
It’s a Sunday morning in the late summer of 2002. I’m sitting in the Kennedy Cafe, on Kennedy Avenue in Hammond, Indiana, looking out the window, sipping coffee and waiting for the waitress to bring my breakfast. Two days earlier, I drove in from my home in Kalamazoo, Michigan, on one of many excursions to photograph in the Calumet Region. In 1986, I began photographing this part of the Midwest. Years of photographing culminated in 2009 with the publication of The Calumet Region: An American Place. When I was growing up in the Region, it was one of this country’s largest and most prosperous industrial centers, encompassing the southern portion of Chicago and Cook County, Illinois and neighboring Lake and Porter Counties in Indiana. By the time I began photographing the area, it was already sinking into its long decline. When I left for college in the 1960s, I could not imagine the changes to come, nor the hold this place would have on me.

On that Sunday morning, a light rain was falling as I stared out the window. My attention turned to the storefronts across and down the street. I am always looking at things I find visually interesting that might be source material for a photograph. I, of course, don’t photograph everything that holds my attention, but often an arrangement of things will linger in my mind’s eye for a time, perhaps to reappear in a different form in a photograph. On this day, I was paying attention more to words than visual forms. I found the homespun names on the storefronts across the street charming, like a familiar dialect: The Tattoo Lady, Deb’s Gun Range, Mr. Sweeper, Poppy Joe’s, Paradise Realty, Flick’s Tap, Ann’s Linens, Shear Delight. In my delight I jotted down the names, perhaps for some future use.

Flick’s Tap made it into Jean Shepherd’s *In God We Trust – All Others Pay Cash*. As the reader meets Shepherd, the narrator, he is visiting his hometown, and is on his way to meet his childhood sidekick Flick. Shepherd is riding in a cab, something he routinely does in New York City, but never in the Region. When the cabby asks if he’s from out of town, he responds that he is. This pretense announces his reticence about being back in the Region. Looking out the cab window, Shepherd sees “the grimy streets lined with dirty, hard ice and crusted drifts covered with that old familiar layer of blast-furnace...
Shepherd’s list of the “painfully familiar” happens to comprise the subject matter of my photographs. Shepherd nails the description of these things in the social landscape of the Region, even as he finds them unattractive and provincial. Years of photographing have taught me to look at everything and see its visual potential. Perhaps, only a photographer like myself, who grew up building with Erector Sets and model railroads, finds it persuasive to make visual poetry from such subjects. Novelist and critic John Berger observes that “[W]e are near to chaos. But through chaos come prophecies of an order” (200). As the writer shapes words to impress his will and create prosaic worlds, the photographer wrestles with space and form to produce visual poetry.

Shepherd’s cab chugs along and finally comes to a stop across the street from Flick’s tavern. Upon entering, Shepherd sees that the place hasn’t changed much. The bar is longer, the jukebox is bigger, and there’s a color TV hanging from the wall. His memory recoils as he breathes in “the air that was as gamy and rich as ever, if not more so, a thick oleo of dried beer suds, fermenting beer rags, sweaty overalls, and urinal deodorants” (18).

During the many photo trips to the Region over the years, I made a point of seeking out places like Flick’s. They are only indirectly my subjects, but sipping a beer and chatting with a customer, or listening to the chatter of others, deepens my appreciation for the people and the place; and perhaps through a kind of osmosis, these encounters inform my photographs; if only to enrich experience they
concentrate my attention on being there—in the moment.

In his writing, Shepherd reveals a particular quality, the gritty charm, of life in the industrial Midwest—used car lots, bowling alleys, factories, and railroad lines punctuating the landscape. For Shepherd, however, the people are what he connects with the most, relishing their idiosyncrasies. In one such sketch, Flick is tending bar, and he and his old friend are kibitzing over beers about the old days and people they knew. Flashbacks pop in and out of focus, but their conversation is disrupted by a ruckus.

