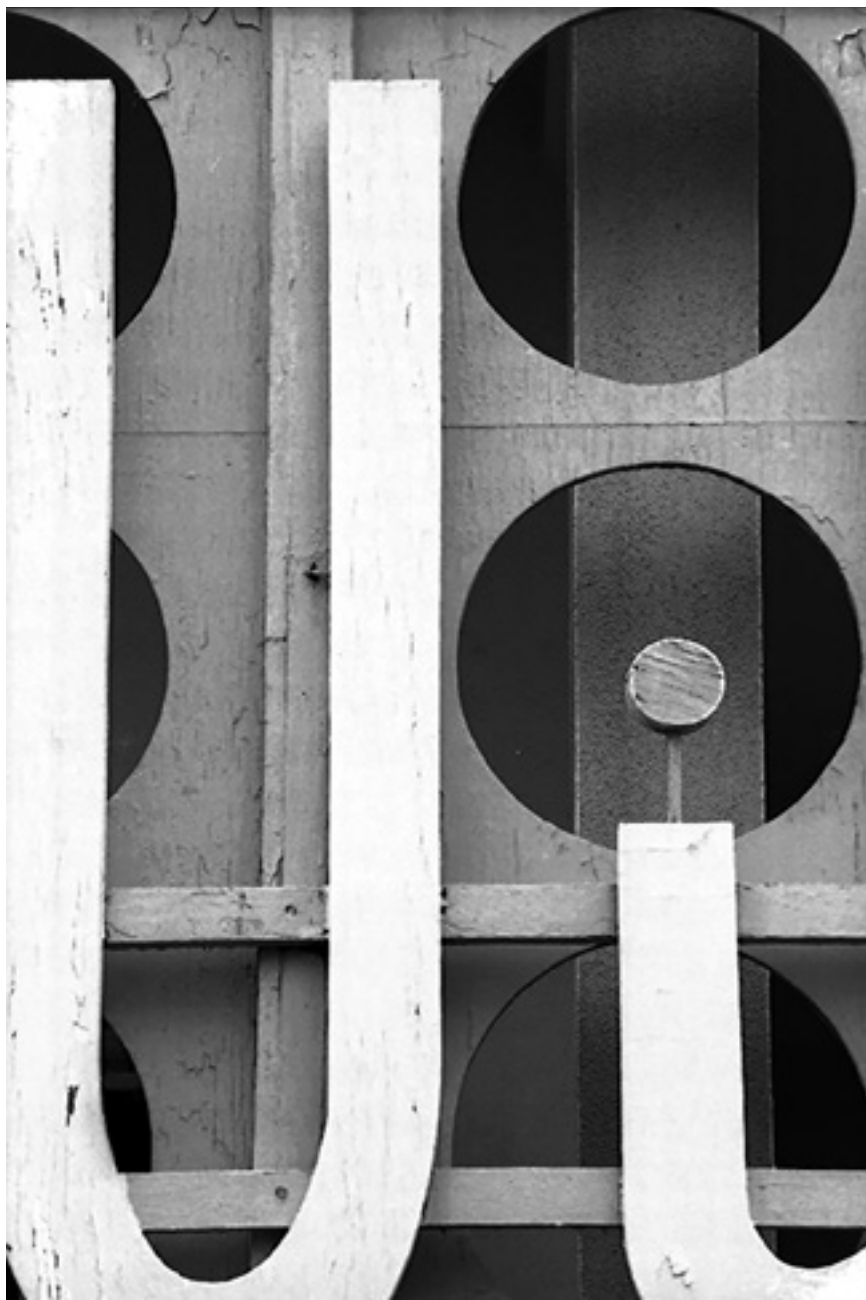


NEAL SNIDOW

Isle Sign,
Apartment Letters, 2014
Silver gelatin prints, 16 x 24 in



NEAL SNIDOW

Meter to the Black

Composition of Loss

In 1996 I began to make pictures of my hometown in Southern California. A beach town, it offered photographic attractions like sunsets and “views,” but those weren’t what drew me. Instead, I chose as my subjects details of the suburbia in which I had grown up: apartment facades, backyards, bits of parks and schools, as well as odd, anonymous objects—railings, fences, electric meters. Like my subjects, I was practically invisible myself in my middle-aged pursuits. I photographed them methodically from a tripod onto black and white film, a wordless man bent over the camera framing images of a retaining wall or ground littered with eucalyptus leaves.

