THE GRAND MIDDLE

"A world that is overfull and sorting out meaning.[1]"

Istanbul is my favorite city to photograph. I could spend endless days wandering, riding the ferries, eating soup and listening to the sounds of boat horns and smelling the food stalls. There is a neighborhood in Istanbul, adjacent to Taksim square, called TarlabaşI, where Kurds, Syrian refugees and the transgender community live. My first time there, I photographed men collecting bags of coal to sell for heating stoves. I went into an abandoned apartment building and photographed the peeling floral wallpaper that was illuminated by light from where the ceiling once was, and I got a haircut from a drunk barber.

A friend told me that TarlabaşI literally translates to "the edge of the meadow". I don't know if this is true, but the concept of a place on the edge of something well known - a popular destination - is where I like to find myself. This is where I photograph.

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Portrait of me making photographs in Tarlabaşı

When I was in High School, I moved with my father and his wife to a sheep farm in Maine. The house was a small Cape and very old. There are revolutionary soldiers' graves hidden in the woodlot. I slept on an early 18th century rope bed and periodically my father and I would tighten it with a wooden wrench that resembled a crucifix to get rid of the sag in the mattress. To keep warm, I slept under thick piles of what my father called historic textiles.

In the winter, we would occasionally have power outages and I would sleep near the fireplace on the living room floor. I had a small paperback book of Henri Cartier-Bresson's photos that I would look at with my flashlight.

[1] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dqsk9c-XVRg

In a way I wasn't present for my childhood. I was physically there, enduring my parents battling divorce and my stepfather's abuse.

Emerson asleep on the floor by our fireplace.

Cartier-Bresson's book comforted me on the cold winter nights. Photography books continue to offer me an escape. When I was a kid, they provided a way of dealing with my precarious childhood. Even today, when I am feeling frustrated or anxious, I will go to a shelf and pull a photo book as a source of solace and, more importantly, inspiration.

Beyond photo books, learning photography carried me through the thicket of my parents' divorce and my itinerant childhood. All my hardships were buffered, in one way or another, by my camera. Since then, the reclusiveness of photography has always excited–and warmed–me. Using the camera to face the world starts a conversation we may only have with ourself. The internal and emotional back and forth becomes a kind of inside joke. Or maybe, more accurately, a secret we are unable to share with anyone.

The roughness of the external reality of my childhood home forced me inward with my camera, but my camera carried me outward–almost without my realizing–far beyond the confines of my home.

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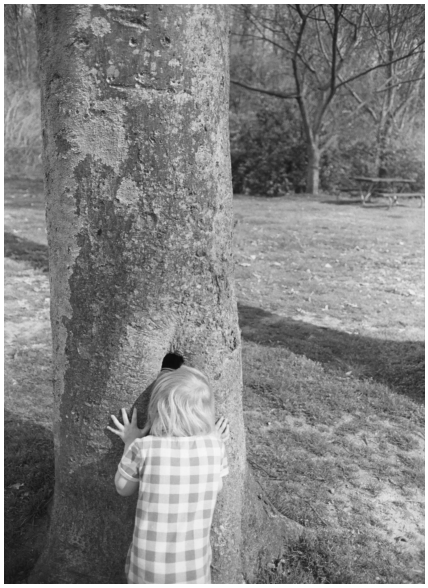
When I started the MFA program, I was stuck at home, alone like everyone else. It was the peak of the pandemic. We had no idea what would happen. I taught school remotely from my basement. I wrote poetry, learned bookmaking and made photographs in the Sourlands near our home in Hunterdon County, New Jersey. My three-year-old son, Emerson, had not started school yet. Between my remote classes, we took long walks on the trails behind our house, where I taught him the ABCs on the gravestones in the nearby cemetery.

Once I became a parent, my identity changed completely. When I was younger, I traveled constantly. When Emerson was born, I gave up traveling and took a job teaching photography at Princeton Day School, a position I really enjoy. Despite the dramatic change in my lifestyle, I never felt like I was making a serious concession by becoming a parent. I was surprised to find how much more time and

space for photography my new life gave me, now that I no longer had to spend so much of myself in transit and looking for jobs. I am at ease, in a way I have never been before, with simply creating.

In my new life, I am less logistical; I am guided much more by emotion and intuition. I always see the world through the lens of Emerson. I have fears for my son and his safety that I never had for myself. My perspective is no longer that of a mere spectator. I am more emotionally intertwined with my work. The buffer and separation I had to what I used to photograph for NGOs is gone. I am finding that I have an innate connection to the seemingly quotidian world that finds its way into my work now. The less spectacular my work becomes, the more intimate it feels as well.



Emerson peeking into a tree during one of our walks during Covid lockdown.

Before I was a parent, my photography was driven by assignments. I wanted there to be little or no distinction between what I photographed for clients and what I photographed for myself. I would often stay longer on an assignment and shoot photos for myself, often returning to locations I photographed before. When I delivered the photographs to the NGO, the photos I had made on my own were indistinguishable from the photos I made specifically for the NGO. My interest in humanity was broad, generalized, and abstract.

Since becoming a parent and leaving assignment work, I now make photographs in less spectacular situations. I am driven by intuition instead of an assignment. I am also driven (almost literally) by my son. My documentation of the world is much more personal, and I like to think in quiet conversation with Emerson, whose eyes are my windows to the wider world, the future and the past. I now explore the complexities of life on my own terms. This is much more satisfying; it feels more honest.

