

## The Franz Kafka of Wilderness Photographers

An interview by Alex Stein with Richard Rothman

Richard Rothman and Alex Stein met on a flight from New York City to Denver. This conversation took place a few days later, on May 16, 2010, in Boulder, Colorado.

Richard Rothman: On the plane, you spoke of the perfection of Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*—of how the play consumed all the energy it created, and how that perfect arc of order, to you, was also a description of the perfect art. You said that civilization was in a casket and that Beckett was one of the pallbearers carrying it off. When I first read Beckett, in high school, I didn't understand him. It wasn't until I got older and came across a quote that the whole thing pulled together for me, the artist and the condition. Beckett had written, "There is nothing funnier than human unhappiness," and suddenly I understood. Except that, granting its wonder as a saying, I would amend it to read: "Yes, it might be true, there is nothing funnier than human unhappiness, except, of course, when it happens to be your own."

Alex Stein: *How much of everything is in our veins and how much is just an accretion of chance and experience?*

I think they both add up, don't you? I know for me the one constant has been my fascination with picture-making. I've loved it all my life. I decided when I was six that that was what I wanted to do. I made a drawing in first grade and something thrilled me, and I still don't entirely understand what that was connected with. It wasn't the usual thing of the teacher praising me. In any case, the desire to be a picture-maker has never left me. Later, in art school, I developed an awareness of what other people thought was important in terms of visual culture. Influence came into the mix, and I forded a wide river of uncertainty. Then I saw an exhibition of Richard Avedon's portraits of his father, leading up to his father's death, and I knew, after I came out of that show, that this was the medium that could handle the kinds of concerns that I wanted to deal with—as an artist and a picture-maker.

*Tell me a little about Redwood Saw.*

I went to California with no idea that this project was going to turn into what it turned into. I don't like to know where I am going. I need a beginning, I need a seed, but I like to have space that allows for digression and exploration and change. I want to surprise myself. I was out there to get away from the urban-landscape photography I had been doing for many years. And it was really just a boredom with that geography that was leading me. I'd begun this cycle of work, which for me is all connected, by photographing in New York City. I woke up one morning and said, This is what I am going to do. I am going to look at what is around me and see if I can make work out of the immediacy of my daily experience. At that time, I had no idea that that would turn into landscape pho-

tography. I didn't even get out the door of my apartment building. I walked into the lobby and I saw something there that I had passed by for years and I took a photograph. It was of these incredibly sad, wilting plastic daisies, in a narrow strip of soil that extended in a brick casing around the walls of the lobby. And the soil was strewn with cigarette butts and cobwebs and bits of cellophane and what have you. But the picture was thrilling. Light was streaming through the filthy glass doorway, steadily illuminating darker and darker grays as you drew further into the lobby. When I looked at this image I realized not only that it held the feelings that I had had about that place all those years but that those feelings were redeemed by the beauty of its transformation. That was the start.



I proceeded to photograph along my block and through my neighborhood, and then I decided that I was going to get on and off every transit stop in New York City in all five boroughs. That took two years. And when I was done with that, a friend asked me if I wanted her old Datsun for free, and I said O.K., because right at that moment I wanted to expand my circle. I started to photograph in between and beyond the spaces I had previously photographed, and eventually I found myself in the suburbs, miles outside New York. It got to the point where I had to drive several hours to get anyplace that I hadn't already been to, and the act was becoming both onerous and less productive. All of that and a lot of other complicated reasons made me ready for a change.

I had already been going "out West" for a while. I was deeply impressed by the light, the air, the space. I had been doing some reading about nature, evolution, and the environment. Writers like Edward O. Wilson, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Bill McKibben. That reading was on my mind, too—the urgent warning signs of species extinction and the importance of forests. I'd



read Annie Dillard's book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, her golden meditation on what it means to be in the world. That combined with needing a new challenge. The focus of the urban work that I had been doing was largely on the surreptitious role of nature in urban and suburban environments. I had never photographed nature on its own terms and I wondered what that would be like. To photograph nature without the built environment, and a near-lifetime of lowered expectations being tied into it.

