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UNCERTAINTY

I a

“I only shoot in negatives,” she says. “Life’s easier to navigate in black and white, I think.”

She has the odd habit on Sundays of walking down the esplanade caressing the heads of tiny children as they pass. Towheads seem to be her favorite. Their blues eyes look up questioning, and she looks down cupping their chins between a thumb and index finger. She smiles at the nervous parents and exchanges a few soothing words in French as she slips the children hard candies, wrapped. Most parents look at her thinking she is foreigner and excuse the peculiar behavior.

She walks on stopping intermittently to shoot trash and abandoned buildings. “I like the fractured light of mid-afternoon,” she says. “It adds drama to the composition, I think.”

I b

Q: How’s the family?

A: You know, dad’s getting around. His bad knee is getting worse, but his mind’s still sharp as a tack.

Q: And your mom?

A: Well, mom is still mom. She won’t let dad get the rest he needs. But what are you to do? She pushed him so hard so they could retire together. Now he just wants to relax, while she wants to take cruises to Alaska, see shows in Vegas, and fly back east to see my brother’s kids.

Q: How are you holding up?

II a

“F-stops are confusing,” she says. “It has something to do with the aperture focal length, I think.

Last Sunday the clay bricks of the sidewalk caught her attention more than the giggling children skipping along them. From Eighth to Twelfth Streets, she noticed every ninth brick had a name stamped into the blood-red adobe, Tex/Mex Brick. She found this a romantically strange name for a manufacturer of clay paving stones. When she thinks of Tex/Mex, she thinks of spicy food washed down with salt and lime-infused golden beers.

She ponders the meaning of aperture focal lengths, but her thoughts are interrupted. Who’d want to stand around a kiln in the heat of border Texas, she thinks.

II b

Q: What do you think this represents?

A: I shot this in Reynosa last September. I think it was on the tenth. The subject's smile captured the pain of her people. She was from Soto La Marina, I think.

Q: How many children did she have with her?

A: She had a small son who sold Chiclets and small clay pipes to the turistas crossing the Pharr International Bridge. Her daughter, the baby in her arms, is three months old and has a cleft palate.

Q: Will you go back?

III a

"Three days out from San Miguel de Allende," she says, "we ran into a dust storm."

As she drives south from Reynosa, the mountains loom ahead blue in their preternatural jaggedness. They remind her of teeth eating the obsidian-streaked, lightning-struck white sand of the desert. From the west, toward the Gulf of Baja, a wind blows sand into dancing coupled whirling dervishes. Their white points spin and compete for the same bleached silica in their paths. The sun burns thick and red and fades into ocher and yellow behind the sandstorm. A small child next to a worn jacale sits with his back to the blowing desert. She stops the car and approaches.

His brown eyes look up, watery and large, the whites streaked with red and conjunctivitis clinging to the inner-corners near the bridge of his nose. Flies hum and pirouette on the breeze.

She focuses the lens and shoots. He stares across the desert. A fly crosses his upper lip, takes flight, and lands on his half-closed eyelid. The fly feeds on a black and green deposit in the corner of his eye.

"Gracias," she says. He doesn't move.

III b

Q: How old were you your first time?

A: The first time I was too young to remember. I was with my dad and uncle. However, the second time, my favorite time, I was sixteen I think.

Q: Was that when you started shooting in negatives?

A: No, that came much later: sometime after college actually. After the divorce for sure.

Q: Have you read L'Assommoir?

IV

“I found this sangria recipe in a little palateria in old de Allende,” she said. “We stopped to refresh ourselves after hiking down the rail line Neal Cassady died on.”

The sun reflects off rhinestone water drops bedazzling a sweating pitcher. The sun, red wine, and floating orange slices cast pink and yellow shadows on her patio deck. Her fingers stroke the crystal stem of a champagne flute. Her fingernails are a darker shade than the sun-lightened sangria. The fingers pause.

“There’s a sign where they say they found the body, you know.”