An uproar broke out in one of the booths back in the Gloom near the wall. Two structural ironworkers were loudly Indian wrestling... Flick’s jaw squared as he darted from behind the bar. I watched in the mirror as he quelled the battle, fed the combatants two more boiler makers, and returned. (102)

With a keen ear for regional dialect, Shepherd evokes a strong sense of place. A transplant to New York City, Shepherd drew on his experiences growing up in the Region for the homespun humor of his radio shows and writings, the most well known of which is the movie *A Christmas Story*. The tavern is a favorite setting for many of these sketches, and Shepherd understands their importance to the social fabric of these working class communities.

My maternal grandfather owned the Terminal Tavern on Grove Street in Blue Island, Illinois, although he didn’t take part in the day-to-day operations. The tavern’s name comes from its location, which was within a block of both the Rock Island and Illinois Central Railroad lines serving my hometown. Grandpa and Grandma lived above the tavern with one of my aunts in the apartment building he had built with the help of friends. Every Sunday my family made afternoon visits to my grandparents, and I would often find Grandpa in the tavern, sitting with friends and talking. Usually I would sit on a bar stool, twirling back and forth and drinking a soda.

Being just a kid then, I don’t remember any of the talk that took place, but the ambiance left an indelible impression. If it were summer, a White Sox or Cubs’ ball game would be on WGN radio, and the play-by-play could be heard in the background, the voices of Vince Lloyd and Jack Quinlan mingling with the banter of the patrons. In his best stories, Shepherd un-corks the fragrance of places like this. These “mom and pop” taverns can be found throughout the neighborhoods of the Region. They have names like Flick’s, Dusty’s in nearby Whiting, or Steve’s Lounge in Chicago’s Hegewisch neighborhood.
My fondness for the people who live in the Region lies just beneath the surface of my photographs of neighborhoods and industrial landscapes. When I stop in one of the local restaurants or bars, I am reminded of the people I knew growing up - my grandfathers, both of whom worked for the Indiana Harbor Belt Railroad, the uncle who worked a lathe at the machine shop, and the Chicago fireman who moonlighted at the candy wholesale business where I worked after school. Like the texture of the land and skies in my photographs, the people of the Region have their own distinctive patina.

Although we didn’t foresee it, my generation, coming to maturity in the 1960s, experienced the last full decade of industrial growth in the Region. At that time, a nearly continuous belt of heavy industry spread across the southern Lake Michigan shoreline, from U.S. Steel’s Chicago South Works at 87th Street and the Lake, south into Chicago’s southeast side neighborhoods bordering Indiana, then east along the Lake Michigan shore through Whiting, East Chicago, and on to Gary, Indiana. On a clear day, standing on the Whiting beach, the Standard Oil Refinery at your back, you could see the Chicago skyline, and maybe pick out the Prudential building, which at forty-one floors, was the city’s tallest building. U.S. Steel, Wisconsin, Republic and Acme Steel were among the mills in Chicago proper. The last to survive, Acme Steel, closed in 2001. What is left of the Region’s functioning mills are now in East Chicago, Gary, and nearby Burns Harbor, Indiana. Except for U.S. Steel in Gary, they are foreign owned.

Life in the mills has always been grimy and dangerous, the men dwarfed by the enormous industrial structures. In his novel *Middlesex*, Jeffrey Eugenides illuminates the factory experience of his grandfather’s generation beginning their work life in America during the 1920s at Ford’s River Rouge Plant in Detroit. Their experience could just as easily have been the experience of workers at U.S. Steel’s South Works, or of Inland Steel in East Chicago, Indiana, or any number of other mills and production facilities in the Region. He writes that, “[T]he Rouge appeared against the sky, rising out of the smoke it generated. At first all that was visible was the tops of the eight main smokestacks. Each gave birth to its own dark cloud. The clouds plumed upward and emerged into a general pall that hung over the landscape…” (94). Inside at their stations these men did the monotonous and dangerous work:
My grandfather sees only the bearing in front of him, his hand removing it, grinding it, and putting it back as another appears. The conveyor over his head extends back to the men who stamp out the bearings and load ingots into the furnace; it goes back to the Foundry where the Negroes work, goggled against the infernal light and heat. They feed iron ore into the Blast Oven and pour molten steel into the core molds from ladles. They pour at just the right rate—too quickly and molds will explode; too slowly and the steel will harden. They can’t stop even to pick the burning steel from their arms. (94)

