

Foreword from *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*

Salman Rushdie

“Our interest’s on the dangerous edge of things,” the poet Robert Browning wrote in *Bishop Blougram’s Apology* (1855). It’s a line that has inspired writers from Graham Greene, who said in his 1971 memoir *A Sort of Life* that it could serve as an epigraph to all his novels, to Orhan Pamuk, who sets it at the beginning of his novel *Snow*. It could equally well serve as an introduction to the photography of a woman whose aesthetic is one of stretching the limits of what we are allowed to see and know, of going to the ambiguous boundaries where dangers – physical, intellectual, even moral – may await. She doesn’t think twice about entering the mountain cave of a hibernating black bear and her cubs, or a room filled with nuclear waste capsules glowing blue with radiation that, were you not shielded against it, would kill you in seconds. Taryn Simon has seen the Death Star and lived to tell the tale.

I am always immensely grateful to people who do impossible things on my behalf and bring back the picture. It means I don’t have to do it, but at least I know what it looks like. So one’s first feeling on looking at many of these extraordinary images is gratitude, (followed quickly by a momentary pang of envy: the sedentary writer’s salute to the woman of action). I once knew a sports photographer who bribed a course attendant at Aintree racecourse in Liverpool, England, to allow him to sit wedged in at the foot of the giant fence, Becher’s Brook, that is the most dangerous obstacle in the four-and-a-half-mile Grand National Steeplechase, so that he could bring back “impossible” photographs of the mighty racehorses jumping over his head. If one of them had fallen on him, of course, he would almost certainly have been killed, but he knew, as Simon knows, that one of the arts of great photography is to get yourself into the place – the radioactive room, an animal disease centre, the racecourse fence – in which the photograph is about to occur, and seize it when it does.

“Most of what matters in our lives takes place in our absence,” the narrator of my novel *Midnight’s Children* reflects. If Saleem Sinai had seen Simon’s photographs he would have realized that he was more right than he knew. Look at these innocent orange and yellow cables coming up through the floor in an almost empty room in New Jersey, protected only by the simplest metal cage: they have travelled four thousand miles (actually, 4,029.6 miles: Simon likes to be precise) across the ocean floor from Saunton

Sands in the United Kingdom to bring America news from elsewhere – 60,211,200 simultaneous voice conversations, Simon says. But the point about these cables is that you might have guessed that such things probably existed but you almost certainly had no notion of where they were, or how many, or how thick, or what colour, until you saw this picture. You could not have imagined your voice into this banal yet magical room, but it has been here, transformed into little digital parcels of energy. Every day we pass through secret worlds like the worlds inside these cables, never suspecting what is happening to us. Which, then, is the phantom world and which the “real”: ours, or theirs? Are we no more than the ghosts in these machines?

Ours is an age of secrets. Above, beneath and beside what Fernand Braudel called the “structures of everyday life” are other structures that are anything but everyday, lives about which we may have heard something but of which we have almost certainly seen nothing, as well as other lives about which we have never heard, and yet others in whose existence it is hard to believe even when we are shown the pictorial evidence. Would you have believed in the existence, for example, of *Playboy* magazine in Braille? Well, here it is, bunny-ears and all, published by a branch of the Library of Congress, no less. And here, too, is a photograph looking for all the world like a slightly stagey Hitchcockian crime scene, like, for example, the wooded slope in *The Trouble With Harry* where we first learn what the trouble with Harry is (he’s dead, is what the trouble is). It’s a picture of a young boy’s corpse rotting in a wood, taken at a research facility in Tennessee set up specifically to study how bodies decompose in different settings. Here, Simon tells us, there are up to 75 cadavers at any given time, decomposing across a six-acre site. Maybe Patricia Cornwell or the folks at CSI knew about this kind of cutting-edge forensic research, but I didn’t, and even as one looks at Simon’s preternaturally beautiful picture, with its bare glistening branches and fallen leaves and rich autumnal palette, one finds oneself wondering at human beings’ limitless ingenuity, our need to know, in which cause even our own dead bodies might someday be pressed into service, to decay in a woodland glade.

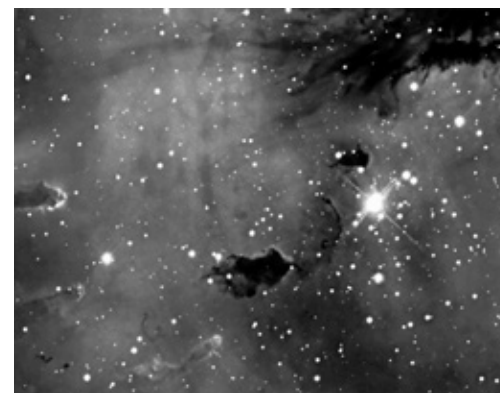
How do you get into some of the world’s most secret places, and get out again with the picture? The great journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski says that he survives the world’s most dangerous war zones by making himself seem small and unimportant, not worthy of keeping out, not worthy of the warlord’s bullet. But Simon doesn’t deal in stolen images; these are formal, highly realized, often carefully posed pictures, which require their subjects’ full co-operation. That she has managed to gain such open access to, for example, the Church of Scientology and MOUT, an inaccessible simulated city in Kentucky used, for training purposes, as an urban battlefield, and the Imperial Office of the World Knights of the Ku Klux Klan with its Wizards and Nighthawks and Kleagles, looking like characters from a Coen Brothers movie, and even the operating theatre in which a Palestinian woman is undergoing hymenoplasty, a procedure generally used to restore virginity, is evidence that her powers of persuasion are at least the equal of her camera skills. In a historical period in which so many people are making such great efforts to conceal the truth from the mass of the people, an artist like Taryn

