

STRANGER, TRAILER, FIELDWORK, GIRL

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You lost?" The sudden voice synced with the clicking of my camera shutter and sent a fearful shock through my body. A tall, lanky man in faded jeans and a thin, tattered T-shirt, topped with a baseball cap, loomed from the tiny door frame of the Airstream and stared down at me, frozen as if caught stealing cookies, crouching at ground level to get a good shot of the cobwebbed cactus and antlers that framed the rusty trailer hitch. Lost? Yes, in more ways than one! I stuttered something about his fascinating ornaments and hoped he wouldn't mind my taking a few photographs.

"Not at all. Pretty cool, eh? Got them from just outside Austin, Nevada. Can't remember when." The proud homeowner's chuckle, issuing from a moustached mouth, revealed large, stained teeth and wafted the unmistakable smell of beer into the stark afternoon air. Trying unsuccessfully to look aloof yet professional, I worked on my "entrée," as my professors had termed the scholar's introductory phrase. I explained that I was a photography student interested in how people decorated their homes and gave some vague description of my thesis research on mobile-home dwellers. He introduced himself as Louie, gave me the go-ahead to shoot all the film I wanted, and trumped his OK by bringing out his own Brownie camera and proceeding to photograph me taking pictures.

I was quite unprepared to see anyone in the flesh, let alone find myself engaged in prolonged conversation. I had, in fact, planned to spend the day taking pictures of trailers from my usual, carefully calculated distance. I had spent months photographing mobile homes of all shapes and sizes: empty ones on vacant lots, peering into spaces between and underneath those shells propped up on stilts preparing to be trucked away; tight, neighborly clusters of trailer houses, sharing a common BBQ and clothesline in the middle of nowhere; orderly, multicolored residential-park models with flowerbeds, gnomes, and garland-wrapped mailboxes. I had observed the insides of some newer, palatial triplewides on sales lots and had crept alone around the interiors of deserted, condemned trailers. There is a kind of decisive geography to what J. B. Jackson once called "mobile dwellings," and that evolving space was the topic of my thesis research.

Nearly all of my pictures were devoid of people because I was spineless when it came to knocking on doors and asking someone's permission and because I'd been yelled at, flipped off, and seen too many angry faces in windows when I stopped outside fences. My car served as a physical and mental safe harbor when I felt the need for a quick getaway—instead of climbing out I'd pop through its sunroof for a quick snapshot. The well-thrashed Honda sheltered me from the elements, too, because my few weekends free of dance and marriage and work and classes seemed to coincide with the handful of annual western Nevada rainy days. Walking around

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