During all the years I lived in and photographed the Region, I was never inside a steel mill. The bowels of these places are out of reach, unless you work in one or have other official business there. Simply photographing the exterior can cause a near instantaneous response from mill security. On one occasion—and there have been several—I had stopped my car to make photograph near the Indiana Harbor Belt Railroad headquarters. I completed the photograph, stowed my gear in the car and went on my way. Seconds later, I noticed a security vehicle chasing after me. I pulled over and I was able to talk my way out of further difficulty, but these incidents have a way of lingering in my mind, inducing twinges of paranoia. I photograph with a large format camera, composing as I look through the back of the camera, a black cloth over my head, as I concentrate on the upside down and reversed image on the ground glass. It’s a wonderful way to make photographs, but the black cloth blinds you to what’s going on around you. Photographing in these settings, I have learned to work quickly. One might think that someone photographing today, with my choice of cumbersome equipment, is more a curiosity than a threat, but that is not generally the case. The photographer and writer, Robert Adams, observes that the reason he likes photographers is because “they don’t tempt (him) to envy. The profession is short on dignity: Nearly every one has fallen, been the target of condescension… been harassed by security guards, and dropped expensive equipment” (16).

Steel mills and production lines are dangerous places, and wandering around in them is not to be taken lightly. Just looking at the scale of these places from the outside induces one’s jaw to drop. Early in the making of the Calumet Region: An American Place, one of Inland Steel’s blast furnaces adjacent to the Indiana Harbor Canal was still in operation. There is a vantage point (where I was never hassled) on the street bridging the canal where I could watch and make photographs. Coke is unloaded from barges by giant shovels attached to overhead cranes carrying their loads into the plant. There’s a beauty to the process of seeing this scale of industrial operation. From that location, I made a few photographs I liked, one in particular of the mothballed blast furnace. Within two years of making that photograph the structure was razed. The scale, complexity and human effort of steel production is found in the...
early chapters of Eugenides’s *Middlesex*

The Foundry is the deepest recess of the Rouge, its molten core, but the Line leads back further than that. It extends outside to the hills of coal and coke; it goes to the river where freighters dock to unload the ore, at which point the line becomes the river itself, snaking up to the north woods until it reaches its source, which is the earth itself, the limestone and sandstone therein; and then the Line leads back again, out of the substrata to river to freighters and finally to the cranes, shovels, and furnaces where it is turned into molten steel where it is poured into molds, cooling and hardening into car parts… (95).

The parts were being manufactured for Model T’s. One by one the coarse parts pass before the men on the assembly line where “Wierzbicki reams a bearing and Stepanides grinds a bearing and O’Malley attaches a bearing to a camshaft” (96).

*Dormant Blast Furnace, Indiana Harbor Canal, E. Chicago, Indiana, 2002*
In the early 1960s, I was a student at Dwight D. Eisenhower High School in Blue Island, Illinois and soon would have my driver’s license. Blue Island’s main street is Western Avenue, which at twenty-five and a half miles is the longest continuous street in Chicago. Western’s most northern point is Howard Avenue, where Chicago meets Evanston. It ends south of Blue Island where it merges into Dixie Highway on the west side of the small suburb of Dixmoor, Illinois, seventeen miles south of the Chicago Loop. Western Avenue and similar arteries connected us to all parts of Chicago and the Region. Cheap gas made driving an inexpensive adventure. When boredom struck, I would jump into the car with friends and take off on a late night drive.

