! I can't stand it if someone sees my tail. I try to hide it, all the time. It's like my full time job and it sucks all my energy."

"Listen to me, X. People see less than you think and if they see something, they forget anyways. Everyone has a tail they're trying to hide. Just show up like always, nobody cares, nobody remembers. But you can't run away, that's just dumb."

So that was the end of my running away plan. But I wasn't so sure people forgot when they saw my tail. Gerry knew more about me than most, but he didn't know how bad it really was and that's how I wanted it.

The pain in my throat and chest was getting worse and taking deep breaths was hurting more and more. My anxiety had hit me with all kinds of bizarre physical symptoms, but this felt different, more life threatening, and it was time for a regular doctor.

I went to a clinic, wondering if I was too young to have my heart give out. I ran through a few tests and the doctor put a stethoscope to my chest, listening for a long time.

He finally sat back and told me my heart was fine.

The problem, he explained, was stress. The anxiety was so severe it was manifesting physically. My nervous system had become so overloaded that it was causing the muscles in my throat and chest to clench and vibrate uncontrollably. I know from my journal he gave it a clinical name: esophageal spasm.

I wondered if a heart problem wouldn't have been better. At least there were ways to try to fix that. The problem here was my mind, which I'd been trying to fix, hopelessly, for how many friggin years now? The monster wasn't just in my head anymore. It was breaking me down, piece by piece, from the inside out. But I still had to get on with my life, I still had responsibilities that according to everyone, apparently, couldn't be fixed by running away.

I had to prepare for my *Glam Bugs* exhibit set to open in June of 1995. It would be my second solo show in less than a year, and this time in a more prominent gallery. Stornaway Gallery had become a media darling, its owners just featured on the cover of the city's entertainment weekly.

I had to keep shooting bugs and start printing the ones I knew were in – the show was a month away. I didn't expect much from this, the art was a little weird and I figured no one would really like them, but the gallery directors seemed to think they were great and that felt good.

Deep down I just wanted to finish the show so I could get back to my urban night shoots full time, to my affinity with them, to the peace they gave me, which I needed badly. I still went on my Alley shoots but it was very sporadic and I found myself going to many of the same places, wishing I had new locations I could explore. I had covered so much of the city.

I tried to ramp up the commercial gigs where I got to light my subjects with strobes, but they were rare. The assisting jobs were more common and here I would pay extra attention to how these commercial photographers lit their subjects. I had been using lights on my night shoots more and more.

With a week to go before the *Glam Bugs* exhibit, my Cibachrome printing was done and I had purchased different styles of wood paneling. I cut them into twelve 4x6 foot pieces and built a base for each of them so the paneling would stand up straight, each a slice out of some teenager's basement room. The prints would be thumbtacked to the paneling, no framing necessary.

I installed them in the gallery and we all thought they looked great. In my journal I wrote: "I'm very happy with how it's all turned out. I wasn't sure it would work but the pieces look great and the concept works!"

The opening reception was another packed house, with all my friends showing up along with my brothers.

But my parents weren't there. A rift had developed between me and my dad over my photography. My career wasn't exactly lucrative and he couldn't accept that I'd chosen this risky path over his lifelong advice to choose a safe career. My dad could never, and never would bring himself to say he liked my work.

No press showed up and nothing sold. I can't say I was surprised. The art was "challenging," as they say.

But then in the weeks that followed, somehow momentum built up. The show ended up being a big success, receiving substantial press leading to several sales. The two entertainment weeklies each did a full story, a French art magazine wrote a good, positive piece, I was interviewed about the bugs for TV, and a college paper also ran a full story. The gallery told me they'd never seen so much press for one of their shows. I didn't understand why my art got so much attention, I never felt worthy.

I was thrilled and this was all great news, but more than anything, now I had the time to concentrate on my night photography.

Back in the city's alleys and gritty corners, my pace slowed once again and the calmness returned. The power I felt over the monster when I redeemed one dark place after another was real – what I brought to the decay seemed to manifest in myself. Any time I went out shooting late at night, I would go to bed serene

and wake up feeling good. It seemed inconceivable that I could be down after having unshackled and saved another decrepit corner. I began to wonder if this might be the therapy I had been looking for.

Now I started to fantasize about upgrading my gear, about getting a Hasselblad camera, where the much larger negatives would create more detailed images. I wanted my Alley photographs to be so sharp you could see every speck of dirt, every glint in the rust. I needed to reveal more of their truth so that their transmutation into an object of beauty and inspiration became even more dramatic. But money had once again become an issue.

In a desperate turn, I started looking to clinical research as a source of revenue. I'd get paid to take a drug being studied, stay on-site, get monitored, sometimes sleep there for a few days or weeks, and give blood samples, sometimes a dozen in a single day. Essentially I decided to be a human guinea pig to get my Hasselblad. In one of my journal's last entries, I wrote: "If I don't die I take home some extra cash." In all, I completed seven studies, enough to pay off some bills and slowly build a fund for the camera and lenses I needed.

In the fall of 1996, I bought the old, used Hasselblad camera, built in 1967, that would take the *Alleys & Ruins* images I shot for the next 20-plus years and that I still have today.

By this point, I had accumulated enough 35mm Alley images for my next Montreal exhibition, maybe a dozen strong pieces. But the Hasselblad changed everything. The larger 120 negatives produced images so much sharper, so much more detailed, that going back to 35mm felt like a compromise I couldn't make. Those 35mm images, shot between the club and bug and film projects, would remain in storage, never exhibited. Until this book, they had never been seen.

Also in the fall, the landlord once again told us that he had a potential buyer. But by this point the building was looking even worse, plus we had learned that it had to be converted to condos and an underground garage would need to be built. This seemed like an impossible selling point. Who would agree to this insanely expensive rebuild? We were certain we'd be there for years to come.

But a week later, a few days after Phil had hosted another successful Film Society screening, he walked into my studio, stone faced. "The building's been sold and we have three months."

We stared at each other, jaws open and in silence.

"Oh fuck. What are we gonna do?"

"I don't know. The last time it almost sold I started looking around. Concordia has a screening room. They said they'll let me use it for the Film Society," he said with a little smirk on his face.

"Holy shit, that's amazing, dude! I'm freakin' happy for you!" I figured Phil would land on his feet. A university screening room would be a huge score and institutional affirmation. His Film Society would go on to thrive for decades and it's still strong today. But I had to get my shit together quick.

I looked around my studio, wondering what I should start packing first. It was a somber moment, with my future a teetering mystery, as always. What would happen to my photography? Where was I going to put all this stuff? Where would I move to? I had to stop to take it all in. I looked at the faux-finish walls, the soft spots bulging from water damage, the kitchen-turned-darkroom. I thought of all the hard laughs with Phil as we'd shoot another ridiculous portrait, all the times I lay in bed crushed by the weight of depression. But this place had been a miracle. This crumbling, unlivable building had been more than a cheap place to live; it had been a sanctuary. It was the creative laboratory that saved my life. I had walked in a broken man, and now, three years later, I was walking out an artist.

As I compressed the last three insane, seesaw years into a few minutes, a hard pit landed in my stomach and I prayed that the monster would stay away. A lot needed to happen quickly and sometimes that didn't work out so well for me. My life here was unsustainable; I saw the ceiling for me as an Anglo artist with damaged social skills. My roller-coaster life of endless highs and lows was exhausting and whatever success I'd had here, with my inability to go knocking on doors or to meet new people, I could never convert that success into something more. I needed another drastic change, and with the studio door now closed to me, I knew where there was an open window. I thought of my brother Rob. He'd moved to Toronto six months earlier and I called him.

"Rob, I have bad news and I have bad news."

"Oh shit, what is it?"

"I'm finally getting kicked out of the studio – the freakin building sold. The other bad news is you're getting a new roommate."

Rob laughed. "X'y, this is the right move! Come to Toronto! No more language crap and you can stay with me rent free until you get on your feet."

Late in 1996, with my studio in storage, my friend Arnold Free threw a going away party for me. It was a fantastic celebration where I said my goodbyes to my dear friends.

I thought of them all. To me, they had been a life raft, though I doubt they ever saw it that way. They were just happy to have me around. We had bonded deeply enough years earlier that when I disappeared and then reappeared – different, cracked – they simply accepted it.

They never asked, "What's wrong with you?" They never demanded an explanation. If I couldn't talk, they were okay with the silence. All I needed was for them to accept me as I was, because I couldn't show up any different. And by doing exactly that, without ever saying a word, they became the ground under my feet that kept me from falling further.

The next day I moved to Toronto. It was the second time I'd moved out of Montreal but this time the move felt permanent, like I was now officially one of the Anglo Quebecers who had moved to greener pastures in English Canada. As much as I loved Montreal, I felt like my future had suddenly opened up and a huge weight had been lifted.

But I also felt the pressure. Rob would let me stay as long as I wanted but for me, I needed independence. This had to be different from Montreal. I started getting into shape, calling firms for commercial work, and was relieved when I didn't have to speak in my broken French. Through my sporadic photo gigs in Montreal I had put together an okay architecture portfolio and jobs started to trickle in.

But when spring rolled around, I de-

scended on my new city's dark corners. With my new camera and a vast new city to explore, the new *Alleys & Ruins* images began to accumulate right away. My art made the commercial work bearable. The one fed the other, and without the blueprint from my "eight-month gift," my life may have spun out of control or simply been anxious, aimless drudgery. My art consumed me in the new city. It electrified me. And it continued to heal me. Every time I went on an Alley shoot and brought back an image, I felt like I'd kicked the monster in the balls.

Even after moving to Toronto, I returned to Montreal regularly to see family and my old tribe. I always brought my gear to continue shooting in the city I knew so well, but I was also eager to turn my new Hasselblad on my old subjects. I had already ventured out so many times with my Nikon that I felt like I'd walked down every alley, visited every ruin.

I decided to re-shoot some of my favorite old locations with the superior camera, but in every case, the original remained the better version. Then I remembered something I'd thought of during my luminous joy years: even static images are fleeting. The old locations I was re-shooting had changed, sometimes only in subtle ways over the last two or three years. This was enough for them to go from sublime to flat. But the outings still left me feeling calmer, and this was enough for now.

I'd been bringing lights with me from the very first day in 1993, but only to subtly fill in shadows. I saw my work as largely documentary; I wanted the beauty to be something that was already there, not something I imposed.

But my commercial work was changing my eye. I was getting good at lighting banal subjects to make them interesting, and I began to wonder what would happen if I applied this new skill to the alleys.

In 1997, with a Toronto image titled *Can't Sleep*, I finally broke my own rules and for the first time, I added unique lighting to a photograph.

The result was a revelation. Suddenly, locations where the city lighting was imperfect became fair game. It would take me years to become comfortable going all out with the theatrical style that defines my later work, but *Can't Sleep* was the moment the door cracked open. The series became infinitely more exciting.

Eventually my relentless and successful search for commercial work required me to find a studio. In another of life's lucky moments, I answered an ad to share studio space for an incredibly low fee. The guy with the studio, Alan Chandler, was in recovery from addiction, living in the space – another guy like me who'd come inches from flying off the rails into oblivion. I hit it off with Alan right away. He became and still is a close friend. He was the rare person who could freely talk about his flaws with no shame, and it gave me the courage to open up to him. He became one of the very few people who knew the truth about me.

The monster had never gone away and it still colored much of what I thought and did. It still interfered with everything: with my art, my commercial business, my social life. It still came around regularly to slam me down and close my world. But my battles with it in the Alleys at night had left it injured and licking its wounds.

I had also started exercising hard, and that was helping to calm me. And a new doctor had prescribed clonazepam, which helped tremendously. The Valium, which I hated, would hit my body fast and soon after I'd want to fall asleep. The clonazepam took much longer to relax me, but when it did I could stay alert.

By 1998, I had a lot of new images and this time I didn't need Phil to show them around. Two good galleries, Lonsdale and Pekao both wanted to host a solo show of my work for their 1999 schedule. This fantastic situation forced me to work on the series harder than ever, to fill two galleries, each with different work. But once again, after going out night after night in the same city, I started to run out of locations.

One trip would change everything. In 1998, I traveled to New York City with my gear, determined to find new places to shoot. I ended up walking through Brooklyn's seedy corners where I discovered an endless supply of grit for my series. But I also found myself in situations riskier than I had ever experienced, including a close brush with what looked like a violent street gang.

I walked away with a couple great photographs and a new understanding: if I wanted to keep doing this work, I needed to explore countless more cities. I just didn't know how that was doable.

One day, while talking to my new painter friend, Mafu Jiang, he showed me the way. He was a committed artist whose work I respected and he was planning to exhibit at the Toronto Outdoor Art Festival.

"You're kidding, right? Mafu! You and your incredible art at an outdoor festival? You've been in museums! This is like selling your work at a yard sale!"

"Xaviu, you crazy," he said, waving me away. "You don't even understand. Have you ever been to the festival?"

The truth was I never had.

"The art. Very, very good! Very good artists. And you! Always complaining you have no more crazy places to shoot. You know..." His head tilted and he smiled, as a thought seemed to build in his head. "There are many, many, many shows like this, all over US. You want more cities for pictures? This is how."

I stared at him, my mouth wide open, understanding that in 10 seconds, Mafu had just blasted the roof off my problem.

But this created a new dilemma – beyond the very real logistical headaches of how to pull this off: on the one hand, I wanted the level of respect that a high end gallery commanded. But on the other, what the hell would I be shooting if I remained in the same city, having burned through every gritty corner that a clean place like Toronto offered? I didn't have a trust fund that would allow me to do anything I wanted. I needed to work.

