

LAURA & VIRGINIA

John McPhee

UNDER THE DARK CLOTH, LAURA AND VIRGINIA TALK. AS DIALOGUE goes, it is not memorable.

"Make sure you're happy with the edges."

"Do you want to use the longer lens?"

"The ten-inch is fine."

"The shutter is closed."

"It's cocked."

"Side-to-side level seems fine."

And yet, with luck, the collective effect can sometimes be more than memorable—a single creative photographic leap, done by two people.

They are in there together, bent forward, tandem, looking at the ground glass, their four legs sticking out below the cloth. The image they see is upside down and backwards but does not appear that way to them. In their mind, it turns, and flips.

"I like the fact that it's slightly asymmetrical."

"The shape bothers me."

Their own appearance, under the cloth, with the snout of the big camera protruding, is so incongruous and vaudevillian that snapshooters the world over have crowded in to take pictures of Laura and Virginia making pictures.

Their collaborative landscape photography dates from 1987. Everywhere they have been, they have routinely visited botanical gardens, seeking not images but regional insight. They have never made a photograph in such a place, until today.

This is the Bronx, the New York Botanical Gardens, the recently renewed Enid A. Haupt Conservatory, and Laura and Virginia are under the dark cloth below the doming center of seventeen thousand panes of glass. They have been attracted by a black circular pool, forty feet across, among jelly palms, saw palmettos, Mexican flags, and crepe ferns. The box-like mahogany camera—a cubic foot and eighteen pounds—inclines toward the water from its tripod to comprehend the reflection of fronds, mullions, clouds, and sky. A visitor—a

tourist, a stranger, with a 35-millimeter camera hanging from his neck—comes up politely and asks first if he is in the way, if he is in the picture. To be in the way he would have to be swimming. He has sensed that he is in the presence of an unusual camera but has no idea what it is or what it is looking at. He asks me because Laura and Virginia are unavailable under the cloth and mostly out of sight. My expertise in this matter is only marginally greater than his, and derives solely from the fact that Laura is my daughter. When she was in college, I carried these big cameras up more than one pyramid in Yucatan and have been wary of them ever since.

"It's a Deardorff," I say to him. "A view camera—the nineteenth-century, Mathew Brady sort of camera. The negative it makes will be sixty times the size of a negative from yours. The things it captures are amazing. You're OK, the lens is aimed at the water."

It is not unusual for Laura and Virginia to spend a whole working day driving, walking, looking for images, setting up the camera, fixing its lines with a carpenter's level, chattering under the cloth, making "tilts and swings" and "rises and falls," and not exposing so much as one sheet of film. If they do all that on a given day and open the shutter once, they consider the day successful. They carry a Nikon 35, the sort of camera that most people fire as if it were an automatic weapon, but Laura and Virginia just look through it as if it were a spotting scope, to select and plan images in a preliminary way.

For a couple of hours, they have been staring at the conservatory pool and things are not going well. Subtly, the obsidian water moves. Faint breezes touch it from the open doors and windows. Every three minutes, big misters come on hissing and the vapors stir the air. In their frustration, half an hour ago, Laura and Virginia took the camera down, set it up elsewhere in the building, studied an image, discussed it, spurned it, and returned to the black pool. Under trying conditions, the dialogue within the dark cloth is not wholly technical.

"You should have been a therapist."

"Think so?"

"Yes, but you would not have been able to stop giving advice."