It is not hyperbole to say that I never imagined I would live this long–or to be a father. I had no concept of the future. I lived hand-to-mouth.

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Recently I had lunch with my wife, Corbin, at a fancy restaurant at the Pebble Beach golf resort. As I described my thesis, she challenged me by analyzing my goals and efforts through her prism of photography: she shoots to record the beautiful spectacle of a wedding day. Her camera comes out at a predetermined time and she travels through the day documenting one anticipated event after another - the kiss, the recessional, the cake cutting, the toasts, etc.

This conversation helped me articulate what I aim for with my camera. My photography involves closely observing a subject and rendering it in a way so as to make it feel familiar.. Our approaches are forms of self-critique: the intriguing self-analysis that lies within what drives me versus what drives Corbin.[2]

To meet Corbin at Pebble Beach[3], Emerson and I woke up in the middle of the night and drove two hours to JFK airport. When we got to the airport, the train that connects long-term parking to the terminal was under maintenance. My fellow passengers and I had to negotiate more delays and a series of shuttle buses. Along with the loading and unloading of carts of luggage, we observed rude and humorous interactions. There was a confused human mass jostling to figure out their next steps – anxious go make their flights. To me, this whole ballet of disoriented humanity was absorbing. I had my camera out the entire time. In most ways, the hour it took us to get from our car to the ticket counter was a highlight of my trip to the Pebble Beach Golf resort.

View through a window of an Istanbul Ferry.

I am inner oriented at times. What may seem inconvenient and frustrating to others, is often what makes me the happiest. I have a desire to problem solve, to get myself out of difficult situations. I find a kind of comfort in enduring these little 'hardships.' Everyday moments of uncertainty.

I will recall The Shuttle Bus Debacle with the same nostalgia as sleeping by the fireplace with the Cartier-Bresson book. These are mini-events that shape my view of the world and they form the roots of my photography.

Most people, Corbin included, are driven by the desire for convenience and abundance; I suppose this is human nature. While I consume and appreciate what is fancy, I am attached to more basic human experiences. My lens focuses on the background hum, the pulse behind the spectacle. I am not as

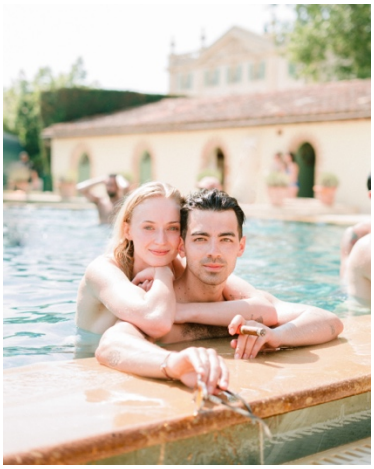
[2] By this description and according to Collingwood's theory, Corbin is producing craft.

[3] Corbin is a wedding photographer and my son, Emerson, and I occasionally meet her at resorts throughout the world.

interested in the choreographed walk down an aisle surrounded by flowers as I am by looking through the droplets of rain on the dirty window of an airport shuttle bus. I want the background story.

Corbin has her name in lights and enjoys the accouterments. I tend to flourish in the background. I thrive on the bus ride to the airport terminal, in between the cracks. I am always traveling to the Grand Middle. Sometimes I am a commuter and other times I am a traveler. As a photographer, I am always a passenger, never the pilot.

(To me) the Grand Middle suggests a place where everyone is common, a human overlap, where things are shared, exchanged, *changed*. I acknowledge the overlooked. However, the overlooked is often significant–is often what is *most* significant to me. There is an emotional (and electric) charge in the way photography can elevate the common into something more than mere documentation. I choose what I shoot without a specific environment in mind. I arbitrarily made a few destinations up, so I could search for photos along the way. It seems to be working. Maybe the point is not to have a destination, so I can be present for the transitions and happenings around me.



Sophie Turner and Joe Jonas at their after party in France.

I am not searching for the ordinary or mundane, I am seeking out the familiar. I want to show what it is like to live with and appreciate the familiar. I want to highlight the unexpected beauties. Years of working this way has made what is familiar for most almost exotic to me. I toggle between the glistening world of celebrity weddings and the ignored worlds of the disenfranchised. Since I have always worked alone, there is even something exotic or strange about having coworkers–about my steady workplace.

Often my work feels like a kind of eavesdropping. This is why I often find myself photographing at convenience stores. For most of us, convenience stores are purely utilitarian. We routinely overlook what actually happens in them. I spend time in stores, familiarize myself with it visually, until it becomes something other than a merely functional piece of the economy.

I have always thought about my work as being rooted firmly in *place*. The Grand Middle is all about the in-between places. And my NGO work was always about capturing specific cultures. But, after chatting with colleagues and reflecting more on my work, I realized my photography is more about time than place. In the background of many photographs–my own and others'–you can feel the hum of the seasons, the time of year or the time of day the photo was taken. This is obvious in a photograph

of a sunset or a snowcapped mountain. But it is just as important in my dusty and dark photographs of the roadside taken in the brown New Jersey autumn. I like to think of autumn as a main character in my most recent work. In this way (and others) a photograph may become about where you are without showing where you are.