Also, all the work I had been doing for all those years was really about what drives me nuts about American culture. It had been socially critical work, work that I was instinctively drawn to. To photograph those things that I found banal and disturbing. I asked myself what it might be like to try and make celebratory work. I had been to the Muir Woods, which was one of the most beautiful places I had ever come across. So I booked a flight—but to the northern range of coastal redwoods, because first of all I hadn't already seen it. I spent that first trip, three weeks, in a tent in the forest, by myself, photographing every day, and it was the correct thing for me to do at that moment. It was the most visually stimulating environment I had ever been in. And, yes, what a differentiated pleasure, after so many years of photographing the things that were disturbing to me, to be photographing in a place that was so articulated and ancient, and that possessed a scale I had not experienced—except for what it is like to look up into a star-filled sky—as far as making me feel really small in a way that I enjoy immensely.

So it all clicked on that level, and I had no idea it would turn into what it turned into, but I quickly discovered that this forest is really just a very tiny fragment of what was originally there—it's estimated that the remaining old-growth redwoods are about five percent of the original forest, and that might be a generous estimate. What remains are these museum-like areas that feel huge

when you go into them, but the longer you are there, and the more you explore them, the more you recognize how fenced in the forest is, how limited, in comparison with what has been lost. And this stand of protected forest, where I was tenting and photographing, was adjacent to a small town called Crescent City, which had originally been covered with forest that grew all the way down to the ocean. I'd go into the town for my supplies, and the more I went the more it sank in that what I had come out here to do maybe wasn't what I was going to do. Here was the better story: It had to be about shooting in both the forest and the town. So, on my second trip, I had the whole forest experience again, but it was also on this second trip that I began to shoot the town as well. I was focusing on the architecture, and I realized after this second trip that I also wanted to extend my project to portraiture. I hadn't done portraiture for many years, and I had never shot portraits with a four-by-five camera. That's a different game from doing it with a roll-film camera, because you have to conduct a formal portrait session. You can't just walk by and snap that one-hundred-twenty-fifth-of-a-second shot without a tripod. It takes time to set up. There has to be a thoughtful encounter with an individual, but I had to be very quick with strangers, who, for the most part, were just passing by. I had less than five minutes to set up and shoot almost all of these portraits, but I'd thought it over for a year, before I went out there, and, to my surprise, I was ready somehow.

One thing led to another. I had a feeling about the people that made me want to do the portraits in the first place. I followed the water. I was picking up on what at first I thought of as this tremendous vulnerability and I was relating that vulnerability to what I was experiencing in the forest amid the precious remains of its once magnificent expanse. I was relating it to the way in which economic forces are bearing down upon this kind of environment, and the people themselves, caught up in what, for lack of a better term, I must call an "unsustainable cultural and economic reality." I wanted to get at that in the portraiture, so it was really a matter of what I thought of as a kind of casting, though it took me a long time to phrase it to myself this way. The business of trying to photograph a town is a poetic act, because a town—even a small town—is a big thing, and you have to select, edit, pare down, and represent your vision of your experience, to which you bring all your baggage, and your thoughts and feelings, too. Part of why this town appealed to me was that it was small. The population sign, in 2004, when I began to go there, said six thousand, but it's probably quite a bit larger now.

At any rate, the casting had to come about intuitively. One day, I photographed this young girl—actually, I was photographing an incredible car. It was a Ford Gran Torino, a paint-free junker that looked like a shark and had this unbearable bumper sticker on the back that read, "I'd slap you, but shit splatters." All on this degraded piece of roadway that ran through the commercial district. I had set up for the car when a girl, maybe fifteen, came riding by on a colorful bicycle that would have been more appropriate for a five-year-old—a little girl's Sting Ray bicycle. She'd looped a plastic bag from her errand around one handlebar. She looked damaged, she looked severely damaged. And just as she was gliding by I asked if she would mind being in the picture I was taking. Her face, painful with hope, looked at me from behind big ugly glasses. She said yes, and very sweetly, I might add. That evening, I thought about that touching girl, and as I was mentally reviewing the portraits I had been making,

I eventually came to realize that one of the strongest undercurrents in all the work I had been doing was decoding unhappiness. And once I became clear with myself about that, the rest followed more easily. Though, of course, there was, too, that terrible business of whose unhappiness is being photographed? How much is projection, and how much is witness and testimony?