While the Alleys were my true north, my galleries, Lonsdale and Pekao, were also showing real enthusiasm for my other, more experimental studio work: the *Glam Bugs* and the *Crystals* series. This encouragement was a powerful motivator. From 1999 to 2003, in another creative frenzy, I dove deep into that work, creating and exhibiting those pieces. It was a fulfilling detour, another way to explore my core themes of redeeming the overlooked. But I hated how my Alley series kept stumbling from a lack of new subjects. I craved the access to all those other cities that Mafu had outlined for me.

The galleries offered prestige; the festivals offered cities. After years of weighing these very different paths, I finally



My home on the road for the better part of a decade. This was Mafu Jiang's "crazy" suggestion turned into reality, a Spartan life that felt like a fantastic adventure. I couldn't care less about a cushy bed; this van was the engine that funded my art and gave me the ultimate freedom. It was a dream come true, allowing me to explore and photograph new cities every week, fueling the "tsunami" of the *Alleys & Ruins* series. The decal on the window: a hockey goalie I fell asleep staring at. I'd never stopped playing the sport and the decal was a small, quiet reminder of that Sorel kid.

chose the cities.

In late 2003, I moved from Toronto to Ann Arbor, Michigan where a friend, Mary Ellen Lloyd, was living. Mary Ellen was the kind of person who made it her mission to help anyone who crossed her path. She took me in, introduced me to her world, and her son Phil Blass became one of my most trusted companions on the night shoots.

The move to another country had once again turned my life upside down. I was now an immigrant like my parents had been, but Mary Ellen's serene presence allowed my anxious soul to calm down.

This move was the beginning of a tsunami of new *Alleys & Ruins* images as I suddenly found myself in a different city every week, funded by my participation in the art festivals. I would travel with all my gear, living a Spartan life, sleeping in my van a quarter of the year and doing art shows. Here I would meet hardworking and talented artists who became friends.

I also met countless, wonderful art lovers. Some, after seeing the *Alleys & Ruins* photographs, would join me later that night as I worked in dangerous corners of their city – a vital second set of eyes looking out for threats.

But having come from the gallery world, I remained in contact with them, exhibiting in galleries and later museums, maintaining a kind of parallel life. And here also, my gritty night photographs seemed to capture the public's attention. I exhibited them widely, often to great fanfare. Their popularity continued to grow, year after year, and I maintained a rigorous shooting schedule.

Eventually, in a kind of meta twist, the press started asking to come along.



The "Meta Twist" in Chicago. A PBS camera crew blasts me with light while I check a Polaroid test shot for *Luv*. This was the surreal reality of my later years: trying to maintain my quiet, technical ritual while a film crew documented every move. Moments after this photo was taken, gunshots rang out and the police arrived.
Photo: Jaime Pitillas

It began with NPR, then the *New York Times,* ABC, PBS and more. They followed me into the dark with cameras and microphones in what became a surreal period. My intimate, quiet moments of peace in these places were being replaced by bright lights and reporters asking questions. My private, healing ritual had become a public spectacle, shared with the world. It was certainly an honor to have the work be so intriguing, but this experience ran its course.

One cool, refreshing night in 2015, I was in Chicago exploring alleys alone. I walked into an almost pitch black alley and started to smell the tangy wet rust. Then I noticed the grease beneath me glinting from the moonlight. I stopped and stared at the reflection, transfixed. There was something familiar. Then a rush of joy ballooned inside me.

"I remember this place," I thought with a big smile.

It was a strange and sudden feeling. For a moment I imagined sharing the same space. The 50-year-old artist and the ghost of my younger self who had started this whole journey. The man who had been terrified and the man who was no longer running, separated by two decades of an impossible fight.

It was 1993 and I was walking down my first alley in Montreal, a broken man who had, by complete accident, stumbled into a dark run-down part of the city, not knowing it was the beginning of my salvation. I looked around at the raw decay surrounding me in this Chicago alley and wondered if it truly had been by accident. Then it hit me.

How is it possible, I thought? How the fuck did I manage to do this? How did a man who had been so completely shattered, a man who couldn't function, who could barely speak, whose life was all but extinguished, how did that man build this? I had made a successful, lucrative career photographing society's trash; the stuff people didn't want to look at or didn't even see. I had taken this trash and made miraculous art.

I stared at the walls of the alley, looking at the scrapes and gouges and thought how beautiful it was. This trash had saved my life. ■

MEMOIR CONTINUES ON PAGE 271

Polaroids and Technique

Whatever personal demons I was trying to vanquish, I was also a photographer facing technical challenges that had to be overcome. No one taught me my process; I had to invent it in the dark through trial and error. Back then there was no Google, no AI, and no digital screen to check my work. There was just me, the dark alley, and the film.

I worked with a 50-year-old Hasselblad. While the world rushed toward digital, I slogged on with the old technology for decades because nothing else could capture the grit I needed. Until the mid-2010s, digital cameras couldn't hold a candle to the resolution of a 120 negative, and they still can't survive my marathon exposures.

When Kodak discontinued my preferred film, Ultra Color 100, I freaked. I had fallen in love with its color palette and built much of the series around it. I bought a large stockpile and kept it frozen. Many of the photographs in this book were made years after the film had officially disappeared from the market.

The first step was often the most difficult: composing the image. I could sweat it out for a long time, debating if the camera should be one inch higher or lower – a decision made harder by the darkness.

Once locked in, I analyzed the existing city light. Before everything became LED, city lights were my friends: sodium vapor, mercury, fluorescent – each created a unique color on film. I had to visualize that color foundation in my head, then determine how to build on it: which colors to add, how bright, at what angle, flash or spotlight. I usually worked out the lighting scheme in minutes, but applying that vision to film was the tricky part. And if the location was too dark, all the light and color would have to come from me.

When the lighting became complicated, I turned to my lifeline: the Polaroid back. I swapped the film magazine for a Polaroid back to get a murky preview. If the final shot was 30 minutes, the Polaroid was 30 minutes. I'd wait, peel it apart, shake it dry, and examine it with a loupe. I usually groaned – they almost never looked good. The colors were way off, the contrast was muddy, but they were a map, and I learned to interpret them. That single, chemical smear told me exactly how far I was from my goal.

The actual lighting was a physical performance. It took me many years to learn I had to wear dark clothes – and I built custom shades to hide the light source. I carried a massive collection of colored gels, often layering them to create custom hues.

I would lock the shutter open, start my timer, and step into the frame. I needed to see the image building in my mind to know what to do next and to avoid overexposing sections. By moving constantly in dark clothes, I remained invisible; only the light painted onto the rubble registered. The process was painfully slow. A long night in an alley often produced only three exposures.

Eventually I got good at this, but film is unforgiving. Sometimes, thinking I'd nailed it, I'd see the results days later and realize I had missed. That meant the shot was almost certainly gone – the location usually lost to time before I could return.



Polaroid test shots, various locations, 1997–2017
The only way to see in the dark with film.

The studio was and is whatever I can carry.
50-year-old Hasselblad, colored gels, flashlights, and gaffer tape



Full Theatre

Peak spectacle (2010–2020)
Ruins and alleys as grand stage



Lighting Alleys & Ruins no. 137, *Portal*. Photo: Robert Stolarik / *The New York Times* / Redux, 2011

Dub Stop

I'm out with my friend, a filmmaker and music video editor, when we find this spot. The stop sign has "dub" scrawled above it, *Dub Stop*, a perfect title, a wordplay on "dubstep," the music genre. I show it to him, and while I start planning my lights he begins telling me a story. Normally I tune out everything when I'm shooting, but what he says is too insane to ignore.

He used to edit rap videos for Chicago's music scene. For two years he lived in that world, until one night he almost didn't make it out. A director brought him a project that was way overdue – he was hired to finish the cut in one night. By morning the producer stormed in with two men. When he said it wasn't ready, the producer went ballistic. He yanked a gun and pressed it to the director's temple. Then he turned it on him.

"You better explain why this video still ain't done."

He tells me how he froze, certain this was it. The director had burned through the money and lied, and now he was implicated. He talked his way out, barely. The producer put the gun down, he finished the edit, and he walked away from that world for good.

As he tells me this, I'm moving through the underpass, painting the rusted beams and scarred columns with light. I'm half listening, half working, but *Dub Stop* turns out to be one of my strongest photographs.

Maybe his close call seeps into the picture, or maybe it doesn't. The danger and ugliness is all there, I just made it pretty.

Dub Stop location during the day, 2025





Alleys & Ruins no. 134, *Dub Stop*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Chicago, IL, 2010. 11:00 pm, 7-minute exposure

Hard Rock

I scout this spot under the Eagle Avenue Bridge at dusk. It has a perfect view of the downtown skyline with perfect urban decay surrounding it. The only problem is the industrial work lights mounted on poles, currently raised and dark. If they turn on tonight, I'm screwed. I decide to wait.

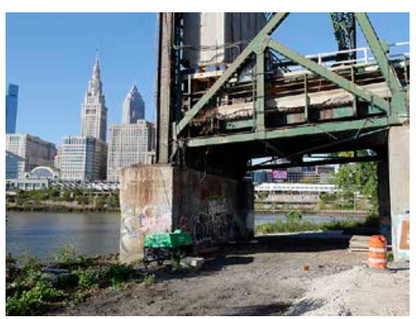
"Hey! Hey you!" I spin around, expecting to see a security guard or police but nobody's there. "What are you doing down here?" I scan the desolate Flats, this long stretch of isolated, run-down industrial waste. There's not another soul in sight. It could be coming from any number of hidden corners or bushes. My neck tightens.

Then I hear it again. "Hey! What are you doing?" The voice calls out three more times over the next hour – each time, I search. Each time, nothing. The darkness finally settles in and the work lights stay dead. I'm relieved, mostly because I can leave.

The next night, my new friends John and Maryann arrive for the shoot. Behind them is their freakin' huge Rottweiler. Now I can relax. I run a Polaroid test in the darkness and it looks good. I shoot four 8-minute exposures, varying each one. I show John how to work a spotlight through trees 30 feet away, creating warm shadows across the wall. And I walk in front of the camera with handheld flashes, adding green light to the steel girders, and blue to the ceiling. The colors bleed and layer beautifully.

Beneath this bridge, where I stood wondering about that invisible voice, 40 artists once created a surreal, collaborative outdoor gallery: the Temple of Lost Love. For 11 years starting in 1991, they turned this spot into a shrine. They stenciled skeletons, hung mobiles made from electric guitars, and mosaicked the pillars with glass, holy cards, and candy trinkets. – much of it faintly visible in the photo. It was a place of midnight fires, cryptic messages, and beautiful chaos. In 2002, the city mistook it for vandalism and painted over everything. Eleven years of layered art were erased under a flat gray. They apologized later, but the Temple was gone.

The decommissioned Eagle Avenue Bridge, 2025, slated for demolition, sits on an undeveloped part of the Cleveland Flats





Alleys & Ruins no. 135, *Hard Rock*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Cleveland, OH, 2010. 10:00 pm, 8-minute exposure

Motor City

The first time I see the epic ruins of the former Packard Plant, I can't even think about a photo. All I do is explore the monumental decay, the largest industrial ruin in the US, 3.5 million square feet. When I finally get to thinking about shooting, there's one obvious spot: the skybridge crossing over East Grand Boulevard.

I return at night with my friend Anna and set up. While creating the Polaroid test shot, the situation heats up quickly. This is not a great part of town, and several cars, a couple candy-painted sedans on big rims, drive by slowly, the guys staring closely at me, Anna, and the gear. Some of the passengers don't look too pleased with the sight. A few more minutes of this and I decide to cancel the shoot. There's no way I can get a good shot if I'm tense and rushing the process. Plus, we could die.

Months later I call on my old friend, Tom Holt, the baseball-bat-wielding fire department lieutenant who helped me with *Smash* six years earlier. He's happy to hear from me, and eager to go on another shoot. A couple of days later I'm back at the ruins. Tom shows up brandishing a big gun in his holster and wearing his police-looking fireman's badge on a lanyard around his neck. Now, whenever a car drives by full of curious onlookers, Tom stands firm, hands on his hips, clearly exposing his badge and gun. His laser-focused stare is impressive, and now I'm relaxed. I calmly frame the heart of the plant and pull out my lights for the extensive work I need to do for such an enormous scene.

I walk down the dark, desolate road on the right side several times, firing bursts of blue, then returning to add bursts of green and magenta higher up – in the end having lit up the whole side of the plant. This is followed by lighting the sign with a spotlight. I even light the inside of the bridge by lighting from the back. And finally I light the foreground pillars with a blue flash. This final pop of light results in an error, revealing myself holding the blue light that created the color. It's an accidental self-portrait.

Accidental self-portrait while lighting with a blue strobe, invisible, just how I liked it.



After the shoot, while we're standing there looking



Alleys & Ruins no. 136, *Motor City*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Detroit, MI, 2010. 9:30 pm, 8-minute exposure

at this marvel of disintegration, Tom leans against his truck and gives me the story.

"This place used to employ 40,000, now it's just slowly burning itself to death. Fires happen here all the damn time, 'specially Devil's Night before Halloween. Arsonists just do it for kicks, y'know? We used to come every single time, put 'em out. Real pain in the ass. Then one day one of our boys gets injured puttin' out a goddamn fire in there, and we all agreed, that was the last time. We never came back after that. Now if we get a call about a blaze at the plant, we tell 'em, sorry, can't do it. City just lets it burn.