There is another way that time works through my photographs. Though they are inevitably and wonderfully stamped with specific times, I am also looking for something timeless in the corners and cracks of everyday places. Something others can connect with even if they know nothing about the particular location. My photography of the Middle, wherever I happen to find it, is also about reconciling my past and my present, giving some coherence to the fragments that make my life.

I don't expect my viewers to see this personal side of my work, however. The viewer's experience will always be different from what I intend or imagine. This is okay. Actually, it is the point. What is most important is that we share an experience, with different interpretations and reactions to give it life. The Grand Middle–and any good piece of art–can somehow hold our different reactions all at once; it can bind them together.

find myself, with whatever material is at hand, I don't consider my photographs to be casual or "raw." They may look loose and casual on the surface, but they are carefully constructed. They have to be to bring the background to life.

This applies not only to single photographs, but also to my collections. They are both tentative and highly curated. During the last couple semesters of the MFA, the epiphany for me was the realization that they are never complete–that they don't have to be. I now feel comfortable, or less uncomfortable, knowing that my photographs may be arranged in infinite pairings and sequences and still achieve a kind of coherence. It's my own little lexicon or even a kind of grammar. It's in my studio where this methodology emerges, where I fuss over details and sit with ambiguities. This, as much as any other aspect of my work, is about working through my personal past and reimagining the future. In the end I can't separate this lonely work from wanting to connect with others through a shared vision.

My goal, if I had to put it in words, is to make work that is compelling, without having to know why. I want to initiate a slow reveal.

Contextual considerations

The Grand Middle is my version of Cartier-Bresson's Decisive Moment. This phrase epitomizes what I consider my photographs to be about.

Photographing the Grand Middle is about seeing everything as it is in the moment without projection or judgment, and letting discovery follow. I try to avoid extremes. There is always beauty in the familiar. Many pursue the mundane for the sake of being mundane, but I am trying to acknowledge the overlooked. I also want to create something worthy of contemplation. I want to convince you to stay a while and keep looking.

In pursuing the 'Grand Middle", I am not sure why I choose to shoot what I shoot. I will walk past something striking, oblivious to the main spectacle, and then I will suddenly get excited about the way light and forms interact in an intersection. This kind of work excites me much more than the ones I made doing assignment work around the world. I look for things without knowing what they are or what they mean; which I hope is also what makes them interesting to others.

A lot of photographers are not very specific about subjects they photograph. William Eggleston, Lee Friedlander and Henry Wessel are great examples of photographers who work without a preconceived notion of what they are going to come up with; they are specialists in wandering and create by responding intuitively to the world.

Eggleston and Wessel do not work by photographing specific subjects and organizing them into taxonomies like Friedlander, but their work is vernacular. Eggleston photographs in color around the South, seeking out moments and settings that are intuitively Southern. Wessel is a master of form and light within the frame; he shoots whatever he finds on evening walks with his dog. All three seem to shoot randomly until the viewer realizes the uniqueness comes in how they form their frames and build their work. Themes emerge for the viewer when they see the work come together in a collection.

I am a bit different in that there is some otherwise spectacular content in the background of what I am photographing: background and foreground are almost inverted in my work. An example of this approach is my recent portfolio from Egypt. I photographed on the street without any pressure to photograph the Pyramids of Giza or, on the other hand, to document the misery of garbage collectors in the 'dead city'. The pyramids are in the pictures, but they are not featured prominently.

*Image from Robert Adams' "*Eden"