I hope I can address both glory and pain in my work. I think that is why the impulse to go and create a celebratory body of work was upon me in the first place. I had been doing the dark, difficult work for many years. Opening up the narrative to another realm of expression felt important. Photography is reactive. I come with my agenda, some of which is conscious, and I react to what I see. It's important to stay open. Given time, things usually do unfold. I was attracted to the town for the reasons I have mentioned, for its proximity to the forest, for the fact that it was what the forest had become, but, even more significant, I came to understand that the town had been boom and bust for its entire post-European history. At first it was a mining town, and it was mined out. Then it became a lumber town, and all the forest was cut, except for those museum spaces that a few people—ironically, the already wealthy lumber barons—fought hard to protect. Then it became a fishing town, and now it's over-fished. It began to seem that this business of successive extraction industries and, again, the unsustainable nature of the economic foundation spoke to issues that transcended the town's specifics and made for a bigger story.

For a long time, I'd had the desire to tell a big American story. I loved the idea of trying to get as near to the novel form in pictures as I could get. I also felt—and I know this is over-reaching because I'm sure I did not achieve this goal—but I also felt that I wanted to stretch, and create something that was not just about our immediate culture, which is what any important art is going inevitably to be about, anyway. How can art avoid speaking from behind the veil of its epoch? But I also wanted to include some of my thoughts about the larger evolutionary picture: that life is spawned in the ocean and that forests are an important part of the earth's next chapter. I needed to acknowledge those veri-

ties, even if I could not represent them in ways as palpably as I would have liked. I bounced between town and forest like a Ping-Pong ball. Years in New York City had given me a hunger. I think the things we will probably miss the most, as this century progresses, are wood and space. We are running out of both.

*Do you know that great line of Oscar Wilde's? That America is a country that went from barbarism to decadence without having passed through the intermediary stage of civilization?*

I do. Wilde was a great craftsman. Craft is something we haven't yet touched on. The way in which the concerns of craft speak to each artist is what makes that artist. John Ashbery was once asked to explain his remark that his language sometimes got in the way of his poetry. He replied, "I don't remember what was running through my mind if I said that, but I do remember going through a period where I thought, maybe, that meaning was getting in the way of my poetry." The question this raises for me, though, is: Once you have thrown out meaning, how far is it from throwing out everything? I also wanted to make complex pictures. This came about as a byproduct of the ongoing process of picture-making. I have to see where I can go, logically, from where I am. For me, this has been a process of increasing formal complexity. The formal complexity, though, has somehow to be interwoven with the logic and emotions of the images. Or maybe I knew only that I wanted to fill my frames with as much density, as much space, as much intricacy as I could, and that the compulsion made sense to me because those qualities seemed to be an echo of the forest itself.

So composition is always a concern. You don't get away from composition. You wouldn't want to. But you also don't want anything mechanical, rote, or predictable. I don't want just to have had this pleasurable process. At the end of the day, I want to have caught the fish. I take the kinds of pictures that I would want to put on my wall and look at. The theory of composition is burdened with rules of thirds and golden triangles. Every rule can be successfully broken, and



there are many games that can be played. But it was thrilling in that environment to take my photography to the most formally complex level of composition of which I was then capable.

*Do you think in language when you are composing in the camera?*

I am having a completely nonverbal experience. I am looking for a composition that has the maximum amount of depth, chaos, and tension, while still resolving at a very high level of order.

*So how do you know when you have done what you set about to do?*



John Ashbery must be on my mind today. He was asked the same question and he said, “I have no idea. All I know is there is some mechanism in my brain that, when I get to the end of a poem, says, ‘Yes it works’ or ‘No, it doesn’t’ and that’s good enough for me.” It took me a year to edit *Redwood Saw*. I know how many bad photographs have to be made to get to the good ones. What I do have is the ability, when I am looking at something, to know right away whether I want to photograph it. And—I didn’t even realize until recently that this was unusual—when I look at my contact sheets I know instantly whether I have made a first-quality picture or not. To the point where now, after having photographed for many years—I don’t even bother anymore to do what I once did, which is to go back and look at pictures ten years gone with the thought that I might see things very differently now, and that perhaps if I go back to the old stock I’ll be able to pull something out that I hadn’t recognized on the first go-round. I have never pulled out a single frame. Not even one shot.

