

SEANKELLY

Carroll, Eric William. "I struggle when I know the words to a place by heart," *The Design Observer*, May 19, 2014.

THE DESIGN OBSERVER GROUP

"I struggle when I know the words to a place by heart"

Photographs from the irregular newspaper LBM Dispatch



Howard in the asparagus patch of a community garden. Detroit. [Photo by Alec Soth, from LBM Dispatch #3: Michigan]

Ten years ago, photographer Alec Soth established himself as a master of the 8x10 format in his series *Sleeping by the Mississippi*; these days he's known for posting "unselfies" on Instagram. Where others might see creative regression, I see an artist determined to find an effective use for photography in an era when, as Soth says, "a document is being made of just about everything all of the time."

Lately Soth has been issuing "Dispatches" in the form of an irregular newspaper created with writer (and fellow Minnesotan) Brad Zellar. Together, they take road trips to distant states and report the stories of the people and the land. The partners work on their own deadline and produce a self-published broadsheet shortly after they return. The papers are simple — black and white, flash-lit photographs of people and landscapes, presented with titles and often with a brief text. Under the title, *Jack. Downtown Dallas. 50th Anniversary of the J.F.K. assassination*, we see a boy wearing a fedora and raincoat in front of a nondescript wall, avoiding eye contact with the photographer. We learn that he was named after Jack Kennedy, and that his parents have taken him out of school to attend the memorial. In another photograph, titled *88-year-old Bil* ("My mother said she couldn't pronounce the other L"). *Dance N Swing*.

Sandusky, Ohio, we find a man dancing by himself with a toothy smile, frozen mid-stride, looking like a wax statue of an unfamiliar celebrity. These are vignettes of ordinary moments rendered extraordinarily. The Dispatch model — writer and photographer record a strange and perhaps broken world — is not without precedent. It might remind you of Walker Evans's and James Agee's collaboration, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, still one of the most resonant documents of the Great Depression; or make you wonder how Robert Frank's *The Americans* would have looked if Jack Kerouac had written more than the introduction. I think of Soth and Zellar as modern-day folklorists, working in the vein of Alan Lomax, who traveled the world to record the songs and stories of everyday people — particularly cultures he felt were in danger of being lost to radio and television.

Like Soth's earlier projects, *Dispatch* works because he is an outsider. "I struggle when I know the words to a place by heart," he told me. "So I've felt like I've done my best work in the U.S. — but not at home." Understanding the limits of his project, he resists describing his work as documentary:

I feel sort of presumptuous thinking that my photographs of poor people in Alabama are going to matter more than the pictures poor people are making of themselves in Alabama. But there's no doubting that I'm inspired by the generation of documentarians like Lomax who were doing that kind of noble documentary work. It's just that the world doesn't function in the same way. I guess my photographs are a dialogue with that history of social engagement. I'm trying to figure out how I can connect with world, with people around me, in an environment that is very different than it was in the 1930s.

Soth — like Lomax — embraces new technologies and media. When he and Zellar are travelling, they post the day's photographs and thoughts on Tumblr. All of this activity gives the feeling of news. But is interviewing and photographing a cake decorator, a bull rider and a recovering methamphetamine addict "news"?



Spread from the most recent issue, *LBM Dispatch* #6: *Texas Triangle*, December 2013.

"News forces you to go out into the world and encounter other people's lives," Soth says. In a society where it is increasingly common to stare at a phone in public, or hide behind headphones, any interaction

with a stranger off-line can be interesting. Soth has often made the comparison that a photographer going on assignment is similar to a band going on tour. You hone your craft, connect with strangers, try to gain new fans. "This is one of the great things about photography: it keeps forcing me to butt up against reality," he says. "The actual experience of going into the world and meeting people wakes me up to the beautiful and horrifying realities of real life."

The old-fashioned feel of *Dispatch* makes the project seem deceptively simple: travel to a state, talk to strangers, make pictures of their life on the day you meet. But each trip is preceded by months of research, and now that Soth shoots digitally, he's generating more photographs than ever. Much of his work now is editorial: picking which strangers to talk to, which cities to travel to, which photographs to include. The result is a newspaper in which every person, every fact and every landmark feels important. If you've picked up a "real" newspaper lately, that vitality can come as a shock. The people and places recorded here in gray-scale tones read as essential facts. If you tried to summarize this country and left out their stories, it would seem incomplete.

Alec Soth & Brad Zellar; intro by Eric William Carroll: "I struggle when I know the words to a place by heart"



Leo Marks Jewelers, Toledo, Ohio.

From *LBM Dispatch #1: Ohio*.



Fun Valley. South Fork.

From *LBM Dispatch #5: Colorado.*



Dave and Trish. Denver.

From *LBM Dispatch #5: Colorado*.