Photographic collaboration tends not to happen, and the list is a short one from Hill and Adamson in the mid-nineteenth century to the married couple Bernd and Hilla Becher of contemporary times. Laura and Virginia, long ago, took two Deardorffs to Iceland, where they intended to use them separately. Laura had first seen Iceland the year before, with me, in pursuit of my work, which had to do with open fissures, a newly risen volcano, moving lava, and the fact that Iceland is a geophysical hot spot coincident at present with the spread-

ing center of the ocean. Its freshly generated landscapes are surreal. Nothing arrested her eye more than the apalhraun—black, jagged, unvegetated plains of rock. She returned to Iceland with Virginia, and they set things up on the apalhraun, and at warm pools with inflatable canoes beside geothermal pumping stations, and in the high winds of Krafla in the interior, where Iceland itself is spreading. Their ideas and subjects were so similar that one of them said, early in the journey, “Maybe we ought to work on this together,” and their long collaboration began. Work they did in 1988 in Iceland is owned by, among other places, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. It has traveled in collected exhibitions to Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, Saint Louis, Santiago, Tianjin, London, Prague, Cologne, Basel. Wherever the pictures go, people tend to show bafflement that two photographers can somehow make a single exposure, and they ask how it is done. They ask, over and over again, “Who pressed the button?” And even when they understand that “the button” is the least of it, they tend to remain curious and puzzled. Other artists are full of wonder, too. In Laura’s words, “Nobody can believe that two women can go around collaborating for ten years in a field dominated by lone males.”

Virginia Beahan and Laura McPhee met in an introductory photography class at Princeton, taught by Emmet Gowin in the fall of 1977. Laura was a sophomore. Virginia, then a high school English teacher in Pennsylvania, was auditing the course. Laura went on to earn an MFA in photography from the Rhode Island School of Design, and Virginia from the Tyler School of Art. Laura is a professor of photography at the Massachusetts College of Art. Virginia has taught at Mass Art, and also at Harvard, Wellesley, Columbia, and elsewhere. Neither one is hesitant with words. In the span of their collaboration, words by the tens of thousands, in every conceivable category, have been muffled by the dark cloth.

“We work in a kind of shorthand now, after ten years.”

“You articulate ideas to each other that you would never articulate to yourself. The collaboration requires the view camera. It forces us to talk about things.”

“Our slow intentional way—the way we work—makes it possible for us to collaborate.”

These are people whose act takes a long time to get them together. The light is right for them twice a day, and they never choose dawn. An exception once probed the rule, and the exception’s name was Sierra Nevada, which rises like a trap door and faces east, where the

sun never sets. If the Sierra wall is to be seen in raking light, it has to be at dawn. Laura and Virginia saw rusted relics of a 1940s Japanese-American relocation center lying in desert sage below the loftiest mountain majesties in the contiguous United States. They got up in the dark, grumbling, fuming, and set up the Deardorff on the fruited plain.

When working in New York or New Jersey, they consistently finish breakfast by noon. At two, they are moving; their day has begun.

“At first, it’s frustrating. We look at a lot of stuff, reject most of it, and get depressed.”

“Then things start to open up.”

A few days ago, they walked in Central Park all afternoon.

“The park is so beautiful and so thought out you feel how every curve and hillock is there for you to get the vistas.”

“A lot of what we are looking for is surprise.”

Bag the park. They have also been doing rooftops, which require planning.

“This is a new thing for us—arrangements, appointments. We like to be loose.”

“New York is a big lotta work.”

A roof in the West Twenties was wooden-decked in five levels, had an outdoor shower, a breeze-activated paper goose, a breeze-activated paper loon, concrete dogs, frogs, rabbits, and squirrels, and a rich ecology of real trees, plants, and flowers in sixty tubs, planters, pots, and urns. The roof had teak furniture and had been used as a movie set.

The Empire State Building, a few blocks away, was so immense it was threatening. They turned their backs on it, and let the view camera peer through the vegetation, the wildlife, and twenty-five rooftop water towers spaced out like chessmen and all but obscuring the World Trade Center, three miles south.

“I don’t even like those trade towers.”

“Maybe we can get rid of them entirely.”

On a roof close by the western pier of the Brooklyn Bridge, they turned slowly and assessingly through an almost circular view: the South Street Seaport (“Tourist agenda”), the Fulton Fish Market (“Funky”), the legendary skyline of lower Manhattan (“Corporate clump”).