I finally just stumbled on the structure of *Redwood Saw*, but it was right for so many reasons, and that is the luck you hope to have when you are working. All my life I’ve only known how to move forward by taking one step, and then another. It takes a certain amount of tenacity and stamina, and it takes

the ability to do it thoughtfully. If you are steadfast, if you are fortunate, there may come a moment where things accumulate and you leap. But moving forward is also tied up with the inability to do anything else, or with not wanting to do anything else. Even in my darkest moments of doing this, I have never questioned the vocation. Though I did entertain two brief alternative career thoughts, before I made that drawing in first grade. One was to be a psychiatrist, the other was to be a court reporter. That tells me something. It tells me I was interested early on in what makes things tick, in essences, in the world outside my own ego, in secrets.

*What it tells me is that you were eventually going to become a graduate student specializing in Kafka.*

I love Kafka. I remember reading *The Castle* one summer vacation when I was in high school. From the first sentence of almost anything he writes, you realize you are in a world that is highly condensed and highly processed, emotionally and mentally. A world pared down to the essences of narrative. And it is roving and dauntless and passionate.

*I can visualize the headlines now: “The Franz Kafka of Wilderness Photographers to Show at Brooklyn Museum.”*

I wouldn’t complain about that.

*What is your relationship to your family?*

I haven’t seen my father since I was five. So my relationship to my father is both painful and obviously formative. I am close with my mother, who is very loving—though not the least bit supportive of my ambitions. [Laughs.] My grandfather was an orthodox rabbi who emigrated from Austria-Hungary to Brooklyn, so my mother grew up in a strict Orthodox household and she rebelled the way first-generation Americans typically did. A big part of her rebellion was marrying this man who ended up leaving us. Then she remarried. She taught grade school in a yeshiva. I attended the yeshiva and hated it. Everything about religion has always rubbed me the wrong way. I remember the irritation vividly, because it was so prominent in my life as a child. I also remember encountering this series of books at a department store in Philadelphia which I coveted. It was a highly illustrated paperback science series, and I bought a book called “Fossils,” in which I read that dinosaurs had become extinct sixty million years ago and that the earth was estimated to be five billion years old. I asked the rabbi, “How come you have taught us the earth was created in six days and how come the Bible suggests that the earth is only six thousand years old?” And the rabbi said, “Open that book up to the copyright date and tell me when it was written.” I opened the book and I told him, whereupon he picked up his Bible and said, “Do you know how old is this book? It is two thousand years old,” and that was the end of his argument. I went home and I told my mother how much I didn’t want to be in the yeshiva, and she allowed me to go to public school. My mother has impressed me continuously with the way in which she has pursued her narrative of self-discovery. She went through therapy. And she

put me through therapy, at age seven, after the disappearance of my father, and I've always respected her for that. She wanted, at great expense of time, which was scarce, and money, which was scarcer, to put both of us through a process that to this day looks doubtful and shaky, but that was nonetheless an investment of the kind of hope that when I look back on it reassures me that I had a parent who was all the way there, fighting for us both.

*What will you tell me about solitude?*

I need it. My trips, once I committed to doing all my work traveling, which has been since 2004, are usually solitary. They allow me to burrow down past the point of distraction, to listen to my own thoughts (not always a pleasant occupation)—they can be a kind of evolving meditation. It takes time for the mind noise to be dispersed. My dreams can get crazy. The unconscious sometimes feels like a garbage can. The dreams I have are so obviously this waste-disposal process of a relative kind. But then, if I am alone with my thoughts long enough, and engaged in a productive project, or in what I hope will become a productive project, I always get to a good place. A lot of this is about boiling things down to what really interests me. I try to compose my thinking about my work into the simplest kind of structure imaginable. That's my advice to anyone who is doing art: What are you most interested in? What are you most curious about? I don't need to know where I am going, as I said, but I do need the seed, and that arena of interest, if I can find my way to it, is where I realize that seed. There is always something I want to look at more than anything else.