"Y'know what kills me? The alarm goes off at three in the morning, we gotta rush out. Your adrenaline's pumpin' 'cause you have to treat every call like there's a family trapped inside, right? We risk our necks to get there fast. But then we pull up and it's just another empty shell that hasn't been lived in for 20 years. Some kid with a lighter or some bored guy angry at the world set it off. It's just garbage burnin'.

"We still gotta put it out, though, 'cause if the wind shifts, those sparks hit the house next door where a grandmother's sleepin'. So we're out there freezin', riskin' injuries to save a buildin' that isn't worth a dime."

He looks at my bags of gear and smiles at me. "I'm glad someone still has use for this place."



Walter P. Reuther Lib., Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State U., 1956



Photographer unknown c. 1990s



2010



2015



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2025

Portal

I was in New York for my *Alleys & Ruins* solo show at the Condé Nast building in Times Square. *The New York Times* wanted to document my night shoots, so a few days later I head out with Corey Kilgannon, a veteran city reporter, and photojournalist Robert Stolarik. In the first 10 minutes, Robert takes more photographs of me than exist from my entire life before that night.

We head to a spot I'd already staked out by the East River in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, across from Manhattan. A majestic location: remnants of one of the neighborhood's old shipping piers, and the skeletal remains of a dock that had served the waterfront since the 1800s. Behind it all, the iconic Manhattan skyline.

I set up, figure out my lighting and exposure, and shoot a test Polaroid that requires a heavy dose of my own lighting. After two minutes of processing, I peel away the sealing strip on the instant film – which doesn't seem so instant in the digital age – and the shot looks good. I'm always excited when I know I'm zeroing in on a good photograph, but especially tonight: there's an audience, and they're taking notes. I show them the Polaroid, thrilled at the picture I'm constructing. I get the film ready and prepare my lights for the actual shot.

Just then, red and blue flashing lights wash across the ruins, and a siren gives one short, ear-splitting bark.

Oh, I forgot to mention: to get to this location, we had crawled through an opening in a chain-link fence. We were clearly trespassing.

Portal location by day, Queens, 2011



An officer has stepped out of his car and is yelling at us. "Hey! What the hell you think you're doing? Come out of there – now!"

Corey volunteers to speak to them – maybe his Times credentials can buy us a break. I keep the camera on the tripod, hoping for the best, but he returns with bad news. If we're not gone immediately, we're getting cuffed and locked up for the night.



Alleys & Ruins no. 137, *Portal*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Queens, NY, 2011. 12:15 am, 20-minute exposure

It's a heartbreaking moment and I'm pissed. I had spent two days driving around, staking out dozens of locations, taking notes, digital pictures… This spot, through the fence by the East River, was a treasure.

I wasn't mad at the cops. I was mad because it was a form of death. I wanted to give life to this image, another redeemed ruin for my soul, but instead it would lie buried and lost forever.

I'm miserable as I disassemble my gear, and Corey notices. Then I see that he's smiling. "You don't understand, this is great," he says. "The story just got way better – the cops kicking us out?" It's something of a consolation, but not really what I'm looking for.

We pack up and leave because neither of us wants to take a ride in a cop car, and we head to another good location I'd found, in nearby Queens, which in the end becomes a bonus: Alleys & Ruins no. 137, *Portal*.

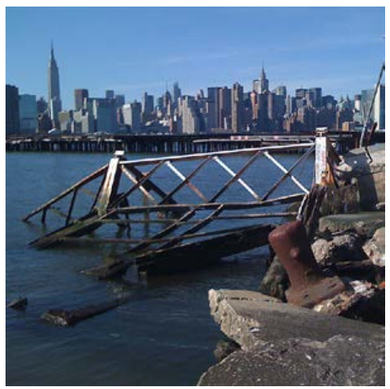
I have to leave New York the next day, but a month later I'm back and the first night I head straight to this location. My heart is pounding out of my chest because I know how fast things change, and there's a very good chance all the ruins by the river are gone. I squeeze through the fence again, anxiously looking around. If the same cop catches me, I'm totally screwed.

I walk up to the location and I'm elated – it's all just as it was! I quickly throw my tripod up, frame the shot, and grab my lights.

This time, no cops. No interruptions. Just the river, the ruins, the skyline glittering behind them, and the quiet click of the camera's shutter.

Ten minutes later, it's done. Alleys & Ruins no. 138, *New York, New York*.

New York, New York at low tide, 2011. The location behind the fence – the one that got away, until it didn't. The pier ruins were gone within a year.





Alleys & Ruins no. 138, *New York, New York*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Brooklyn, NY, 2011. 9:00 pm, 10-minute exposure



Alleys & Ruins no. 139, *Tracks*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Chicago, IL, 2011. 10:00 pm, 15-minute exposure



Alleys & Ruins no. 152, *Carnival*
Digital composite, multiple exposures
Dallas, TX, 2018. 11:30 pm

Dead Weight

A new friend agrees to join me on a night shoot in Dallas. I've found what appears to be an abandoned semi-trailer deep in a grungy alley and a second set of eyes is a good thing.

I show up and wait for him to arrive. Ed rolls up and gets out of his car. "I hope you don't mind, I brought some company."

He opens the back door and four kids bolt out of it. They go running down the alley laughing and screaming. Turns out tonight is his turn to take care of the kids, so like any good father, he brings them to a dark alley in the seedy part of town.

The four boys range from 9 to 16 and they're thrilled to be part of the shoot, especially since it's so late.

It's usually quiet when I work, but tonight will clearly be different. The kids are a boisterous bunch and they never stop moving or laughing. It's the first and only time I've had little kids roaming these dark corners with me. But they understand to not run around in front of the camera, and that works for me. Though I wonder what his ex-wife will say when she finds out.

I get to work, lighting the truck, and it gets quiet. This has grabbed the boys' attention. But then I need to crawl under the truck to blast the green light, and the howls of laughter start up again, louder than before.

Dead Weight location by day, Dallas, 2011. Locals told me the semi had been sitting there for years.



I take four shots, crawling under each time, and they lose it every time.

We finish and it's after midnight. The kids are more excited than when they arrived. I don't think dad will be getting much sleep tonight.



Alleys & Ruins no. 140, *Dead Weight*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Dallas, TX, 2011. 11:45 pm, 12-minute exposure

Cotton Belt

Wandering the decimated northeast side of St Louis, I see the hulking Cotton Belt Depot building, an abandoned freight warehouse. It's gigantic and weirdly proportioned, way longer than a typical city block but only 30 feet wide.

I walk toward it and stumble upon a huge tent city. Tents, tarps, shopping carts, blankets, scattered belongings, and dozens of people living there. They've erected a big sign that reads, "Welcome to Hopeville." It's a city for those consumed by alcohol, drugs, or mental illness, or for those who simply ran out of luck. They have one thing in common: they're all clinging on.

I don't enter Hopeville but I later learn some details.

The "Mayor" is a woman they call Big Mama. She's the no-nonsense leader who settles arguments, speaks for the community, and cooks giant meals after everyone chips in raw materials. She landed here after being laid off, without enough saved to keep paying rent.

At least one resident is an artist, apparently a talented one. He's always eager to show his new drawings but he has to hide his supplies in nearby abandoned buildings so they don't get stolen.

I arrive at night with a group to shoot the depot. It's an absolutely desolate part of town, isolated and vulnerable. While working I feel uneasy, and a little guilty, thinking of the huge encampment on the other side of the building. A hundred people clinging on, while I'm on this side photographing my fear of becoming one of them. And yet, what am I to do?

Cotton Belt by day, 2008. The depot has been abandoned since 1959. As of 2026, people still live inside and around it.
Photo: Sublunar Photography





Alleys & Ruins no. 141, *Cotton Belt*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
St Louis, MO, 2011. 10:30 pm, 22-minute exposure

Reckoning

Three days after Detroit declares bankruptcy – the largest municipal collapse in US history – I'm back in the city, prowling one of its endless abandoned buildings late at night.

By sheer luck, I'm not alone. The day before, I'd met Officer Nate MacRae, and to my surprise he offered to come along. In all my years of shooting my *Alleys & Ruins*, I've never once taken a cop.

When I tell him I plan to head inside with my lights, his eyes bug out, laser-focused on me. "Hold on! Are you serious? You could be attacked in there!"

Hand on his gun, he enters first and I follow a few steps behind. The sharp beam from his flashlight creates a stark view. The interior is straight out of a horror movie, and I snap a couple digital pictures. He scans the corridors, aims his light into the different rooms and around shadowy corners until he's satisfied. "Okay," he says. "It's clear. And if anyone's hiding, you'll hear them moving in this debris. I'll be right outside."

As we step out of the darkness, I wonder why I've never taken a cop before. Everything is so safe with him here. But I know the answer: it would be cheating. I could hardly call my process guerrilla style if I have the city's finest watching my back. Part of the draw of my work, and part of my interest in it, is that there's true drama in the night of my shoots. When I started the series, I would go alone. Eventually I often brought one or two people. I liked the intimacy and the connection to my setting, the way my senses needed to heighten in these run-down locations. And I always believed the strange blend of serenity and tension would somehow be reflected in the final image. I had to be part of what was around me, not just a detached observer. But my experience with Nate is unique. He's superb at watching my back, and for one night, I'm willing to trade a little adrenaline for more peace of mind.

Westside Cold Storage building, 2013.
Demolished, and in 2025, an empty lot



The ruin itself is nothing remarkable for Detroit,



Alleys & Ruins no. 143, *Reckoning*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Detroit, MI, 2013. 12:00 am, 15-minute exposure

just another carcass among thousands. This one had been the Westside Cold Storage Company, its main entrance now crumbling, its lobby splayed open to the night.

Inside, just to the left, is or was someone's home: a mattress, an old recliner, clothes and shoes scattered in heaps. While I set up outside, a man shows up and begins pacing nervously back and forth about 30 feet away. He has no shirt, and what's left of his pants are torn-up rags. Sometimes he crouches and stares at blades of grass or at the fire hydrant. He never speaks, never comes closer. By the time I leave, I feel guilty. I assume I'd been shooting in his home, and he had no power to stop us. All he could do was watch with dread, wondering who the hell was stomping all over his stuff.

The building carries its own tragedy. Just a year earlier, a fire gutted much of the structure on the opposite end from our shoot. Police believe scrappers with a blow-torch sparked it accidentally. The blaze spread too fast and one man, trapped inside, was forced to the rooftop. Witnesses told reporters they saw him engulfed in flames before he leapt from three stories to his death. Even now, a year later, the walls still breathe smoke, the stench of damp ash and burned wiring seared into the concrete.

Home of the man pacing outside





Reckoning location the next day

Nate's flashlight sweeping for danger
as I followed behind



Superhuman

I'm approached by Horace, an odd looking fellow. He's wearing a suit jacket with the sleeves torn off and has no shirt underneath. His face, chest, and neck are scarred with dozens of tiny lines from many small cuts, apparently inflicted years ago.

He tells me he's just gotten out of prison where he met a superhuman being who taught him to connect with his mind and with his own superpowers. Horace then tells me he has himself achieved superhuman abilities. He attempts to describe an unnatural back flip he did recently, 20 feet in the air, landing on a rooftop, while escaping a band of pursuers.

I ask him if he can show me anything right now. "I can't demonstrate to you my powers – they only work when I'm in danger or when they are truly necessary."

The ruins of the Taylor Electric Supply Warehouse in 2014, from video. A massive fire in 2006 left behind bare walls that street artists claimed as their own. The city painted over them repeatedly, but the artists kept coming back. The building was demolished in 2015.





Alleys & Ruins no. 146, *Electric*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Portland, OR, 2014. 11:00 pm, 30-minute exposure

The Viper

I meet Sam the Man and his brother Chuck the Magnificent while searching for a location to shoot in Detroit. I'd been exploring the 2-mile-long Dequindre Cut, a one-time rail route, carved below street level in the 1920s. The Cut was another epic example of Detroit's ruins. I had seen it a few times over the years but was always too afraid to shoot it. It was a valley of abandoned buildings and bridge underpasses that at night was pitch black and desolate to the extreme. Lighting it would be a huge undertaking, drawing attention to me in a remote, obscured location that just seemed too dangerous, even by Detroit's standards. I'd hoped that finally, tonight, I could at last muster the courage to shoot it.

When I dropped by to take a look, it was being demolished! Construction and demolition trucks sat parked and empty, and the cut was being flattened – but the devastation on either side was untouched. There was one last remaining piece of blight at the northern tip, and I knew it wouldn't last. I ventured there and began exploring.

Crossing a bridge over the Cut, I find Sam and Chuck sitting by the road. Chuck is actually curled up on a couch and half asleep. But Sam is friendly and wants to talk. He sees me looking closely at everything. "Hey what you lookin for?" I tell him I'm looking for a place to photograph later at night.

"You gonna take pictures?" he says laughing. "Ain't nothin to take pictures of here."

I laugh too, and explain briefly what I want to do. And I ask what the gang situation is like around here. Sam has a unique way of breaking up words in the middle, and adding emphasis to the second half. "Well, I'm the care-Taker… been here 30 years, this is my neighborhood. Seen it all change – used to play ball on the street. I can give you access – you take all the pictures you want! – just buy me a beer!"

The couch, from video, a few hours before I shot it.