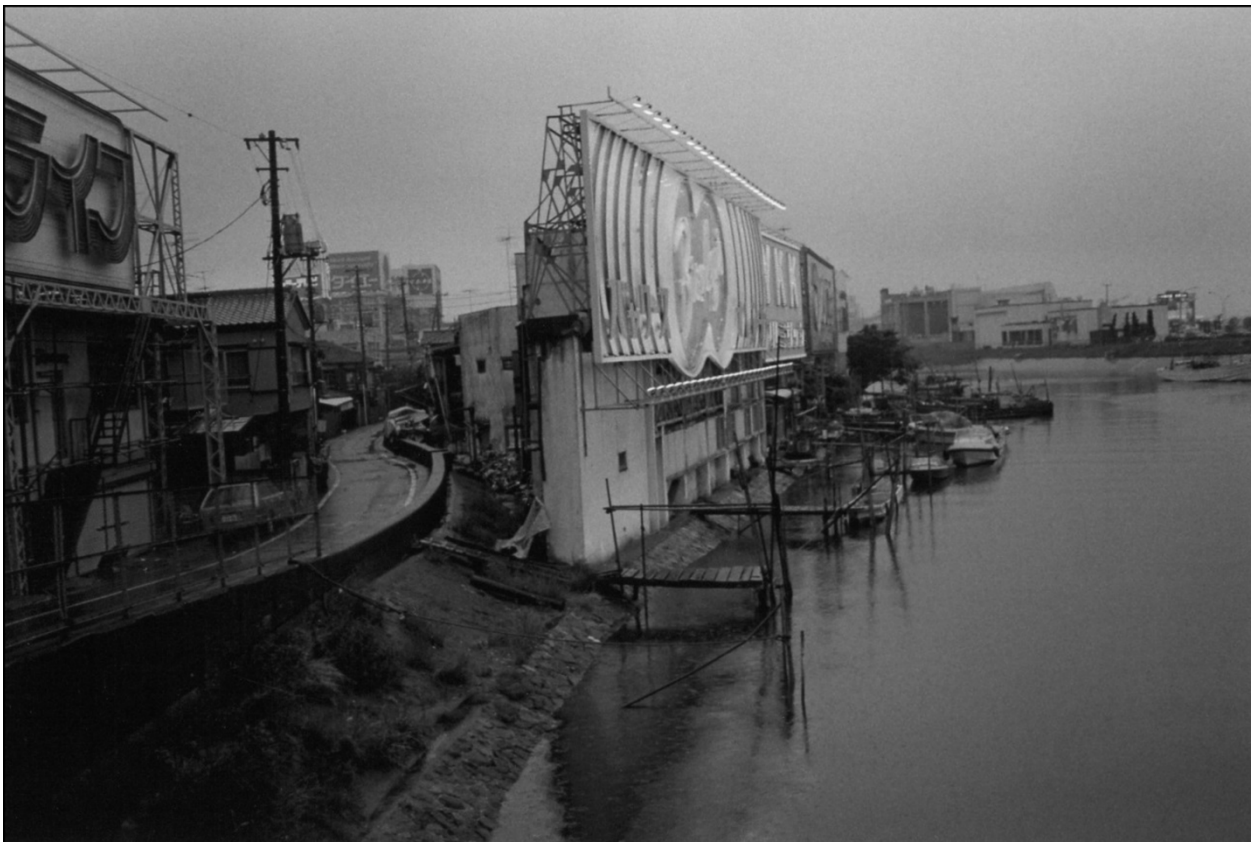
Robert Adams is a direct influence on me, especially in his practice. He is quiet, thoughtful, intuitive and understated. I often reference the work from his book, *Eden*. Adams spent an afternoon and an evening making photographs at a truck stop in Eden, Colorado. The photographs are as much about America as about a specific truck stop. Adams has a knack for making sure that all the people in the photographs have obscured faces. There is a quiet elegance in the way the truck stop feels as though it is at the edge of the world - a place that becomes the antithesis of 'Eden'.

*Image from Robert Adams' "*Our *Lives* and Our Children*"*

Another body of work by Adams that has influenced and provoked me is *Our Lives and Our Children*. Adams photographed people coming and going from a grocery store with carts full of grocery filled paper bags. A mundane situation that makes little sense until you learn there is a nuclear power facility nearby. Once we know there is the nuclear power plant in the neighborhood, there is a looming effect that completely changes the context of the photographs. The photographs are hard to normalize.

In my photographs of the Mexican border wall, or the Egyptian pyramids, the backdrop of a geopolitical wall or famous historical monument, although less ominous, the context of the photos change. In the case of Adams, once the viewer realizes that there is a nuclear power plant in the neighborhood, the scene from a grocery store parking lot becomes hard to normalize. It looms large. In the case of my Pyramid photographs, they are seen and blend into the vista, not becoming any more or less important than the other elements in the picture.

A lesser-known photographer who is nevertheless a major influence for me is Koji Onaka. I was first introduced to the work of Koji Onaka through Dashwood Books on Bond Street in New York City.



*A photograph from Koji Onaka's Book, "*Slow Boat"

He shoots color and black-and-white landscapes with a 35mm lens on a Nikon SLR. At the core of Onaka's work is his printing; He is as much a printer as he is a photographer. The prints are carefully constructed articulations. They are perfection, delicately formed in a fragile space. If they were made a hair lighter or darker, they would completely collapse!

At first, some of Onaka's photos look completely unremarkable. As if they were made by an Introduction to Photography student who was simply happy to have made a print. Upon a closer look, the eye starts to detect a remarkable sophistication and complexity. The light is subtle and silvery and captures the spirit of the weather or even the day with an elegant authenticity. But these are not simple renditions of what the camera recorded – there are artistic stakes. My reaction of Onaka's work is that he makes a statement about the world *he* lives in, rather than the world we all inhabit. I like this idea.

Slow Boat is the best known of Onaka's books. The concept is that he is a slow-moving photographer that makes pictures according to his immediate environment. Just like a sailor is limited by tides and weather, so is Onaka as a photographer; this is a riff, I imagine, on the cliched notion of a flaneur.

The deeper I go into his books, the harder his riddles are to solve. I believe every photographer's style is a riddle that the audience is asked to solve. Onaka's work is unique and idiosyncratic. This Onaka-ness is more a matter of mood than means: something that transcends black-and-white or color or geographic content. Onaka's work is quiet and graceful, but not forced. I mean that the elegance is not contrived for the sake of an audience, but there is a purity in what Onaka does and the way he sees – there is something that goes beyond the *way* he sees. It lies in what he chooses to acknowledge. This purity is a precious glimpse into his soul and the world.

After having collected his books for a few years, I contacted Koji hoping he would teach a weekend workshop at Princeton Day School. I went to Japan to meet with him. We initially met at an exhibit he had at the Fuji headquarters. We walked through the show and then had lunch at the top of a skyscraper and then coffee. He said he'd prefer to have a drink, but he had a lecture to give later in the day.

Over the course of my visit, Koji and I would meet and have several quick meals and a few drinks. On one occasion we went to a clandestine building of used bookstores. We rambled and chatted. His demeanor was often reminiscent of a mime. He gesticulated, but quietly. Onaka seemed to have a perpetual smile.