Imagine, from my block at 120th Street, driving north on Western Avenue eleven miles to 18th Street. Turn right and travel a mile or so and you will be in the vicinity of Blue Island Avenue, the heart of Chicago’s Pilsen neighborhood, so named by its nineteenth-century Czech inhabitants. In need of coffee, you wander into the Economy Restaurant, and there spot Katman and Stoch in a booth. They’re the protagonist and friend in Stuart Dybek’s, *I Sailed With Magellan*. They’re dipping fries in salsa, on Dexadrine and coffee, pulling an all-nighter. In their accelerated state, it occurs to them that they have never seen the dawn, and so they set out to see it, assisted by Stoch’s uncle, a security guard at a Gold Coast high rise, who escorts them to the rooftop. It’s three o’clock in the morning. Stoch is standing in the blustery wind at the edge of the building and he calls out to Katman: “Check this out.”

Far out over the dark lake, where the horizon might be, there’s a reddish aura as if an enormous coal we can’t see is glowing. We stand watching, waiting for the coal to peep over the rim of black water and crack into crimson and gold. But dawn seems stuck, glimmering just out of
sight beyond the curve of the planet, whose rotation we can feel in the numbing wind that buffets the chain-link fence bordering the roof. The speed in our systems made us shiver faster. We’re staring out, not so much shivering as vibrating like the fence, when Uncle Hunky joins us and we point out the glow. (167-168)

The glow is not the dawn, but the blast furnaces of the mills in Gary, and Uncle Hunky says laughing, “[Y]ou two dupas thought Gary, Indiana was the dawn!”(169).

Before their curiosity to see a sunrise, the two young men were dreaming of a road trip, aka Sal and Dean (the main characters in Jack Kerouac’s *On The Road*) to escape the city for the excitement of Mexico. The open road was the catalyst for many young men, including myself, to break the spell of the hometown. My own road trip was to the mountains of Colorado—a considerable contrast to the Calumet Region.

After graduating from high school and uncertain of my plans, I enrolled at Thornton Junior College, in nearby Harvey, Illinois. I wasn’t sure what I wanted to study, but I knew I didn’t want to work in a mill or refinery. The Clark Oil Refinery was across the street from my high school, and although the industrial forms caught my eye, the stench it released into the air was unpleasant, not to mention harmful to our health. From the high school ball fields, we could see the small figures of men moving about working at the surface and on the towers. Later, I learned that one of my cousins was employed there, his first full-time job after graduating from high school.

Steve Tesich has written two coming of age stories placed in the Region, the novel, *Summer Crossing*, and the screenplay for *Four Friends*. Both works are partly autobiographical, and in full, or in part, are set in East Chicago, Indiana, where Tesich, his mother and sister emigrated from Yugoslavia. Tesich is better known for his screenplay of the 1979 movie *Breaking Away*, set in Bloomington, Indiana, where Tesich went to college at Indiana University. But it’s his lesser-known, *Four Friends*, directed by Arthur Penn, to which I feel a closer harmony.

The first third of the movie and the conclusion take place in the Region, where those scenes were filmed. The story begins with Danilo, the young adolescent from Yugoslavia, and his mother arriving in the United States to join their hard-nosed steel worker father and husband to begin their new life in East Chicago. The brusque steelworker picks up his family at the train station, and as they drive away we see through Danilo’s eyes a panorama of the Region unfold over bridges, past the steel mills, to the tiny apartment where they will live. At their destination, Danilo looks about, and in the near distance sees the mill his father will walk to for his next shift. This first scene rolls past bridges crossing the Calumet River channel near its entry to Lake Michigan in South Chicago, and on to the mills in East Chicago, places where I made several of the photographs appearing in *The Calumet Region: An*
Four Friends, released in 1981, and Summer Crossing, published in 1982, share some things in common, specifically high school graduates making their way into the world. Four Friends has epic aspirations, following the different routes that the main characters take through America’s 1960s counter culture. The novel is centered in the Region, and is fundamentally about the place. In Summer Crossing, high school graduates Daniel Price, and his two friends Larry Misoria and Paul Freund, struggle to come to terms with what to do with their lives after graduating from high school.