I tell him I'm going to explore a little and if I see something I want to shoot tonight, I'll buy him a beer. I walk



Alleys & Ruins no. 147, *Dequindre Couch*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Detroit, MI, 2015. 11:00 pm, 30-minute exposure

through the ruins of an old lambskin factory and I'm not surprised to find a thousand great locations. But one in particular grabs me: a once elegant couch sits quietly among the rubble, framed beautifully by a literal hole in the wall. Behind it, the interior of the building is now a budding forest.

I walk back to Sam and Chuck. "Here's five dollars," I say, giving Sam the bill. Excited, he says, "Hey that'll get me three beers! You got full access man! And don't worry – everyone here knows me. I'm the vi-Per. Ain't no one gonna mess with you." He gives me a fist bump and introduces himself: He's Sam the Man, always has been. His inseparable brother is Chuck the Magnificent.

I tell him Chuck looks comfortable, and he says his brother is sad because his girlfriend died recently. I say I'm sorry and ask how she died.

"She died because of ob-Session."

"Obsession?"

He hunches over and looks at the ground. "She was stabbed 37 times by a guy… who was obsessed with her. He loved her, but she had a boyfriend. So he killed her, right here in front, right on the street. *Thirty-seven times,*" he emphasizes, looking at me. "He don't like to talk about it. It was his girlfriend. Killed her right on Mother's Day too."

That was only four months ago. He nods. "Mmm-hmm"

I ask him what he means by caretaker.

"I sleep right in there," he says, pointing to a doorway of the building I'll be shooting in later. Sam tells me as if it's the most natural thing in the world. "That's where I live. This is my spot – me an my brother, right here. Thirty years. This been my hang out."

Sam the Man and his brother, 2015



"What about winter?" I ask, thinking about the approaching bulldozers.

"What about winter?" He begins to shiver. "It gets cooold in the winter, man, it gets cooold! Tell me about it!" he laughs again.

"What do you do?"



A panoramic view constructed from multiple video stills to capture the entire expanse of the ruins – the old Lamb Skin Co. and its surroundings. The abandoned couch was under the collapsed loading dock roof, visible on the right.

"Blan-Kets man! Aaa.lot.aaa.blan-Kets!"

"Looks like you got this whole place all to yourself."

"Me and my brother… and lots a cats." He leans back and looks up as if remembering something. "Thirty years…"

I tell Sam I'm going to look around a bit more. He gives me another fist bump and I head off back to the ruins of the old Lamb Skin Co. I shoot a quick video while waiting for my friend Nate to arrive, nearly impaling my foot on a three-inch nail in the rubble. Then I'm back at the couch, planning my lighting. As always, I want to make this place glow. And then I wonder who sleeps on the couch? Is it Chuck? Am I taking over his space? I groan.

I notice behind me, Sam the Man is walking down the alley. "You going to get your beers?" I call out.

"You know it!" he yells, fist in the air, and laughs.

By the time the shoot is over, it's near midnight. Nate and I pack up and walk out to the street. Chuck is fast asleep on the same couch, but Sam is not around. Maybe he's in his bed. I dig into my pocket and pull out another fiver. I roll it up and jam it into a crack in the chair – a little morning surprise for the brothers. It's the least I can do for the Viper.

Inside Sam's home, 2015. The doorway he pointed to when he said, "I sleep right in there."



Dwelling

I'm snooping around an unusual pile of trash at night in Chicago. A shot could be anywhere.

"What are you doing here?"

I turn around. A police cruiser has stopped in the middle of this vacant dead-end street. The cop has the door open, one foot on the ground.

"I'm just looking for something to photograph."

The cop squints her eyes, not sure what to make of my response. Without taking her eyes off me, she says, "George, everything okay?"

From beneath this heap I hear a muffled, "Yeah, I'm good."

Then I notice there's some order to it. Is this a homemade dwelling?

"You best be movin' on," says the cop, and I turn back toward her.

"Uh, yeah, no problem," I say, nodding. I start walking toward a nearby, dark parking lot in my continuing quest. The cop gets back in her vehicle, does a slow U-turn and drives away.

I keep searching in the parking lot for a possible shot when I hear a noise. I look back toward the trash heap 50 feet away and sure enough, it's a home. A hairy, ragged figure – George, I presume – is stepping out for some air through a makeshift door that blended in with the heap.

He looks at me and I raise my hand, saying hello. He raises his hand and I go back to my searching.

Later, I would think about that cop. She knew his name. She knew where he lived. She was looking out for him.

Crawford Steel – where this was shot – is covered in celebrated murals. I was more interested in the dumpster at this ugly corner.





Alleys & Ruins no. 149, *Dumpster Dive*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Chicago, IL, 2016. 10:30 pm, 30-minute exposure



Alleys & Ruins no. 144, *Light Circus*
Houston, TX, 2013. 11:00 pm, 15-minute exposure

Alleys & Ruins no. 148, *Dive Bar*
Chicago, IL, 2015. 11:00 pm, 15-minute exposure





Alleys & Ruins no. 150, *Primo*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Philadelphia, PA, 2017. 10:30 pm, 20-minute exposure

Razor

I'm preparing for the shoot that would become *Razor*, mounting my 50-year-old Hasselblad to my equally old Gitzo tripod when two guys come out of the shadows and surprise us.

"What is this, man? What y'all think you doin' back here?" they look around at us, at our gear, and the other guy says, "The hell y'all settin' up back here?"

We freeze – my heart rate goes up a notch. We're in Harrowgate, one of Philly's most notoriously crime-ridden neighborhoods. And deep in a completely secluded dead-end back alley. I'm hoping they're not hostile.

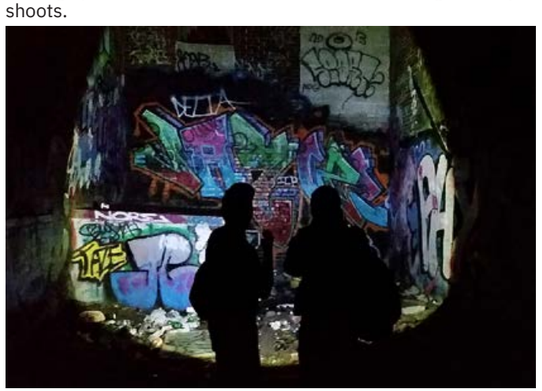
I glance at my companions and they're looking back nervously. I raise a hand and try to stay calm. "Hey, sorry. We're just setting up for a photo shoot. I'm gonna light up the alley and take a picture," I say smiling and friendly. "No harm meant."

"Photos? At this hour? Man, we saw them flashes. Thought somebody was messin' with our spot."

The air is clearing and the other guy says, "Yeah, nah, we cool. We got a music studio right there in that buildin'. We do beats, vocals, all that."

Turns out they're both chill and friendly. One of the guys with me, Andrew, wants to check out their studio and they're happy to oblige. They head off and I resume preparing the shot.

Setting up to shoot *Razor*. This is how dark it often got on my shoots.



The lighting scheme usually comes quickly to me. Aside from the exposure times, placing the tripod and locking the camera in place is often what takes the longest.

I finally lock it all down, and click the shutter open. It's going to be a 35-minute exposure and I'll want to do at least three so I know I've got



Alleys & Ruins no. 151, *Razor*
Kodak Ultra Color 100, 120 negative
Philadelphia, PA, 2017. 10:00 pm, 35-minute exposure



Scouting Razor earlier that day. The razor wire was right there, I just didn't see it.

it right. I'm shooting film after all, and there are no second chances. I'll be in Chicago when I finally see what I have.

I grab my lights and attach the colored gels. I flip the black hoodie over my head and step in front of the camera to begin lighting. After 35 minutes, this one is in the can. I click the shutter off, and prepare for shot number two.

At around the 20-minute mark, I'm walking backwards and lighting the wall on the right, when my left leg gets tangled up in something. I don't get what's happening because it's too dark, so I shut off the light and shake my leg to release whatever's there. Then I feel a sharp sting followed by a rush of warm liquid streaming down my leg. It's a short, but effective coil of razor wire.

Within five seconds my shoe is full of blood.

I head back to the camera and put black velvet over the lens to pause the exposure. Then I sit down and pull my pant leg up, and I'm horrified by what I see. There's a big gash so deep that my muscle is showing and the blood continues to leak out. Andrew and his friend Dorian volunteer to find a pharmacy and bring back supplies.

Once they leave I snap back and realize the shot is only halfway finished. And this is only my second exposure! I grab my lights, remove the black velvet from the lens, and get back to work. First I have to orient myself – what have I already lit. Ten minutes later, shot number two is done.

The guys haven't arrived yet and the wound and loss of blood is making me dizzy. I really don't think I have another option. I was hoping to have bandaged the wound by now, but I know my leg will heal, and it's now or never for the shot.

I slump back to the camera and click the shutter for exposure number three. I'm in a bit of a haze as I begin lighting and my blood-filled shoe keeps squishing with every step. I've never done a shot while being so injured and it's not pleasant, but the adrenaline keeps the pain at bay.

Soon after I've completed the shot, the guys return with urgently needed medical supplies. Being photographers, Andrew and Dorian can't resist taking photos of my wound. Looking at them later, they are gruesome and reminiscent of crime-scene photos.

I clean up as well as I can, wrap the wound in a bandage, and start packing up my gear. It's midnight and I head off to find an emergency room.

The razor wire that cut me, lit beautifully



Boom!

I'm on the outskirts of Miami's Wynwood District where I've found an incredible abandoned building that local graffiti artists Trek6 and Ishmael have transformed into a giant, realistic boombox. I know immediately that if I light paint it, I can make it glow and come to life in a way daylight simply can't capture.

Wynwood might be the coolest place in the city. It's a neighborhood wrapped in stunning murals, but it's an island, and this location is definitely off the island. As day turns to night, the vibe shifts from happy tourists to sketchy reality very quickly.

Three people had expressed interest in joining me to help with the shoot, but when I told them precisely where I would be setting up, everyone bailed. I call each of them, pleading.

At this point, it isn't just about security. My lighting process has become so complex that I physically need help just to create the photos. My wife, Nikki, has become my essential partner, someone who knows my work so well she can anticipate and provide guidance, but she's back in Chicago.

I'm standing alone on the street with my tripod set up, staring at the boombox. I've got my lighting figured out, wondering how the hell I'm going to pull this off solo.

Then, my phone rings. It's one of the people who bailed and she's changed her mind.

She arrives, and we get to work. The shoot goes flawlessly and we turn the building into a glowing, vibrant monument against the deep night. The resulting photograph could easily sit with either my dark work or my bright work. It is the perfect hybrid, a fitting end to the series.

It's February 20, 2020. A few weeks later, the world shut down.

The location by day on the outskirts of Wynwood. The abandoned structure had been transformed into a giant boombox, setting the stage for the final image of the series.





Alleys & Ruins no. 153, *Boom!*
Digital composite, multiple exposures
Miami, FL, 2020. 8:00 pm

The Anatomy of a Collapse

For 35 years, I was in the dark about what happened to me in that office in 1987. I was a happy, outgoing person one day, and a shattered, non-functional man the next. It felt like a bomb went off in my head for no reason. But it wasn't for no reason.

What I experienced was a catastrophic nervous system collapse, a trauma response now known as *complex PTSD.*

While classic PTSD often comes from a single, horrific event, my experience was like being exposed to acid rain for years. It was a "constant drip" of smaller, repeated wounds that wore my system down to its breaking point.

Untitled, 1990. Hollow period, 1990–1991. 35mm slide.



Think of a house alarm. A healthy alarm goes off when there's a real intruder, and then it shuts off when the danger is gone. But if, for 17 years, someone is constantly rattling the windows, jiggling the doorknobs, and whispering threats from outside, the alarm system becomes frayed. It learns that the world is a place of constant, low-grade threat.

That's what my childhood was like. The social alienation, the personal humiliations, and learning at home not to speak up, because others had suffered more.

To survive, I became incredibly skilled at ignoring the alarm. I suppressed the anxiety, pushed down the fear, and built a happy, outgoing life on top of this faulty wiring. My system may have been more fragile to begin with, but in the end, it was simply overloaded.

The VP's question, "Your name is?" was the final, devastating blow. It was the intruder who went beyond rattling the window and smashed it, directly targeting the core of my identity. In that moment, my entire nervous system – frayed from decades of stress – finally exploded.

The aftermath was a system stuck in the "ON" position. My brain's primitive survival instincts took over, shutting down the parts responsible for language, social engagement, and creativity. That's why I couldn't speak, why I felt disconnected from my own body, and why my artistic "vision" simply vanished. My body was flooded with stress hormones, leading to a cascade of physical symptoms: the clenched jaw, the inability to get a full breath, the feeling of being hunted every minute of the day.

The damage went deep into my physiology. My *interoception* became dysregulated – my body lost the ability to read its own signals correctly. Eating, one of the most basic human functions, became a trigger. For years I had to organize my entire life around *not* eating. I went hungry often, starving myself for social events because I knew the consequences: if I ate even a small snack, my anxiety would spike instantly, my throat would tighten, and I'd barely be able to speak.



Untitled, 1990. The Hollow period, 1990–1991. 35mm slide.

But the damage to my voice went further. For roughly twenty years, my throat would often seize when I tried to speak, a condition called psychogenic dysphonia. It came and went, but it was always worst with one word: my name. Something below my Adam's apple would clamp down as if my body had decided that "Xavier" was the one word it would not release. I'd stall with an "uhh" before the name came out tight and strangled. I used to think it was the sound itself, something about the letter X my damaged system couldn't produce. But it was never the sound. It was the name – mocked, hidden behind a single letter for years, and asked for by the VP in the moment everything shattered.