It’s hard to remember now why this project presented itself with such force, but one of the main causes must have been the great grief my wife and I were then experiencing. After years of trying to have children, we’d lost a horribly expensive in vitro pregnancy—our last chance, or so we felt, at being parents, and we were devastated. A painful blankness took hold of life. My wife would come home from work each day in what seemed to me a white, chalk-like haze of hurt. As for me, on semester leave from my job teaching English, I had plenty of time to stew; and in a genteel, steady, and prodigious way, like the pale host of my Virginia forbears, I drank from March through May until I couldn’t drink any more. The drink, the triple Scotches doubled and trebled, achieved its familiar tincture of de-

pression, a permanent iris effect like a soiled copper wash out on the edge of things, a sort of peripheral yellow the acid hue of film development chemistry.

I felt deeply lost. Then, like a sudden punctuation mark, I felt a chest pain one afternoon while I was cooking dinner. I kept sautéing onions, wondering what to do, but the pain didn’t stop. At the emergency room, all tests for this fugitive heartache turned negative, but during the night I spent under observation in the hospital, the larger questions of mortality—of what Emerson called “the lords of life”—kept appearing as embodied dream figures in my half-sleep: querulous old men losing their way to the bathroom, and strapping night nurses guiding them to their beds in loud, hectoring voices. At one point early in the morning, a strange woman strode from nowhere into the room as though in a James Thurber cartoon, looked brightly at me and then at the patient heretofore hidden behind a screen in the next bed. “Oh you have to see this!” she said, and cheerfully threw the curtain aside to reveal my absolute twin, a bearded middle-aged lookalike who grinned ecstatically at me like a lost brother before bursting into the stuttering baby talk of a stroke victim.

As a lifelong reader, it was disappointing in a time of crisis to see how little solace there was in this central activity of my personality. As if in a B movie, I could see my hand dipping fatefully into the motel nightstand for the Gideon Bible, therein to find that peace that passeth all understanding, but this melodramatic instant never arrived.

Instead, I continued to plow through my current book, something by the Jungian James Hillman. I was feeling the double bind of interest and frustration that talk about the soul brings to the soul in pain—everything seems right enough, but none of it makes one feel any better. However, Hillman kept mentioning “the images,” and this puzzled me. I supposed he meant the pictures in dreams; but this felt incomplete, in the same way Hillman’s whole effort, despite its brilliance, lacked some crucial efficacy, like out-of-date medication—perhaps like the prodigious flow of J&B and Johnnie Walker I’d been purchasing the last few months under the discreet liquid eyes of the East Indian convenience-market manager and his sari-clad mother seated beside the newspaper racks. I let Hillman’s book go idle, but the idea of pictures stayed with me; and as the

summer came along, I thought I might go to Southern California to visit my mother and take some photos.

* * *

My first California neighborhood, an area of apartment houses near the beach where my parents and I lived from 1953 to 1958, had always drawn me in a powerful way. We moved out of the apartments to a house in a subdivision three quarters of a mile off, where my mother still lived at this time; but my trips south would always include a visit to those older, beach-shabby but somehow luminous and magnetic blocks. There at the old apartment was my bedroom window, looking out as it always had onto the quiet street, the palm trees, the ocean just beyond at the end of the block with its same steady sound and light. I could imagine my younger self in there still, reading, painstakingly assembling a model plane in the perfect silence of the past. I could give him a soundtrack—maybe “Cupid, draw back your bow,” or “I’m painting it blue,” or even the Nat “King” Cole Show from a distant room that would enfold my small mental cutout into its own depth like a View-Master or pop-up book—and yet I could never will this figure to look up or speak.

Occasionally, I’d feel myself break through the present to something deeper—or perhaps “fall through” is a better figure: on my rambles, I might be overwhelmed with a sudden sadness, a primal ache spread wide like noise between distant stations on the radio, or the sound of surf at night. This I understood in some way to be a truth of childhood. I never knew when this uncanny visit might come, and despite often badly needing assurance that the flat and denatured present was not the world’s last answer to whatever my question was, such glimpses could never be willed. But when they came, they came with force: pedaling over my old school grounds one day, I rolled idly toward a rusty backstop where we used to play ball, only to feel my whole body start to shake with some ancient emotion; it was all I could do to keep my balance. All through this period, the precinct of the apartments continued to exert its gravity until I finally had a dream in which I gazed down on the apartment from above, filled with the uncanny knowledge that “here the work would continue.”