The center of the story is Daniel’s love affair with the older and worldly-wiser Rachel. His preoccupation with her propels the story, but it is the Region itself that holds center stage. During one warm summer night, Rachel drives Daniel to Whiting Beach, the volume turned up on the car radio as they bounce across the railroad tracks that separate the neighborhood from the waterfront. Daniel’s heart is aimed at Rachel, but his senses can’t escape the surroundings. “A breeze was blowing from across the lake, warm and humid. Her blouse fluttered. Her hair blew back. I could see the lights of Inland Steel in the distance. The water smelled of industry and jobs” (224). Throughout the novel, the Region’s presence hangs over the characters like an unseen hand pressing down on them. “The air was getting misty and smoggy …[Y]ou could smell the steel mills and the refineries… On certain days you could watch soot fall like black snow” (21).

Daniel’s friend, the hot-tempered, angry Larry Misoria, recognizes the contradiction between where they live and a possible fate that might await him. His family’s home is across the street from the Sunrise Oil Refinery, operating twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Misoria’s anger over his parent’s lives spills over in daily conversations with Daniel:

You know what they’re like. You’ve seen them. Marshmallows. Everything is ‘lovely and nice.’ You look out of our house and you look right at that fucking refinery and you smell that shit they call air and they think it’s ‘lovely and nice’ because my dad can walk to work and not only
that, he can walk home for lunch. How lucky can a man be?
That’s his big deal. (75)

The refinery (the Region) is the presence Misoria can’t ignore, the dragon he must slay. The face of this dragon is a smiling cartoon character painted on the side of oil storage tanks and trucks. Misoria’s malevolence goes beyond his hatred of his parents and the mere existence of the refinery, and extends to everyone who passes through its gates: “Smoke hissed out of the refinery, rising, disappearing into clouds. Men walked through the yard, surrounded by a fence, like termites through termite mounds made of steel” (76). Reading these words, I am reminded of the houses I photographed adjacent to refineries, and seeing only a short distance away refinery workers going about their work inside a fenced-in world. Photographing in East Chicago and Whiting, in the neighborhoods closest to industry, often it seemed to me that time had stopped, that it was still 1960.

![Schrage Avenue and 126th Street, Whiting, Indiana, 1999](image)

The hometown is a well-served theme in storytelling, especially Midwestern story telling. To escape from, to be stuck in, or to return to one’s hometown can provoke complex sets of responses. When I returned home for a visit from college in Michigan, I encountered my own confused feelings and ambivalence about my hometown. In Lee Zacharias’s short story “Disasters” the narrator is back home in Hammond, Indiana, accompanied by her fiancé Jesse.

What was supposed to be a short stop over had turned into days of waiting for the parts needed to repair her broken down sports car. At the start of the story, the narrator and her fiancé are riding the South Shore train returning to Hammond from a day trip to Chicago’s Loop. It’s twilight as the narrator closes her eyes, reflecting back on when she had “come north from college on the Greyhound, a great cloud hung just ahead of the Kankakee River on Highway 41; inside that cloud I grew up” (314).
The sky itself is a presence in the literature of the Region, a pallor setting a tone for these stories. Photographing in the Calumet, I have become aware of the particular quality of light and how it intermixes with the tonal values on the landscape. This is due, I assume, to the combination of industrial and atmospheric effects of Lake Michigan. I am often asked about my decision to photograph in black and white. I point out that the tonal values best express my emotional connection to the place; the palette of middle gray tones in my silver prints similar to the appearance of steel and concrete, the moods of the lake and sky. There is too, the quality in black and white photographs that evokes memory more than color. John Berger postulates why black and white photographs are stronger triggers of memory. “The sharper and more isolated the stimulus memory receives, the more it remembers, the more comprehensive the stimulus, the less it remembers. This is perhaps why black and white photography is paradoxically more evocative than colour photography” (193). I do not know if his conclusion has been scientifically verified, but it does equate to my own experience.