The hardest thing for aspiring creative people is to learn to trust that kind of feeling, that instinct, that longing, because they are surrounded by: "Who cares about that? That's been done before." And: "What is the point of that?" An artist has to believe in his own experience of wonder. I had graduated high school early. I came from a visually unsophisticated family—people who do not truck deeply with images. Orthodox-Jewish. It is all about the word. I went to art school at sixteen with no other ambition than to draw like Michelangelo, but no sooner had I blinked than I was being pummeled with Andy Warhol and Marcel Duchamp. My love, since childhood, was drawing. I was happy as a clam through my freshman year because that year focused on drawing and I was the star draftsman of my class. Then sophomore year rolled around and there was no such thing as a drawing class, let alone a drawing major. And to top it all off, nobody knew much about painting anymore. Painting was "dead." But there was still the desiccating shell of the painting department wrapped around us like a mummy's gauze. Neo-Conceptualism was roaring its ugly proscriptions. It took a long time before I finally understood that the lesson they were trying to force-feed us was that there is a dialogue here, and if you want to be involved in culture at a high level you need to take heed of it. But I didn't care anything about that dialogue, the way it was being presented.

I think my breakthrough moment came when I read *Remembrance of Things Past*. I had slogged through Joyce's *Ulysses* before I got to Proust. *Ulysses* was totally unpleasurable, but Proust was pure magic. I had a moment of what I can't exactly call recognition, since I was going to go down that road no matter what, but it was, I felt, a moment of validation. Those two novels, written at about the same time, taking such different approaches, gave me a clear mes-

sage. My revelation through Proust was not just of his formidable architectural achievement as well as his human insight; it was of his not seeming to care what the required dialogue of the regime of the moment was, and of his trust that there would be a response to his call from those who were secure enough, and awake enough, and alive enough to return it.

*When you think now of your time in California, what is it that you came away with?*

Well, I came away with the realization of my ambition to create the book that I have tried to describe a bit. A book to reflect this country and the moment that we are in, but also a book that is subjectively accurate. I came away with that enlarged sense of experience that one has when one looks deeply at something, in the way that one has to when taking pictures. It's a heightened process, like any art form. Sometimes when I am photographing, I imagine there are these tentacles going out from my eyeballs, long strings that have these little fingers on the their ends, and they are literally scrubbing the surfaces of everything I look at, emotionally and physically. That kind of looking can be exhausting, but it can also be exhilarating. One of the luxuries of this business is that you get to feel like you really are in the world, playing your part, opening out to it, like the woman on her back in your short story "Say Hello to All My Friends at the Aviary," looking into the rectangular frame of a deep-blue painting, imagining pulling it down upon herself like a coffin lid.

*Imagining herself dying into all that beauty.*

Once, I came across a baby deer that had been hit by a car. It must have just been hit. It looked completely alive. The eyes weren't glassy or fogged over. A gorgeous fawn. White dots speckled on its fur. I am trying to convey my sense of the area in Colorado where I am shooting now. A magnificent animal has been hit and is lying by the side of the road, bleeding, eyes still open, breathing, but paralyzed and about to perish. And that's how I feel about a lot of the beauty I am experiencing. I know how short-lived it can be. The culture is addicted to the kind of growth that its machinery is mandating, despite the awareness of all that comes with that growth. The great landscape photographer Robert Adams once said he didn't want to photograph wilderness any longer because wilderness was no longer true. All the flowers had been fenced and counted. I need to photograph both. I think that that is still the only hope for telling the story I think needs to be told. There are still remnants of wild nature that can be saved. But you have to bring the news, to make the case, to testify to the extraordinary wonder of it all. We've destroyed in two centuries what has taken billions of years to create. This is easy to forget if you're not looking at it. Part of looking is the transmission of something that cannot be delivered in any other way.

*There are some gorgeous nudes in Redwood Saw. Is there anything that you would like to say about "the nude"?*