But of course a lot of time had passed—forty years. That seemed a long while to be obsessing over a worn-out

apartment house. My generation had no shortage of narcissists fretting over their supposedly bad childhoods—not bad in the sense of *violent*, *hungry*, or *poor*, but as somehow *not leading to a happy adulthood*, a far less certain indictment. So I was a skeptical pilgrim. As befits soul work, signs and portents accompanied the enterprise. Once, seeing a new vacancy sign outside the apartment, I got the idea of passing myself off as a prospective renter in order to get inside—the interior spaces, I was sure, would act on me like the bike ride across the playground, only much better, setting off depth charges of forgotten feeling. These transports I would somehow hide from the manager as I went from room to room, ad-libbing a cover story. But when I finally worked up courage to pick up the phone for an appointment, my ear was blasted by a shrill howling, neither computer nor fax but a banshee wail I’d never heard before (or since), warning me off. Another time, again on my bike, I saw that not only was the very apartment we had occupied vacant, but that someone was inside cleaning it. With a rising sense of good fortune I dropped the bike in the ivy front yard and went to the screen door. “Hello,” I called to the woman vacuuming the living room, “I used to live here. Would it be okay if I looked around?” The woman briefly surveyed me, eager, large, bearded, sweating, wearing grimy bike gloves, and sensibly answered, “No.”

So later I began to take pictures. Photographer friends at the community college where I worked had taught me an old-fashioned black and white technique that seemed intriguing. Mostly I was hoping to make an image that would remind me of the Folkways album covers I had loved in high school, those post-Walker Evans photos of weathered doorways and played-out guitars filled with nostalgia and Americana. But the moment I set up the camera and tripod in the old neighborhood and saw these scenes from my past through a viewfinder, I felt a thrill that was a surprising ownership, a bringing to light, an alchemy that could turn a brooding sorrow into an artifact of reflection. Standing over the camera in the beach overcast early in the mornings and going through the somewhat arcane process of metering to accommodate such slow film often felt like a daring, righteous theft punctuated with a shutter click. I would hurry from spot to spot, muttering to myself with eye screwed to the viewfinder, nervous that an apartment resident might catch me: one by one I felt I was free-

ing objects and places from some drowsing captivity—the *mailbox*, *the incinerator*, *the porch*, *the stairs*.

* * *

My father had passed away three years before on these sweet gray sidewalks, walking his dog—a heart attack so swift the cut on his chin from the fall never bled. The blocks he was walking are curved rectangles two lots deep at their ends. There are no alleys, no glimpses down and within, so at night the secret hearts of the houses and their realms of darkness behind the garages and at the ends of the yards are individual, not communal. Within these shadows, possums hang from overhead electric wires, snails are stealthy in ivy beds, and cats watch from the warm tops of water heater enclosures. Walking the boulevard, you feel sealed off, walled away from the residential streets moving at right angles into the subdivision. The magnolias, so scrawny in their plantation, Eisenhower years, have long since secretly broken through into sewers and cleanouts, and in their forties and fifties are thriving—huge, vivid, and glossy, studded with enormous white blossoms. Father made his way past these under the streetlight and their moving, liquid shadows, and then one short block along the boulevard, off the curb and across the street parallel to ours, and along the next short block.

On the evening of his funeral, I felt seized by preternatural energy and began striding the way Father had gone along the light gray sidewalk, past the place of his collapse and down toward the ocean. The Palos Verdes Peninsula rose to my left, twinkling with lights. I walked with purpose, quickly and firmly, suddenly struck with the certainty that the energy with which I was walking was endless, that I would never tire, that I could easily walk all night, crisscrossing the South Bay street after street. I moved down toward the ocean and into the apartments, stitching the streets, reeling off block after block, holding the ocean itself off for a while, still just wanting to move swiftly among the apartments, absolutely tireless and alert past their nighttime presence, their empty courts, stairwells, garages, glowing windows; gliding past them in the shadows, I knew everything there was to know about these places: their storage cabinets, laundry rooms, crawl spaces, fuse boxes, hardware, eaves, and vents—all seemed lit from within as I strode along. I moved up and down the avenues,