We later found ourselves down a street of junk camera stores. We happened upon a store with bins of nothing but broken tripods. Another with only tubs of flashes. He found a large square light table on wheels. He gestured with the merchant and smiled the way he did during our conversations – this made me see that he was not putting on a different personality for his foreign guest. Ten dollars later, he and I were pushing the light table through Tokyo traffic – a wheel came off, rain was threatening, and the distance to his home didn't seem to diminish. When we arrived and realized that the table would not fit through the front door, he gestured in his Charlie Chaplin way that we would hoist the light table up to his second story balcony with string. This worked.

The whole experience sort of exquisitely molded my perception of Koji Onaka. He is humble, flawed and profoundly sensitive. He embraces all of who he is ... I suppose this is why I like Koji Onaka and his photographs so much. There is the adage that we should never forget where we come from... as I pass through this MFA, I want to come out on the other end with a genuineness to my work that

doesn't rely upon external perceptions and social media validation. I want the visual and poetic contents of my mind to be enough for an audience. No frills or gimmicks – just sincerity.

Koji Onaka and I are two men, less than a generation apart, from completely different cultures. We are both negotiating our places in the world through our love of photography. Our paths crossed and I identified a connection in our world view - the middle. I have admiration for him and appreciate how he sees the world in a way very few people can understand. His work is not dense, but it is not easily accessed. I still exchange messages with Koji, but I doubt he thinks of me as often as I think of him.

Koji Onaka hoisting the light table up to and through his balcony window.

Among the many lessons I have learned from Onaka is that the greatest piece of art we ever create is the life we lead.

Realizing that my life is a work of art and that my art is an extension of my life–almost as essential as breathing–has given me a new sense of confidence. I have found a kind of self-acceptance through my MFA work that I never had before. Especially in the final two semesters, I have overcome my hesitations and self-doubts about my photography and myself. I will always struggle, that is part of the human process, but I can reconcile myself to the fact that not everyone needs to accept my work or understand it. Maybe more importantly, I don't feel that I need to know exactly what I am doing–the mystery that was once a source of stress and anxiety is now an exciting motivation.

Much as I admire and try to emulate Onaka, the epitome of autobiographical work for me is Masahisa Fukase's *Ravens*. Though deeply personal, it tells you nothing about the specifics of his life–particularly his failed marriage, which was the inspiration or impetus for the whole project[4].

His work catalogs a journey - both a literal and metaphoric train ride to his hometown - following his painful divorce. Birds, specifically ravens, linger in almost every frame. What they mean is left for the

[4] https://topmuseum.jp/e/contents/exhibition/index-4275.html

viewer to decide. The rich ambiguities of *Ravens* validates my own journey, gives me permission to shoot my own mundane scenes of trees and birds without worrying what it all means.

An image from Fukase's book, Ravens.

Fukase's book feels to me almost like a photographic version of T.S. Eliot's *Wasteland,* a poem that means a lot to me. Eliot's long-form poem is a great example of how an artist may create something beautiful and important without knowing precisely what it's about.

Another literary inspiration for my photography is Cormac McCarthy's work, especially his novel, *The Road*. This book is a story of love between a father and son traversing a post-apocalyptic world. Today, I see the future and the precariousness of the present through my son. This concern has reshaped my perception of the everyday and worked its way into my photographs. McCarthy has taught me through his sparse and poetic style of writing, as much as the content, that there are no rules to the creative process, only examples.

Parenthood and process

As much as my work has been shaped by other photographers, the much deeper context for my work is the swirl of the relationships between me and my son, Emerson. I am not talking about an abstract aspect of my identity or my psychology: the rhythms and routines of parenthood shape my work in many concrete ways.

Emerson is six and I am often his primary caregiver. This leaves me with a segmented schedule and limited time to photograph. Even so, I manage to photograph constantly. I always have a camera on the seat next to me in the car, while Emerson sits in the back, either sleeping or making demands from his carseat–his throne. I teach at the same school Emerson attends, and many of my photographs depict what I encounter on our commute between home and school. On a good day, I will get a series of trees at dusk using a flash. The process is slow and, at times, frustrating, but the situation is temporary.

These limitations on time and environment are in many ways welcome. When I was a documentary photographer working for international NGOs, I was confined by the 'spectacle.' Now I am free to photograph whatever I want, however I want to. The few parameters I have are geographical: most of my work takes place not far from my home. But within the limits I find I can shoot anywhere; I always find environments and images that satisfy my aesthetic goals. I have always been flexible, but now I have no choice but to find excitement and beauty wherever I happen to be. I suppose I have learned to let my surroundings lead the way. They've led me to the Middle.

This is another way Emerson has directly shaped me as a photographer. When I watch him I see someone intuitively inhabiting the Grand Middle. Whether we are in a $1700 hotel room or a New Jersey diner, Emerson's needs and wants are the same. He is not impressed by famous golf courses or beautiful views. He tries intensely to solve jigsaw puzzles or aimlessly hits a pickle ball around on the beach. For me, these are tender moments to observe. In the morning of our Pebble Beach visit, we sat by the fire and talked about how humans used to not have electricity and how important fire was to survive. His response was "they didn't even have old cars?". This was a significant moment to me, but only a passing exchange to him. He quickly moved on to the dinosaur puzzle by the firelight - we didn't want to wake up Corbin who was still asleep.