In Zacharias’s, “Disasters”, the “great cloud” also reflects the emotional state of the narrator, reminding her that before her family moved to Hammond they had lived in Chicago, where they had friends in Lincoln Park, with its fine brick town houses and tree-lined streets. But in Hammond, it is only “freight trains, trucks, heavy winter skies. Yellow brick cocktail lounges dark through the doors, glass block windows so thick no light could get through” (314-315).

Twilight is fading as the train pulls into the Gostlin Street stop, and the narrator and her fiancé leave the station for the nearly empty streets of Hammond. On State Street, she points out to Jesse the lights of the downtown business district. Downtown Hammond was once the regional shopping district. When I started my series, the shift to suburban malls was already a fait accompli. Zacharias describes scenes like those I have photographed. The protagonist and her fiancé walk “past streetlights tatting the land cleared for renewal, [crossing a] bridge over some dark sludge” (317). In a tone of disappointment she points out to Jesse where the old public library had been replaced “by garden apartments strung over asphalt so like all the garden apartments I’d seen that pointing them out seemed hardly worthwhile” (318). Memories of past and the present moment weave through her mind. They walk across State Line to the former notorious strip of Calumet City (Cal City), Illinois, once known for having more liquor licenses than any community in the country.

The narrator’s malaise mirrors the vacuity of Hammond’s post-industrial downtown. The story was published in 1992, and Zacharias’s descriptions of the area parallel what I saw when first photographing there. The character’s reflections about her hometown and her feelings of loss are similar to feelings I have had when photographing a rundown landmark. There are a handful of distinctive buildings remaining in downtown Hammond, but most of the gems are gone, or are in disrepair. The most dominant new building on State Street is a faux-colonial style mega Baptist Church, the husband and wife founders of which were for a time memorialized in a mural portrait painted on a wall of a church building facing a parking lot. I was fortunate to have made a photograph
of it before it was unceremoniously painted over.

Mural, First Baptist Church, Hammond, Indiana, 2001

A the end of their evening, the narrator and her fiancé call a cab for home. Home is the house that she lived in for years, her parents’ before they retired to Florida, and now belonging to her steel worker brother. Sitting on the bed, “rubbing her fingers over the faded chenille [she’d] slept under for years and years …(looking) …at the icky blonde furniture that was so familiar …and the wall painted an imaginative pink instead of mint green as when I’d lived there…” she speaks to her fiancé “very casual like I’d never lived there at all. ‘I hate this house’” (323).

I have only a dim memory of the first house I lived in. It was a two-flat on Canal Street. Aptly named, the street paralleled the Cal-Sag Canal, the waterway linking Great Lakes shipping at the Port of Chicago and Lake Calumet to the Illinois River and eventually to the Mississippi River. I knew none of that as a young child, but I did know to stay away from the canal. My mother grew up on the opposite side of the canal, and she was determined to pass on to me the warnings she was told of the hobos and other dangers lurking along its banks. All that I saw were the barges moving in one direction or the other, and the Rock Island trains crossing the canal bridge. Later we moved to the house my parents had built on the north side of Blue Island, a mere block and a half from the city of Chicago. The small brick house on Artesian Avenue was the center of my world.

Five years after we moved to the Artesian Street house, my world suddenly expanded. It was Saturday, August 27, 1955. At 6:15 that morning, several miles to the east at the Standard Oil Refinery in Whiting, the overnight crew was performing their last duty before the end of their shift, to restart the 252 foot tall piece of equipment known as a hydroformer. It wasn’t a single error or breakdown, but a sequence of events that caused the massive explosion that ignited the fires engulfing acres of storage
tanks which took eight days to extinguish. Tons of flaming debris pummeled the residential neighborhood adjoining the refinery. Nearby residents shaken out of their beds thought it was an atomic bomb explosion. Over fifteen hundred residents living near the refinery were evacuated. Firefighters were called in from Whiting, Hammond and East Chicago. They arrived to see burning oil on Indianapolis Boulevard.