following the old shapes of the dune and the bay, the primal beach and seagrasses bought and sold for a hundred years by the Figueros and Ainsworths and Huntingtons, and the gray scrub shore where people gathered moonstones—and where, at the turn of the century, two old men had slept side by side in the salt works office at the lagoon, selling salt by the hundredweight, grumping through the long gray customerless days before turning in midst the surf-roar and the seabirds scudding overhead: these old dreaming men tossing on their cots while buoys sounded their bells over the rush of surf as they did when I was myself a child feverish and sleepless—this was the layer I felt sure I could get to just by walking quickly and steadily enough. For a period in my mid-twenties, I’d taken to running in the evening, young and fit enough at least to glide along streets, alleys, and avenues past the flowing and dreamlike diorama of planters, apartments, yards—it was this power I felt I was recovering as the sidewalks unreeled beneath my feet.

He had retired from the May Company department store where, after managing Housewares and Hardware, he rose at last to run the credit office on the third floor. He’d had several heart attacks, but like other of my male relatives from the Second World War generation, this onslaught had made him more stoic than cautious. On one of my photo trips after his death I had occasion to do some business for Mother at the May Company, and found myself on the third floor, near the credit office—a blank sort of place just opposite the escalator. He’d stood at the window and greeted the often angry customers whose credit cards had been rejected at the registers in Boys or Juniors or Notions, explaining patiently how purchasing one item on credit and then returning that item and purchasing another item, also on credit, did not necessarily lower or erase one’s overall balance or lessen the need to make timely payments. This news would have been delivered in his Southern accent, soft and polite, blue eyes blinking more quickly as the explanation repeated. The space where he stood looking out at the escalator that was rolling his clients ever closer was large and white, a still heaven of furniture displays and empty model rooms through which occasional customers threaded singly or in meditating pairs. He leaned his blue May Company men’s-department suit against the white cabinets, braced a knee throughout the afternoon to give his leg a rest—his



NEAL SNIDOW

*Apartment Hall and Flag,
Pitosporum and Dumpster, 2014*
Silver gelatin prints, 16 x 24 in



wing-tipped shoes, toes slightly upturned, fitting snugly into the soffit below the storage. One floor below was the small music department where I'd often wait with Mother for his shift to end, mesmerized by the jazz albums and their bold mid-century covers: Francis Wolff's portrait of a young Coltrane listening with an unfathomable attention to playback at the *Blue Train* sessions; or later, that photographer's warm color photo of Horace Silver's handsome father, immaculately dressed and Panama-hatted, bathed in a park's autumnal light the same tobacco-hued tone of Joe Henderson's wreathing tenor-sax solo in "Song for My Father"—the title track in F-minor, as Leonard Feather's liner notes have it, "plaintive rather than mournful."

* * *

I wanted to be on the street early with my camera, before too many people were up. The hour between six and seven was best. I'd have scouted the day before, walking in offhand alertness, not thinking too much, and waiting for something in the passing scene to tug or catch at me in some inner way—like a rough surface snagging cloth. Spaces were what I was looking for, the feel of a slight concavity that was more memory than physical presence, remembering—as a kid, perhaps—*where I glanced, where we were walking.*

Freud, so I learned, felt that memory was a stratum in the mind where our pasts lay perfectly preserved, funerary objects in the burial chambers of recall. However, as my pictures accumulated, I saw that this was clearly an overly optimistic theory of the mind's ability to stabilize the past. Poring over contact prints or making enlargements, I knew that each revisiting of memory was as much creation as re-creation. Though the photos might make a sort of language for re-speaking the past, this was a tongue in which metaphor held priority over name.

I was already well acquainted with tropes of loneliness from childhood—the compulsive blank gaze at window boxes, sea light, and the desert pleasure of empty sights and sounds. These spaces began to show up in the photos from the beginning. I felt drawn to surfaces that, like the suburbs themselves, seemed "blank" at first glance but on which could be seen a subtle patina of history as well, a trace of lost time within which some sort of answer to the present might wait.

I found I took many pictures of blind windows, pulled to these voyeurs' locales where the desire to see within was suspended in the surface interest of the window's texture itself: glass, muntins, frame, sashes, cracked putty, salt-corroded aluminum, the flawed stucco at the window's edge—I began to imagine all these as figuring the ways we have of looking within and back. I felt drawn to doors and fences subject to the same decay against which they defended, as well as architectural details, walls touched with the circular rub of an absent plant, or the patina of repainting. There were plants as well—succulents, bamboos, grasses, palms, and pitosporums in subdivisions and vacant lots, once the subject of an orderly agenda but now vestigial, a scrim between past and present. There could also be images of power and understanding sent underground, ordering systems grown into crude networks, textured with time; I made pictures of taps, utilities, electric meters, wires, fixtures, and other traces of life's galvanic body rising into the light—perhaps like the dreams we recall and reconstruct, now condensed into daylight systems of value, of what we need to have been, and what instead seems to be.