Horse Rancher Dave Begotka. Osseo, Wisconsin. McDonald's, Interstate 94.

Are you a real cowboy?
Yes, I suppose I am.

Are there a lot of cowboys in the Midwest?
There ain't too many of us left, period. All the old boys are dying off.

Do you come to this McDonald's often?
I get in here pretty much every morning for coffee. I guess it's just an excuse to get out of the valley.

Have you ever sold any horses in Ohio?
I must have.

From LBM *Dispatch* #1: *Ohio*.



Eleanor, 82, and Ron, 89. Sterle's Country House. Cleveland, Ohio.

Eleanor: We're on a date. We'll eat first, and then we'll dance. My mother and father were from Czechoslovakia, and our house was always full of music and dancing; we'd dance to anything. Ron's kind of particular and doesn't like to polka, but I'll still dance to anything. My husband passed away 14 years ago, but I wasn't about to let that slow me down. I still see the hairdresser once a week. It doesn't matter how old you are, you have to take good care of yourself. I know a lot of people from dancing around, but I've never considered myself part of the mainstream. I like to do my own thing and never had any use for trends. As long as I can stand, I'll still go out dancing once or twice a week. What else am I going to do?

Ron: I was the vice president of the Cleveland Trust, which was once the 18th largest bank in the country. I've been coming here forever. It's one of the finest restaurants in the area, but it recently changed owners, so we're interested to see how that goes. One thing we have in common is what I guess you'd call older values; we think you should get dressed up if you're going out for the evening. A lot has changed, obviously. Look at some of these people; they look like they're going to a dog fight. What can I say, Cleveland's just like everywhere else. Everything's been raided, and most of the world I used to know no longer exists.

From *LBM Dispatch #1: Ohio*.



Facebook main campus. Menlo Park.

We are lonesome animals. We spend all of our life trying to be less lonesome.
— John Steinbeck, "In Awe of Words," *The Exeter*, 1930.

From *LBM Dispatch #4: Three Valleys*.



Jonathan. The Googleplex. Mountain View.

I'm sorry to interrupt you, but may I ask what you do here at Google?

I'm a yoga instructor.

From *LBM Dispatch #4: Three Valleys*.



Douglass, Beverly Hills.

Douglas Woodward is the former Mayor of Beverly Hills, a small community that is completely surrounded by Waco. For 35 years Woodward has run a cake decorating school — “the largest cake decorating school in Central Texas” — out of a little storefront in Beverly Hills. Both of Woodward’s parents were bakers, and he is a second-generation cake decorating instructor.

From *LBM Dispatch #6: Texas Triangle*.



Jack. Downtown Dallas. 50th anniversary of the J.F.K. assassination.

Jack's mother, Debra: "We named him after Jack Kennedy, because we thought J.F.K. stood for the ideals and values we want to instill in our son. I thought it was important for Jack to be down here today, so he's skipping school."

From *LBM Dispatch #6: Texas Triangle*.



Howard in the asparagus patch of a community garden. Detroit.

“I grew up right here, in the Empowerment Zone. Everybody just calls it The Zone. I worked for the Big Three — Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler — and got kicked to the curb by every one of them. I started volunteering at a soup kitchen in the neighborhood, and at some point we just decided that if we were going to be feeding people we should be feeding them good, healthy food. I now work in the gardens, and everything we grow is certified organic. If people have dignity and health, they’ve always got a chance.”

From *LBM Dispatch #3: Michigan*.



Coplan's Iron and Metal. Escanaba.

Michigan is perhaps the strangest state in the Union, a place where the past, the present, and the future are all tied up together in a hard knot. ... It is the North Country wedded to the force that destroyed it.

— Bruce Catton, *American Panorama: East of the Mississippi*, 1960

Easy come, easy go. ... Well, we know that now. We tried the easy way and met disaster. Now we are on the hard road, but we believe it is a high road. We Michigan folks are proud of what we are doing and the way we are doing it. We want the world to know of that pride, and by it we want to be known ourselves.

— *Michigan: A Guide to the Wolverine State*, Michigan Writers' Project, 1941

From *LBM Dispatch #3: Michigan*.



Bob Smith. Boody Hill Wedding Chapel, Steuben.

Bob Smith is only the third person to live on Boody Hill. The place is named for Jacob Boody, a free thinker who settled there in the 19th century, built a museum, farmed, made dozens of elaborate rock carvings with Biblical themes, and entertained visitors who traveled from all over the country to hear him hold forth on topics such as science, slavery, and women's rights ("Women are the foundation of the world," he wrote). Boody reportedly removed his own appendix and displayed it in a jar in his museum. Like his descendant, Boody Bob Smith is something of a renaissance man. He has built an elaborate series of gardens on the property, all of which are irrigated by a system of underground tubing that draws water from a pond. "I'm 2000 years ahead of the rest of the world," Smith says.