Fatherhood has not only redefined how I have to work by imposing new limits on my lifestyle, it has also given me the space to complete this MFA, and achieve the clarity and the confidence to embrace my work fully. Fatherhood has meant settling in New Jersey, taking a job as a teacher, by far the most stable work I have ever had. I am now rooted in a way I have never been before, including during my own childhood. I now have space to *contemplate* my own work. And for the first time, I am developing ideas *consciously*. I can see more clearly how my photographs build upon one another.

Working intuitively no longer means being reactive. When I worked on assignments abroad I made photographs in bursts. Now I am more consistent and steady. At the start of the MFA, my process was to edit photographs I had already made. My strongest ideas and revelations still primarily emerge in the editing process, but now I also make connections between photographs as I am photographing.

Simply talking about my work with other photographers and being forced to articulate my intentions has helped me see my photographs through a different prism. Meeting with my mentors enabled me to talk about my work freely with people who understand my reference points and inspirations. My old self-doubt has dissolved through this exchange. During my penultimate semester, I was able to reconcile being both a father and an artist. I have been getting better at living with the hum in the back

of my head telling me I needed to be working on photography when I was parenting and the persistent pressure of parenting when I was making photographs.

Emerson in the NICU just after he was born.

There is a tension here, but I think it is a productive one. From the day of Emerson's birth, parenthood has felt like a schism. I remember vividly the feeling of walking out of the hospital after Emerson was born - his delivery was complicated, and we almost lost him. I was hyper aware of my surroundings– the pavement and the sunshine and the crispness of the trees–I kept asking myself why everything was normal. The world outside the hospital was like an alternative universe. Since then I have felt through Emerson that reality is always split in two, by our different perspectives, by the collision of past and present. Dealing with this collision is what both photography and parenthood are now about for me: not trying to escape the tension and smooth the world over, but trying to use that tension, learn from the schism and the gap however it manifests.

That gap is the Grand Middle. The simple fact that I can name it now and approach it artistically means I am more comfortable with it. I think that I have always been interested in that gap. I think it has always been implicit in how I live and work. But only in this new phase of my life initiated by Emerson has it become explicit; through him and through the MFA I can now see it as something grand. Seeing how he lives and breathes the world has changed everything for me.

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Other than my new working conditions, and my new approach to making photographs, this new period of my artistic life is defined by certain themes and subjects.

Trees started appearing in my work when I lived in Charleston, South Carolina. My first successful tree photographs came from outside a political rally for Marco Rubio. I walked out of the t-shirt printing factory he spoke at and saw light on some bare branches. The scene reminded me of Thomas Joshua Cooper's *Between Dark and Dark*, a favorite book of mine. In his *Dark* portfolio, Cooper delicately places wintery, bare trees alongside scrapped rocks and torn terrains.

Maybe I initially chose trees as a subject because they were readily available in my everyday routines of parenthood and teaching. I now shoot trees constantly, wherever I go, but mostly in New Jersey, on my commute to and from school. This is how the trees of my commute, my routine travel, became my version of *Ravens*. One of my advisors calls them "dirty trees," a phrase that has stuck with me. There is nothing romantic about these trees which seem to haunt the edges of the world. The built environment with all its efforts at control and order. They are unremarkable reminders of fragility and a unique convergence of ugliness and beauty.

I often shoot my roadside trees on the way home from school, in the fading light or darkness of the late afternoon. Emerson is often asleep in the back–he doesn't even know I am shooting. He is in his dreamworld and I am in mine. We are not in the blasted world of *The Road*, but we are alone on the side of a road, and in those moments it sometimes feels like the edge of the world. Even when he is asleep Emerson is a kind of witness to my work. At least insofar as I cannot help from seeing things through his eyes–or trying to.

Emerson is a part of the backstory of everything I do now. Recently, while photographing in the forest or on the street, I have been trying to keep in mind the backstory, everything my perspective brings:

expectations and various experiences, various scars. An example of this is the work I made recently in Florida. I photographed on the street and along some paths while I was in Tallahassee visiting my best friend who lost his daughter to suicide. My charged emotional state was a big part of what directed my attention and gaze that trip.

As my various tree photographs accumulated, they evolved organically into a realized body of work. In their quiet, often unattractive ubiquity, the dirty trees exemplify my idea of the Grand Middle. Trees are available to be used for a range of expressions. They have allowed me to feel and experiment a lot with photographic form. It is astonishing, when you take the time to look, the range of mood and meaning that such an ordinary thing can open up. This is an essential part of the Grand Middle.

Spectacular scenes and sites are comparatively limited in their expressive range. This dawned on me on my recent trip to Cairo, where I photographed on the streets for a week. I approached every possible setting and subject–convenience stores and pyramids–with the same level of formality. It's in my nature to spend forty-five minutes shooting four rolls of film on a grassy rotary in Cairo and shoot only a few frames of the Sphinx at Giza. Everyday things like trees and birds are quite literally more alive than grand artifacts and archaeological sites. They are dynamic, nebulous, and not tethered to a particular place.

The trees in my photographs have evolved into photographs of urban and suburban intersections - specifically telephone poles, smoke stacks and convenience stores. My photographs now depict an "urban forest" of intersections and industrial landscapes. The rural and urban scenes blend together and shape each other's meaning when set side by side. This is how another theme emerged in my work alongside my trees: barriers, boundaries, borders, and edges.