It became so painful that I sought Botox injections directly into my larynx. The toxin paralyzed the clenching muscles, and the relief was immediate, but for months after each injection I could only whisper. I took the injections several times, trading my voice for relief from pain and stress. But I had to stop. It didn't exactly help me earn a living.

But what's astonishing is the dysphonia never once appeared in the alleys. Not once in twenty-five years. In the one place my nervous system was calibrated to my surroundings, my throat was free.

What followed was as much a psychological problem as it was a physiological injury. My nervous system needed to be taught, slowly and painstakingly, that *the war was finally over.*

But in 1987, none of this language even existed. "C-PTSD" wouldn't be floated as a term until 1992, and the World Health Organization didn't officially recognize it until 2018. Even now, the American Psychiatric Association still doesn't include it in their diagnostic manual.

The dozen psychiatrists I saw over my life were working with a faulty map. They were treating "depression and anxiety" because the actual disease wasn't in their rulebook. Only while researching this book, and re-examining my breakdown, did I finally learn the cause and its name.

Because I went largely untreated, I was left to find my own remedy. I had to invent my own therapy, and teach my nervous system to stand down. It was a medicine I found by accident, and it was waiting for me in dark city corners.

Part 5. 2014–2025

Letting Go.



This Floating World, 2010, from the Crystal series

In the final years of shooting the *Alleys & Ruins*, I had pretty much mastered my techniques. I could turn the most blighted, frightening locations into an image people wanted to enter. What had started as a desperate survival mechanism was now a solid, foolproof device.

I no longer obsessed over the monster. It sat in a corner of my mind, broken, diminished, capable only of the occasional swipe.

My final images were arguably the best in the series. I could have continued, knowing how much stronger this body of work would get. But the desperate need to shoot had faded. The Alleys had done their work.

When I started doing art festivals, I assumed nobody would be interested in night photos of bleak urban corners. I couldn't have been more wrong. The public hadn't seen anything like them. And when I showed them in galleries and museums, they stirred that world's imagination too. I remember Chad Wolfond, the director of Lonsdale Gallery, shaking his head: "I'm so high on your art, I don't know how you do it." The work was a hit with the public and with the critics.

In those alleys, my nervous system was on red alert, but for the first time, it made sense. The danger was real: someone could step out of the shadows at any moment. The hypervigilance that had tortured me for years in grocery stores and dinner parties finally had a legitimate job, and the effect was instant relief. Physical fear – real, immediate, rational – put the psychological fear on pause. The irrational, sourceless terror that never shut off simply went quiet, and in its absence, I could breathe. I could think. I could relax. The most dangerous places in the city gave me the best peace I knew.

The work forced me to confront my deepest fear: ending up homeless in these very places, the fate my father had once lived. But standing in the shadow of that fear night after night, transforming it into something else, I built an escape hatch I didn't know I was building.

I came to recognize alleys and ruins as the outer manifestation of my inner landscape: ugly, reviled, terrifying. For the first time, my outside world matched my inside world, and that recognition brought an unexpected calm. The endless fight to pretend I was okay... the exhausting masquerade simply stopped. In a place that was already broken, I didn't have to hide anymore.

But I was able to transform that darkness into something else only because the light inside me had never fully died. Each time I walked into a ruin and walked out with something beautiful, I was teaching my nervous system a new story: it was possible to enter the darkness and not just survive, but create. The old pathways of fear got a little weaker; the new ones got stronger.

Night after night, using my lights, I was defusing the spaces I feared would become home. Only then could I walk through on my own terms. I was taking the backdrop of my worst nightmare and rewiring it, turning a future where I slept under loading docks and fire escapes and crevices, into a stage I controlled. Each time I did this, I felt a part of my trauma flutter away.

Maybe it was the alleys; maybe it was just time, or the meds, or the people who carried me. I'll never know for certain. But I know what I felt walking out of those places.

The Alleys also gave me control. In a life where I often felt helpless, here was a world I could master, by composing the frame, and bringing light to the darkness exactly how I wanted. The final images were entirely my vision. Even the sheer physical exhaustion felt good.

But my lighting was so complete, the transformation so thorough, that when people looked at my photographs, they saw only the beauty. They didn't see the danger, the filth, the fear – the very things surrounding me as I worked. I had done to these places exactly what I had done to myself for decades: hidden the wreckage behind a surface so convincing that no one thought to look beneath it.

And the success that followed – the exhibitions, the press, the sales – rebuilt my shattered sense of self. But not into the old me. My shine had rusted. But rust has its own color, its own depth, a beauty the polish never had. I had become rusted chrome.

But there was always a ceiling. My work opened doors to curators and institutions, but my social anxiety ensured I could never make the lasting connections that turn access into real advancement. It was a truth I had to accept.

But I had found a workaround. The art fairs again were the solution: instant, direct, non-institutional. I was calm in these settings, in complete control of my success or failure. My sanity and self-reliance were more important than the endless pursuit of the traditional art world's hierarchy. It allowed me to build a career on my own terms – no teaching, no day job, no safety net, barely any connections. I rarely thought about it, but a man who once couldn't buy bread without his heart hammering had, with something bordering on the miraculous, made a living for decades doing the one thing he was told would never pay the rent. This was my hard-won independence.

After I'd broken the monster, I became disoriented. This battle had defined the majority of my life. At one time, the only thing that made sense to shoot, the only thing I identified with, was the ugliness and revulsion I found in dark gritty corners. But that long, arduous path had reached its end.

Shooting more *Alleys & Ruins* suddenly became the opposite of what I wanted to do. It was no longer what would keep me sane.

Sometimes I think about going back – to any of them – the alleys, the ruins, the dead-end lots in neighborhoods I never bothered to research. I did it for 25 years without hesitation. And now, just the thought of doing it once more gives me the chills. That's how I know I'm better. That man was insane.

Because of my success, because of the peace I had finally found in my personal life, and because my old light had made a return, one day in 2017, I had a thought: why don't I bring my lights and camera somewhere nice?

But this was a loaded question. For 25 years, the unwanted danger had been part of the ritual. The fear, the ugliness, the redemption, they were the context, and they were the engine. Standing on a beach with nothing to prove, I wondered if I'd have anything left to say.

I still wasn't interested in photographing obviously beautiful places. These new locations would be ordinary – places people walked by without a second thought. Not the frightening spaces I once feared would consume me, but overlooked ones, and now they would get the full force of my lighting.

I couldn't have picked a better time or place. I was planning a trip to Florida and it was a great opportunity to finally light something that wasn't falling apart.

This break with my past went deeper than just location. My 50-year-old Has-

selblad, which I had loved for its superior large negatives, was at last falling behind. The digital world had finally caught up. In 2017, after decades of being a film purist, I bought a digital Nikon. I was nervous – my ritual would need to change. Digital cameras couldn't handle my trademark 20 to 30-minute exposures, but the creative possibilities were immense.

My first attempt, on Sanibel Island, was a bust. I found a path under a canopy of trees framing the ocean beyond and I called it *The Road Less Traveled*. It took three attempts. Three 3:00 am wake-ups, failing badly at first. My new Nikon felt alien compared to the Hasselblad I'd mastered over decades. I was still emotionally disentangling myself from the Alleys & Ruins, but this image felt like a literal representation of my new path: a road leading into a brighter horizon.

On that final morning, while fighting to nail *The Road*, I saw a completely different composition – a vertical view of the same canopy. I treated it like a sketch and banged off one exposure, walking down the path with an orange spotlight, then switching to a flash and green gel. I did it all in almost complete darkness, only once, not really sure what I was doing. I didn't bother with a safety take.

The surprise came later. *The Road* was finally exactly what I had hoped for: a beautiful, symbolic image of my new journey. But that throwaway shot was a gem. I titled it *Pocket Bliss*.

It felt like a message from the universe: I had fought hard to crack the code of this new path. This night proved I was on the right one.

I called the series *Light Paintings* and it opened up a whole new world. Now I could shoot and light anything, not just beaches, but gardens and old toys and fairy houses and mushrooms.



Pocket Bliss, 2017

Above is the throwaway shot that became a gem. I was still struggling to master my new digital camera, but this was the night I finally "got it." While fighting to perfect *The Road Less Traveled*, below, I shot this single, unthinking frame in the exact same location to kill time. After two nights struggling to get one image, on my third night I somehow managed to juggle two.

The Road Less Traveled, 2017



I like to think this is where my art would have taken me eventually, with or without my crash. But realistically, I don't think that's true. I needed that drastic detour in 1987, where I was forced to develop my unique lighting techniques, to end up here.

By the time I gave it a name, light painting was everywhere. It had snuck up on me. For decades I'd been working it out alone, on film, one long exposure at a time, with no one to copy and no one to tell me I was doing it wrong.

The new world of possibilities gave me an incredible burst of creative energy. A year later, this new work had taken over. It felt odd at first, not having to look over my shoulder for danger as I worked.

The final image of this long journey is a photograph that straddles both worlds. Shot in 2020 on the outskirts of Miami, it sits comfortably between the dark and bright work.

Alleys & Ruins no. 153, *Boom!*

But declaring the war over doesn't mean the scars magically vanish. The monster was broken, crippled but not dead. It still lived in the corners of my wiring, and every once in a while, it would try to stand up.

The last time my crazy showed its full face was in 2014, in my Chicago studio, when a client came over to look at some of my art, something I had done countless times.

This was 27 years after the meltdown. I had established myself as a respected and successful artist, but I was having a stressful day. I knew something was off in my system, but I thought I could get by without my meds. I was always concerned about dependency, so I only took them when absolutely necessary. These anxiety surges had become rare and I thought I'd be okay.

The client arrived and the familiar cold wave of fear hit me. I felt the tarantula squirming on my head. I thought the little fuck was gone. But like in every horror movie – and that's what this was – the monster always comes back. I thought to myself, "Just fucking die!"

My client wanted to see a few options for a large piece. I stood there in sheer panic, almost catatonic. I started to speak but those invisible hands were squeezing my neck, making breathing and speaking difficult. A few strained words came out, my eyes bugging out like the Grim Reaper himself was standing in front of me.

The client looked at me with curiosity, disgust, and anger. No concern. Most clients would have asked if I was okay, in case I was having a stroke. This gentleman just said, "I don't have time for this," and walked out as if I'd shown him some kind of disrespect.

In classic fashion, I obsessed for days over the thought that someone out there thought I was crazy. I needed to put things right. If he could only see what a great guy I was, he might understand there was nothing strange about me. Nothing at all.

I called him a few days later, but once someone had seen my crazy side, I couldn't act normal around them. The call went to voicemail and I left a rambling, incoherent confirmation that yes, this guy is cuckoo. I hung up, took a deep breath, and with decades of experience with my damaged self, I shook it off, straightened my back, and got on with my day.

That night I had plans to go out with friends. In earlier years, an emotional flashback like this would have led to a downward spiral that put me in bed for a week. Instead, I kept my plans. I saw my friends, had a terrific time, laughed my

ass off, and went to bed with a smile. I had learned how to turn off the alarm.

But that night in 2014 was a reminder. The breakdown decades earlier wasn't something I simply got over; the condition had left permanent marks on my wiring. I thought of the man hiding in the crevice – my life today is a miracle when I consider the paths I could have taken.

The incident made me wonder: could I finally confront the monster head on? It occurred to me I'd never actually seen it, or its favorite weapon, the tarantula. This was a creature I needed to confront face-to-face.

I turned the lights off, sat down, and in the dark I closed my eyes and tried to summon him. I wanted to visualize the enemy that had hunted me for decades. I looked for the fangs, the claws, the dark shape in the corner. I wanted to scream at it, to banish it for the thousand times it had attacked me. But the harder I looked, the more the image dissolved.

There was no demon standing there, there was only me. *I was the monster*.

All these years I'd been in a hate-filled battle with myself. And not just myself, but my injured, beaten-down self, the frightened inner child that didn't know any other way to protect itself. There was never a mythical external enemy. It took me all those years to realize the absurdity of that thought.

But I also realized that in the alleys, the self-hatred took a different turn. Those nights when I was "kicking the monster," I wasn't beating down that frightened child. I was beating back the paralysis that held him hostage.

I was trying to prove to him, night after night, that the awfulness of these places was no match for me, that I could keep us safe. I had to master my ability to feel secure in unsafe places to earn



"2nd Fridays" at my Chicago studio, 2017. For a decade, I threw a party here every month as part of the gallery walk. This space saw it all: the connection with the autistic boy, the "tarantula" meltdown with a client, and the hundreds of friends who helped me laugh it off.

his trust, to prove to that terrified part of me that I was finally strong enough to take the wheel. The battles in the dark weren't an attack, *they were a rescue mission.* They built the foundation I needed to treat myself with actual compassion when I had the chance.

I thought of myself in that office chair, on the first week of the meltdown in 1987, panting and freaking the fuck out. I had told myself, in an incredible moment of self-preservation, that no matter where this ugly path took me, I needed to be kind to myself. I'd held onto that mantra the best I could, knowing I often failed. But starting now, the first step was to stop calling myself a monster and finally become friends with this vulnerable side of me.

One of the paradoxes of this journey is I was *not* afraid of what everyone else feared, and yet *deathly* afraid of what everyone else shrugged off as "life." Danger felt safe. Safety felt dangerous. That was the wiring's signature malfunction, and in the alleys, I was fearless.