It was important that these images be unpopulated. It was objects I wanted, and the "tears of things." Church icons, their historical roots in Egyptian funerary portraits, radiated a stillness that was a sign of their subjects having passed over, and the sacred nature of the image was a quality of that unreachable stillness. Now when I opened the shutter to let the morning's gray light settle over the film emulsion, the shards and surfaces of my neighborhood seemed to take on a similar poise.

On my photography expeditions, I'd stay with Mother. As always, I did a lot of listening. Everyone told stories in our family, and many were delightful. However, no one was quite the tale-teller mother had become over the years. Mother's stories were never improvisatory or searching; in the theology of narrative, she was a firm predestinarian. Once a story had been heard, at the appearance of its first words one knew one's fate ineluctably for the next few minutes, for, once relaunched, the tales never varied in incident, detail, point of view, or conclusion. And it would have taken a bolder Lollard than Father or me to interrupt this ritual; the fixed brightness in Mother's eye and the tiny but unmistakable tremor of emotion in her voice gave

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has condensed...*

strong warning that her moment was not to be tampered with. In the usual family way, I had managed to grow up knowing all this without really knowing it, but now that there were just the two of us, my role as audience became far more constrained.

Sitting with me in the den as we drank coffee and read the *Times*, she unrolled several from her old repertoire—tales going back to her childhood in Nebraska: of the time her parents encouraged her to learn to skate by taking her to the pond in Lincoln and simply leaving her there one winter afternoon; what her cousin had shouted at the radio quiz show regarding the geography of a certain town in Missouri; what her first husband, the man who had died in the war, whose name had been mentioned fewer than half a dozen times the first forty years of my life but who, now that Father was gone, was coming more and more into her narrative rotation, had said of the dance band at the mixer at the University of Nebraska one evening in 1942. As Father had done, I smiled and nodded. But it began to occur to me: *my pictures are my anti-stories*. I sensed in the mute and inexplicable calm of those images I liked best a small chamber of air against this narrative avalanche.

In the meantime she began a more recent story, an upbeat anecdote of what the Korean owner of the coffee shop at the pier had said in his endearing broken English. Under the nacreous overcast of her morning health walks, senior get-togethers, and the anxious pressure of her emerging role as an unattached person, a new colony of small, fixed narratives was forming in Mother like seed pearls.

But suddenly she mentioned seeing me. “Oh you did?” I said. Interruptions in the narrative flow were unusual, especially references to me; I had never learned not to be

surprised at them, and a little alarmed.

Mother had been returning from the pier past the Presbyterian church, and there I was, a half block away on South Juanita, her son, bearded, overweight, once perhaps a person of some promise but now a childless and unforthcoming freshman composition teacher in his late forties, for some reason pursuing a new activity—hauling a tripod and camera around the neighborhood in which he’d grown up and, at the moment as she was driving past, hunched over and peering through the viewfinder at what seemed to be a pittosporum in a vacant lot.

“Yes, I was on Avenue D and there you were,” she said, “and I thought *Bless his heart, there he is, taking his pictures.*”

* * *

I was looking for traces; the successful photo, I was learning, was one in which a certain neighborhood air was—at least to me—immanent.

In the blocks near the apartment, with its light-struck beauty, the beach sun stippling full on the stucco surfaces in the emptying bliss of the onshore flow, the quiet was of a certain post-trauma recovery, a blinking out into the day. People in this neighborhood often seemed stuck, becalmed. In the breezes and thinning sun, polite alcoholics made their deliberate way to the Party House for a quart of vodka, holding themselves erect, slightly eroded at the face but neat and clean, wincing a bit as they walked in nice slacks and carrying a folded hankie in a hip pocket. There were also sharper-dressing, underemployed men in their forties, carefully coiffed in pompadours or a modest roach, wearing cabana shirts and sport togs, aviator sunglasses, buckled loafers (during the seventies, of a blinding whiteness), about to be or just having been separated from their wives, sellers of Ninety-Eights and LeSabres, resumes listing “expediter” experience at Northrop or Hughes, ad-journing to the 488 Keys or the Windjammer for drinks through the long overcast afternoons.