In my first semester, I took a few weeks and drove along the Mexico/US border. I wasn't documenting a landmark as much as I was showing the humanity of a place. The photographs are intended to personify the liminal and literal depiction of borders. I made the photographs using the technique of photographing around the wall, instead of the 'the wall'. The geopolitical border and the personal threshold merge together in these photographs

Even though 'the wall' had been in the news continuously, I had not thought conceptually about the idea of borders. I was conscious only of traveling along the border as a way to get from San Diego to see Corbin who was photographing a wedding in Utah. After the trip, while looking at the resulting portfolio, I started to see fences and barriers recurring in my photographs. They were all over the place!

It was a major link in my photographs that I noticed in editing and in conversations with my mentor, Cig Harvey.

The recurrence of these membranes, some made from chain link and others formed through industrial landscapes obscured by leafless trees, must have come partly from something internal. I felt they were more than a mere visual device. I may never fully know why I have subconsciously been drawn to photograph through membranes, but I have always been attracted to horizons, mindful of the ways lines of all kinds shape our access to a place. The work I have done with barriers and fences acts as a crossover point where human nature and non-human nature merge. I suppose you can distinguish between natural and unnatural borders, but in the frame of a camera–a membrane unto itself–they are always mediated by our perspectives and imagination. I am now conscious of these elements in my frame when I hold my camera up to my face. This was apparent even when I was photographing through the window on the JFK shuttle bus from the parking lot to the terminal.

There is one photograph that reminds me of my childhood home that brings these aspects of my work together. It is the most unspectacular scene. Through the dense weave of trees and growth–like tangled rope–you can barely see the house in the background. It is almost completely obscured by the invasive brush. There is also a woven wattle fence, which to me represents a concrete worldly obstacle. The massive, messy tangle of trees, on the other hand, remind me of barriers that are more internal and self-imposed. In the image, both of the obstacles collapse into a single membrane.

I see the world, my world, through the broken and dirty lens of my past experiences. I experience my painful childhood and cold childhood from a distance, a distance I can never close completely. This is the burden of the past that I now try to mold into something beautiful. It is clearly a strange, cold kind of beauty.


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This is why the dirty trees that thrive in the Middle remind me of my past; my fragmented childhood sprouting up around my linear life path. These ideas are not seen by the viewer, but they are present. Many of my landscapes, whether of trees or other fragmented objects, are congested in this way. Congestion is a compositional tactic I started doing intuitively and now use often. Something is compelling to me about the chaos, the wild collision of different things, and the overlap of different borders.

Through these themes and methods, the experiences of my own childhood and the anxiety of parenthood collapse into one another.

Process, gear and technique

I don't want there to be anything easy about my work. My goal is for my photographs to require a slow and extended read. The pictures are meant to be visible representations of what is invisible, ideas hiding in silver of the acetate in film.

As part of my method of making photographs in dramatically varied moments and environments, I put a flash on my camera (or use a point and shoot camera with a built-in flash) and started shooting, even landscapes, at dusk or at night. This allows me to photograph for more hours of the day and to play with light: I especially like to see how it reflects off of rain and snow. The bright orbs and triangles that emerge congest the frames giving the viewer a cramped composition - I like the feeling of not having control over how it will turn out. It makes me feel like the landscape itself is speaking through the frames; even if this does not translate into "beauty," I find a rugged authenticity to the congestion that I cannot resist.

I shoot with film cameras. I use both black and white and color film. I have scores of different cameras and dozens of 28mm lenses. The vast majority of my photography is done with a 28mm lens. The only explanation I can think of is that I see the world with a wider breadth than a normal lens. Lately, I have also been shooting with extreme telephoto lenses. I think I was inspired by Fukase using a 300mm for his *Ravens* work. Lens sharpness and manual controls are less important than spontaneity and equipment weight.

Cameras handle in different ways. I choose equipment according to what is appropriate for what I am going to photograph. Equipment selection is very much like finding the best pair of shoes for the weather or packing a raincoat or sweater in response to the forecast–I think that the nuance of gear

selection is often overlooked. I choose my gear based on what I am photographing and how this equipment feels in my hands.

Each morning I load cameras into my car and photograph on the way to school. Lately, I have been photographing deer wandering in the dark like post-apocalyptic zombies. I shoot from the vantage point of my car window.

Sometimes I leave school early and photograph in Trenton, near the Polish neighborhood. I park at the Salvation Army store and wander the racks listening to how people speak, before I go outside and shoot. Another favorite spot of mine is Phillipsburg and its many blue collar neighborhoods. I chat with people as I photograph feeble holiday decorations or train tracks through the bare winter trees. I wander. These sojourns are my favorite way to spend time. I think, observe, and relax. On occasion I will go to a particular vacant lot in Newark and photograph airplanes with a 500mm lens - up close as they are taking off or landing. I drive there on foggy days so I can see them disappear into the clouds.[5]

[5] Fukase shows an up-close image of a commercial jet in *Ravens*. I remember seeing an original print in person at a gallery in London. I was impressed by the frayed edges of the silver print. As I write this, I think that print may inspire my aesthetic of tactile prints.