“The light on the Brooklyn Bridge is soft but dimensional.”

“The bridge is so seductive; no matter what you look at, you come back to it.”

The camera has various component parts, and to some extent the photographers build it every time they set it up. The lens on its lens

board fits into the front standard. The rear standard includes the ground glass—a lightly gridded window exactly the size of the film. The front and rear standards are connected by the accordion-pleated bellows, and all of it rests on the bed, which fits onto the tripod. A system of threaded adjusters give it more than a little kinship with a surveyor's transit. Aim a 35-millimeter camera up the side of a tall building and the film sees a trapezoid. Fiddle with the knobs on a Deardorff and it sees the building as it is. Tilt the lens a little too much and the edges of the exposure will shade off and become opaque—an effect known as vignetting. L.F. Deardorff & Sons, of Chicago, has been making view cameras since the nineteenth century. Laura and Virginia's is forty years old. Its present value is about two thousand dollars. Its lenses cost a thousand dollars apiece. The film costs about seven dollars a sheet.

There were whitecaps on the East River, and once the view camera had been set up, leveled, and adjusted, it tended to wobble in the wind. Although the dark cloth is weighted in its four corners, it flapped when they conferred beneath it.

"Think about color. There's a certain palette here that's hard to break up."

"The white shape in the foreground bothers me."

"Stop. Stop. Go back a touch."

Pleased by what they saw in the ground glass, they stood up side by side, pulled out of the film holder the dark protective slide that covers the film, wrapped the cloth around their shoulders as if they were a pair of living tent poles, opened the shutter for twenty seconds, and successfully shielded the camera from the wind.

You could compile a list of the view camera's negative aspects. With the tripod and extra lenses, the whole apparatus weighs more than fifty pounds, and the ground over which they have backpacked it has included sharp lava. Their film travels heavy in a duct-taped Coleman cooler with ice packs wrapped in towels. In addition to dust, Laura and Virginia have seen black flies flying around inside the camera. On a footbridge by the falls in Paterson, New Jersey, the camera shook from pounding water. Heavy traffic vibrates it. To load film, they must be in total darkness. With black-plastic sheets, they blacken the interior of phone booths. They blacken closets. A motel room takes at least an hour. But nothing on the list approaches the challenge of wind.

At Krafla Geothermal Electricity Generating Plant, in Iceland in 1987, it was difficult enough for the photographers to remain standing, let alone the bulky camera, in a wind that was bevelling fast-

rising steam. Two passing Germans, father and son, helped Laura and Virginia fashion a plastic tent, and the four of them, straining, held off the wind. In Sparanise, in Italy in 1994, a wind blew in such concentrated gusts that it stirred blossomed branches in one part of a cherry orchard into cloud-like swirls, while trees close by were motionless, doing the photographers more than a favor. In the middle of Pearl Harbor, in 1996, they set up the camera on the memorial above the USS Arizona, but nothing they tried could overcome the wind, and they packed up defeated. ("It was almost as if there were a force that didn't want us to make that picture.") In Sewaren, New Jersey, in January, 1997, they had me along with them so they could show me the true beauty of my native state, and a winter wind was blowing. Their discerning and composing eyes, which had circled the earth, had become strongly attracted to the New Jersey Turnpike, and to the commingled industries and residential enclaves that lie in the flats between the turnpike and the Arthur Kill. On Elf Road, in Sewaren, they found a concrete pier of a Conrail overpass that had become a stone monument three stories high, bearing the names of forty-two dead rock stars: Buddy Holly 1959, Big Bopper 1959. . . . Jimi Hendrix 1970, Janis Joplin 1970. . . . Elvis Presley 1977, Keith Moon 1978. . . . In their slow, intentional way, they set up the camera and composed their picture with a deliberation worthy of a great river or of skaters on a Dutch canal, while the object in view of the view camera was an immobile hundred-ton slab. Watching and waiting in that New Jersey wind I found myself thinking, correctly, that I would be far more comfortable if we were doing this in Alaska. New Jersey's wet cold can shrink marrow. The camera on its tripod was shaking like a tree. Much of the waiting was for a moment of relative calm. The moment finally came, and while Laura and Virginia held taut the dark cloth like a shielding banner, Laura counted "a thousand one, a thousand two," and on up as the film took in the light, and she inserted, between counts, gratuitous information for me: "Color film prefers to be overexposed." I prefer not to be and was absorbing nothing.