I know what a clinician might see: a man repeatedly seeking danger as

self-medication. Was this healing, or was I trapped in a loop? I can't say for certain. What I know is that the therapists I saw in those days couldn't figure me out. The alleys could. Maybe I was lucky. Maybe this same path would have destroyed someone else. Twenty-five years, over 1,200 nights, and no gunshot wound, no metal plate in my head. All I can say is that I'm here, and the monster is quiet.

Without a proper diagnosis or a roadmap, I had spent years cobbling together my own remedy. But it wasn't until I moved to Toronto in 1996, determined to finally build a life on my own terms, that I formalized it.

I typed the list out and taped it to my desk. I titled it: *Salvation X*.

It became my morning liturgy for the next decade. Deep breathing for five minutes. Meditation for ten. Positive stream of consciousness writing for another ten. Exercise. Stretching.

And most importantly, Visualization: I would travel back to Sorel in my mind, to the Red Ranch of my childhood. I would find my five-year-old self, praise him, and give him a big hug. I did everything I could to keep my life from spiraling.

But looking at that piece of paper now, one line stands out above the rest. Right there, sandwiched between "Play Guitar" and "Take your Vitamin," was the seed of this very book: "Write about Alleys and Stories from your past. 2 hours weekly."

Even then, without a diagnosis, I intuitively knew that photography alone wasn't enough. The Alleys were part of my therapy, and writing about them – the stories, the ruminations – was how I processed the cure.

One key thing helped save me: I never externalized the negative feelings I had for myself. I could have easily begun to hate other people out of anger or jealousy, but that never happened. My own pain made me hypersensitive to theirs. I've always loved seeing people happy. Watching people in pain is heartbreaking because I know the territory. I learned that everyone is at least a little broken inside.

Some of the most profound changes in my life began when I found a woman I loved deeply, and who loved me back just as much. She knows me – all my flaws – and still loves me.

I was ashamed most of my life. Ashamed of my social anxiety. Ashamed that, without medication, being around people could feel like my head was in a vice. I'd been tough in so many ways, clawing forward relentlessly despite the setbacks, but in this one simple, essential human way, I felt like a failure. My inability to connect easily with others, especially after my ease with people in the before times, was something I found impossible to forgive in myself.

And then came Nikki. Pam and I had been good together for a while – she was a kind and generous person – but it didn't last, and we parted as friends.

Nikki was funny, outgoing, calm, deeply honest, and someone people adored instantly. I watched her move through the world with a kind of grace I couldn't comprehend.

Sometimes my system still spins out. The breathing tightens, the old panic rises. And she knows. She takes my hand, and in the calmest voice, reframes whatever I'm spiraling about. Five seconds and I'm back. From where I stand, it looks like a superpower.

We've been together 15 years. For a long time, I couldn't believe she truly accepted the part of me I most despised. Even after I confessed my "dirty little secret," I was sure she'd eventually see me

the way I saw myself: broken, defective. I stayed suspicious. Waiting.

But she was never bothered by that part of me. She only asked that I love and respect her, be true and honest with her. And that was easy.

It took years, but I began to believe her. Little by little, I stopped waiting for the day she'd finally see me the way I saw myself. We make each other laugh every day. We make each other feel safe.

She'd tell you I'm wrong, that the parts I hate are not defects, they're just me. That's still a stretch, but I'm trying to take her word for it. Accepting what I spent decades rejecting is a lifelong struggle. But it's the only way to give myself the same grace she's given me all along.

Finding Nikki made me think about the nature of joy. How fragile was my wiring? What was the threshold where it could have remained intact? Why did my brothers not experience the same trauma from Sorel? Was there a genetic difference?

I've always believed my mom's wiring was made of steel. Despite everything, she remained a beacon of joy. But she also dodged a massive bullet. In the first days of the Spanish Civil War, when she was seven, terror arrived at her doorstep in Málaga. Her father was a member of the *Guardia Civil,* a target for the rising anarchist militias. A mob gathered below their third-floor apartment, screaming up at the windows, demanding the family show themselves, shouting they were going to throw everyone, including the children, to their deaths.

While the mob raged out front, my terrified grandparents gathered the children and escaped out the back. They hid in a factory owned by a sympathizer for months.

A simple toss of the coin saved them.



Chicago, 2011. One of our first dates. She saw past the noise, the mess, and the self-loathing to the person underneath. After finding her, I knew I could breathe.

My grandfather finally secured a transfer to a small, friendly town and just like that she escaped being hunted and traumatized. Instead, she had an idyllic youth. We grew up hearing her funny, charming stories of life in a quirky little town where it was as if no war was even taking place.

My dad was the dark one. He grew up spoiled in a gilded cage that turned to quicksand when he found his own father dead. The quick, absolute collapse of the family fortune left him homeless on the streets of Zaragoza and the damage was done. He fought the rest of his life to clear the dark clouds above him.

I am the son of both. As a child, I was always told I was a perfect blend of their characters. I carry his darkness, but I also carry her luck and her light.

Some of the best advice I ever got about happiness came from my longtime best friend, Neil.

We got together almost every week for 14 years in Chicago. Dinner and drinks, often many drinks. If I got to complaining about something, or if he did, he would always say, "And that's okay!" He said it so often it burned into my brain. Eventually, if I found myself having a negative thought, I'd punctuate it with "And that's okay!"

His positive outlook was inspiring. He accepted imperfections and scars without letting them rule his happiness. He was a bon vivant, someone who went out all the time, made friends anywhere, always had a funny story to tell.

When he developed an aggressive form of Parkinson's years later, the disease attacked quickly. Within 18 months he could barely speak or walk. It could take him a minute to stutter out a word. Going out became a complicated matter of helping him into a wheelchair, where a thumb on the joystick moved him along awkwardly.

In 2025, he was in a bad state. Having lost so many of the essential gears of joy in his life, I had to know. I asked him: is it still "And that's okay"?

He looked at me with a big grin and a twinkle in his eyes and said, "*Yes!*"

It's been a long road back to genuine happiness. But much of that joy has come from seeing what the work, born from such darkness, has been able to give to others.

A few years ago, a husband and wife approached me at a show. The man was in a wheelchair, visibly impaired but clearly excited. His wife told me he was a big fan. We chatted briefly, and they left.

An hour later, the wife returned alone. She hesitated, holding back a palpable wall of emotion. "My husband... was in an accident a few years ago. He can't move anymore. He used to be so active." She paused, collecting herself. "He finds joy in absolutely nothing. Except one thing." She looked right at me. "He is obsessed with your pictures of ruins. He stares at them all day. He told me he loves to see the beauty in all the despair. For his birthday, I want to buy him *Dequindre Couch*."

Later, she emailed me: "When he received the shipment, it was like he was 12 again on Christmas morning."

My pain, and my desperate attempt to relieve it, had created the only source of joy for a man trapped in his own physical prison. We were both staring at the same rubble and finding our own way to survive.

Then there are moments of pure celebration. One year at the Old Town Art Fair in Chicago, a collector named Brian walked into my booth. He told me, almost sheepishly, "I'm getting married today. To my fiancée Kate."

"That's fantastic, congratulations!" I said.

"Actually, we were hoping you

With Neil Moldenhauer in Chicago, 2010. The friendship that started with a six-pack in a dark alley became the brotherhood that helped anchor my new life in the city. He taught me that happiness is about finding the joy even when things go wrong.





The Art Chapel, 2010. Kate and Brian moments before sharing their first kiss as husband and wife inside my booth at the Chicago Old Town Art Fair. They asked to be married surrounded by the *Alleys & Ruins*. It was the ultimate proof that these dark, broken places had been fully transformed into a setting for light and love.

wouldn't mind if we got married in your booth. We decided weeks ago – we wanna be married surrounded by your art."

I was shell-shocked. Then I saw him look to his right and smile. Standing ten feet away was the entire wedding party: bride, maid of honor, best man, flower girl, and the minister, all waiting to hear what I'd say.

I glanced from Brian to the wedding party and back again, then practically screamed, "Of course you can! Holy shit!"

A huge grin spread across his face as he waved everyone in. A wedding ceremony took place right there, surrounded by the beautiful grit of the *Alleys & Ruins*. The minister said a prayer, vows were exchanged, there was crying, and they were married. When the applause died down, I gave them a wedding gift. It was a piece from my *Crystal* series titled *From Soul to Soul*. My booth had become a chapel.

And then there was Earl Hamner Jr., creator of *The Waltons*, one of the most beloved shows in television history. He was 85 and, improbably, a collector of my work. When he received a piece he'd purchased, he wrote me an email I've never forgotten.

He told me he'd once bought a painting because it made him want to live longer, and that my photograph gave him the same feeling.

His wife fought him over where to hang it. He won, and put it in his office where he spent most of his waking hours.

The doctor who treated the anxiety in my larynx, Dr. Jacquelynne Corey, a surgeon at the University of Chicago, had three of my photographs hanging in her house. She shared this with me, to my astonishment, when I first sat in her office. I thanked her and we moved on to the procedure. She knew me as a confident artist – she had no idea that the work on her walls was born from the same wreckage she was now treating.

My *Alleys & Ruins* photographs have been going out into the world for decades. Most hang in places I will never see, carrying stories I will never know.

Speaking about the *Alleys & Ruins* series at the Florida Museum of Photographic Arts, 2015. The work traveled from the darkest, dirtiest corners to the pristine quiet of a museum, where it also feels right at home.
Photo: Neil Moldenhauer





The Edna Martin Christian Center, Indianapolis, 2018. One of the many workshops I've led over the years. From high schools to colleges to community centers, sharing my story became a regular part of my life.

I've spoken in high schools, colleges, and community centers, galleries and museums, sharing these images and telling people that broken things can be beautiful.

Today those same alleys hang four feet tall, with the same impossible saturation and glass-like surface I fell in love with in my darkroom thirty years ago. I can stand in front of one alone, and it's exactly what I imagined – like being back in the alley, just me and the night.

All of this – the joy, the weddings, the healing – happened because a severely broken man stumbled into a dark alley over 30 years ago and, faced with his fears, refused to look away.

This book almost didn't happen. For decades, the truth – the crash, the paralysis, the shame – was something I planned to take to my grave. I had done everything to hide it, convinced I'd dodged the biggest bullet of my life, that my family and friends had never caught a true glimpse of the monster.

The crack in the armor happened 10 years ago when a reporter for a Christian magazine wanted to do a deep feature on my work. During the interview, she kept digging. She sensed a secret I wasn't divulging and she asked if I'd be more comfortable writing it down. Just to get the interview over with, I said yes.

She emailed me a set of probing questions, and I sat on them for a week. Then, thinking I would never actually send them, I started to type.

A flood of memories poured out of me. The office, the school, the shitty apartment... it all came out with a vivid, terrifying clarity, as if I were still there. I couldn't believe the awful details I was putting on paper. My secret, in words, right in front of me. It was jarring. At one time, I thought even torture wouldn't get me to admit this. I was tempted to delete it all, but instead, I hit send.

The reporter was moved to tears. But her editor? He took one look at it and said, "This is way too much for our readers. We can't publish this."

I laughed. That was the reaction I expected. But I thanked her. She had done me an enormous favor. Her genuine belief that there was a deeper truth behind the art gave me the permission I finally needed to face it. And her emotional reaction to reading it showed me the truth was something worth sharing and that I shouldn't be so afraid of telling it. She had helped me liberate myself from the secret I had been carrying for nearly 30 years. That text became the skeleton of this book. But it still took another 10 years – writing, retreating, writing again – before I found the courage to fully commit.

But memory is a tricky thing. As I built this memoir, I wondered: Did I get the details right? The symptoms, the timeline, the precise horrible thoughts – had



Mediterranean Paseo, 2017. The Costa del Sol, near the condo my parents bought for their retirement, a hard-won paradise they enjoyed for almost 30 years. My 85-year-old father joined me for this shoot, marking the only time in his life he ever watched me light while I worked. He stood in the dark, baffled by the technique but mesmerized by the process. After decades of not understanding what I did, he finally saw it happen. He never said he liked the photo.

I remembered them correctly? My old journal, the one Monique had given me in 1994 – my Rosetta Stone – had somehow survived the years. I barely remembered writing it, let alone where it was. I found it tucked away in an old filing cabinet that's followed me since I moved in with Phil in 1993. It confirmed every horror and added a thousand details I'd repressed. It unleashed a flood of memories, bringing that insane period fully back to life.

But finding my own lost history was only the first part of an uncanny coincidence. Around the same time, I was interviewing my 92-year-old father, trying to fill in the blanks of his life and of our life when I was a kid. He mentioned that he, too, had written a memoir on his computer decades earlier, but he couldn't remember where or when. A 30-year-old memoir I knew nothing about? Surely my dad had lost the files.

But a faint memory sparked. I recalled helping him with computer problems ages ago, backing up a handful of old text files to my computer to save them from a dying hard drive. It was a long shot but I prayed those files were his journal, and that I still had them.

I dug through my semi-organized digital archives and found a little anonymous file simply titled ABC.doc. Clicking on it gave me an error message. It took days of trying different software before one program finally opened it. I held my breath.

It was his journal! And there it was: his entire life story, written with incredible detail. I checked the date the file was created. He had written it a year after retiring, in 1993.

At the same time I was in my studio filling the pages of my journal, trying to make sense of my broken life, my father was just a few miles away, doing the very same thing. His stairwells were my alleys. His swallowed ice was my locked jaw.