Whiting is far enough east of Blue Island that I didn’t hear the explosion earlier that morning. But my friends and I did see the giant mushroom shaped cloud hovering in the eastern sky. I remember thinking it looked just like the mushroom shaped clouds of A-bomb blasts we’d seen in school movies and on television. These were the days of “duck and cover,” and it didn’t take much of an imagination for the thought of the atomic bomb to occur to us. That day was the first I heard of the town named Whiting, Indiana. The memory of the Whiting refinery explosion stayed with me, and was the catalyst for the Calumet Region project. The first place I photographed was Whiting and the homes in the neighborhood adjacent to the refinery. Memory and place are a pervasive presence in my photographs, past and present informing my choice of subject matter. Photographers, working as I do, bear witness to what is before us; we are given to point out singular moments. Henry James expressed something similar when he wrote that it is “the prime business and the high honor of the painter of life always to make a sense—and to make it most in proportion as the immediate aspects are loose or confused.” Though the means and results differ, this is true of all artists working from life. James continues, “(t)he last thing decently permitted him is to recognize incoherence—to recognize it, that is, as baffling; though of course he may present and portray it, in all richness, for incoherence” (172-173).

Steve Tesich was fifteen years old when he immigrated to East Chicago in 1957. Therefore, he couldn’t have witnessed the Whiting refinery explosion, but it’s fair to conclude it was a momentous enough event for him to have known about it and to use in Summer Crossing. Near the conclusion of the novel, Daniel and Rachel meet for the last time. Daniel is certain if he says just the right words to Rachel he can prevent her from leaving him. But the moment is cut short, as they are pulled away from each other by a tremor sweeping past them, and in the same instant they notice “the brilliant glow of light like a gigantic flash bulb exploding behind them.”

In the distance, over the flat roof of Kroger’s Supermarket, due east in the direction of the Sunrise Oil Company and Misiora’s home, I saw in place of that one flickering flag like flame the jagged outline of an enormous blaze. It was if a small mountain had suddenly been dropped down on the eastern horizon and set on fire. (358)

In the haze of disorientation Daniel imagines, as did my friends and I, that maybe the Russians had finally started World War III—a circumstance he concludes, that if true, would certainly stop Rachel
from leaving him. They walk toward the direction of the explosion and arrive at Railroad Avenue and 142nd Street, where they see the site where “two huge oil tanks had exploded and in their place were flames two or three times taller than the tanks had been” (358).

Daniel walks from the scene of the fire smelling of oil and smoke, and runs into Larry Misiora, who had left weeks ago without a word. Misiora is smiling, he’s in a bristling mood, and he tells Daniel that he started the fire. “I did it … I went and did it, Daniel.” At first, Daniel doubts his friend, but soon he realizes he is telling him the truth.

I kept trying to go away and stay away… This last time I went west. Got as far as Iowa and just couldn’t keep going. I kept seeing that Sunrise character, that smiling cartoon. And I knew, you see, I just knew that, when things go bad for me I’d go back. It would always be there, waiting for me to return. My place. My job. …Sooner or later I knew it would get me. And the thought of walking through those gates for the rest of my life, I tell you, it just made me crazy. So I did it. You might say I went and removed the temptation. (363-64)

*Summer Crossing* concludes with the three high school friends going their separate ways. Misiora drives off in his car, to parts unknown. Paul Freund, after a summer working in the city parks, lands a union job, with assistance from his soon to be father-in-law, as a toll collector for the Indiana Toll Road. Daniel realizes the time has come for him to leave and he boards the train for New York City. He’s in a reflective mood as the train moves past his hometown, and he thinks to himself: “I lived all my life in East Chicago, and the New York Central rattled through it in less than five minutes” (373).