From *LBM Dispatch #2: Upstate*.



Marie, with Alexis and Jessica. Saratoga Race Course, Saratoga Springs.

Marie owns an insurance agency, and was spending a day at the track with friends who work for Clear Channel Communications.

From *LBM Dispatch #2: Upstate*.



Bilal, head shepard. Osmanli Dergahi. Sufi Muslim farm, Sidney. Bilal is originally from Harlem.

*Green is the color of Paradise
Come, come, whoever you are.
Wonderer, worshiper, lover of leaving.
It doesn't matter.
Ours is not a caravan of despair.
— Mewlana Jalaluddin Rumi*

From *LBM Dispatch #2: Upstate.*



McKenna. Corsicana Tumbling Academy. Corsicana.

From LBM Dispatch #6: Texas Triangle.



Cory and Justin. Bull riders. San Antonio.

"We're brothers with different fathers. We go someplace different pretty much every weekend to try to get on a bull. I suppose it looks crazy, but it's just something that gets in you that's hard to let go of."

From *LBM Dispatch #6: Texas Triangle*.



Megan. Grand Junction.

Megan and two friends from The House, a homeless shelter for teens, were made up as zombies and wandering around a small carnival in Grand Junction. Megan is 18 years old and has been orphaned and homeless since she was 15. Her father died of heart failure, and her mother committed suicide. "You have to have friends, try to have fun, and keep your dreams alive," she said. "That's all you can do." Megan's dream is to be a make-up artist for the movies.

From *LBM Dispatch #5: Colorado*.



Grand Junction.

*Real events don't have endings,
Only the stories about them do.*
— James Galvin, "The Story of the End of the Story"

From *LBM Dispatch #5: Colorado.*



Kimball Hill Homes, Cornerstone development. Stockton.

The strongest guard is placed at the gateway to nothing. Maybe because the condition of emptiness is too shameful to be divulged.

— F. Scott Fitzgerald, Tender is the Night

Like many stalled developments in Stockton, the Cornerstone project is heavily gated and accessible only to those with a key code. When we attempted to scale the fences to nose around, ProVigil, the virtual guard on duty, sounded the alarm. “Burglary! Burglary!” a robotic voice shrieked from loudspeakers around the property. “Leave immediately! You have entered a restricted area! Authorities are responding!”

We left immediately.

From *LBM Dispatch #4: Three Valleys*.



Highway 15, near Daggett.

From LBM Dispatch #4: Three Valleys.



Miguel, ten months old. Woodville Farm Labor Camp. San Joaquin Valley.

From LBM Dispatch #4: Three Valleys.



Jesse Reese. American Legion Post #205. Dover Burial Park. Dover, Ohio.

From LBM Dispatch #1: Ohio.



Neda, Beverly, Diane, and Mitch (with Aidan in his arms). Single parents Thanksgiving dinner. Katy.

"I think the first couple years after a divorce are lonely for anybody. Overnight you lose most of your old social networks, and the big holidays are particularly hard. I'll be honest with you, the first Thanksgiving that it was just me and my two kids was sort of pathetic. I decided to try and find some people who were in the same boat. I found out about this group on MeetUp, and it's been terrific for both me and the kids."

From LBM Dispatch #6: Texas Triangle.



Rosebud-Lott vs. Waskom. Class 2A-Division II high school football playoffs.

Waskom, population 2178, is located just across the border from Louisiana, and it seemed like half the community's residents made the 193-mile trek to South Lake for the undefeated Wildcats' first playoff appearance in 21 years. Waskom beat Rosebud-Lott, 53-37, to set up a showdown with the 12-0 Crawford Pirates.

From *LBM Dispatch #6: Texas Triangle*.



Austin.

In dreams we stand in this great democracy of the possible and there we are right pilgrims indeed. There we go forth to meet what we shall meet.
— Cormac McCarthy, *Cities of the Plain*

From *LBM Dispatch #6: Texas Triangle*.



88-year-old Bil (“My mother said she couldn’t pronounce the other L”). Dance N Swing. Sandusky, Ohio.

My people were Baptists so we never went to dances. I also never smoked or drank. When I was overseas during World War II, I used to trade my cigarettes for chocolate bars. Though I didn’t dance, I was always infatuated with Latin music. One night in the late’40s I went out to see a band and this girl came over and asked me to dance. I told her I didn’t know how, and she handed me a card for an Arthur Murray studio. I stopped into the place the next week, took my first dance steps at the age of 28, and have been dancing ever since. I’m also a photographer, and have traveled all over the country taking photos of ballroom dancers.

From *LBM Dispatch #1: Ohio*.

Gallery by Alec Soth and Brad Zeller.