People are often asked, "If you could do it all over again, would you change anything?"

What an impossible question for me. I would love to not have gone through the years of trauma, blind to the cause, utterly alone, unable to verbalize it to anyone, with no one to explain how to get better.

But what would I have to give up to sweep all that away?

I wouldn't have Nikki and the good life we have today. I wouldn't have the depth of connection with the friends who carried me. I wouldn't have my hard-earned art. And I wouldn't have the inspiring stories from the people I've touched.

I like to think about all those unknowable stories, the strangers I will never meet who found something in the work.

People ask me why there are never any people in my photographs. It is intentional. My alleys have no people in them, but in their conspicuous absence, they are entirely about people. They are about you, the viewer, being in the alley. I light these dark corners like theatre sets to invite you onto an empty stage. I want you to stand in the wreckage and feel the same kind of paradoxical, uneasy peace that I found there.

But there's another absence. I'm inside these photographs – walking through the frame, building the image with my hands – yet my technique erases me completely. Only the light remains. I had spent my life perfecting the art of being present and invisible.

The toughest alleys I ever entered weren't in Chicago or Detroit or Brooklyn. They were in my mind, and these pages are what I brought back.

For 25 years, my artistic technique required me to do the very things my psychological condition had already forced on me: avoid people, seek dark and empty locations, walk fearlessly into terrifying places I thought would become my home, and disappear within the space. Then paint bleak concrete in vivid color until doom felt like an invitation.

The subject matter always said *run*. The light always said *stay*.

I was performing my pain, night after night after night, and the performance became the cure. The art and the therapy were the same activity; the transformation in the photographs was the transformation in me. I never planned it, it just happened. The illness chose for me, and what it chose turned out to be art.



My wedding to Nikki, 2018. This wasn't my first wedding, and asking my friends to fly across the country again felt like pushing my luck. I had a sinking feeling, bracing myself for empty seats. But every single one of them showed up. To me this photo is priceless; it contains nearly every lasting and meaningful relationship I have ever made, the tribe that carried me through the fire.
From the back, left to right: Ingrid D'Elia, Rocco D'Elia, Steve Wagschal, Arnold Free, Phil Spurrell, Bethnie-Flore Dorsainvil, Alex Aviles, Alan Chandler, Randy Grant, Neil Moldenhauer, Gerry Wagschal. Seated: Rob Nuez, Mary Ellen Lloyd, Dan Barkley, Nikki Simkus, the woman who made me believe I deserved to be here, and me, Xavier Nuez.
Photo: Cathy Bock and David Bock

Light Paintings

After the Alleys (2017–present)
Luminous Joy Reclaimed



Lighting *The Gate is Open*. Video still: Kay Berkson

The Gate is Open

For years I had an idea for a photo: a winding path leading through lush foliage. One day, walking through my Chicago neighborhood, I see: a winding path leading through lush foliage. I take a photo with my phone and promptly forget all about it. Sometimes an obvious photo isn't obvious at all.

Months later, I pass the same gate. It's still open. But this time I notice the problem: there are almost no flowers. I want color, abundance, a garden bursting with life. I file it away and keep walking.

More months pass. The gate is still open. Who leaves their gate open all the time in a big city? This time I start imagining what it would take: bringing in dozens of flowers, staging the entire scene. But first, I'll need permission, and I assume the owners are kooks, leaving the gate open constantly. I don't want to risk vanishing through the path and getting shot on the other side. So I mail a letter: an old-fashioned, handwritten note explaining I'm an artist who wants to photograph their yard at night. A week later, they call. When I finally meet the retired couple, they aren't kooks at all. They're Sydney and Kay, and they leave the gate open, they explain, as a neighborhood gesture, a quiet signal that anyone is welcome.

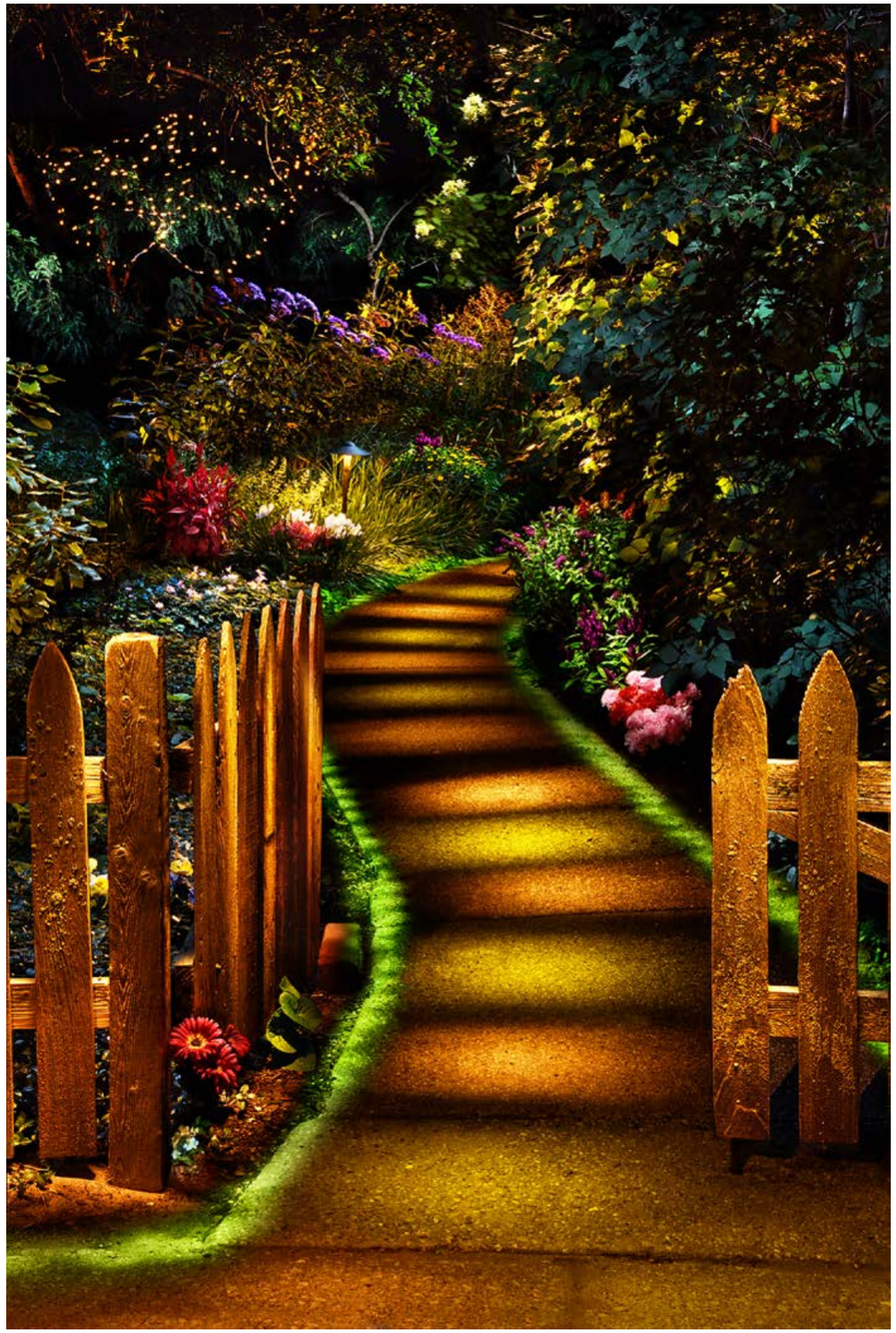
After 25 years of sneaking around places I wasn't supposed to be, of assuming every shadow held a threat, here's an open gate and an invitation.

The snapshot I couldn't see as a photo until the following summer



The shoot happens fast. I buy every flower in the photo, and throughout the morning and afternoon I design and build the garden. A few hours later I'm back with my gear and with Nikki's vital help and suggestions. I take my usual absurdly long time to simply compose the image, then figure out the lighting within a couple minutes.

For half my life I'd been lighting ruins, places of decay and abandonment – places that reflected something broken in me. Now I was lighting a garden, a path leading not to salvation, but within it. A gate that wasn't locked or dangerous, just open.



The Gate is Open
Digital composite, multiple exposures
Chicago, IL, 2022

Darkwood

For most of my life, I crouched in the dark. I hid in shadows, worked in shadows, felt safe in shadows. Mushrooms do the same thing. They thrive in dimly lit places, unseen, doing quiet work underground. When I learned a lighting technique that could make them glow from within, I knew I had to photograph them. For months, I tried to shoot mushrooms in the forest at night, but it proved impossible. The best solution was to bring the forest to my studio, where I could control every aspect of the image.

I gathered moss, bark, and branches from the woods, then got help from two local mushroom farms that supplied the exotic varieties. I began building miniature sets, arranging each element to suit the unique character of each mushroom. A mist maker added an ethereal touch. Looking through the lens, I could feel the connection between these tiny forests and the expansive woods that first inspired me.

But unlike a brick wall, mushrooms are fleeting. I was racing against time before they wilted and dried out. Each photo became a 36-hour all-nighter, fueled by little naps in the studio. In the dark, I used long exposures, painting the scene with colored gels.

In the alleys, I had always been inside the darkness, lighting it from within, invisible.

But every once in a while I find my mind wandering back to those places – to the warm healing blanket those nights delivered, the insane adventures they produced, and all those eccentric, world-weary wanderers I met: Sam and Jorge and Jesus. And I find myself missing it.

But then I have to remind myself why I was there in the first place: the crippled mind that dragged me to the edge of oblivion, night after night, for 1,200 nights – and the miracle that I came out of it alive. When I find myself longing for it, I think, once again: am I stark raving mad?

One thing I'd learned out there: if you could find something worth lighting in these places, you could find it anywhere. Now I'm on the outside, pointing the light in. Still building theatre sets, knowing that, today anyway, this is where I belong.

The half-finished studio set, built with moss, bark and flowers, and mist, before lighting it.





Darkwood Whispers
Digital composite, multiple exposures
Chicago, IL, 2023



Tranquility
Digital composite, multiple exposures
Chicago, IL, 2021; Yosemite, 2022



The Quiet After the Storm
Digital composite, multiple exposures
Philadelphia, PA, 2018

Bicycle Zen
Digital composite, multiple exposures
Zanesville, OH, 2018

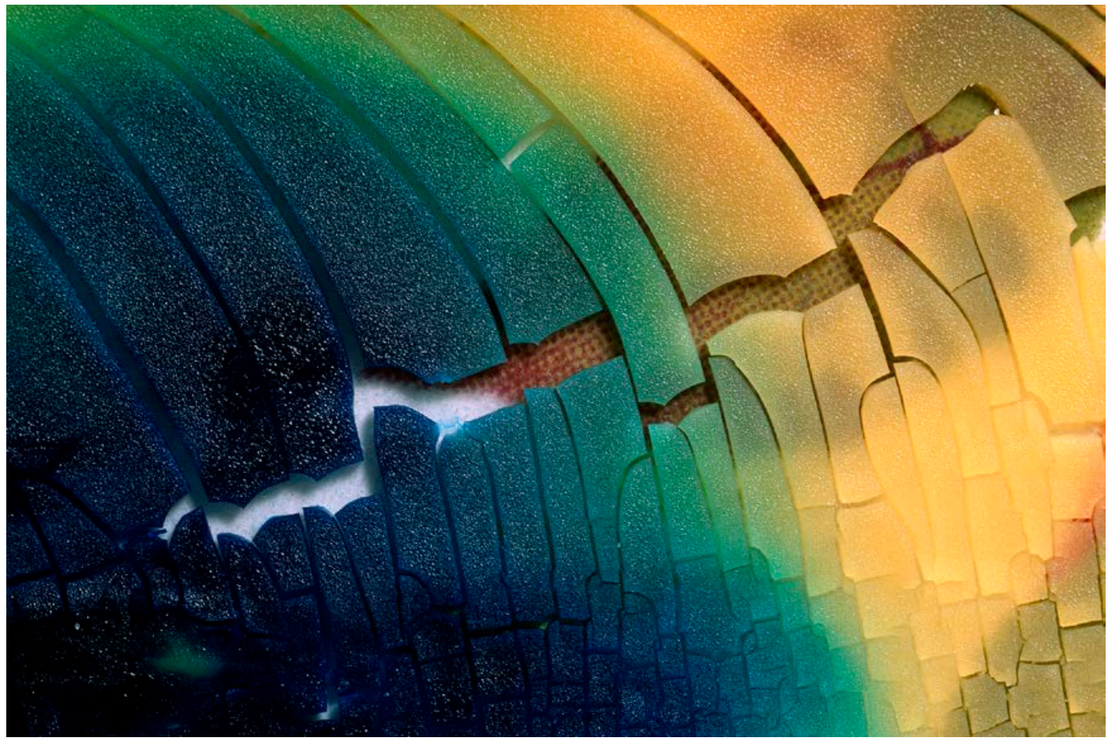


A Twilight Welcome
Digital composite, multiple exposures
Chicago, IL, 2025



Part 6. 2025

Epilogue.



A Brief Silence, 2000, from the Crystal series

When I started writing this book, I knew I had to go back. For 30 years, I had returned to Montreal to see family and my old tribe, but I had never really revisited the locations that had shaped me.

This time, I brought my dad. He didn't know most of the places that had defined me; for years, our worlds had been separate. So he became my companion on a tour of my past.