Simon is an invaluable counter-force. Democracy needs visibility, accountability, light. It is in the unseen darkness that unsavoury things huddle and grow. Somehow, Simon has persuaded a good few denizens of hidden worlds not to scurry for shelter when the light is switched on, as cockroaches do, and vampires, but to pose proudly for her invading lens, brandishing their tattoos and Confederate flags.

Simon's is not the customary aesthetic of reportage – the shaky hand-held camera, the grainy monochrome film stock of the “real.” Her subjects – gray parrots in their quarantine cages, marijuana plants grown for research purposes in William Faulkner's home town of Oxford, Mississippi, the red-hot form of Dirty Harry's .44 Magnum shot in the heat of the forge, a pair of Orthodox Jews United Against Zionism – are suffused with light, captured with a bright, hyper-realist, high-definition clarity that gives a kind of star status to these hidden worlds, whose occupants might be thought to be the opposites of stars. In her vision of them, they are dark stars brought into the light. What is not known, rarely seen, possesses a form of occult glamour, and it is that black beauty which she so brightly, and brilliantly, reveals. Here is the beach house at Cape Canaveral where astronauts go with their spouses for a last private moment before they blast off into space. Here is a man skewered through the chest hanging in the air during the Lone Star Sun Dance. Here is the floodlit basketball court of the Cheyenne Mountain Directorate in Colorado, a surveillance post designed to survive a thermonuclear bomb. One can only imagine what strange post-apocalyptic one-on-one games, what last-ever turn-around jump shots might be attempted here if things go badly wrong for the rest of us. This is the way the world ends: not with a bang but a sky-hook. (No, on reflection, there would probably be a bang as well.)

Simon uses text as few photographers do, not merely as title or caption but as an integral part of the work. There are images which do not reveal their meaning until the text is read, such as her photograph of the flowing Nipomo Sand Dunes in Guadalupe, California, beneath which, she tells us, lies buried one of the most extraordinary film sets ever built, the City of the Pharaoh created for Cecil B. DeMille's 1923 silent version of *The Ten Commandments*, and deliberately buried here to prevent other productions from “appropriating his ideas and using his set.” There are (rare) instances when the text is more bizarrely interesting than the image. Cataloguing the confiscated contents of the US Customs and Border Protection Contraband Room at John F. Kennedy Airport, Simon offers up a kind of surrealist fugue, an ode to forbidden fruit (and meat) that outdoes even her cornucopia of an image: “*African cane rats infested with maggots*,” she sings, “*African yams (Dioscorea), Andean potatoes, Bangladeshi cucurbit plants, bush meat, cherimoya fruit, curry leaves (murraya), dried orange peels, fresh eggs, giant African snail, impala skull cap, jackfruit seeds, June plum, kola nuts, mango, okra, passion fruit, pig nose, pig mouths, pork, raw poultry (chicken), South American pig head, South American tree tomatoes, South Asian lime infected with citrus canker, sugar cane (Poaceae), uncooked meats, unidentified sub tropical plant in soil.*”

For the most part, however, her images easily hold their own, even when accompanied by the most astonishing information. The smoky, white-on-white portrait of the degree-zero



NGC 281, The Pacman Nebula, Kitt Peak National Observatory, Tohono O'odham Reservation, Arizona, *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*, 2007

cryogenic preservation pod in which the bodies of the mother and wife of cryonic pioneer Robert Ettinger lie frozen is beyond spooky, speaking so eloquently of our fear of death and our dreams of immortality that few words are necessary. The top-shot of a mass of infectious medical waste achieves the abstract beauty of a Jackson Pollock drip-painting, or, perhaps, a Schnabel smashed-crockery piece. There are images of deep humanity, such as the portrait of Don James, a terminal cancer patient, taken just after he received a prescription for a lethal dose of pentobarbital, for which he had successfully fought under Oregon's Death With Dignity act. There are mind-numbing grotesques, such as the picture of Pastor Jimmy Morrow the Serpent Handler of Newport, Tennessee holding a lethally poisonous Southern Copperhead snake just above a Biblical text instructing us to “Call His Name Jesus” – and there are mind-expanding epic images, such as a roseate portrait of a star-forming region, the Pacman Nebula, nine and a half thousand light years away. (That's slightly less than 57,000,000,000,000 miles, by my calculation: a long way to go for a good picture.) And in at least one instance there's a remarkable piece of “found” art. Who could have predicted that those ninety stainless steel capsules containing radioactive cesium and strontium submerged in a pool of water and giving off that blue radiation would so closely resemble, when photographed from above, the map of the United States of America? When a photographer comes up with an image as potently expressive as that, even a dedicated word-person such as myself is bound to concede that such a picture is worth at least a thousand words.

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