

The big picture: Alec Soth's American road trip oddities

Tim Adams : 4-4 minutes : 1/9/2022

A couple of years ago, Alec Soth, the great road-tripping witness of American life, decided to retrace the path of the most famous funeral procession in his nation's history: the train journey that carried assassinated President Lincoln's 6ft 4in corpse from Washington DC to his home town of Springfield, Illinois. The steam-powered cortege was witnessed by millions of Americans, among them the poet [Walt Whitman](#), who was moved to write his elegy, *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*. Soth set out on his journey with a line from Whitman's poem in his head – "And what shall the pictures be that I hang on the walls, To adorn the burial house of him I love?" – and a notion "to mourn the divisiveness in [contemporary] America".

Soth made his name as a photographer with *Sleeping By the Mississippi*, his landmark 2002 journey along the human margins of the storied river. He quickly found the polemical impetus of his Lincoln project too confining. He continued his journey but adopted another more freewheeling line from Whitman instead: "From this hour I ordain myself loos'd of limits and imaginary lines, Going where I list..." He followed his eye, rather than his head.

The result is a book, *A Pound of Pictures*, which free-associates around some of the themes of that original project. Most of Soth's images are taken of roadside oddities – a woman measuring "the girthiest sycamore in Michigan", for example, or a wedding party stranded waiting for a bus. Connections and themes emerge. One is a sense of people searching among wasteland wildflowers for something unknown. You are reminded that Whitman was a great butterfly hunter – there is a famous photograph of the [poet with a moth on his finger](#) (it later turned out to be made of paper). Soth's moth on an orange segment is real enough, another surprise interloper among his images, staring back at you with a predatory warning eye.

A Pound of Pictures by Alec Soth is published by Mack. An accompanying exhibition runs at [Sean Kelly Gallery](#), New York, from 14 January to 26 February