I process my film at the school darkroom, usually after school or during a free period. I have specific development times based on what ISO I've chosen. I then scan the negatives on a quick scanner that can scan an entire roll in four minutes. Then I catalog and label each frame in Photoshop. I load the scans into a Lightroom catalog and then I choose favorites and print out digital contact sheets with each frame being ID'ed. I cut out each frame with a guillotine and then I sequence and pair photographs. My favorites I print into 4x5 work prints. I pin them up in my office or, more often, I make a stack of prints that I sort through and organize.

The pairing and sequencing is what I enjoy most and what, I believe, is the most creative part of the process. I am more intrigued by how photos work together than I am by how they work individually. I think about how a narrative may be implied or made and about how images work together regardless of content, or shape each other's content.

The pairings and sequences grow. They start to form relationships with other pairs and individual photographs. Then I start to see themes and motifs emerge. Many of my sequences are made into grids or accordions and then they are sequenced into boxes for 4x6 prints. On occasion, I will make a photobook.

Form

An audience may peek into an artist's (or writer's) process in their photographic work prints - or the marked up manuscript. This is what is most beautiful to me: pen marks on a manuscript or the crop marks and notations made on a print have the patina of ideas emerging. For me, this is much more inspiring than the published and refined work, either hanging on a wall or designed into a book form. The doodles and notes in the margins are a more complete understanding of the artist's thought process than in a finished and polished piece. Not only do we get a peek into the handwriting and process of the writer (or artist), but we get to see the evolution of an idea. This provides intimate access to the artist. *For me, these manuscripts are the pentimenti of the finished work.*

Great examples of sublime manuscripts are the doodles in the margins of Dostoevsky's work, the pencil marks on Eliot's typewritten pages and Tom Wait's messy handwritten lyrics on hotel stationary. Ironically, I think that some of these pieces, in their worn and frayed condition, are more suitable for the wall and formal contemplation than a finished work.

Print Boxes are one way that my work differs from traditional photographic forms. Each box contains its own sequence. There is value and comfort in knowing that (even if I never change it) the sequence is not permanent. On many occasions, I have a printed published work or a series committed to a wall for an exhibit where the final form cannot be easily changed. The discomfort of an unchangeable form is mitigated or eliminated by having the photographs sequenced in a box.

The photo boxes are tactile, informal and offer ways to renegotiate the context of the series of prints. When I have completed books in the past, either through a publisher or as a handmade edition of one, there are always mistakes and things that need to be changed. I have comfort in knowing that the boxes are a living document. They may be changed, rearranged and reformed with relative ease.

Each print box has a sequence. And each box is sequenced among the other boxes. These sequenced boxes build upon one another. My ideas continue to emerge. I may add a box or rearrange the boxes to incrementally build my ideas about the world we live in, and my experiences. My box portfolios become a living document. My ideas and my organic process are inseparable.

I am particularly excited that I am able to add boxes as I develop my work. The boxes do not need to be entered in a specific order. Furthermore, I can sequence the boxes with work from before the MFA and continue after I graduate! This seems like an ideal format for my work and my temperament.

Boxes are a portable, presentable and organized embodiment of me and my art on my journey through life. I have few possessions aside from cameras, books and clothes. The print boxes are something I take with me with ease. The portability of the boxes is true to the spirit of the making. A form, like a book (you can take it with you), but also something that can be added to or otherwise changed as the work evolves.

For some reason, I have often compared the process of photographers and photographs with the process of writers and literature. I think that is why I have been drawn to collecting and making photography books. With the form of the box, I am able to make a series of work, but reshuffle or re-sequence unlike what one can do with a literary book.

I find sequencing to be among the highest forms of the photographic medium. Perhaps it's legitimate to sequence based on mood. But, I think the main reason for being able to change my work is the playfulness that comes with impermanence. Nothing in my life has been secure. I like the elasticity of being able to change things; I like not having to look at my completed work as final. The boxes are a

living thing. I like the idea that someone who owns the box or happens to be spending some time with it in a gallery may become involved with re-sequencing its contents.

Sequencing and resequencing has a kinship with travel. Even if we return to a destination, the trip will always be different.

A Reminiscence of Blankets

Two Novembers ago, on my way back from an MFA retreat, I stopped by my parent's farm. We went out for dinner at a restaurant that exemplified the notion of the Grand Middle. As the meal ended, I was getting ready for the drive back to Princeton, when my stepmother, Nancy, suggested we go to the historical society to see 'the exhibit'. It was already dark out, and the museum was closed, but she had keys.

The historical society was located in an 18th-century house. The first floor was a museum. My parents had curated a show of their collected antiques with an emphasis on textiles. I was impressed by how the very blankets I used to sleep under were now elevated and acknowledged as precious artifacts.

All through my childhood, my father said he collected ‘the Levis’ of the 17th century. He didn’t want the fancy highboys or grand porcelain, he collected the primitive furniture and textiles; these were what he referred to as the blue jeans of their time.

It's not a stretch to see that what my father was collecting was the grand middle of a particular time and place: 17th and 18th century Northern New England.

We drove back to the house on the same country roads I drove to and from high school everyday. The roadside bramble was illuminated by the headlights of the station wagon. I decided I’d postpone my departure and drive home the next morning. I would sleep on a rope bed, this time on the one in my father’s warm library which doubled as a guest room.