And now, indoors at the New York Botanical Gardens, wind should not be a factor, but even the lightest breath of air can move this nervous water. Twice, they have made exposures that they feel are imperfect. They are far into their third hour, much of it under the cloth, looking for stillness in the shining black reflection. To pass time, I walk around reading the small placards at the bases of trees. I learn that royal palms were named for nothing majestic. Genus *Roystonea*, they were named for Roy Stone. This information fails to enter-

tain Laura or Virginia. After another ten minutes in unacceptable air—with the misters on and the black pool a slightly quivering jelly—Laura says, “I can’t deal with this, Virginia; it’s driving me insane.”

Virginia, reading incident light, has been discussing shutter speeds and *f*-stops. A Nikon’s *f*-stops stop at 22. This lens goes to 90. Virginia gets back in under the cloth.

Virginia: I do like the asymmetry.

Laura: Where is it?

Virginia: That’s more like what I thought I was seeing.

Laura: I can’t believe we’re taking yet another picture of this swamp.

Virginia: What did you focus on?

Laura: The palm at the end of my mind.

The misters, for the moment, turn off. The doors, for the moment, are closed. The air relaxes. You could light a match and the flame would not bend.

“Pull it.”

Laura pulls the dark slide.

“Do it.”

Virginia moves to open the shutter, but a child near the edge of the pool throws a coin into the water.

SIX P.M. ON THE MOSHOLU PARKWAY AND IN MOST PEOPLE’S DAYS THE equivalent is noon. In this summer light, dusk is still distant, but a faint sense of purpose has come into the air and the professional tempo has abandoned zero. Laura and Virginia taking a picture is analogous to my making notes. Until they see a print, they don’t know what they’ve got. While aiming in a general way at New Jersey, they are reviewing the afternoon’s effort and calling it a scarlet macaw.

In Costa Rica, in the rainy season some years ago, they were finding no images they wanted to take home with them, and day after day passed while conditions failed to improve. Eventually, in their frustration, they set up the Deardorff and tried to make art of a red bird tethered to a stainless steel tree. This was the one exposure they made in nearly a week. When they looked at the result, they were not surprised by its absolute lack of redeeming value, and the scarlet macaw became for them a symbol for a bad idea resulting in a bad picture.

A voice in the back seat says, “So why don’t you give up the Deardorff and settle down with your Hasselblads?”

They shoot back:

“Because of what it sees.”

“The quality of description invites slow looking.”

“It sees more than the eye would see—a whole view in incredible detail.”

“Every hair. Every blade of grass.”

From the eighty-square-inch negative, they can achieve that level of detail in a print exceeding eight square feet.

Under the dark cloth, when they look at the ground glass, eight by ten, in effect they are looking at the negative they are making. Much as copilots say to each other, “Wheels down,” “Down and locked,” Laura and Virginia say repeatedly, “Check the edges of the picture.” Do they ever crop?

“Rarely but not never.”

“Part of the pleasure of making a picture is getting it right in the frame.”

“When you crop it, it’s never quite right.”

When they study the ground glass under the dark cloth, they are cropping the landscape rather than the picture. They use an eight-power loupe, which looks like a big jeweler’s lens, placing it on the ground glass, and looking through it to improve the precision of the focus.