Taking pictures of the forest had led to taking pictures of the town, which had led to taking portraits. How can I make this richer, more difficult, more challenging, more rewarding? I asked. Nudes! I answered. I'd been thinking about

nudes for a long time, but I had never shot any. I'd drawn them, of course, in art school. I'd loved and cared about them, had had them in my life—all of which was why I wanted to deal with them—but I considered, primarily, three more specific things concerning the nudes in *Redwood Saw*. One: I thought they would up the ante, with regard to the issue of vulnerability that had initially led me to portraiture. Two: I thought that they would make an interesting contrast with the forest, and they also brought in some Biblical themes that I wanted to play with, vis-à-vis the Old Testament Creation story. But, most important: I wanted to bring the spirit of Eros into the work. Crescent City is a town that has a lot of young people. It is a very unhealthy town. You look around and you see people who are sixty years old, and fifty years old, and even forty years old, scooting around in electric wheelers because they can no longer walk. Crescent City has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in the country. And it struck me, as I was doing the portraits, how quickly a lot of these teenagers became adults. They have a couple of kids instead of, you know, going to college. It hit me hard how the story just goes on, no matter what the details of the narrative are, that this is the end-all, the primary, the fundamental, human, animalistic impulse. Bearing, making, creating children. Carrying it on. No matter how despairing it is. No matter how dark it is. No matter how painful it is, the story just goes on, embedded in the bodies of these people.

So there is a portrait of a buxom young girl in a tank top in front of a bunch of tall weeds that are in flower. She's in a parking lot. While I was in Crescent City, I asked every single waitress and every single barista to pose for me, and this girl was working at a coffee shop. She looked about eighteen and I asked her if I could take her picture. She said, Oh, yeah, sure, but could I come on back tomorrow when she was on break, and when she came back the next day she had gotten herself made up to the nines. Makeup like she was going to the prom. Hair done in this complex, pristine way. Wearing her best jeans. Her best sneakers. Her brand-new sleeveless shirt. When I photograph people, at first I never give any direction. I just want to see what they will give me, and as long



as it doesn't seem like it's burdened with self-consciousness, with artificiality, I take it. Whatever they give me. She jutted her huge bust out and here she was, in the spring, in front of this colossal acre of weeds that were just flowering in a parking lot, and it said so much to me about the town and, beyond the town, about the human condition. I know this girl has two kids by now. I'd bet my bottom dollar on it. She was right at that incredible moment where she was going to take her greatest asset, which was her youth and her body, and fling herself into the future. And that was poignant to me, and it made me think of doing nudes. And early on, having decided on the nude, I made it a point to have an equal number of males and females. There is a lot of Eros remaindered there for me. It was a deep vein. The male nude in front of the van—he lived in that van. I got to know his story very well.



It's a gift that I was asking them for. It's a real gift of intimacy. And it is hard to honor that correctly. It's a great challenge. To do the contemporary nude and to invest it with all the appropriate complexity and layering of signal. There is something essential about what happens when we are down to our skin. It is hard to get that correct in art, in representation. This is what you might call the exciting problem. How do I do that right? How? By whose model? This is very tricky territory, and I almost hesitate to talk about it because I haven't figured it out. The puzzle is there. These primal forms of sexual desire. I want that to be part of my work. It has got to be, to reflect life in any meaningful way.

*Your experiences are very autobiographical for me.*

Well, I'm glad.

*There is a lot of raw, condensed emotion in your expression.*

I like trying to solve formal problems immediately. I like to take risks. Expression is half, at least, a problem of form.



*What is your relationship to irony?*

Irony is another problem for a lot of us. On the one hand, irony represents play and responsibility, and ethics, and everything that goes into registering genuine despair. It is our job, I think, as artists, to expose these deepest repressions of despair. The art that I respect most speaks to the most urgent fears and longings of being alive. Seeing and perception must be connected, and that is one of art's tasks.

*Why does this make me think of William Blake?*



I have only one line of Blake's rattling around. People ask why I am a black-and-white photographer. Blake said, "He who prefers color to form is a coward." I want the bliss of my transformative encounter with the world, and there is something austere at work there, but I also, perhaps self-indulgently, want to believe that my art is a testimony. Which is why I have chosen to riff on the documentary form. I want it all. But mostly I want to make a record of awe that is simultaneously a record of protest.

