

and nod to him to-night!” reads Mother, the surf now a distant sibillance in the perfect loneliness of the graying streets of The Village.

* * *

Back home upstate, several hundred miles from The Village, I set up a darkroom. We had adopted a baby, were parents now, so there was limited time for printing. But every once in a while I could get into the darkroom and make images. Our daughter was sweeping us forward in that ferocious tidal pull parents come to know, but this advancing into time still seemed to require some backward motion. In an old cabin on our rural property, I hung black plastic over the windows, put the enlarger on what had been a kitchen counter, covered the sink with a door blank, arranged trays over its surface, laid a trickling garden hose in the rinse tray, ran its suction drain into the bottom of the old sink, cleaned some house screens to set up as drying racks, and started to make prints.

Once my eyes adjusted I could see the images darken in the trays. Anyone who has developed pictures knows this pleasure, the image rising slowly out of the ghostly squares rocking in their fluid.

Twenty years before, we’d sold our house in Redondo and moved to Northern California in one of those events that, like ground shifting along a fault, just seem to occur; I can’t recall ever supplying a friend, relative, or even myself with a coherent reason for this move except that it seemed the thing to do at the time. Now, coming into the cabin and seeing the images on their drying racks, I thought of my father, a lifelong exile from his beloved Virginia birthplace. As it did for so many, the war had picked up his family and sent it spinning across the country. He loved Southern California, but still—how deeply we had lived in the shadow of his loss. I couldn’t deny that I also felt like an exile: I could still recall the day we’d moved north, how in the middle of packing and car loading I needed suddenly to drive up to one of the empty stretches of beach around 20th Street in Manhattan Beach, walk across the sand and dive in *one last time* as a native, a local, one who belonged, floating under and looking up at the wave, at its glassy essence, its clear and glaucous light passing over and gone.

But the images demanded that exile, couldn’t have existed without it.

“Meter to the black,” I was instructed, “then back off two f-stops and let the highlights take care of themselves.” At 25 ASA stepped down to 12, the tripod mustn’t tremble, the mirror has to stay locked in the up position, you have to stand to one side and trigger the shutter with a remote release as if waiting for that comic flash in the pan of powder in some old frontier studio. But those miniature fireworks never come; instead, the subjects of your gaze remain mute during their sixtieth, or thirtieth, or quarter, or half, or even whole second-long capture before the shutter snaps to a close. Then those “lords of life” are left to the breathing world, while in the camera lie waiting the sonograms in grayscale of the subtle body of the past.

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*Interior Pool, Apartment Porch
and Stairs, Swim Pool
with Float, 2014*
Silver gelatin prints, 16 x 24 in