When they count a thousand one, a thousand two, they seem by comparison carefree and vague. Time is as casual as focus is precise. If the light meter suggests four seconds, they’ll double it. Thirty seconds—they’ll give it a minute. If your lighting of choice is the late, raking kind and the various glooms that follow, you need to give the camera a long slow draught. To exposures of less than a thousandth of a second and exposures of one second or more the photochemical law of reciprocity does not apply. The product of light and time is not constant. Known as reciprocity failure, this phenomenon (or lack of one) tends to detach from technology the photographer who wants to work in low and failing light. Improvisation enters the equation. The procedure goes supple, like an inspired chef tasting everything and measuring nothing.

“It’s like salt.”

“You throw on a few more grains.”

“As we told you, better over than under.”

“With color film, underexposed is the kiss of death.”

They made a fifteen-minute exposure of an artificial volcano erupting water in Las Vegas. Virginia, all the while, was on patrol, intercepting passers-by, trying to prevent them from walking in front of the camera. She failed to see an infiltrating Asian tourist, who reached the camera and stared straight at it from a distance of ten inches.

“He’s got his nose in our open lens!” Virginia screamed, and ran over to shoo him away. Shutter open, the camera went on looking at the volcano. The exposure was such a long one that the man did not show up in the picture, which belongs to the art museum of Princeton University.

During a twenty-minute exposure at a reservoir in Costa Rica, power boats and wind surfers moved in and out of the picture, but when it was developed they weren’t there. During a long exposure over plunging sluices at a reservoir in Sri Lanka, big white ibises flew in and out of the picture, but when it was developed they weren’t there.

While Laura and Virginia were making a slow exposure of a chaparral fire in California, a line of prisoners, in orange fire fighting suits, walked through the picture from left to right but escaped being caught on film.

In the Aeolian islands, they opened the shutter for an hour and a half on the real Stromboli erupting. While they waited, they went for pizza. The darkly outlined final product was brightened by motion: by the shifting stars, by the flashlights of hikers, by the ninety-minute brushstroke of the moon.

They cross the George Washington Bridge to New Jersey and go north on the Palisades Parkway to Rockefeller Lookout in Englewood Cliffs. From the river the rise is sheer, two hundred feet, to the brink where they set up the camera, after climbing over a protective fence. This is one of the New York views that belongs in Category 1 with the view over the water from the Staten Island Ferry near Richmond and the view from the summit of the Throgs Neck Bridge. Past the Bronx and Yonkers, the reach upriver extends at least twenty miles. Directly opposite, the drawbridge is open in the Spuyten Duyvil, stopping the toy trains. Downriver, the great bridge brackets the receding city—Morningside and Midtown and the Village valley and Wall Street. What they see in the ground glass is a fifty-fifty ratio of concentrated city and tree-covered diabase-palisade cliffs, with a fjord running through. In their constant search for the dividing lines between altered and unaltered worlds, this scene is at mid-spectrum.

The river lies on a fault, I contribute. The rock on the two sides is in all respects different, and the New York side is a billion years older. With loupe and level, Laura and Virginia are speeding up. On the cliffside, the falling light has turned half of the crown of one young maple gold. “We’re going to lose that in about a minute—that tree. We’re going to lose that light.” They let the camera soak it in for three minutes. Virginia, as she waits, expresses some regret that the

film is not Fuji. It is Kodak Vericolor, which she says is “very natural,” but she mentions “the acid green of Fuji,” and its “intense saturation of color.” Looking down the river at the city, she adds, “A soft shot like this, the Fuji might juice it up.”

Virginia lives in New Hampshire and has a daughter, who has just finished college. Laura has a daughter in the Class of 2017. Virginia’s husband, Michael Beahan, is director of audio-visual services at Dartmouth College. Laura’s husband, Mark LaPore, teaches filmmaking at Mass Art. The collaborative rambles of Laura and Virginia happen when they can.

We drift south, toward Jersey City, for a rendezvous at sunset with the Colgate clock. Funded by foundation grants, their pictures are from Iceland, Costa Rica, Hawaii, Sri Lanka, southern Italy, southern California. Why New Jersey?

“We both grew up near Trenton.”