In *Redwood Saw*, one of the most compelling portraits for me is of the teenage girl in her back yard, where there is a discarded sofa and a lot of trash. The sun is at about two o'clock in the afternoon and there are clear skies. The light is blindingly revealing. The girl has on a Superman tank top and she is wearing sandals and jeans and she has her head cocked, looking into the camera, at a twenty-degree angle. To me, it's a picture of doom. I came to the girl through another member of her household, the wiry woman of another portrait, who is standing in front of a rusted doorway, with a tiny American flag blowing in the wind to the right. I met the older woman by chance. An absolutely charismatic woman who explained that she was part Indian. She had a long history of drug abuse. She was a self-mutilator. If you look carefully at the picture, you'll see that her feet and arms have extended white patches from the wrist to the elbow. She told me she had poured lye on herself. Another portrait taken in the same back yard in which I photographed the young girl whom I now think of as Supergirl, shows a heavy-set, broken-looking man who I thought at the time was surely Supergirl's father, but now I am not so sure. Anyway, he was some



sort of father and she was some sort of daughter. Philip Larkin, right? "Man hands on misery to man / It deepens like a coastal shelf. / Get out as early as you can, / And don't have any kids yourself." That was my feeling as I made my way around in those portraits. And yet . . . and yet, still . . . the great Beckett line about how I can't, I must, I will, go on.

*You don't seem too sure about the connection between those portrait subjects. Didn't you ask?*

I'm not a documentarian; that's the first thing. Some people have complicated interpersonal circumstances. There are stepfathers and half cousins. And then, too, I do ask, but I am not taking a census.



*The last sequence of Redwood Saw is seascapes. Your seascapes are like Chinese poetry.*

I worried my way to the ocean. It felt a little too easy an ending. I struggled with too many shots. I understand the importance of water. I look at the world and I see water shaping every inch of it and I wanted to deal with that. I felt overwhelmed, inept in the face of the subject. I actually sent a first draft of the unfinished project to a mentor. He's a photographer whose name I am not going to mention. He wasn't convinced by the ocean shots or by the pictures of the forest. At first I was in despair, but that despair became a beautiful thing when I realized, O.K., I really am alone here. That means I have total freedom. I am going to do what I set out to do. I shot more seascapes. I edited their proliferations down to a few spare fathoms, to what the narrative required.

Do you recall the aquarium portrait directly before that concluding ocean sequence? The illustration of the aquarium on that battered backdrop? That little baby in the foreground? What interests me about that image is just on the personal level—it has nothing to do with the art. I shot it off Highway 1, the road that many consider the most beautiful in America. For the most part, it skirts the coast and offers crests and views over the Pacific Ocean. But when it comes near Crescent City, for some reason it diverts into the town. Anyway, this woman appeared. Gorgeous. She was a dead ringer for Boticelli's Venus. Tall—that same wavy, light-brown hair, like the sea. A little bit chunky. Those great Western cheekbones and full lips and deep-set blue eyes, and she was a

complete meth freak. To take a focused, large-format portrait, as I've said, there has to be stillness enough for a thirtieth of a second or more. Which means you can't move for that length of time. This woman was incapable of that. I wanted the picture of her with her baby. I thought it was such an important picture. I took two exposures. Neither worked. I wanted it so much. There was something very obvious about her extraordinary beauty and the tragedy unfolding.

But I finally asked if I could take a picture of just her baby. It was easier for him to stay still for a thirtieth-of-a-second than it was for her. If you look at that baby's face twice, you will see something you probably didn't see the first time. Which will also mean that this was not a good enough picture in the first place, since I have to tell you this story to make my point, but, what you will get, I hope, from a second look, is that the expression on the baby's face has all the complexity of a gaze into the future. And he's gazing into the future in front of a cartoon illustration of our evolutionary past, painted on a cinder block wall in a parking lot.



*Can you say something about the struggle for survival?*

There is a portrait of a young boy, standing against a wall that had been decorated with the painting of a flying eagle on its upper-left side. The boy was a teenager. In a tie-dyed T-shirt, hands self-consciously stuffed into his pockets, eyes averted from the camera. It was taken in a parking lot at the side of a building that was or had been some kind of veterans' hall, and I saw the eagle. This became one of the few images where I just parked my camera and said, This is it. I am going to wait here and cast this picture.

I was going to wait for the right person to come by and I didn't have to wait very long, because the first person that came by was this kid, and I saw myself in him. He was a kind of doppelgänger. I recognized a kind of oversensitivity that doesn't go over well in a small town. And this image of the eagle, with its implications, to me, of the hyper-militarism and overpowering corporate culture that have overwhelmed the politics of democracy in this country felt





unsettlingly significant. I also saw this eagle as a symbol of the brutality and mercilessness of nature, after having spent the time I spent in the forest. I want the story to be balanced, in that way. It is hard not to see how fearsomely that eagle is swooping down upon him.