We drove to my old college, where a photography teacher once gave me the confidence to start. We parked outside my first basement apartment, and I told him how I'd gone in a 17-year-old small-town kid and come out with the city in my blood. And finally, we visited the Sanctuary itself: the half-condemned building in Westmount. I told him how it had been collapsing around us while we created art.

"*¡No me digas!*" he said, smiling in disbelief. Unbelievable!

It's fully renovated now, blending in politely with the multimillion-dollar homes surrounding it, no trace of the ruin that saved me.

But the big trip was always *Sorel*. I had visited a few times over the years, reconnecting with my old friend Mario, balancing the bad memories with the good, but I had never gone back with the one person who needed to go the most.

When my dad retired in 1992, he vowed never to return. Over the decades, I had probed the wound gently.

"Dad, why don't we go visit? You had a good life after you left, what does it matter anymore?"

"Sorel? Never again! *¿Estás loco?* I said I'd never go back to that *puto pueblo* and I never will."

But now, at 92, the clock was ticking. My mom had passed away three years earlier, leaving a giant hole in his heart – in all our hearts – and a silence in his life. I knew asking him was a long shot, but I had to try.

"Dad, I need to go back for the book. Will you come with me?"

He looked at me. The stubbornness that had defined him for a lifetime seemed to soften.

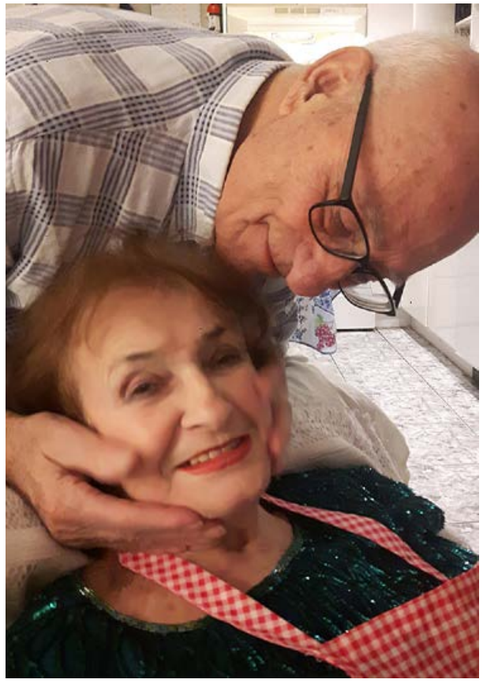
"For your book? *Sí*. I'll go. If you think it'll help."

What? I was floored. For 33 years, his refusal had been ironclad. But for my art, for my story, he broke his own golden rule.

I asked Rob, and he agreed immediately. But Charlie would be sorely missed too. This was exactly the kind of adventure he would've jumped at, but he had passed away, far too young, five years earlier. He had been so integral to my early photography, and I would have loved to share part of this book with him, but this trip would just be the last three of us. As we drove the hour-long ride from Montreal, this road trip felt like a pilgrimage for the survivors.

The Sanctuary, 2025. Visiting the building where it all started. It's fully renovated now, blending in with the neighborhood, but looking up at those windows where my studio was, I still see the ruin that saved me.





My mother and father, late in her life. She was the source of the light – always singing and laughing.

We took the old scenic route along the river, the way we used to before the highway cut a quick path to Montreal. As the familiar landmarks appeared, I looked at my dad, relieved to see no dread was appearing. Rob and I were excited, pointing, remembering.

We passed the old city hall where my dad had stormed in when I was 11, yelling at everyone like a lunatic when I'd been unceremoniously dumped from the A League in hockey.

Across the street, where the old outdoor rink would pop up in the winter, a new structure was being built. I remembered the covered players' bench, our private refuge on cold winter Saturday nights, where we used to hide out and drink our beers. Was it gone? What other changes were we going to find?

We drove past our school, Harold Sheppard, and stopped. This had been our little English bubble, where just about everyone was my friend, where I felt safe and content, as long as I didn't have to go to the principal's office. The school and the English community hang on by a thread today, but they are still there.

Then we drove straight to our house, the only home I'd known for 17 years. The big pine tree was gone, the one my dad had planted as a seedling until, to his dismay, it became an unwieldy giant and took over the front yard.

We got out and my dad stood there, leaning on his cane, staring. He'd been pretty quiet on the trip and it took him a minute to recognize the house without his

With my brother Rob at Harold Sheppard School, 2025. This was our English bubble in Sorel, a safe haven where everyone was my friend. It's also where Rob spread my new name and shield, "X."





The Return, 2025. Assisting my father as we approach our old house in Sorel for the first time in 33 years. He had vowed never to come back, but for this moment, he let me lead him. Photo: Robert Nuez

pine. I could see him processing the complex emotions this place evoked. I knew it had ground him down and taken so much of his dignity, but I hoped positive emotions would take over, that he could forgive after three decades.

"*Everything is memories*," he whispered. "Memories, memories, memories."

"What are you thinking, Dad?"

"A lot of bad memories. All the terrible things that happened here. But the hardest memory is of your mother. I see her everywhere. *Everywhere*."

"Oh, no," I thought. I felt a spike of guilt. This is not how I wanted this to go. Was I traumatizing him all over again just for a book?

But then he smiled, a sad, small smile. "I remember she used to plant vegetables right there," he said, pointing to the side of the house. "She was always singing. *Siempre, siempre. Era la alegría*. She was always the joy."

Sorel wasn't just the site of his battle anymore: it was the landscape of his memory of her. His somber mood had lightened a bit.

Then we headed for the forest that used to be our peaceful refuge, where I'd hung out so often with my friends in the giant, seemingly endless woods.

From behind the steering wheel, Rob glanced over at me. "Remember when we went winter camping? With summer sleeping bags?"

I laughed. "And then the temperature plummeted. Fuck were we dumb. We almost froze to death!"

Rob's smile started to fade. "Where is it? All I see are houses."



My father stands in front of our old house. "I see your mother everywhere," he whispered. "She was always singing. Always, always. She was the joy."

We drove deep into the new subdivision. I had wanted to see Red Ranch one more time, but the decades had done their work. When we saw the farms begin we knew there was nothing left. The forest was gone.

Red Ranch was gone and I missed it, but I'd visited so many times as a sanctuary in my mind, it didn't matter.

We went to the hockey rink where I'd been a hero while also being stung over and over by deep humiliation. I hadn't been inside in almost 50 years. None of that mattered anymore. It was fun to just be there and watch the skaters. I looked at one of the nets and smiled, remembering the thrill, nothing else.

We ended up in old downtown, walking the streets.

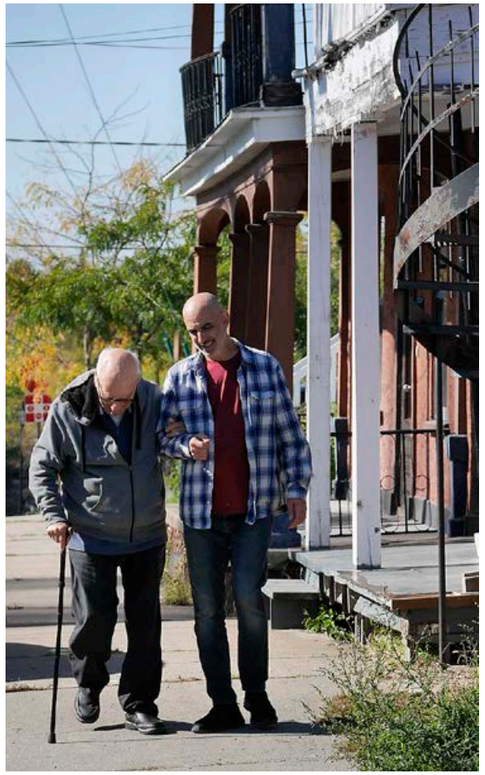
"What are you thinking now, Dad?"

He stopped and looked around.

"I'm happy I came back. If it wasn't for your book, I never would have. But being here... I don't feel one way or the other, it's just a place now. I'm too old to care." He paused. "This place, it took a lot from us. But it couldn't take everything."

He looked at the old buildings around us. "We were unlucky to come right when the anger exploded. They were looking for people to blame. But I think all that's over." Then he turned to us. "*Criamos a nuestros hijos aquí.* We raised our boys here, and your mother and I were always very proud of that. Very proud of you."

The day before I was set to fly back to Chicago, I sat with my dad in the living room of his small assisted-living apartment. We were making small talk when I noticed something above his head that



Walking the streets of downtown Sorel, 2025. My father had vowed never to return to this town, but he broke that promise for me, returning for the first time in 33 years, Photo: Robert Nuez

had always been there but I'd never really seen before.

For decades, through all my struggles as a young artist, he had never once said he liked my work. He always said he was proud of me, just never *that*. It was a sore point between us. Whenever I pushed for validation, he would retreat to his standard defense: "I don't understand art, so why should I comment on it?"

It was frustrating, and we'd had heated arguments, but I had learned to live with the silence.

But above his head on the wall was my art. I had to blink from the shock of never having understood before. I looked around and saw more of it on other walls. Only two things hung in that entire apartment: family photos and my art.

It wasn't my best work. It was the old stuff – prints from before the crash, from my *Luminous Joy* years, some of them badly framed, fading behind cheap glass. I realized I hadn't noticed them before precisely because *they had always been there*. They had become background noise to me.

But the noise suddenly became clear. Those pictures had hung in the house in Longueuil. They had moved to a couple apartments in the city. They had traveled to their condo. And now, they were here, in his final home.

Through 30 years of downsizing, when furniture and clothes were tossed, and wall space diminished, these pieces remained. They were packed, moved, and re-hung with care. Every single time.

I looked at him and finally understood. His silence wasn't indifference, *it was fear*. To an immigrant who'd survived homelessness, praising my art felt like permission for me to starve. He couldn't encourage the risk, but he quietly praised the courage. He couldn't cheer for the dream, but he cherished the proof that I was living it.

The fear had become habit. After 40 years, he couldn't rewrite the script.

It occurred to me, as I watched him drink his coffee beneath my photographs, that I'd never said it back: *I was proud of him.*



The Wall of Art, 2025. My father's assisted living apartment. For decades, he said he didn't understand my art. But here, he had built a museum of my life, hanging my work right next to the family he loved. It was his silent, permanent validation.

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This first edition of *Alleys & Ruins* was made possible in part by the early support of the following patrons.

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Chronology

1960 Leopoldo, 27, and Bienve Nuez, 31, leave Spain for Canada, arriving in Montreal with their young son and eighty dollars.

1965 Xavier is born in Quebec. The family moves to Sorel.

1982 He leaves Sorel for Montreal and junior college at Dawson.

1983–1987 He discovers photography and produces the bright early work during the *Luminous Joy* period.

1984 The *Crystal* series begins, the only body of work that predates the crash.

1987 A sudden nervous system collapse changes his life and redirects his art.

1992 A government job in Ottawa gives him a financial and mental reset after the crash.

1993 He returns to Montreal, moves into a crumbling industrial building, and begins the *Alleys & Ruins* series in earnest.

1996 He buys a Hasselblad and moves to Toronto. The series shifts to medium format.

2003 He moves to the United States and begins expanding the series across American cities.

2007 The work extends coast to coast.

2010 He settles in Chicago.

2018 He marries Nikki.

2020 He shoots the final Alleys & Ruins image in Miami. A few weeks later, the world shuts down.

2025–2026 The memoir and photographic archive are brought together as *Alleys & Ruins,* the book.

Where the work was made

Alleys & Ruins, 1991–2020

Alabama: Birmingham

Arizona: Phoenix

California: Alameda, Berkeley, Compton, Los Angeles, Marin Headlands, Mare Island, Oakland, San Diego, San Francisco

Colorado: Denver

District of Columbia: Washington, DC

Florida: Conch Key, Key West, Miami

Georgia: Atlanta

Illinois: Chicago, Springfield

Indiana: Indianapolis

Iowa: Des Moines

Louisiana: New Orleans

Maryland: Baltimore

Massachusetts: Boston

Michigan: Ann Arbor, Detroit, Ypsilanti

Minnesota: Minneapolis, St Paul

Missouri: Kansas City, St Louis

Nebraska: Omaha

Nevada: Las Vegas

New Jersey: Newark

New York: Buffalo, New York City

Ohio: Cleveland, Columbus

Ontario: Ottawa, Toronto

Oregon: Portland

Pennsylvania: Philadelphia, Pittsburgh

Quebec: Montreal

South Dakota: Deadwood

Tennessee: Nashville

Texas: Dallas, Houston

Utah: Salt Lake City

Virginia: Bristol

Washington: Seattle

Wisconsin: Madison, Milwaukee

The Alley Stories are true accounts from twenty-five years of night photography. When a story and its facing photograph were made on the same night, the text says so. Otherwise, the stories are paired with images that share their spirit.

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"You will never see a dark alley the same way again" – *PBS*

In 1987, Xavier Nuez's nervous system collapsed without warning. Within a day, he went from being outgoing and confident to being unable to hold a conversation. There was no diagnosis, no treatment, and no name for what he had.

Six years later, he walked into a dark alley at night with a camera – and the terror stopped. So he kept going. For twenty-five years and 1,200 nights across fifty cities, he wandered the alleys and ruins of North America with a 50-year-old Hasselblad – chased by gangs, guns pointed at him – returning every time, because the only place the fear couldn't find him was in the dark.

This is the story he planned to take to his grave.

Xavier Nuez is a Chicago-based fine-art photographer and author. *Alleys & Ruins* is his first book.

nuez.com