There’s an unspoken emotional divide in the literature of the Region, between those who leave and those who stay. These stories, as well as my photographs, were completed long after each of the authors left the region. Photographing in the Calumet, I was conscious of the present moment pressing upon the past, and vice versa. To use William Faulkner’s oft quoted line, “The past isn’t dead. It isn’t even past” (92). The first photographs I made of houses in Whiting awakened in me strong feelings of familiarity. I flashed back to my childhood experience, the house on Artesian Street, of walking to school past houses like those I was now photographing.

The homes I photograph and admire the most are vernacular structures. They call to mind the homes of my childhood neighborhood. In appearance they speak less about style and the builder and more about the people who live in them. In the *Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachleard expresses what is at the heart of my intention when photographing houses. “If we look at it intimately the humblest of dwelling has beauty” (4). The straight on, portrait like approach I employ, and the small 4x5 inch silver contact print extends emphasis to intimacy.
Bachelard is enamored with small woodcuts of houses, and expresses that “[t]he more simple the engraved house the more it fires my imagination as an inhabitant. Its lines have force and as a shelter, it is fortifying ...in skilled hands representational images of houses can become “insistent, inviting … no dreamer ever remains indifferent for a long time to a picture of a house” (50).

The houses I photograph are generally in working class neighborhoods, and often they are situated very near heavy industry. In these settings, intimacy becomes ennobling, and I see these dwellings in a different light, as Tom Joad figures standing firmly against a harsh and prohibitive other. As Bachelard notes, “…everything comes alive when contradictions accumulate” (39).

One particular brick facade home on Schrage Avenue in Whiting was emblematic. More than any other single home, it spoke to me of domesticity in the midst of the industrial landscape. The house faced west, its backside to the refinery, a cared for lot and dead end street flanking its sides. The owners took fastidious care of the place, from the perfectly kept yard to the carefully patched driveway. A feature of the house was a Madonna statuette resting in a niche below the draped front windows. Later, it was moved to a garden spot below the garage window. Over the years I have made a ritual of driving past the house. I was reassured seeing it, cared for, stout against the bleak refinery landscape. In early 2010, I met a journalist in Whiting for an interview about the Calumet book. Over coffee, our conversation came around to the importance of place in people’s lives. Like myself, this journalist was fascinated by the pride of place of the residents’ homes, particularly noticeable in the Region’s industrial belt. He asked to see where I began the series and I led him to the house on Schrage Avenue. I made the turn to drive up to it, but there in front of me was an empty lot where the house should have been. Only after the journalist left did it sink in. I stood facing the vacant lot, my hands trembling, feeling that I had suddenly lost a dear friend. I walked closer to look for a fragment,
but found no evidence the house had ever been there.

129th and Schrage Avenue, Whiting, Indiana, 1999

With every passing year, pieces of the Region’s distinctiveness disappear. The familiar is erased, covered over diminishing public memory. Yet even as the Region has changed, a visit there today puts me in two worlds: the place it is becoming, and the one of my childhood when three shifts comprised a routine day.

Memory of place is the connective tissue of these stories and photographs. Over the years of photographing in the Region, I was conscious that I too was telling a story, one connected to my own experiences, and simultaneously aimed at the arc of history reshaping the Region.
Wilhala County Park, Lake County, Indiana, 1999

Works Cited


[1] An earlier version of this essay appeared in the fall 2011 issue of *Miscellany*, the journal of The Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature. Photographs, Indiana Harbor Canal, East Chicago, Ind., 1986; Yard Between Houses, Reese Street, Hammond, Ind., 1987; 57 Chevy, Whiting, Ind., 1999; House, Hammond, Ind., 1986, Wilhala County Park, Lake County, Ind., 1999; Dormant Blast Furnace, East Chicago, Ind., 2002; and Mural, First Baptist Church, Hammond, Ind., 2001 have been added and were not included in the earlier version.