*I hate artists who say, Here's what I did, go make sense of it. Like the value in a work is the amount of incomprehension it generates. Nobody understood Van Gogh in his time, ergo . . . cogito . . . sum . . . But, fellow-alumni upon this great school body we call the earth, first rid yourselves of self-delusion and then go and seek to be more generous.*

Yes, be more generous by being accurate about your feelings. That's why the editing is so important to me. If I don't have that essential stake in shaping my final effort, why bother? Why make the sacrifice? I don't disclose any new ways. I didn't pioneer any new light angle. So what I was left to do was edit it down severely, to create a narrative circle. But even had I not stumbled upon the resolution, the ocean would have had to be there. Every night I was in the forest, or in the town, I had to get to the ocean. And there was a lane down which I could drive my car right to the foot of the coast. The land rose above me and I was scooped out into this private relationship to the closest thing we have here, on this planet, to the infinite, besides the sky. That feeling I have tried already to describe to you of what lured me into that old-growth forest initially. The need to experience my smallness, and the expansiveness of time. To locate that place from which the imagination can throw itself anywhere. So that's where I wanted to end the story, where I began it in a way. That's why I think of it as a circle. To me, it was a circle.

*At the conclusion of Kafka's The Castle, there are deleted scenes as good as anything in all of literature, but perhaps, paradoxically, not quite good enough for The Castle. Let's go ahead and try to insert a few of those. Talk about image-making.*

The history of image-making, vis-à-vis human civilization is impressive. I don't believe it is going to cease, unless something fundamentally alters what we know as human nature. It is a profound hunger. The hunger to make the image. And the hunger to take in the image and to make sense of it. The hunger to pattern the world. That's what I love about photography. It works as a call-and-response. The audience matters, but only when you work, and the only audience that matters when you work is the one that is in your head. The call is the stuff you look on and the response is the poetry to which it gives rise, and the two are wed in the way you begin, hopefully, to capture how you feel about the world.

*Crane o'er the mountain flew. And wither then? Out of this world?*



Ever since I can remember, I have fantasized about being a bird. That connects to the idea of the image-gatherer. From the heights, the vantage widens.

*Dragonfly.*

I don't know much about them, but they like water. When I am photographing, I always follow water. I did it in California, that first trip, tenting, and it is not evident in the shots I took, but when you are in those forests that's where the light is. You find a canyon of light that the water cuts, and that's where I find many of my pictures. And I guess the dragonflies may be a good representation of how swift you have to be to catch it all.

*Moon.*

I'd been living in New York City, strictly a creature of the sidewalk. Now I had the urge to leave that and experience the opposite. Far away from the city lights, on the night of a full moon, it is spectacularly bright, but of course it's a misty kind of brightness and things are half revealed or revealed in shadow. Just as the

loss of our great forests reveals the shadow that hangs over our sense of what it means to be in the universe, so the star-gazing experience reveals neither mercy nor condemnation, but only rapture.

*What do you say about revolution?*

Oil in the Gulf. Every day the spill ten times larger. Every day accompanied by the same old politics and intransigence. It's the fault line, and the pressure is building. There is only so long to deny reality before reality asserts itself. And that will be our revolution, because nothing short of that is going to lead to the correction, here, that I think has to come.

*Grace.*

I never told you one of the unbelievable ironies behind the sequence of clear-cutting images, those woeful trees that looked to you, you said, like, "stricken, desiccated orphans." I came upon the whole scene down a road called "Wonder Stump." Sometimes the world just hands you the metaphor on a silver platter.



Alex Stein is the author of *Dark Optimism*, *Weird Emptiness*, and *Made-Up Interviews With Imaginary Artists*. He lives in Boulder, Colorado.

Photographs and text copyright © 2011 by Richard Rothman. *The Franz Kafka of Wilderness Photographers* accompanies the monograph *Redwood Saw* by Richard Rothman, published 2011 by Nazraeli Press LLC. Order address: 2871 NE Alameda Street, Portland, Oregon 97212. [www.nazraeli.com](http://www.nazraeli.com)