As a movie fan, it had long seemed to me that apartment life at the beach was made for the estrangements and floating dread of noir, that post-war corrective to the *Sunset* magazine enthusiasms of the Golden State—the quiet, for one thing; the long, breathing afternoons, the ocean’s sigh, the soft, searching light, the isolating fog—and when the fog burns off, the clarity that is even more isolating in its

gorgeous emptiness. In the apartments themselves, one learns, people are escaping, gone to ground. The apartments I knew were silent, globes of cool bright air. Out of these, people issued forth, but quietly, toward the garages at the back or under the units. Even on fine summer days, there were never throngs at this part of the shore; people arose out of the landscape singly or in twos and threes, making their way to the beach, crossing the Esplanade and disappearing down the ramps to the ocean.

As a child, a small but vivid bubble of dread, a chill in the spirit level of the afternoon, might intrude any time. Alone in front of the apartment, at my chores of chopping ice plant or sweeping sand, there might be a furtive shake of a window shade across the street, or from a second story the trembling of blinds and then their coming to rest where a hand had plucked them. Once, an older boy, maybe nineteen, materialized on our street in a fatigue jacket, strolling past my broom and me with what looked to be an M1, a big blocky rifle he carried with self-conscious ease on his shoulder before disappearing into the haze of the late afternoon light.

As a child I had become invested in the nearness of the ocean, a great whispering void a hundred yards to my right as I lay in bed in the apartment on Vista del Mar, and where the fact of solitude took up permanent residence within me—the “view of the sea” that named our street.

On many days during this time, the beach’s most essential state was as a vast locale of roiling, dirtied cream, the wind of the late afternoon when everyone has gone home and the county guards are shuttering their small, stilted stations. Surfers called this “blow out time,” when the onshore chop and its crosscurrents ruin rideable waves and the sky is bleached in dazzle in the coming overcast. This is the lonely hour to which the day’s whole isolation has condensed, until the small, cream-walled apartment a block back from the ice-plant bluff behind me begins to exert a certain gravity from its zodiac of lighted windows, its hose for rinsing feet, slab porch, dinette table, and murmuring television.

Preparations for the sunset are occurring in the western sky above the horizon, a bleached ivory yellowing, then fogging to gray that will brighten later into sullen red. I am seven, eight, or nine, swimming, flopping around in the roaring foam, diving under the swells to ride out the chop

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in perfect safety in the green undersea cavities as the surf crests silently above my head—with E. most likely, my inseparable mysterious friend of the perpetual red baseball hat, long pale fingers, red-knuckled, given to warts, the equanimity of unspoken understanding. He lives in a shabby, rambling, two-story, bow-roofed, green-shingled jazz-age bungalow overlooking the ocean. Behind him at his door when I come to play hangs the great misshapen face of his brain-damaged younger sister gazing at me like a damp mottled rising moon, slurring my name in her unerring memory—or, once, seated on their driveway in the same gray late afternoon roar, the pitching ocean a backdrop, her white legs splayed open doll-like on the old weathered concrete, suddenly jetting an astonishing arc of urine like a rainbow from between her thighs, the stream of prodigious, exquisite waste turning yellow and copper, even purple in the westering light as her brothers laugh in their agony of embarrassment. E. is my eternal partner in movies and games—out of the surf we shiver, drape our small pale bodies in towels, find our glasses, those mutual badges of weakness, rinse our feet at the showers, step into our “go-aheads,” trudge the steep ramp to the street above. Inside the apartments as I walk home, the televisions begin their glow, a brave gay melancholy I associate with the hour of Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Leerie the Lamplighter*, that cheerer of the shut-in—“O Leerie, see a little child

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.

Neal Snidow teaches English at Butte Community College in Northern California. “Meter to the Black” is excerpted from his memoir *Vista Del Mar*, to be released in the summer of 2015 and available at www.vistadelmarbook.com. He completed his undergraduate work at the University of California, Riverside, and at St. Andrew’s University, Scotland, and holds a masters degree in English from the University of Virginia. This is his first publication.

NEAL SNIDOW

*Interior Pool, Apartment Porch
and Stairs, Swim Pool
with Float, 2014*

Silver gelatin prints, 16 x 24 in

