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Sleeping by the Mississippi

Photographs by Alec Soth

Deceptively simple on the surface, in the words of Alec Soth, “a series of scenes in a lucid dream,” *Sleeping by the Mississippi* journeys through back waters and side channels of the great river road, and gives us glimpses of places and people ignored in the new world order, most of whom probably aren’t connected to the world wide net, and yet are deeply connected to the American psyche, to the flow of human blood through human veins.

Rivers and beds go together in our songs and poetry. “I built my hut near the Congo,” said Langston Hughes, “and it lulled me to sleep.” Several folk songs speak to this as well, a tradition the Grateful Dead resurrects in *Brokedown Palace*

“Gone to plant a weeping willow, on the banks of the river, it will roll,
roll, roll
Lay my head, by the waterside, in my time, in my time, I will roll, roll,
roll
In a bed, in a bed, by the waterside I will lay my head
Listen to the river sing sweet songs, to rock my soul”

I build canoes and run expeditions on the Lower Mississippi River, my experience has always been the floods and maelstroms of motions, something not seen in Alec’s photos and yet felt pulsing throughout. The river has a strange way of destroying things and rearranging them again in its own fashion. You will find human trash, a baby doll or an empty vodka bottle, organically recombined with tree roots and mud on its sandbars. Like attracts like. In some piles of driftwood a predominance of basketballs and baseballs, and plastic balls and rubber balls is found. In others nothing but signs of various sorts and shapes, stop signs, mile markers, and riverboat plaques. Another will produce a thick pile of willow branches, carefully chiseled clean by beaver, their teeth marks visible in the gleaming cambium. Discordant items are made whole by the Mississippi’s mysterious ways: a hoe shoved deep into the heart of a black walnut root, rubber tires floating alongside logs, an abandoned freezer filled with driftwood, this is the poetry of the river.

You don’t need to see the cold cohesive quality of the river disappearing silently and unchangeably around miles of bending forests and disappearing into the fog to feel its inscrutable motions in *Crystal* or *Charles*. Survivors of the flood, *Mother and Daughter* are clinging momentarily to some secure raft of driftwood or muddy point along the banks of the river while the water incontrovertibly keeps rolling on by.

We don’t witness ambitious businessman on their way up the ladder. In fact, we don’t see the shining faces of any middle Americans who capitalized in glory days the 90s. *Sleeping by the Mississippi* is the story of gnarled oaks and wily willows who were uprooted in the flood and run aground downstream. Children do not appear in this context. This is about old and worn out pieces of America that have landed along the shores of the third coast, and the seeds that are planted in the mud. Perhaps the seeds will one day sprout in the fertile floodplains, but for now they are nothing but seeds, dreams lying silently in waiting.

We are given fleeting hints of some of the people who were born within the great valley of the Mississippi and rose to great heights above the mud and the sand, Johnny Cash, Mark Twain, Charles Lindbergh, but their presence is ghostly, like the phantom of a car in *Cemetery*, *Fountain City*, *WI*. Other ghosts can be palpitated in *Green Island*, *IA* hospital bed or the chilling version of the submerged mattress in *Helena*, *AR*.

It is a deep thing, to lay your head in any particular spot. You would only do this in some place of great peace and contentment. Adam and Eve’s “bower” became their place of refuge after their fall in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, the location from which all ensuing drama unfurled, a bower as complete and contained as *Crystal’s* or *Herman’s*, a place where you can seek refuge from the madness of men and machines, a place of quietness at the very least for one night. This feeling is implied in the spiritual “I’m gonna lay down my sword and shield, down by the riverside” in that you would only disarm in a place of safety.

Alec didn’t set out searching for beds when he began tracing the river south out of the Great North Woods 2300

miles to the Gulf of Mexico. But he wanted to see the place that Lindbergh's dreams first took flight. As he followed the bayous and backwaters other dreams and other beds appeared in the viewfinder of his camera, and the motif developed naturally. He began asking people about their dreams. An inmate who doesn't appear in these photos wanted to start a pilot school. A deaf man in the Blue Ox Bar of Brainerd, Minnesota, wrote on a napkin "my dream is to find someone who would love me so much!" As he journeyed further into the heartland of America other dreams began surfacing like the boils blooming in the middle of the big water, and it was like there was this forgotten society living along the Mississippi, locked up in prisons, their apartments collapsing around them, those living in the wake of upward mobility. Even though their circumstances were troubled, their spirits were intact. It's the same circumstances that gave birth to the blues, which were also born along its banks. You can see little signs of their dreams visible amongst the poverty and desperation of their daily lives. *Charles* and his model airplanes, the simple life on *Peter's Houseboat*. In a moment of enlightenment, Alec saw *Charles* and *Peter* as "a model for how to be living: feet in the water, head in the clouds." The river has always afforded freedom of thought and expression as well as movement. Remember, it was the Ohio that Seth crossed to find freedom with babe in hand in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Jim and Huck found theirs floating downstream on a log raft.

Somehow Alec was able to provide a medium for middle America to express itself, to be seen and heard, maybe through his attention to what a person's greatest desire might be. The dream that won't die, *Mother and Daughter*. The unending dream, the ball of yarn in *Green Island, IA*. *Crystal* glows with a heavenly light, her dream fills the room with a pink glow that fuses together the bedcover and walls, the incongruities of her world have become one complete self-realized whole.

It's a question we could ask ourselves, and maybe each other, what is your dream? It's a question you'll be met with when you stand at the water's edge and for the first time you witness your reflection spinning chaotically with the flotsam and jetsam of a nation. Maybe this should be a requirement for presidency.

A nun at the Chapel of Perpetual Adoration said "My dream is to be as consciously aware as possible of God's presence in my daily life." A Kentucky convict punctuated his simple dream with question marks: "My dream is to be in a Hot Rod magazine???"

Alec said: "Many people asked me to describe my own dream. I've never settled on a single answer. I want to be aware of God's presence and be in a Hot Rod magazine. My pictures have something to do with all this dreaming."

You cannot see through the water of the muddy river, like Thoreau was able to do through the clear waters of his beloved Walden Pond. But after sitting on its banks long enough and watching the strange features that erupt on its surface, the boils and whirlpools, you will begin to understand what lies underneath, what forces are there being represented. If water is a mirror of the soul, the Mississippi reflects the soul of America. And beyond: the rising stars, the moon and the other planets, the Milky Way Galaxy are all seen here, quivering reflections in midnight light. Moving water both reflects what lies beyond, but it also creates the basic patterns of life, and then quickly extinguishes them. It is God's studio, the place where helixes are constructed and then dashed to pieces.

Perhaps you would see yourself if you stood long enough on the banks of the river and watched its motions and reflections. Perhaps you would see some piece of America. Perhaps you would see the patterns and colors of light seen in Alec's photos, the forgotten people and places, the dirt and the dreams, the brilliance and the absence, the currents rushing one way and then the other, the strange patterns of life and fluid motion, and the driftwood carried in the current, the driftwood that feeds the fires of our nation, and the seeds that lie waiting to be awoken as they silently dream, *Sleeping by the Mississippi*.

—John Ruskey