“It’s a landscape with the aspect of memory.”

“We want it in our book.”

In Trenton, the Deardorff spent ten evening minutes drinking in the Bridge Street bridge. Anyone who grew up near Trenton, as I did too, will accord that bridge the aspect of memory, with its bathetic letters that all but span the Delaware: TRENTON MAKES THE WORLD TAKES. The long exposure glossed the river, turned it into delinear frosting.

The allure for them of Carteret and Rahway is shared, safe to say, by no one else passing through on the turnpike, but they see in its refinery tanks and residential streets a “fantastic landscape”—in a phantasmagorical sense “a landscape of dreams.” They even compare Carteret to Hawaii. In the lava fields of Kilauea, among the record outpourings of recent times, are isolated parcels of spared ground called *kipukas*—a few acres, here and there, that the lava has so far missed. On some of these are surviving houses with people still in them. Instinctively, Laura and Virginia were drawn off the turnpike and into the *kipukas* of Carteret, where bungalows with picket fences survive the industrial magma.

“People are in a place.”

“The place changes around them.”

“They don’t leave.”

One summer evening, parked at such a place, they were waiting out a thunderstorm and planning a picture that would include both the pickets and the Port Reading Refinery. As they studied the background, a bolt of lightning came down through it and a huge black cloud shot to the sky. The lightning had ignited three million gal-

lons of gasoline. While the black smoke rolled overhead, they made their picture.

The Colgate clock is half a mile south of the Holland Tunnel beside the slip of a ferry to Manhattan. The view across the water to Wall Street is, easily, in Category 1, and now, at 8 P.M., a hundred thousand Wall Street windows are glistening copper. The sun is so low over new Jersey that its westward raking light must be feeling for Hokkaido. Its easterly rays backlight the big clock through a frieze of rooftops, tree crowns, razor wire, and chain link, described by these photographers as "a tableau of urban living." Like a ferris wheel, the clock is an open, skeletal structure—an octagonal analog time-piece with hands thirty feet long. As dusk arrives, the hands are illuminated in red neon streaks, and the whole three-thousand-square-foot face is surrounded by rows of white light bulbs.

Laura and Virginia have climbed a chain-link fence and set up the Deardorff on a crumbling slab of old pier. Three steps backward and they're in the river. Pressure rises. Police could break this up. The sun is vanishing fast. On this July night, the wind off the water is surprisingly cold. But the clock itself is the principal agent of today's crepuscular crescendo. They have chosen 8:20 as the optimum moment for opening the shutter, because of the drooping dihedral of the illuminated hands.

To lift the lens above the fence line, the tripod is fully extended, and one at a time they have to get up on the camera's storage box to see what is under the dark cloth. A ferry docks, and people walk by grinning.

"We have vignetting."

"Can we frame it differently?"

"All I want is to make sure we get an eight-by-ten out of this."

"With the vignetting we're in trouble."

"Maybe we'll like it."

"We need to level side to side."

8:15 p.m. "Cool. We're going to be right on schedule."

"I think this is going to be beautiful."

"I'm so happy for you."

Shivering, the two of them wrap themselves in the dark cloth, which consists of two heavy cotton layers—the inner one black, the outer one white. Virginia, standing on the camera box, removes the dark slide, and steps down.

"What do we want to do?"

"Three minutes."

"OK, three minutes."

"Pull it."

"Check the wind."

They unwrap themselves, open the shutter, and for three minutes hold up the cloth against the wind. During the three minutes, a man and a woman, dressed Wall Street and approaching the ferry, walk right into the picture.

"It's OK."

"They won't register on the film."

Now the man and the woman slow down—in front of the camera, in front of the sixty-foot clock—and each one is tapping at a cellular phone.

Slowly, they leave the picture, with a full minute to go.

"So there was a piece I was reading last night about a couple who wrote together and about the terrors of collaboration."

"So they got divorced?"

"They discovered that two heads are better than one."